



2009

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### Recommended Citation

Orendorf, Jennifer Megan (2009) "Architectural Chastity Belts: The Window Motif as Instrument of Discipline in Italian Fifteenth-Century Conduct Manuals and Art," *Quidditas*: Vol. 30 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol30/iss1/10>

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## Notes

### **Architectural Chastity Belts: The Window Motif as Instrument of Discipline in Italian Fifteenth-Century Conduct Manuals and Art**

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*Offering advice on a range of topics from the quotidian to the extraordinary, from superstition to scientific, fifteenth-century conduct manuals appealed to readers of all Italian social classes. This essay focuses specifically on manuals which prescribe behaviors for women, and investigates the reception of these precepts and the extent to which these notions informed and transformed women's lives. Specifically, I examine one piece of advice which recurs throughout instructional literature during this time: the prescribed notion that women should remain far removed from their household windows for the sake of their honor, reputation and chastity. Widely read manuals, such as Alberti's *Della Famiglia* and Barbaro's *Trattati delle donne*, promulgated windows as literal "windows of opportunity" to further vice, lust, adultery, vanity and profligacy. Furthermore, these concerns are addressed in texts beyond the realm of the prudent, instructional literature; the theme recurs as metaphor for deviancy in contemporary fiction and portraiture. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, for example, features several tales in which women carry out affairs by way of their bedroom windows. Within the genre of portrait painting, both *Fra Filippo Lippi* and *Sandro Botticelli* painted interior scenes which featured women positioned at windows. The synthesis of these seemingly disparate sources reveals a complicated moral climate that undoubtedly had decisive consequences for Italian women during the fifteenth century.*

The Italian Quattrocento was an era of shifting paradigms, emerging identities and cultural ideologies. As the Italian thirst for excellence burgeoned throughout the fifteenth century, prescriptive literature flourished and the family, newly recognized for its central importance to the welfare of the state, began to take precedence in the hearts and minds of civic humanists. Francesco Barbaro and

Leon Battista Alberti were amongst the first to promote domestic order and virtue as fundamental elements of society. Their treatises on the family affirmed that if the family upheld strong morals and strove for excellence then the state would correspondingly prosper and earn universal renown.

Generally, it is thought that the emphasis on the family helped to redeem the status of women, providing them greater autonomy and influence. However, my research reveals the contrary – not all attention was positive attention. As daughters, wives, mothers and brides-to-be were recognized for their domestic contribution to society, their freedom of action underwent increasingly strict surveillance as the home was equated with honor, virtue and proper codes of conduct. To maintain these ideologies women were literally confined to the household to which the family honor was attached. Thus, women and home collapsed into one, a composite symbol of status, familial wealth and prestige.

The spatial construction of honor became more complicated as certain spaces within the home evaded easy classification, and as a result, considered morally ambiguous. Liminal spaces, such as windows, balconies, and loggias were suspect because they belied the integrity of the architectural boundary between public and private spaces. These interstices were problematic for Quattrocento moralists. Essentially feminine because they were a part of the home and masculine because they allowed participation with public life, windows and other household openings were, both literally and figuratively, voids in regulatory ideals of the period. Prescriptive literature responded to the paradoxical position of these openings by inflating the behaviors over which male heads of households had to be wary and deflating the possibilities of movement for women. For example, Barbaro praises the tenets of the Greek Gorgias, “who wanted women shut up in their homes so that nothing could be known of them except for their reputations.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Alberti’s treatise

1 Francesco Barbaro. “De Re Uxoriam,” *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists and Government and Society*, eds. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 203.

Della Famiglia, the main speaker, patriarch Giannozzo dictates instructions to his wife to mind the household possessions carefully he maintains that in order for her to be dutiful she “must not spend all day sitting idly by with your elbows on the window sill, like some lazy wives who always hold their sewing in their hands for an excuse, but their sewing never gets done.”<sup>2</sup> In popular culture, these orifices were continually used as symbols of deviant behavior and settings for clandestine affairs: small “windows” of opportunity that allowed female protagonists to manipulate their confinement and interact with the public.

