Architectural chastity belts: The window motif as instrument of discipline in fifteenth-century Italian conduct manuals and art

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

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts
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As the Italian thirst for excellence and knowledge burgeoned throughout the Quattrocento, the genre of instructional literature responded accordingly to social demands. Offering advice on a wide range of experience from the quotidian to the extraordinary, from superstition to scientific, conduct manuals appealed to readers of all Italian social classes. Investigating the relationship between this body of literature and the lives of contemporary women, this paper will focus specifically on those manuals which prescribe behaviors for women, and will investigate the reception of these precepts and the extent in which these notions informed and transformed women’s lives. In order to better understand this complex relationship, I will focus on one particular 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. The adherence to such an idea would prohibit women’s use of their household windows, confining them to the deep recesses of the home, far from public view and public life. 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, such as 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 both popular fiction and contemporary women’s portraiture. Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, a book which conduct manual authors continually deemed inappropriate for women, 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 Botticelli painted interior scenes which featured women positioned at windows. The synthesis of these seemingly disparate sources, hitherto unexplored within the same context, reveals a complicated moral climate that undoubtedly had decisive consequences for Italian women during the fifteenth century.
Introduction:

“Marital Chastity and Feminine Conduct: Prescription or Description?”

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 champion 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 movements underwent increasingly strict surveillance as the home was equated with honor, virtue and proper codes of conduct. Amidst a complicated catalog of virtues prescribed for women, which modern scholars have variously termed the “triune convention of virtues,” “a dowry of virtue,” and even “a grab bag of virtues,”¹ chastity is

always regarded first and foremost so that we might regard chastity as the mistress of the house with all other virtues serving as her handmaidens. This analogy, in truth, is much more poignant than cursory reflection reveals. For fifteenth-century Italian society, the patrician *donna della casa* was instructed to embody chastity, to become a veritable paragon of virtue for the family, household, and even her local parish or community. Her value and identity were intrinsically linked with the physical boundaries of the home, themselves fortresses of family honor, prestige and position. Thus, women and household were perpetually bound to one another, ideologically and physically, symbols and chattel, as part of the same social program to win public honor and attain virtuous and chaste reputations for the family. The following advice, offered by Barbaro in the second book of *De Re Uxoria*, exemplifies the fifteenth-century notion of the affinity between woman and household as symbols of honor and reputation:

“I am wont to compare these men who are properly called ‘uxorious’ to those who are so pleased with splendid exteriors on their houses while they are forced to do without necessary things inside. Hence, they present a golden façade to give pleasure to neighbors and the passers-by” (Barbaro 208).

Here, Barbaro equates love of one’s wife with love of one’s home where both house and wife showcase family wealth and prestige. If exterior adornment is taken to the excess then inner virtue is compromised. Barbaro explains more directly in the next few lines:

“Moreover, sumptuous attire, magnificent clothes, and luxurious apparel give pleasure to those who frequent porticos, open courts and sidewalks or very often promenade through

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2 For a fascinating discussion of concepts of honor for Roman prostitutes’ see Elizabeth Cohen, “Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22, (Spring 1992), 597-625, wherein she examines court records that recount instances of public house-scorning in efforts to damage the reputation of prostitutes.
the whole city” (208). Not only is the decoration of oneself and one’s property dangerous at or near the confines of the home, but Barbaro warns that it may lead to further vice, such as the will and desire to frequent public places, which are, for him, antithetical to domestic values. Barbaro’s advice reveals the complex associations with women and home, virtue and reputation, display and public space in the fifteenth-century Italian collective consciousness, themes which will serve as the conceptual framework throughout the rest of my thesis.

The spatial construction of honor became more complicated as certain spaces within the home evaded easy classification, and as a result, were determined 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 head of households had to be wary and deflating the possibilities of movement for women. 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.

