Unit 2 Reading Guide: Families and marriage

In this unit we will examine the fundamental social institution of Renaissance Italy: the family. Despite Jacob Burckhardt’s claim that individualism is a defining characteristic of the Renaissance, individuals in the period drew much of their sense of identity from membership in a family. But Renaissance families differed significantly from one another depending on social status. And especially among the elite, family and lineage were defined by agnatic relationship—that is, male descent. Women left one family and joined another after negotiations that resembled those of business or diplomacy. We will begin by looking at family structures and then turn to the ways in which humanist thought legitimated them. We will then turn to the marriage bond, the shaky foundation of the family, and the ways in which Renaissance thinkers discussed the nature of women and their proper relationships with men. We will end by considering some challenges to the ideology of male superiority in the Renaissance.

Essential questions for this unit
- Who was part of the family?
- What did an ideal family look like?
- How was the family related to other institutions (political, economic, social)?
- How were men supposed to act in the family?
- How were women supposed to act?
- What’s love got to do with it?
- What happened when norms were violated?
- Whose norms were these, and did they apply to everyone?

Paper topics for this unit
The following paper topics are suggestions; if you would like to define a different paper topic, you are welcome to do so. See the paper guideline handout for more details.

1. Discuss the place of love in relationships between men and women in the Renaissance? Was love a constructive force in the family? A destructive force? How did Renaissance thinkers deal with the conflict between the values of the head—as reflected in marriage negotiations, treatises on the family, and other sources—and those of the heart?

2. What, according to Renaissance thinkers we have read, characterized female nature? Why were women subordinate to men? To what extent did the arguments of writers such as Castiglione and the experiences of women like Cassandra Fedele challenge the prevailing notion that women were subject to men because they were inferior?

Tues. 10/1: The Renaissance family
Read: Brucker, 28-73, 106-120 (§§16-34, 51-54).

1. Read §§16-19. What kinds of negotiations were involved in arranging marriages among the well-to-do in Renaissance Florence, and who was involved? What role did the dowry play? What qualities did parents and prospective husbands seek in prospective brides and their families?

2. Read §20. The Velluti were one of Florence’s leading families at the time; Agnola was Piccio Velluti’s illegitimate daughter. What effect did illegitimacy and then widowhood have on Agnola’s prospects for marriage?

3. Read §§21-24. How did Renaissance Florentines feel about deaths in the family? What kinds of documents are excerpted in these sections, and what do they tell us about Florentines’ sense of family?

4. Read §25. How did Fetto Ubertini base his bequests on the legal status of his widow, daughters, and sons? Why did he take into account whether his wife and any widowed
daughters decided to remarry or not? What do his decisions imply about the place of women in the family?

5. Read §§26-27. How do these testaments reflect the same kind of values you saw in §25? Are there any new issues? How well off was Andrea di Feo, the stonemason?

6. Read §§28-29. Why would someone petition for legitimacy? Why would Giovanni Gherardini’s mother entrust her son’s wealth to the Commune?

7. Read §§31-34. What kinds of behavior strained or broke family ties? What were the grounds of the dispute between Remigio Lanfredini and his father Lanfredino (§31)?

The vendetta (§§51-54)

8. Read §51. What was the cause of the vendetta between the Velluti and the Mannelli? How long did it last? What part in the quarrel did the later generations have? How was hostility expressed short of actual physical violence? Why weren’t Filippo Velluti and Lapo Filigherini convicted of the murder of Lippo de’ Mannelli? In what fashion did the two clans make an uneasy peace, and did it really resolve the dispute? How did the vendetta finally come to an end?

9. Read §52. After you have gotten the story straight, consider the following questions: Why was Pagnozzo’s brother Nofri included in the condemnation? Why was it a punishment that they and their families should be considered magnates? Why would the government declare that the Strozzi would regain their *popolano* status if they brought back Pagnozzo and Nofri, dead or alive? How did the Florentine commune get involved in the vendetta, and why?

10. Read §54. Why might Antonio Rustichi say that being forced to apologize was a worse punishment for Simone Buonarroti than death?

11. What do §§51-54, taken together, imply about the connection between family membership, quarrels, and legal responsibility for crime? Why would information about vendettas be recorded in diaries and other family documents?

