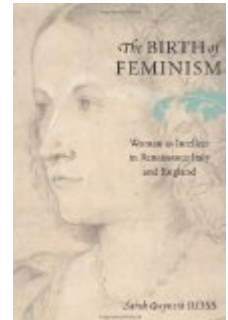


Sarah Gwyneth Ross. *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. 405 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-03454-9.



Reviewed by Christine Meek

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Readers of the innumerable studies of the position of early modern women and of the large amount of original writing by them that has now been made available are often disconcerted and disappointed at the submissive attitude displayed by many of these women, who often seem all too ready to accept their exclusion from important aspects of life and their secondary role even in those aspects in which they were permitted to share. Even those who criticized the way women were treated and demanded a better deal mounted no serious challenge to the prevailing social system. Although some scholars have used the term “feminism” with regard to early modern women’s literary activities, others have seen no justification for the use of the term before the very end of the eighteenth century. In this substantial and well-researched study, Sarah Gwyneth Ross addresses this question head on. Her book is a study of Renaissance feminism in Italy and in England from the fifteenth through the seventeenth century, primarily on the basis of the works of a selection of women writers them-

selves, but also taking into account what contemporaries and later commentators said about them in order to show both their achievements and their reception.

Obviously a study of feminism in a period when many would doubt its existence requires justification and this depends on the definition of “feminism.” In an introduction that usefully outlines much of the material covered in the book, Ross sets about justifying her topic and defining her terms. She starts from “the conviction that feminism does indeed have a history,” and while it changed over time, “its different manifestations nonetheless share a common motive: the desire to improve the condition of women” (p. 3). This is perhaps a rather soft definition of “feminism,” but she offers a sharper definition when she distinguishes three different types of feminism in the Renaissance: explicit critique of the prevailing patriarchal system in its effects on women; vocal celebration of female excellence, especially with regard to women humanists, which she calls “celebratory” feminism; and finally “participatory”

feminism, that is, women who made the case for equality of the mind by carrying out the same scholarly work as men, thus causing contemporaries to rethink the question of women's capabilities and potential, even when they did not explicitly criticize the patriarchal order or praise their female peers. This last category obviously greatly broadens the range of activities that can be defined as feminist, but its significance depends on a favorable reception by contemporaries and later commentators.

The book is organized into two main sections, which represent different phases of feminist activity coinciding roughly with chronological periods. The first is "The Household Academy, 1400-1580"; and the second "The Household Salon, 1580-1680." The roles of educated women active in literary activity in Italy and England are treated in parallel in each section. Ross is dealing with secular women, who were not nuns, not members of ruling houses, and not courtesans, and in the fifteenth and for much of the sixteenth century, these women understood themselves and were understood by literary culture to be the products of what she calls "household academies." They owed their education to their father, who either taught them directly himself or ensured that they had suitable tutors, and it was as "her father's daughter" (the title of chapter 1) that they were able to venture into learned circles, stressing their relationship to their father-teacher and addressing letters in quasi-filial terms to scholars and other public figures, who might in some cases be relatives or associates of their father. But Ross regards all this positively, in terms of rhetorical strategies rather than as an indication of restraint on female expression. She regards the fact that the main scholarly productions of English women writers of the sixteenth century were translations of biblical and patristic works as an indication of their importance, not a sign of lack of creativity or ambition on their part; much of the effort of the leading male humanists went into translations, and versions of scriptural works

represented the highest form of academic endeavor. She regards women humanists in both Italy and England as success stories, rather than rare exceptions to the limitations on women's intellectual achievements and ambitions. She argues that these women should be studied as male scholars of the period are and compared with each other and not with the female population as a whole. After all, most men of the period did not receive an advanced education any more than did most women, and learned women should not be seen as an undifferentiated collectivity, but as individuals engaging in different forms of intellectual activity.

Ross provides a series of case studies: Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, Laura Cereta, and Helena, the daughter of Pietro Bembo, for Italy and the daughters of Thomas More, especially Margaret Roper, the four daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke, and two daughters of Henry Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, for England. Looking at the names for Italy, it is difficult not to think "the usual suspects"; with the possible exception of Roper the English figures are less well known. But this reaction would be unjustified. The author avoids simply rehearsing well-known material and is able to provide much fresh evidence from wills and family documents that helps to set these figures in context. Only chapter 4, entitled "Models of Feminist Argument," contains much familiar material and some repetition. Perhaps the most illuminating chapter in part 1 is chapter 3, "The Biographical Tradition," which looks at biographical compendia in Italy that comment favorably on learned women and list them as among the glories of their family and the city. A learned and admired daughter could augment her father's prestige, so that the enhancement of reputations was reciprocal. Comments on learned women in England have to be sought in letters of friends and relatives or accounts of the lives of their male relatives, but here too they attracted admiration and it was even suggested that learn-

ing made them more attractive as prospective wives.