Many scholars have identified the Renaissance obsession with chastity as a part of a greater social program of values and customs. Along with other closely related terms, such as purity, virginity, virtue, and honor, and the Italian terms, onestà and virtù, the
Renaissance notion of feminine chastity is obscured through variable language, thus requiring flexible analysis from scholars. The sources regarding feminine chastity have been as wide-ranging as the terminology: prescriptive literature, religious sermons, legal documents, letters, and popular culture have all received significant attention. However, the common thread across these varied fields is the claim that the virtue of chastity, for the patrician woman, was essential not only for the lady’s success and wellbeing, but also for the success of her family. This wealth of scholarship might be divided into three broad frameworks: feminist, social and cultural. Feminist scholars recognize chastity as a gendered construct for which only women were held accountable, and as fundamental to the patriarchal system, providing men the authority to control and regulate women’s behavior.3 Social historians have focused on the relationship between ideals of chastity and women’s social status, occupation, and geography, concluding that early modern definitions of chastity were neither absolute nor permanent, but subject to idiosyncrasies and manipulation.4 Historians of early modern culture have studied chastity as a common theme featured prominently in early modern literature, theatre, and visual art throughout

3 Julia O’Faolain and Lauro Martines (1973) examine the exalted position of virginity as an accepted and regulatory mode for women, in their words, “a stick wherewith to beat all who were not virginal chaste and modest”141-143, 176-78. Franco Mormando (1998) examines the sermons on marriage relations given Sienese friar, Bernardino of Siena, in an effort to define whether or not he held progressive or regressive opinion towards women’s autonomy.

4 Judith Brown (1986) cites increased importance on women to be religious and moral guides for the family as one factor restricting women from work in the public sphere. Guido Ruggiero (1993) cites the racy poetry of Aretino as the antithesis of the civic morality prescribed by Barbaro and Alberti, therefore promoting illicit culture. Michael Rocke (1998) notes that male identity and sense of honor was largely defined by their ability to guard and protect women’s chastity, where Sharon Strocchia (1998) examines the public rites of honor in Italian Renaissance cities, concluding that these rituals prove that society regarded male honor more highly. Gabriella Zarri (1998) is interested in the Post-Reformation social disciplining of women in convents whereby a renewed emphasis on feminine chastity and submission to authority resulted in stricter confinement for nuns. Elizabeth and Thomas Cohen (2001) distinguish honor codes, as separate from religious codes, a set of deeply embedded value system which requires separate codes for men and women and which requires that men are responsible for women’s moral and ethical characters.
Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Finally, several texts and source books contain a combination of these frameworks in their assessment of women’s experience in the early modern Europe, all of which include substantial surveys of chastity and sexual virtue for women.

Modern investigations of chastity reveal the ubiquity and complexity of this essential virtue in Quattrocento Tuscany, along with its variety of applications for current research. Nevertheless, this singular virtue that inspired the myth of the chastity belt beckons for further investigation. My work endeavors to elaborate on existing scholarship to find a common discourse on chastity that exists between the civic humanists and popular culture; I will examine each genre’s treatment of sexual discipline according to the unique aspects of that genre. Ultimately, I hope this thesis will open up new avenues for social and historical inquiry on the issues of marital chastity and the social disciplining it engenders so that we might complicate and enrich our understanding of women’s experience in the fifteenth-century. The origin of chastity belts, devices Eric Dingwall calls the “most curious results of jealousy ever invented by man” (i), have not been conclusively dated to Europe. However, Dingwall believes that it is highly plausible that the device dates back to the medieval times with introduction to Europe.

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through Italy at the time of the Crusades.\footnote{Dingwall argues that extreme jealousy in Europe, and particularly Italy, as seen in the sterner laws over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were susceptible to the appeal of girdles of chastity.} As difficult as it may be to pinpoint actual uses of chastity belts in the fifteenth-century, a similar tactic, the preservation of feminine chastity through strict confinement to the home, is much more evident and equally as restrictive. Several documentary sources attest that this practice was very real and widespread. Prescriptive literature is perhaps the most fruitful source providing us with contemporary concern for chastity, but as they offer admonitions and prescribed ideals, to what extent can we accept these texts as revelatory of actual circumstances for Italian women in the Quattrocento?