Thurs. 10/3: Renaissance family values


1. Why did Coluccio Salutati urge Caterina di messer Vieri to devote herself to her religious duties? What did he think of her intellectual and family aspirations?

2. What was the point of Barbaro’s treatise? For whom was it written? In what language? How does the fact that it was written by a man for men affect the way Barbaro discusses women?

3. Why should women obey their husbands (according to Barbaro)? What are the consequences of disobedience?

4. Barbaro derives a number of precepts for female behavior from the ancient cardinal virtue of moderation (or temperance). What are they? How does female moderation differ from the way men should behave?

5. What responsibilities does a wife have in the household, and how should she carry them out? How should she behave toward servants? Toward her children?

6. How do Barbaro’s and Alberti’s guidelines for choosing a wife compare with how Renaissance Florentines actually chose their spouses (from Tuesday’s readings)? What problems might a father encounter when trying to find a match for his son or daughter “by the rules”?
**Tues. 10/8: The Renaissance view of women (and men)**

Read: *Reader*, 60-79, 110-124, 137-139, 152-161 (Boccaccio: selected stories from the *Decameron*)—also review *Reader*, 22-54 (Petrarch: selections from the *Canzoniere*); *Machiavelli*, 419-429 (“A fable: Belfagor”).

The selections from Boccaccio and Machiavelli were intended, for the most part, to be humorous. (The story of Griselda is an exception.) But humor depends on the audience’s appreciation of the norms that humor violates. The following questions are intended to help you identify those norms.

1. What effect did the plague in Florence in 1348 have on people’s adherence to social norms? What did the young ladies fear might happen if they went off to the country with the three young men?

2. What does the ninth story from the third day imply about the proper attitude of a husband toward his wife? Of a wife toward her husband?

3. In the introduction to the fourth day, Boccaccio tells part of a story. What is its point? What power do beauty and lust have over human beings? Is it possible to repress them?

4. Is the seventh story of the sixth day plausible? What does it imply about women’s sexual appetites and how they compare with men’s?

5. What does the story of Griselda imply about the proper attitude of a wife toward her husband? What do other characters in the story think about Griselda? How should a husband behave, according to the story, and does the marquis behave properly?

6. How does Petrarch portray Laura in his *Canzoniere*? How does his account of her compare with the views of proper womanly character and behavior expressed by Salutati, Barbaro, Alberti, and Boccaccio? How is love related to marriage for Renaissance thinkers? Compare their attitude with the emotions reflected in Brucker, §16 (Gregorio Dati) and §22 (Luca da Panzano)—how did those two husbands talk about the deaths of their wives?

7. What is the moral of Machiavelli’s story about Belfagor? What feminine behavior did Machiavelli condemn? What would such a story teach about the proper roles of husband and wife within the family? Do Machiavelli’s norms for male and female behavior differ from Boccaccio’s?

**Thurs. 10/10: In defense of women**

REMINDER: Your first 5-page paper is due no later than today!


1. Read the assigned pages from Castiglione’s *Book of the courtier*. The previous discussion has identified the qualities of the ideal male courtier. How does the ideal court lady differ from them? Are women the mental equals of men, according to the dialogue?

2. What makes a woman seem modest and virtuous, according to the speaker in Castiglione’s dialogue? What makes her seem immodest and wanton?

3. Read the introductions to Cassandra Fedele’s *Letters and orations*. What challenges did Fedele and other Renaissance women face in acquiring an education? How did they differ from challenges faced by men?
4. How do Fedele’s letters to Isabella of Castile and Naples compare with Petrarch’s letter to Francesco da Carrara? What similarities do you note? What differences may be attributed to the author’s and addressee’s sex?

5. How was Cassandra praised by Isabella, Beatrice Sforza, and Eleonora of Aragon? What connection did they draw between her learning and her sex?

6. Read Fedele’s correspondence with Balthassare Fedele (chapter 2, letters 15-17). How does Fedele feel about her family? How might such a woman feel about leaving her family and joining another through marriage?

7. From what you have read so far, to what extent did Cassandra Fedele challenge prevailing assumptions about the place of women in the family and in society, and to what extent was her life shaped by them? What roles were available to her, how did she shape them, and which did she eventually adopt?

8. What do you think it felt like to be an educated woman in fifteenth-century Italy?