

Elena Cornaro Piscopia: Cracks in the Glass Ceiling

There is a presumption amongst many that I speak to that prior to the Seneca Falls Convention all women occupied an oppressed, lowly position as a chattel of the men in her life. In fact there were many examples of outstanding women, some, like Queen Elizabeth, Joan of Arc, Eleanor of Aquitaine and Catherine the Great are well known, others, such as Elena Piscopia, need their story to be re-told lest their achievements are forgotten.

Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia was born on June 5th, 1646, in Venice, The Serene Republic. Because her father held high office in the republic, he was procurator for St. Marks, the family was entitled to live on St Mark's Square, in this case in the beautiful Palazzo Loredano. Realizing that his daughter was astute and intelligent, she was the third child, when she was 7 her father hired eminent tutors to instruct her in languages. Elena soon mastered Latin and Greek as well as grammar and music. Within a few years she had been awarded the title *Oraculum Septilingue*; she was also proficient in Hebrew, Spanish, French, and Arabic as well as her native tongue. In addition to languages she studied mathematics, astronomy, philosophy and theology; where she became well-known for her prodigious reasoning powers. By her early twenties, Elena was out-distancing the tutors and so her father arranged for her to attend the University of Padua. Her humility caused her to eschew academic recognition of her talents until, at her father's urging, she applied to become a Doctor of Theology. Unfortunately, due to opposition from the Catholic Church, she was denied the opportunity. Her peers were outraged and she was urged to change the Doctorate to philosophy, which she did. Her doctoral examination was attended by the elite of the Universities of Padua, Bologna, Perugia, Rome, Naples and Ferrara as well as almost the entire Senate of Venice and many other notables of the day. The audience was rapturous at her brilliant answers and she became the first woman to receive a Doctors degree. So impressed were they that Elena received the Doctor's Ring, Teacher's Ermine Cape and the Poet's Laurel Crown; the Cornaro Window at Vassar College commemorates the event.

From her teenage years on she was an accomplished musician. Aside from her knowledge she was adept on the harpsichord, the clavichord, the harp, and the violin as well as composing a substantial body of music. Prior to attending Padua, in 1665, Elena had taken the habit of a Benedictine Oblate. This was more a device to continue her studies without the encumbrance of a husband, she did not become a nun but thereafter had the excuse of her marriage, or at least engagement, to Christ. She was a great mathematician and philosopher, who loved to debate, and was often visited by scholars from all over Europe. She resigned her place in Venetian society and dedicated herself to learning and charity, dying, probably from tuberculosis, on July 26th 1684. She was only 38. So revered was she that the University erected a statue to her. The following year, a medal was struck in her honor and her writings were published in 1688, in Parma. Elena Cornaro Piscopia was a great scholar who was recognized as such by her peers and lauded for her achievements; she is a great example to us all.

Sources: *Elena Lucrezia Piscopia Cornaro* entry in the Catholic Encyclopedia

Guernsey, Jane Howard. *The Lady Cornaro, Pride and Prodigy of Venice*, College Avenue Press, New York, 1999.

"Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia", *Biographies of Women Mathematicians*, Agnes Scott College.

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