My inquiry rests with the discipline of marital chastity for fifteenth-century patrician women in Tuscany. Through the study of three disparate sources, prescriptive literature, popular literature, and portraiture, heretofore unexplored together on the subject of sexual discipline and chastity, I hope to uncover new avenues through which to complicate our understanding of women’s sexuality. My interest in these distinct sources, aside from a distracting appetite for eclecticism, is to unveil or perhaps more appropriately “unlock” a common discourse that reveals fifteenth-century attitudes about women’s confinement for the purpose of safeguarding chastity. By engaging in this discourse, I will explain to what degree it was acceptable for women to transgress the confinement of the home through the weaknesses of its boundaries – the household window. As such, my paper’s focus is threefold: social constructions of gendered space, discipline of feminine chastity, and transgression of accepted norms, three concepts which frequently collapsed into one another.
There is little current scholarship that has studied these themes in conjunction one with another, and none have approached these themes by merging prescriptive literature with both popular literature and portraiture for a fuller understanding of women’s movement and the regulatory boundaries of the home. Peter Stallybrass’s “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” argues that as there was a growing concern for morality across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the female body became more defined as naturally grotesque and therefore needed to be contained and kept under strict surveillance. He identifies three locations where surveillance was concentrated: the mouth, chastity and the threshold of the house. Furthermore, Stallybrass remarks that the “woman was the emblem of the perfect impermeable container, and hence maps out the integrity of the state… the state, like the virgin was the hortus conclusus, an enclosed garden walled off from enemies” (129). While Stallybrass makes many of the same connections I have made in doing my research, his interest lies with sixteenth and seventeenth-century Elizabethan society, comparing the conduct literature of Erasmus with popular literature of Shakespeare. Certainly, comparisons across the two cultures and periods can be made, but as every culture has its own eccentricities, the Italian mentality of the Quattrocento deserves examination. Natalie Tomas takes a different approach in her book “A Positive Novelty”: Women and Public Life in Renaissance Florence (1992), demonstrating across four different female demographics that women did have opportunities to wield political influence. She concludes that “spatial area was not therefore irrevocably fixed as either ‘public’/male or ‘private’/female” (12). I would agree with Tomas that many women did enjoy certain political freedoms, but as her survey includes the activities of exceptional women during exceptional times her
assessment may not apply to all patrician women or even the collective mentalities about women during the fifteenth-century. Jane Tylus’s “Women at Windows: “Commedia dell’arte” and Theatrical Practice in Early Modern Italy” shares my focus on women who negotiate the boundary between public and private space. Surveying more than one hundred window scenes from Flaminia Scala’s plays, Tylus demonstrates that the “conspicuous use of window scenes strove to represent and destabilize the conventionalized spaces which their spectators daily inhabited” (342). Tylus argues that within these plays, the middle-class ladies held an advantageous position over others in the city because of their access to the world through their windows and the ability to retreat, when need be, to the safety of the household interior. Certainly her research is important to my own, upon which I hope to append the surveys of portraiture and popular literature. Robert C. Davis’s article “The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance” (1998) focuses on gendered urban public space in Venice, where the accounts of foreign travelers reveal the rigidness with which patrician ladies were locked away in their homes and rarely seen in public. Their exclusion, Davis argues, is due to the myriad of male-driven activities which ostracized women from public places and made many areas of the city truly dangerous for women. Women responded by putting on an exaggerated spectacles of feminine display such as parading through the streets in extremely high platform shoes. Because these spaces were self-fashioned by men and women in society both rituals define gendered space within the city on cultural rather than natural terms. Most recently, Lauro Martines has conducted a survey of popular literature from Boccaccio in the fourteenth century to Lorenzo Salva in the late sixteenth century. This survey is concerned with the prevalent theme of seduction throughout these 251 popular
tales and the threat amorous affairs pose to the domestic space. Like me, Martines strongly believes that because culture expressed a need for stories with familiar themes, characters and places, these fictional tales are an invaluable and fairly accurate source of everyday affairs. As his focus is seduction, this essay also hinges on the location of the window of the home, where the majority of the scenes of seduction take place.

Furthermore, Martines also includes a discussion on the “language of the eye” which relied on these household openings in order to carry out illicit affairs. He states, “This too is why window and door area, particularly the former, are so often singled out in Renaissance fiction; eye contact was made there and ocular signals were frequently transmitted at windows” (213). Martines's survey of literature is impressive, but as such, he does not dedicate specific analysis to the Boccaccio stories, with which I am concerned in chapter two. My goal with my close analysis of these stories along with the comparison with the ideas set forth in Barbaro’s and Alberti’s treatises and the themes presented in Lippi’s and Botticelli’s portraiture that I can enrich and broaden the scope of the works of these earlier scholars.

