

# A Preliminary Study on the Views of Humanists on Female Education during the Renaissance

**Jiadi Xia**

*School of Humanities, Anhui Normal University, Wuhu, Anhui, 241009, China*

**Abstract:** *During the European Renaissance, humanists advanced new education in Italy and other European countries, supported by the nobility and local rulers. Female education developed significantly during this period, benefiting not only from the Reformation of religious education, but also from the scientific and systematic nature of education. Educational opportunities for women of the peasant, merchant, and artisan classes in the cities increased, while the women of the upper nobility began to receive more education in areas such as physical education, fine arts, and history. Courses in practical applied sciences were incorporated into girls' education, enabling women to demonstrate more competence in the political, economic and cultural spheres. This laid the foundation for women's social participation and the subsequent feminist movement.*

**Keywords:** *Humanism; Female Education; Educational Reform*

## 1. Introduction

During the Renaissance, women's education developed significantly in Western Europe, reviving to some extent the Greek and Roman view of women's education. Although women's education during this period was still restricted by class, the audience had expanded from the medieval period to a wider group of women, including the families of wealthy merchants and intellectuals. A combination of liberal arts and science courses were also introduced, adding to the richness of the content. Educators such as Vever and Comenius attested to the value of education for women, but it was still aimed at preparing women for their traditional roles in the home, such as managing the household and nurturing the children. In terms of educational philosophy, women are still subject to social and religious influences and receive an education that is limited by the times and aims to portray the traditional image of women as "faithful, virtuous and persevering".

## 2. Background to the emergence of women's educational thought during the Renaissance in Western Europe

### 2.1. Cultural patronage of noble women

During the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries, a significant change took place in the model of women's education in Europe, revisiting the Christian spirit of rational discernment based on the pursuit of scientific experimentation and empirical knowledge, and the formation of the concept of education that rejected a priori, supported skepticism, and gave full play to the individual's ability to act. [1] As the Renaissance cities nurtured the germ of rational thought in many scientific and philosophical disciplines, the emerging bourgeoisie, consisting of urban proletarians operating handicrafts, cross-border traders, and tenant farmers, were prompted to form institutes of higher education and civic organizations to promote the norms of humanist education. Subsequently, the bourgeois ideology advocating basic liberal education and the corresponding urban atmosphere and social organization also gradually took shape. As a result, these factors gradually contributed to the realization of cultural rights and interests in the Christian sense, such as the right to early childhood education and the right to enroll in school at the appropriate age, respect for women's physical and mental development in both material and spiritual aspects, and the emphasis on fairness in access to educational resources for both genders, while at the same time encouraging the cultivation of women's critical thinking skills. Most of the women of the nobility have the right to receive and choose from a wide range of higher education programs, including Latin phonetics, literary appreciation, skills in the management of property and domestic work, music, and the fine arts, to name but a few [2].

### ***2.2. Development of liberal arts education in Italy***

During the Renaissance, the development of capitalism required the pursuit of new things to increase the political and economic influence of urban capitalism and people's worldly pleasures, and the increase in the power of the city government gave private economic groups, the city's preparatory organs, and wealthy individuals in the upper class more money to support the educators' wide-ranging reform campaigns, which enriched the spiritual and cultural resources in both private and public spaces [3].

The Renaissance humanist educational ideology was centered on moral education and physical exercise. Moral education in the new type of school was vastly different from that of the Middle Ages, which favored the cultivation of secular moral qualities, such as bravery, restraint, patriotism, enterprise, love of freedom, the pursuit of equality, and humanitarianism. Barchiza and Victorino, in the course of their teaching, selected passages of moral significance in the works of famous classical poets of antiquity and educated the students with facts, examples and their philosophies, introducing the students to the classical writers of antiquity, including the poets Ovid, Virgil, and Cicero, among others.

### ***2.3. The Impact of the Reform of Public Schooling in England***

The gradual rise of the university contributed to the secularization and popularization of education in Western Europe. Although medieval universities were not yet free from Christian political jurisdiction and bondage, some were directly governed by the papacy and provided direct financial assistance by the Church. However, the emphasis on the application of knowledge in complex disciplines in the university triggered a trend of scholarly exchange and debate among academic authorities, tutorial groups, and the students they led in secondary and tertiary schools, and programs aimed at developing skills in literary translation, logical discernment, and public speaking were also on the agenda. At the same time, the modernization of the purpose of university training and the structure of academic disciplines accelerated as a result of the fusion of a curriculum that conformed to the spirit of classical Christianity and a school system that emphasized teaching performance. Such growth factors clearly broke through the shackles of religious theology: natural and social sciences, engineering and technology, and vocational education were included in the teaching, and complex human resources adapted to the realities of urban development and production practice were trained. The ability of university students to understand, think, analyze and reason has greatly improved, shaking the feudal authoritarian and obscurantist ideology prevalent in theological education [4].

