

To Be a Woman and a Scholar

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On a Saturday morning in June exactly three hundred years ago this year, the first woman in the world to receive a doctoral degree mounted a pulpit in the cathedral of Padua to be examined in Aristotelian dialectics. Her name was Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia. She was thirty-two years old, single, daughter of one of the wealthiest families in Venice. Precociously brilliant, she had begun to study Aristotle at the age of seven. Her father had backed her studies and supplied the best of tutors; by the time she enrolled in the University of Padua, she knew not only Latin and Greek, French, English and Spanish, but also Hebrew, and Arabic, and Chaldaic.

What was it like to be a gifted woman, an Elena Comaro, three hundred years ago? What happened to a bright woman in the past who wanted to study another culture, examine the roots of a language, master the intricacies of higher mathematics, write a book or prevent or cure a terrible disease?

To begin with, for a woman to acquire anything that amounted to real learning, she needed four basics.

She needed to survive. In the seventeenth century women's life expectancy had risen only to thirty-two; not until 1750 did it begin to rise appreciably and reach, in mid-nineteenth century, age forty-two. A woman ambitious for learning would do well to choose a life of celibacy, not only to avoid the hazards of child birth but because there was no room for a scholar's life within the confines of marriage and childbearing. Elena Comaro had taken a vow of chastity at the age of eleven, turned down proposals of marriage to become an oblate of the Benedict Order.)

Secondly, to aspire to learning a woman needed basic literacy; she had to be one of the fortunate few who learned at least to read and write. Although studies of literacy in earlier centuries are still very incomplete and comparative data on men's and women's literacy are meager, it appears from one such study that before 1650 a bare 10% of women in the city of London could sign their names. What is most striking about this particular study is that men are divided by occupation — with clergy and the professions at the top (100% literate) and male laborers at the bottom of scale (about 15% literate); women as a group fell below even the unskilled male laborers in their literacy rate. By about 1700 half the women in London could sign their own names; in the provinces woman's literacy remained much lower.

The third fundamental a woman needed if she aspired to learning was, of course, an economic base. It was best to be born, like Elena Comaro, to a family of wealth who owned a well-stocked library and could afford private tutors. For girls of poor families the chance of learning the bare minimum of reading and writing was small. Even such endowed charity schools as Christ's Hospital in London were attended mostly by boys; poor girls in charity schools were apt to have their literacy skills slighted in favor of catechism,***) needlework, knitting, and lace making in preparation for a life of domestic service.

The fourth fundamental a woman scholar needed was simply very tough skin, for she was a deviant in a society where the learned woman, far from being valued, was likely to hear herself preached against in the pulpit and made fun of on the public stage. Elena Cornaro was fortunate to have been born in Italy where an array of learned women had flourished during the Renaissance and where the woman scholar seems to have found a more hospitable ambiance than in the northern countries. In eighteenth-century England the gifted writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, writing in 1753 about proposed plans for a little granddaughter's education, admonished her daughter with some bitterness to «conceal whatever learning (the child) attains, with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness».

And yet, despite all the hurdles, some bright women did manage to make a mark as scholars and writers. Sometimes girls listened in on their brothers lessons. A fortunate few, like Elena Cornaro, had parents willing and able to educate daughters equally with sons. But by far the largest numbers of women scholars in the past were self-educated. Through sheer intellectual curiosity, self-discipline, often grinding hard work, they taught themselves whatever they wanted to know. Such self-teaching may be the only truly joyous form of learning. Yet it has its drawbacks: it may also be haphazard and superficial. Without access to laboratory, lecture, and dissecting table, it was all but impossible for women to train themselves in higher mathematics, in science, in anatomy, for instance. So if one asks what it was like to be a gifted woman, to aspire to learning at the time of Elena Cornaro, the answer must be that it was a difficult and demanding choice, requiring not merely intellectual gifts but extraordinary physical and mental stamina, and only a rare few women succeeded in becoming contributing scholars and writers. All the usual scholarly careers were closed to women, so that even for women who succeeded in educating themselves to the level of their male colleagues, the opportunities to support themselves were meager. After Elena Cornaro's death a half a century passed before a second woman, again Italian, was awarded a doctorate at the University of Bologna. Not until 150 years later did American universities admit women for degrees and two centuries passed 95 before Oxford and Cambridge conferred degrees on women.