Using the civic humanists, Francesco Barbaro and Leon Battista Alberti as my points of entry in chapter one, “Women’s Civic Duty: Chaste and Enclosed,” I hope to reveal ideologies of feminine virtue through their highly influential texts *On Wifely Duties* and *Della Famiglia*, respectively. However, prescriptive literature is problematic, offering a means of securing an ideal rather than describing reality. Therefore I aim to elucidate the validity of these treatises with further discussion of two forms of popular culture: literature and art. Combining learned, instructional texts with popular sources without overt didactic purposes allows for a fuller picture of Quattrocento attitudes. In
chapter two, “Windows of Opportunity,” I will examine three tales from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* which incorporate the theme of women utilizing their windows to subvert patriarchal control. My third and final chapter, “*La Finestra*: A New Convention for Portraiture,” focuses on visual art as text wherein I will analyze two fifteenth-century portraits one by Fra Filippo Lippi and another by Sandro Botticelli, both of which feature women situated at their windows, an anomalous convention for portraiture at the time, and therefore, all the more provocative for further study.
Chapter One:

“A Wife’s Civic Duty, Chaste and Enclosed”

Humanist tracts have certainly given modern historians valuable insight into attitudes on the family, acculturation of private life, household management, and mercantile society as well as providing for posterity an intimate portrait of conjugal and kinship relations in the fifteenth century. However, sexual chastity has not been a central focus of humanist literature, and as they were widely read manuals on the subject of the family, Francesco Barbaro’s *De Re Uxoria* and Leon Battista Alberti’s *Della Famiglia* may provide us with new contexts from which we may better understand prevailing ideals about women’s sexual conduct in Quattrocento Tuscan cities.9

The authority given to civic humanists on matters of the family has been widely-recognized by modern historians and scholars. The treatises by Francesco Barbaro and Leon Battista Alberti are invaluable sources for historians of the fifteenth century interested in studying the unique position of the Italian family and its relationship with society and evolving mercantile economy. Similarly these humanists’ tracts allow us to trace the fifteenth-century acculturation process through assimilation of classical philosophy and humanism. Studied for their distinctive portrait of mercantile society in contrast with the courtly lifestyle made famous in Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*, Barbaro’s and Alberti’s works have fascinated social historians. Of course, Barbaro and Alberti

continue to be cited in nearly every study which concerns attitudes about women and the position they held in the fifteenth century, but beyond citing these sources as evidence of prevailing attitudes, there is still the need to conduct more thorough investigation into the ways in which these treatises directly impacted women’s daily lives. This chapter encourages reflection as to the tone, presentation, and intended audience of these treatises with their prescriptions for women’s chastity in the fifteenth century in an effort to understand how deeply women’s lives were conditioned according to these highly esteemed conduct manuals on family. Barbaro’s *De Re Uxoria* and Alberti’s *Della Famiglia* were both widely-read works, receiving a great deal of praise from contemporary audiences, and thus I believe their impact on fifteenth-century conceptions of the family were significant.

The Quattrocento was for Italy a crucial period in the establishment and the refinement of conduct, morals, and behavior. Marked by their renewed interest in extensive knowledge on a wide range of different topics and the desire to demonstrate grace and skill in a variety of activities, Italians were indeed leaders in a cultural flourishing. This fervor for human excellence was complemented, indeed promoted, by the invention of the printing press in 1440. With the agency to reach members of plebian society, informing those who were previously ignorant of the specialized teaching that was privileged only to the learned elite, printed texts burgeoned under the support of the newer, wider market.