The popular sources I examine here, Boccaccio’s Decameron and Botticelli’s *Woman at a Window*, are secular works. Roughly a century separates them, yet each assumes the domestic setting, thus providing a unique glimpse into daily customs and family life and each includes the window as a central motif, both familiar, tangible object of contemporary life and highly charged symbol of transgression. With the synthesis of these distinct sources, I endeavor to unveil, or more appropriately “unlock,” a common discourse that reveals fifteenth-century attitudes about women’s confinement for the purpose of safeguarding chastity. I will begin with discussion of one of Boccaccio’s hundred tales, a tale of marital strife and feminine guile, and then I will examine Botticelli’s enigmatic painting of a woman poised in her bedroom window.

Neiphile’s story, one of the tales told on the seventh day of the Decameron that recount the “tricks women have played on their husbands,”<sup>3</sup> relates the tale of a Florentine merchant, Arriguccio, and his wife Sismonda. From the outset of the tale, the narrator portrays Sismonda favorably and demonizes Arriguccio by listing the many social ills he has committed. Neiphile describes Arriguccio as “a merchant of enormous wealth . . . who had the absurd notion of

2 Leon Battista Alberti, *I Libri della Famiglia* I-IV, tr. Renée Neu (Watkins, IL: Waveland Press, 2004), 222.

3 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, tr. Guido Waldman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 417.

marrying above his station – even today it’s a thing merchants are always doing. He made a wholly unsuitable match with a young gentlewoman, Sismonda.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he is so busy that he has become neglectful of his wife and his household. In a few short introductory passages, Neiphile maligns Arriguccio and justifies to his audience whatever future action Sismonda will take against him.

Reduced to loneliness, Sismonda soon finds a lover in a handsome local man, Ruberto. The lovers blissfully carry out an affair for some time, until finally, Arriguccio suspects his wife’s infidelity and thereby promptly transforms himself from a neglectful ignoramus to a jealous and vigilant husband. However, the adulterers are too fond of one another to easily quit their affair without first employing a little ingenuity. Recognizing the access that the window provides to the public realm (Neiphile tells us that her window “overlook[s] the street,” and allows for frequent passersby), Sismonda contrives a plan that will allow the affair to continue undetected. Each night while she prepares for bed, Sismonda attaches a long string to her toe, routes it out the window and onto the street where it is in easy reach for Ruberto to pull when he wishes to see her. If the circumstances allow, Sismonda then invites Ruberto in for a night of lovemaking just a stone’s throw away from where Arriguccio sleeps soundly.

Their devious plan is successful for some time, but finally, one night as he readies himself for bed, Arriguccio discovers the string attached to his wife’s toe. Driven by powerful suspicion, he unties the string from Sismonda’s toe, affixes it to his own, and anxiously awaits what will unfold next so, at last, he may uncover his wife’s treacherous ruse. Fatefully, Ruberto arrives that same evening to call on Sismonda – unbeknownst to him that the wearer of the string on the other side was no longer his beloved – and he proceeds to tug on the line as usual. Feeling the tug at his toe, Arriguccio leaps out of bed, grabs his weapons, and pursues Ruberto through the city streets. Ruberto escapes unharmed, and, because of the clamor in the middle

4 *Ibid.*, 451.

of the night, the neighbors complain of Arriguccio's recklessness, banishing him back to his home without having avenged his honor. Sismonda has already prepared for her husband's impending wrath by arranging to switch places with her maidservant. She convinces her maid to lie in her place in the nuptial chamber and to suffer her husband's harsh beating upon his return. After Arriguccio metes out the cruel punishment against his "wife" in what is one of the most violent scenes of the hundred tales, he then proceeds to Sismonda's natal home to report to her family the awful sins she has committed against him. Sismonda again uses this opportunity to trade places with her maid so that upon Arriguccio's return with her brothers, she appears calm and collected, pretending to have been engaged in a long night of chores. As Arriguccio cannot reconcile Sismonda's unharmed condition with the brutal beating he has just described, Sismonda's family judges that he has fabricated the account of his wife's disloyalty in a bout of drunken insanity. In the end, Sismonda gets away with her perfidy and the story ends poorly for Arriguccio, publicly shamed and deemed incapable of disciplining his wife.