By the end of the sixteenth century women had an honored place in literary society. A series of writers and translators associated with household academies and represented as paragons of “learned virtue” had demonstrated that education could make women contributors to literary culture and family honor, not liabilities (p. 193). Women writers in the seventeenth century, therefore, required less justification. While the father figure was still important, especially for women who explicitly criticized the social order, more women in the later Renaissance represented themselves as mature married women and writers of proved credentials who required no justification. The household academy of the first period was beginning to resemble a household salon and in a graphic phrase Cornelia, the mother who passed her learning and eloquence to her sons, succeeded Hortensia, the gifted daughter (p. 194).

The women that Ross chooses to focus on in the second section of her book, “The Household Salon, 1580-1680,” are Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, and Isabella Andreini for Italy and Elizabeth Petty, Esther Inglis, Mary Beale, and Mary More for England. While she has much of value to say about Fonte and Marinella, as famous literary figures who were at the same times wives and mothers, perhaps the most interesting of her Italian examples is Andreini, who was of such obscure origins that her parentage is uncertain and who was the leading lady of a company of actors, but was nevertheless so greatly admired as a poet and humanist and virtuous married woman that her son Giovanni Battista was later able to use her name and memory to add legitimacy to his own claims to lofty intellectual activity. The English, or more accurately British, examples are more varied; in fact, they are rather a mixed bag. There are other women scholars and literary figures who might have been chosen, and while she names some of these, Ross does not discuss the reasons

for her selection of examples, though her choice does have the virtue of introducing the reader to some little-known individuals. Petty cooperated with her husband, Sir William, on apparently equal terms in providing a thorough education for their daughter as well as their sons, but their activities are mainly known through their letters, and their daughter Anne did not embark on a literary career. Inglis, Beale, and More were all artists as well as scholars, the first two cooperating with their husbands on at least an equal basis in providing for their families and More producing a particularly overt defense of women that gropes toward the idea of women’s “rights.”

However, this second section of her book is somewhat less coherent than the first, not least because by that time women active in learning and literature were more numerous and consequently more varied. The need to concentrate on women with husbands and children rather distorts her choice, especially as they need to be cases where there is documentary evidence of the relationship. As in the first section, she treats the writings and ideas of these women in a separate chapter from her discussion of their lives and context, chapter 7 entitled “Discourses of Equality and Rights.” This chapter discusses some of the boldest and most overtly feminist works by women of the period, but in some cases at least these are already familiar and as in the equivalent chapter of the first section there is some repetition of material already considered in her chapters on their lives and literary reputations. The parallel discussions of literary women in England and Italy also show some signs of strain. There were no biographical compendia of illustrious women, such as are found in Italy in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century, until the end of the eighteenth century in England, whereas most of the English figures she discusses in her first section had had husbands and children, so that this cannot be seen as a distinguishing feature of the second period. At times, the differences between literary women in Italy and in England

seem at least as marked as the similarities. With the exception of that of Beale, the “household salons” seem rather shadowy, unless one counts the largely fictional assembly of women in Fonte’s *The Worth of Women* (1600). Ross is at times relentlessly upbeat, keen to see feminism and acceptance of women as scholars and writers everywhere. Leonardo Bruni’s exclusion of eloquence from his curriculum for women’s education was a more significant limitation than she allows for. A less favorable interpretation could be placed on Guarino of Verona’s initial failure to reply to Nogarola’s first letter (1436), and not everyone would agree that the tone of her *Dialogue on Adam and Eve* (c. 1451) with Ludovico Foscarini was one of correspondence between equals, or be persuaded by her defense of Eve as less guilty than Adam because less perfect and therefore less accountable. At times, the author seems to be trying to make rather too many points and to have almost too much material to fit easily into her analysis.

But these are the defects of the book’s virtues. It is above all thoroughly well researched with valuable material on the women scholars and writers themselves and on their families and associates that sets them firmly in their social and intellectual context. Ross amply demonstrates the existence of participatory feminism in the activities of women scholars and humanists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The evidence that they were cited and admired by the literary world is especially illuminating, and modern commentators will in future hesitate to speak of them as rare and slightly odd exceptions. The book also traces the awareness that literary women had of each other and the defenses of women’s capabilities and achievements, and increasing criticisms of the limitations on women, which some of them mounted. The tone of the book is moderate and it is full of sound judgments and illuminating insights. It is a notable contribution to a growing knowledge and understanding of the role of wom-

en in the early modern intellectual and literary world.

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