However, the nascent stage of publishing culture during this period and the waning existence in the scribal tradition resulted in a complex culture of literary texts. Certainly there was contradiction between the desire for erudite material and the realities
of what consumers received in exchange for their money and eagerness. Before the introduction of the plagiarism law and publication parameters, it was up to the individual publisher to evaluate the merits of any given text. Motivated by economic gain rather than an interest in the merits of a particular manuscript, publishers would put nearly any text to print that was viewed as a prospective best-seller. Just as in the twenty-first century, where scholars struggle with the wealth of information made available through modern technology and publicly authored websites, the fifteenth century had yet to regulate information that circulated to the public. Paradox lies in the fact that during this time there was also a deeply rooted belief in the power of the printed word. Inquiring minds invested whole-heartedly in the luxury of books, following credulously the doctrines of their hard-earned possessions. Reputable texts like those of Francesco Barbaro and Leon Battista Alberti helped to bridge this transition, applying their knowledge of classical doctrine and philosophy to their contemporary treatises which were relevant and familiar for their readers.

Rudolph Bell suggests that conduct manuals were as prevalent in fifteenth-century Italian society as How-to books are today, and Gabriella Zarri’s extensive survey of prescriptive literature written expressly for women between the years 1471 and 1700 reveals 2,626 vernacular texts, an impressive figure which testifies to early modern demand for conduct and courtesy literature (Bell 6).

Benjamin Kohl, translator of the version of De Re Uxoria cited here, argues Barbaro to have been a celebrated scholar in his own time, stating that the tract was met with much approval amongst friends and learned elite in all of the prominent Northern
Italian cities. Furthermore, the staggering facts and figures perhaps better testify to the success of Barbaro’s youthful tracts. According to Kohl, who derives his information from a seminal scholar on Barbaro, P.O. Kristeller, there exist more than fifty manuscript copies of *De Re Uxoria*, nearly all of which were copied in the fifteenth century, and several English and French translations exist from well into the seventeenth century. Extant manuscripts of Alberti’s work indicate that he enjoyed similar success. Although it was not printed until the nineteenth century, evidence suggests that Alberti’s text would have been well known to his contemporaries and was lauded for its erudition and merit. Alberti’s choice of the vernacular language and dialogue form appealed to his contemporary audience and encouraged commentary from opposing points of view. Thirteen fifteenth-century manuscripts survive today and, according to Girolamo Mancini, at least eight sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholars cited Alberti.

Championing the family at the heart of the mercantile state, Barbaro and Alberti both extol the importance of the economic role of wife and mother for the maintenance and prosperity of the household, and above all to provide offspring toward the extension of the family line. Accordingly, both *De Re Uxoria* and *Della Famiglia* dedicate a substantial portion of the treatise to prescriptions for the ideal wife and mistress of the house. As we have already seen the gravity with which chastity was regarded, it is not surprising to find that it features centrally in each author’s portrait of the ideal wife and mother as an essential virtue which every woman must possess if she were to bring honor and success to her family and household.

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11 Ibid., 186.
I will begin with discussion of Barbaro’s slightly earlier treatise, begun in 1415 and presented to the newlywed Medici couple in 1416, examining first its literary context and form so that I may then interpret the meaning and implications of Barbaro’s prescriptions on virtue for contemporaries.

The chosen title for his treatise, *De Re Uxoria*, or *On Wifely Duties*, appears patently obvious. This tract clearly describes a female subject and implies female readership, specifically those who are, or are soon to become wives. Contrary to what the title implies, we soon learn from the dedication that Barbaro has intended his treatise expressly for a male audience, as his dedication is riddled with honorable mentions of the names of male elites, both historical and contemporary. Conversely, not one single woman’s name is mentioned throughout these introductory pages, therefore relegating women to the object rather than the subject of discussion on the economy of the family and household management, realms in which, in actuality, women played a central and active role.

To better understand the context of the treatise, I will hereby recount the interlocutors involved in the treatise’s conception and circulation. First of all, Barbaro dedicates his book to the very prominent and noble member of the Medici family, Lorenzo de Giovanni de Medici, brother to Cosimo the Great, on the occasion of his new marriage to whom Barbaro concedes that it is a folly of past traditions to offer fine gifts to new grooms with the hopes that the expressions of gratitude will yield even greater profits. This said, Barbaro believes there to be no finer gift to bestow than the advice of one friend to another, particularly advice which promises success and prosperity in marriage. In essence, although Lorenzo has already acquired a wife in person and in
position, Barbaro now offers him the priceless gift of her quality, manners and personality, the ornaments to complete the “package” gifted to him. Lorenzo’s soon-to-be bride is only a passive referent throughout this male-dominated exchange of gifts and property. To add insult to injury, she is dismembered, exchanged on separate occasions, first physically and then qualitatively.