At the heart, or shall I say "hearth" of Boccaccio's tale, is concern for patriarchal control over women's movement through the practice of restricting them to the deep recesses of the home. That he returns to this theme throughout the novelle suggests that strict confinement for the purpose of safeguarding feminine chastity is a common practice amidst fifteenth-century Italian households. The window-balcony motif provided a tangible and symbolic element through which to consider the justness of confining women to a wholly private existence, removed from contact with life outside the household and denied even the sight of the public sphere. Boccaccio delineates these ambiguous and liminal realms as the source of both concern for women's freedom and the potential for liberation, showing his willingness to proffer this space as one worthy of more careful consideration.

This intertextual discourse concerned with the problem of moral domestic space continues beyond the literary realm; the

theme recurs as metaphor for deviancy in contemporary women's portraiture. Similar to Boccaccio's tale, the window motif in Sandro Botticelli's *Woman at a Window* symbolizes the breakdown of the prescribed notion that women should remain far removed from their household windows for the sake of their honor, reputation and chastity.



*Sandro Botticelli: Woman at a Window (c. 1435-49)*  
*Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

Expounding upon the portrait conventions of his predecessors, Botticelli uses the window motif to render a curious domestic scene like those related in the *Decameron*. *Woman at a Window*, dated sometime in the 1470s, is painted from the point of view of an outsider looking in on a lady as she stands perched at a window. The lady, generally thought to be Smerelda Brandini, challenges the didactic principles that forbid women to confront the world through household windows. Contrary to the learned advice on proper feminine conduct, Brandini holds the shutter open with her

right hand while she boldly returns the gaze of her spectators who look at her from below. Her twinkling eyes, subdued smile, and the faint dimple that appears on her left cheek are subtle indications of her intellect and spirit, which she attempts to conceal through this stifled expression. Her thumb protrudes into the viewers' space, transgressing the physical barrier between her and the public. David Alan Brown, offering an explanation for Botticelli's highly animated sitter, an anomaly during a time when restrained profiles of women were common, affirms that "there does not seem to have been any change in status of women during this period . . . rather [Botticelli] may have wished to overcome the limitations of the static profile in an attempt to convey the physical and psychological presence of the sitter."<sup>5</sup> While Brown's assertion explains Brandini's three-quarter pose and her active engagement with the audience, it does not reconcile Botticelli's decision to escape the spatial conventions of portraiture to show the sitter positioned at a household window. As a perceptive and culturally conscious artist who would have been aware of the stigma attached to windows as improper places for women, it was not arbitrary that Botticelli chose to include the window motif so centrally in this portrait. Such a radical departure from the portrait conventions advocated a similar breakdown of those contemporary social conditions that limited women's movement.

At the time that Botticelli painted *Woman at a Window*, earlier portrait artists had incorporated the window motif to different ends. The background landscape, as seen through painted windows in portraiture, most often appears in portrait pairs of noble couples, where the window provides an additional aesthetic element through which artists could display their skills in the art of landscape painting. I know of only one earlier individual portrait showing a woman poised in front of outdoor scenery, Pisanello's *Ginevra d'Este*, found at the Louvre. Here the floral and greenery have been identified as an embossed tapestry meant to emulate the Virgin's *hortus conclusus*. Tapestries depicting flora and fauna, like the *Camera dei Pavoni*

5 David Alan Brown, *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 172.

or “Peacock Room” seen in the well-preserved Davanzati palace, Florence, were common in fifteenth-century homes. This trend to bring the beauty of the outdoors indoors may, in part, result from the very little exposure women had to the outdoor, rural environment—hence their desire to have these scenes recreated where they would daily experience them.



*Pisanello: Portrait of a Princess (c. 1435-49)*  
*Louvre, Paris*

Unlike either of these earlier portrait styles that favor the landscape aesthetic, the painted window in Botticelli’s portrait is the agent through which we meet the sitter face to face. Because of the perspective, we occupy the landscape at which the lady gazes. The audience, the artist, and the patrons, make up her public for whom she is now eternally cast as spectacle. While she remains at the window frozen in time, the ever-changing public passes by to catch a glimpse of her, and just as the conduct manuals warned, one cannot control the number of peering eyes that look upon a lady who shows herself at her window.