Against the backdrop of the rise of universities and scientism in general, some humanist educators severely criticized the British academy's adherence to classical disciplines to the exclusion of modern disciplines, and in general these educational movements called for the content of the education of the young students of the middle and upper strata of society to be based on the training of young students in basic Christian simplicity and respect for scientific knowledge and the social order, but not to be blindly obedient to academic authority, and to be loyal to their homeland, and at the same time to follow the public welfare, participate in the voluntary service of the national community, and to actively participate in the international foreign affairs and invest in the industrial production of capitalism, and they are filled with the concept of self-life.

### ***2.4. Transformation of the educational model by the Reformation***

Martin Luther, the leader of the German Reformation movement and the Protestant Lutheran denomination of Christianity in the 16th century, made outstanding contributions to the improvement of the basic education system in Europe and the preaching of humanistic educational ideas. His humanistic teaching coincided with the doctrine of Protestantism and his idea of promoting the Protestant Reformation in the spirit of Protestantism. His efforts on the universalization of compulsory education and for German-speaking schools gave a great impact on modern education in Europe and America.

The areas affected by the Protestant educational reforms advocated by Luther and other emerging reformers: the coexistence of city schools and state schools gradually took shape. The city school, a direct continuation of the medieval school of the same name, was established by the city government and was administered by a municipal council that hired and paid the teachers. The city council, assisted by monks, conducted school inspections and made regulations. A variety of academic subjects of a higher degree are taught in the upper grades of secondary schools of high standards. The first three state schools (or Latin schools) were established by Margrave Maurice in 1543 in the Saxon regions of Pforta, Meissen, and Grimma, with a total enrollment of more than 200 pupils, who were selected from among the young

people who were poor but had a basic knowledge of Latin. The students were selected on the basis of merit from among poor young people with a basic knowledge of Latin. The subsequent establishment of the Wurtemberg, Pomerania and Ansback schools gave the humanist school a new lease on modernity. To a certain extent, the Catholic Church's use of books to misinterpret and justify religious privileges and economic exploitation, as well as the expansion of women's and German-language education in the country, were also eliminated.

### **3. Background to the emergence of women's educational thought during the Renaissance in Western Europe**

#### ***3.1. Family education: the molding of female chastity and the discipline of female religious morality***

Early Renaissance female educators advocated the education of women and their participation in religious devotions and doctrinal questions and answers. In the prevailing social situation, women must have acquiesced to patriarchal social concepts by default and still followed patriarchal social tenets such as men's role in prescribing the content of education and entering into marriage contracts. They still follow Christian ethical doctrines that value women's marital fidelity and purity and chastity. Thus, they fused the medieval religious moral requirement of female chastity with the teaching aphorisms of the Bible to encourage a certain range of domestic and religious education for women. Even though they attached importance to several ideas of female education, they did not consider women on an equal footing with men, and thus women could not avoid being subjected to the rules of male society in the closed home.

The idea of women's education in this period originated from the humanists' criticism of the avaricious life style among the Catholic hierarchy in Western Europe and their concern over the misinterpretation of the teachings of the Church's upper echelons. They wished to reform the Church, purify religious life, and return to the primitive simplicity of Christianity. For the vast majority of the people, the religious cryptograms were the hope of the people to alleviate the pain of the present world and to draw a blueprint for the afterlife. Therefore, the humanist thought that accompanied their religious claims believed that in order to get rid of the filth of society, the hearts of the people must first be made good and wise. Therefore, these thinkers tried to use humanist culture to oppose and expose the corrupt authoritative style of the Church's upper class, and to purify people's religious life by using the religious cryptic language embedded in Christian morality, thus putting forward the idea of combining the Christian faith with humanism in a clear manner. Relying on the ideological essence of humanist culture and Christian morality to purify people's hearts and minds, it achieves the synergy of education and enlightenment and the transformation of society.

#### ***3.2. Idealized education: affirmation of women's talent for learning and support for women's participation in public activities***

With the penetration of humanist educational ideas and the democratization of education advocated by humanist thinkers in the mid and late Renaissance, some educators gradually realized the importance of national education and opened a number of new elementary school to absorb the children of the common people. By the early 17th century, the two famous universities, Oxford and Cambridge, were admitting a sizable number of commoner students. Women from middle-class and aristocratic families could receive a complete vocational education through boarding schools, convent schools, and the city's Latin law reading and writing schools and guild schools that absorbed women in droves. In addition to religion more subjects were created for the needs of everyday situations. This period laid the foundation for the popularization of women's education in society and for the practice of life out of the Church into the political, economic, and cultural spheres. Thinkers developed a systematic plan of study for women, which called for the development of women's abilities to perform their duties for the family, urban associations, guild organizations, and the aristocratic court.