This exchange extends to several other men beyond these two primary interlocutors, Barbaro and his dedicatee Lorenzo. Many other prominent male figures, Barbaro states, have contributed to this discussion on women and it is purported that more still will find a need for such useful instruction. Barbaro mentions that his good friend, the nobleman Zaccaria Trevisan, contributed to initial discussion about the duties of a wife, and these, moreover, were developed from the expertise of the ancients on such matters. Thus, Barbaro conveys a round table discussion, consisting exclusively of male participants, all of whom have collaborated to formulate the prescriptions presented in De Re Uxoría, which are then to be gifted to a nobleman embarking on the first few months of marriage.

Having described the origin of his ideas, where it now seems appropriate to acknowledge both members of the noble couple and offer congratulations for the bride to be, (the ostensible subject of the treatise), Barbaro begins a long list of Lorenzo’s kinsmen and close friends, as a reminder of the legacy which he must uphold and of the good example he must set for others. Barbaro praises Lorenzo for imitating both his father Giovanni and brother Cosimo in great deeds, and then continues to list the learned and esteemed men with whom he associates, among whom are Roberto Rossi, Leonardo Bruni and Niccolo Niccoli.
In his farewell to Lorenzo, before he begins the prescriptions for his wife and the wives of his acquaintances, Barbaro makes one last reference to fellow men, thus assuring his male readership of the relevancy of this matter to the patriarchal order. Likening himself to Alexander the Great and Lorenzo to Xenocrates, Barbaro presents an allegorical tale in which Xenocrates declined Alexander’s gift of gold for the reason that he had no use for riches. To his refusal, Alexander replied that it may have been true that Xenocrates may had no use for riches, but that certainly he would allow to offer his friendship. Thus, Barbaro defends the merits of his tract in that he has gained pleasure in offering counsel to others on a subject he judges to be noble and valuable. Barbaro has made it abundantly clear that while his tract will address wives and their daily duties, ultimately husbands are responsible for their wives’ behavior. Truly, it is the elite society of men, faced with the task of marriage for procreation, whom Barbaro addresses with the intent of educating them in proper and efficient ways of managing their households through the disciplining of their wives. 13

As I have shown in the introduction, the virtue of chastity incorporates many other virtues which exemplify and promote the cardinal virtue of chastity. Barbaro’s admonitions are an excellent example of this relationship between the prescribed virtues for women. His assimilation of ancient ideals regarding modesty and strict discipline of women through confinement to the home reveal Barbaro’s processes of developing relevant modes of discipline for his contemporary aristocratic families and their wives.

13 The responsibility for men to create a model of decorum for women and then inform society of this model continued throughout the fifteenth century. Wiesner-Hanks identifies the sixteenth century as the earliest in which books were written for girls, and these were in the form of Protestant devotional books. It was not until the seventeenth century that “a few secular books were written specifically for girls, such as guides to conversation and manners, and even romances, though they continued to be strongly moral in tone and concentrated on chastity” (Wiesner-Hanks 151).
Modesty, one of the more common virtues directly associated with women’s chastity, is a central theme and a necessary requirement for women according to Barbaro. For Barbaro, a woman’s outward show of modesty in all aspects of her behavior would demonstrate her chastity. On this point, Barbaro explains “moderation in a wife is believed to consist especially in controlling her demeanor, behavior, speech, dress, eating and lovemaking” (Barbaro 202). Barbaro would have women practice modesty in all activities in which they take part, citing several famous Greek wives as exempla, who, through natural love for their husbands, exhibited unwavering devotion and restraint. With these exempla, Barbaro is particularly aware of the female gaze, a theme he makes central to each of these discussions on feminine ideals. The eyes, “the windows to the soul,” were believed to reveal a person’s innermost feelings and thoughts, which would be inappropriate for a lady to reveal to others.14 To avoid this indecorous candor, women were taught to avert their eyes from everyone except their husbands. To this end, contemporaries should remember the Spartan practice of veiling married women’s faces when out in public, whilst the virgin women were free to wear their faces bare so that men could easily determine that they were available for marriage. Similarly, Barbaro lauds Cretans who allowed young girls “to stand in their doorways to sing and joke and play games with their suitors. But when their women are married they have to stay at home” (203). He extends praise for this practice to the principles of the Greek Gorgias, “who wanted women shut up in their homes so that nothing could be known of them except for their reputations” (203). Barbaro’s conclusion on the topic of modesty are critical in developing his own unique understanding of the appropriateness for the