While Brandini's outward gaze and curious expression are uncharacteristic of the time period, so too is the sitter's plain costume. Brandini's austere dress makes it difficult to argue that this portrait commemorates a public ceremony, as is the case argued for most portraits of patrician women in the Quattrocento. Traditionally, the celebratory occasion justifies the lady's appearance in public. Conversely, Botticelli's sitter is shown wearing very little ornamentation. Her garments are well suited for domestic duties, but not for posing for an expensive painting. Her loose-fitting white *camicia*, or chemise, is worn over her *gamurra*; her accessories consist of only a basic collar around her neck and her hair is concealed in a simple coif under a lightweight cap. Contrasted with contemporary female portraits of the time, such as Pollaiuolo's portraits of elaborately decorated ladies, Botticelli's lady stands out in stark contrast. Certainly, Botticelli had reasons other than Pollaiuolo's when he painted this austere portrait that closely resembles the sober Northern Dutch genre paintings. Perhaps Brandini's plain dress represents her adherence to strict sumptuary laws of the Quattrocento. Her unadorned attire conforms to the proper dress codes for women prescribed by the moralists, who advise men to keep their wives plainly dressed so that they will not feel tempted to venture to windows where they can be seen. While his reasons for such an austere portrait remain elusive, Botticelli's portrayal of Brandini shows a concern for sobriety and a great deal of restraint from material desire. In this regard Brandini is the paragon of the good wife, yet there is still the problem of her bold and defiant presentation at the window.

If we pay close attention to the background detail, we see that Botticelli's portrait captures a spontaneous, candid scene of daily life. The space that Brandini occupies is suggestive of a terrace or *loggia*, and in the background there is an opening that provides a glimpse of an interior space more safely removed from the dangers outside. Furthermore, the choice to leave the door open gives the impression that the woman has entered this place with haste, perhaps intending

to pass back through into the adjoining room momentarily. I imagine her presence here as a fleeting moment in which she absconded to this window to see and be seen. She may be dutiful in the sense that she is demurely dressed, but her station at the window, exchanging glances with those outside of her home, contradicts the instruction of contemporary conduct manuals.

Stripped of all the fineries of dress and wealth, Brandini stands in the window as a figure of individuality and independence, as a woman engaged in social exchange, however inappropriate it may have been for her to do so. She has not taken the time out of her day to be groomed to have her likeness painted as if she were a mannequin made to model family wealth. The absence of a husband, or any other relative for that matter, suggests another sort of intimate relationship, but her enigmatic facial expression leaves us with fewer clues upon which to decipher this relationship. For as many different spectators who stop to behold her at the window, Brandini responds with as many exchanges. It is this ambiguity that builds the narrative and adds depth to Botticelli's painting. Brandini has an agency that her contemporary female sitters lack. Because she opens the window, she controls when, where, and from what angle we see her. She is the active participant in this narrative scene where passersby exchange glances with this captivating and inaccessible lady. Unlike her contemporaries shown in profile, Brandini is aware of her audience, and as she remains poised at her window she invites spectators on her own terms of display and exchange. Fifteenth-century male patriarchs feared such power and agency in women, and their concerns found numerous outlets of expression in contemporary conduct manuals.

Windows reduce the physical and metaphorical barrier built up around fifteenth-century women, and when present in prescriptive literature and popular culture, the window motif flirts with the fine line of what was considered an acceptable boundary between women and the public. The prevalence of the window motif in fifteenth-century culture testifies to the social tensions attached to

these morally ambiguous spaces and to the problems these spaces posed for the discipline of women. The idea of the chastity belt, an instrument that has fascinated and mystified twenty-first-century society, is the product of extreme patriarchal fears of the loss of feminine chastity. Yet it is difficult to determine the actual use and effectiveness of chastity belts in the Quattrocento. Strict confinement of women, however, was a much more apparent and practical means of safeguarding chastity: virtual architectural chastity belts that required women to keep family honor and virtue intact.

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*Venetian Chastity Belt (Supposedly 16th Century)*

*On Display in the Doge's Palace*