#### ***3.3. The quest for gender equality: respect for women's aspirations and encouragement of self-growth***

Thinkers of female education in the mature and late Renaissance period used the family as a point of departure and gave female education a new banner of ideals. That is, women's education was not merely to increase their knowledge for domestic roles, but to make them more capable of educating and raising their children in the future, and to gradually fulfill themselves in the service of the family. It is to enable women to observe the moral law in the field of family management, no longer stopping at the

development of chastity and self-control, but to become more strategic and wise in the maintenance of their future marriages. In *The Learned Lady and the Abbess*, Erasmus recounts the debate between Magdalia, a woman who reads Greek and Latin books, and an abbess about the meaning of women's lives and the meaning of education. Through Magdalia, Erasmus points out the significance of women's education in maintaining peace and happiness in the family environment, using the arguments that "women need education to acquire wisdom in order to be better able to undertake the tasks of housekeeping and rearing of their offspring," and that "learning makes wives and husbands more intimate," to refute the argument that "women need education to acquire wisdom in order to be better able to undertake the tasks of housekeeping and rearing of their offspring. She countered the abbess's inherent prejudice against women's education with arguments such as "women should not have knowledge" and "learning makes wives and husbands more affectionate. For example, "women are not supposed to have knowledge" and "women are not suited to the study of Latin", etc. She called for language learning to be beneficial to women and their families. She calls for language learning to facilitate communication and learning between women and intellectuals, and to develop a positive attitude towards life with a strong faith, arguing that "the many learned women of Spain and Italy are able to compete in learning with any man, including the Moor girls of England and the Pilkheimers of Germany ....." [5]

#### **4. The Later Influence of Western European Renaissance Ideas on Women's Education**

##### ***4.1. Contribution of women's education to the society of the time***

During the Renaissance, a new trend began to emerge in Europe, whereby women began to be educated and their status was gradually elevated. However, due to various constraints, women were limited in what they could learn and for what purpose. Many schools taught only basic knowledge and skills, such as reading, writing and arithmetic, which could only be used to help women better manage their homes and children. In addition, female students were discriminated against and marginalized, and important career fields remained male-dominated.

A handful of elite intellectual women clearly and courageously expressed their view that women's nature is fully capable of participating fully in human life through knowledge gained through reading. Their ideas were constantly interpreted and disseminated by male thinkers, politicians, and literary figures, and had a profound impact on the emergence and reform of feminism in modern times. Some male humanities educators also embraced these elite women and their educational concepts and recognized their state of mind and expression as notable achievements in social and cultural endeavors. In the early days of northeastern Italy, which was closely associated with the prosperity of the court and the towns, women from the small and medium-sized aristocratic classes strongly promoted the development of a female educational culture.

##### ***4.2. Impact of women's education on the development of later generations***

Over time, the development of women's education has contributed to the improvement of the education system as a whole. Women's participation and contributions have been widely recognized in several areas of education. First of all, women's participation has increased the humanistic elements of education. For example, in physical education, women's participation has greatly contributed to the importance of physical exercise. Meanwhile, in art education, women's participation has brought new perspectives to art forms such as painting and singing, promoting innovation and development in art education.

In addition, women's education has had a positive impact on the emancipation of women's minds. Through education, women can better understand themselves and learn to think and express themselves independently. These abilities help women to become more confident and self-reliant in their daily lives and lay the foundation for women to fight for equal rights.

The development of women's education has also contributed to social and cultural change. For example, women's salons have become a new cultural phenomenon and a model for popular life. Women's salon is a social place where women gather for communication and discussion, which serves the function of cultural exchange and promotes friendship and mutual support among women. 17th century salon culture was introduced to France from Italy, and after centuries of development, it has become a global cultural phenomenon.

## 5. Conclusion

During the Renaissance, women, although fully educated, were still regarded as objects by men. As time progressed, the number of educated women increased and the modes of education became more varied. This advancement in education provided women with the opportunity to participate in social, economic and political activities, which emphasized their value and status. Female education during this period focused not only on knowledge but also on developing self-awareness and self-confidence. The wide dissemination of education promoted family harmony, improved the cultural quality of women and, with the rise of vocational schools, provided women with more social opportunities and a foothold in society.

## References

- [1] Liu, Minghan and Chen, Mingli. *History of the European Renaissance-Education Volume [M]*. Beijing: Beijing People's Publishing House, 2008: 19-22.
- [2] Yan Zhixin. *A Brief Analysis of the Educational Status of Urban Women in Italy during the Renaissance [D]*. Inner Mongolia: Inner Mongolia University, 2012.
- [3] Li Ying. *The Pursuit of Humanity in Education--The Transformation of Education in the Period of Western Social Transformation and Its Implications [D]*. Jilin: Northeast Normal University, 2006: 55-60.
- [4] Liu Minghan. *History of the European Renaissance-Education Volume [M]*. Beijing: Beijing People's Publishing House, 2008, 20-30.
- [5] Desiderius Erasmus. *The Colloquies of Erasmus [M]*. London: Reeves and Turner, 1787: 387-390.