14 The eyes were a very popular symbol in amorous poetry following in the style of Petrarch, wherefrom piercing arrows sprung and enraptured unguarded lovers. See O’Neill “Virtue and Beauty: The Renaissance image of the ideal woman.”
confinement of wives and those liberties a wife should be allowed in public life. He concludes that his Italian readers should practice a middle ground regarding women’s confinement in the home, somewhere between the harsh precepts of Gorgias the Greek and the liberal principles of Thucydides, whose fondness for his wife made him weak, and this weakness led him to provide his wife with too much freedom.

I am not, however, suggesting that Barbaro was a revolutionary feminist promoting unheard of freedoms for women. Compared with the extreme ideas of Gorgias, Barbaro’s advice is certainly much more liberal, but his admonitions on wifely conduct are still incredibly restrictive, offering wives no autonomy to govern their own conduct. That the responsibility for wifely conduct fell on the husband is recalled in the wisdom of a popular adage that wives should not act with their husbands as does the moon – the moon goes out only when the sun is absent. Barbaro does not forbid women from going out in public altogether, but he makes it clear that no woman should venture outside of the home without her husband as chaperone. That Barbaro felt the need to address a discrepancy between different schools of Greek philosophical thought on matters of disciplining wives is important in and of itself. His mediating position testifies to the lack of resolve on this issue amongst even the most revered Greek moralists. Barbaro’s recommendations are a compromise between the two Greek extremes, providing Italians with sound, if still very limited prescriptions for governing wives’ sexual conduct.

As with modesty, women’s sumptuous dress is a central concern for Barbaro because it was thought that indulgence in dress would lead directly to lusty desires and loosening of chaste morals. Throughout his second book, Barbaro strongly censured ornate and elaborate dress for women, conceding with the judicious advice that “such
wives are apt to turn from their own husbands and to other lovers” (207). Barbaro validates the claim of this ancient scholar, whom he fails to name, in very clear language of his own. He states that “wives wear and esteem all those fine garments so that men other than their own husbands will be impressed and pleased” (208). By continually linking subsequent vices to the problem of women’s chastity, Barbaro effectively appeals to the foremost concern of his wedded kinsmen: the fear that their wives would turn their affections to other men, eventually resulting in the loss of their chastity.

However, Barbaro brings hope for the distrustful husbands, prescribing a disciplinary measure that will ensure the double benefit that husbands’ pocketbooks do not suffer and that their wives will willingly agree to remain indoors. Barbaro informs his readers through the expert advice provided in Plutarch’s *Moralia* and didactic tone here clearly meant for men’s perusal: “[I]f we were to deprive most women of their sumptuous clothes, they would gladly and willingly stay at home” (208). Fifteenth-century patriarchal ideologies equated women’s desire to be seen and pride in appearance with unchaste morals and fed male fears that women would transgress social boundaries if provided motivation for public spectacle. The resolve with which Barbaro adheres to this equation recalls the passage cited from his treatise in the introduction where excess pride in household exteriors reflected vain and dangerous social mores at the expense of the more important matter of inner concerns that are neglected.

Modesty and sober dress and comportment were not the only subjects worthy of Barbaro’s attention. Even seemingly rudimentary aspects of life, such as a woman’s diet, were given careful consideration as to the effects they might have on a woman’s sexual appetite and carnal desire. Barbaro reminds his readers that the holy nuns practice ascetic
dietary restrictions in order to curb all physical desires, fearing that any indulgence in delicate foods would contaminate their innocent minds and elicit salacious behavior. Under each subheading that details a new aspect of feminine activity lies the perpetual concern for her chastity as proponent of all other virtues.

This trend of examining social and moral ideologies for female behavior, marked by an urgency to define every vice as a gateway towards sexual depravity, continues throughout De Re Uxoria. Addressed as a guidebook for women, yet clearly intended for men, Barbaro manages, throughout nine chapters all “dedicated” to nine different necessary duties for the wife, to continually reiterate the many roads which potentially lead to women’s loss of chastity. This inflation of qualities over which men had to be wary in order to control their women’s sexuality had decisive and profound effects on women’s position in fifteenth-century Tuscany. As we might logically conclude, women’s confinement increased with the rise in fear for women’s sexual indiscretions. Certainly, the possibility of women’s infidelity looms as a central theme throughout Barbaro’s treatise, a theme which I believe was similarly prevalent in men’s minds in Quattrocento Tuscany.

For Leon Battista Alberti, wives’ freedoms and access to the public sphere provided a complementary, if entirely new set of concerns for the Quattrocento Italian paterfamilias. Undoubtedly, Alberti was concerned with feminine morals as much as was Barbaro, yet his treatise, Della Famiglia, cites practical and economic reasons for maintaining women’s chastity. For Alberti, personal merits are directly related to economic prosperity and the survival of the paternal line. Even more so than Barbaro, Alberti’s advice stresses the importance of the preservation of the family through proper
household management. The family, a microcosmic model of the larger social structure, needed as its nucleus, the wife and mother, virtuous role model and custodian of order.

Alberti’s tone does not differ much from Barbaro’s treatise, written only a few decades prior, yet, with Della Famiglia there is a relative increase in women’s responsibilities as donne delle case. This increase in responsibility, however, does not provide women with more autonomy. In fact, on the contrary, I posit that as women’s role and function within the household became more central, so too does their position within it.

True to popular opinion, Alberti ridicules all women who do not strive, at all costs, to uphold chaste morals and proper decorum. Honor and reputation had direct consequences for the success of the family, and as such, all women have a duty to act respectably. On the condition that society supports a strict system of household confinement and that the wife’s primary obligation is to the household, Alberti grants credence to the rule that the wife should always remain “locked up” inside where she could properly mind the home. Alberti’s ideal wife served a utilitarian function, where the terms of the marriage necessitated her continued attention to household affairs so that her husband’s time could be spent attending to public matters. Thus, Alberti’s considerably higher regard for wifely duties did not allow her more self-rule than did Barbaro’s. In fact, Alberti admonitions endorse even stricter confinement of women.

Della Famiglia is written as a conversation that takes place between several men who have gathered to pay their respects to a dying elder. Giannozzo, the predominant speaker of the third book, is a close and trusted friend of the family who stops by to spend an afternoon visiting with those who have gathered in the home. When asked for
his prudent advice on how to run a successful home, Giannozzo recounts for his young listeners the three instructions he offered his new wife upon entering his home after their marriage. According to Giannozzo, the wife should: first, and most importantly, never share the nuptial bed with another man; second, should preside over the household with modesty, serenity and tranquility; and finally, ensure that the household runs smoothly and free of mishap. He praises the wife who has been trained in modesty and virtue, and who, like his wife, fully exemplifies both of these qualities along with her skills in needlework. She should not learn special skills prior to marrying and so that she can be instructed by her husband in the manner with which he would like his home to be run.

When asked what a husband can do in order to reinforce these three points to his wife, Giannozzo replies that the husband can hope to shun every appearance of unchastity if the couple prays together so that God might grant them each their specific virtues.

Accordingly, Giannozzo prays for the masculine ornaments of riches, friendship and honor and his wife for the virtues of integrity, purity and character of the perfect mistress of the household. After prayer, Giannozzo further counsels his wife on the singular importance of achieving and then maintaining a chaste reputation. In order to do so, every deed must be in harmony with proper feminine decorum. She should shun make-up, keep her cast eyes downward, eschew improper speech, and avoid vanities lest she provoke disdain from her kin and neighbors. Alberti’s treatise, like Barbaro’s, exhibits an interrelated and complex program of virtues, all of which complemented the cardinal virtue of chastity.

The interlocutors’ discussion of the duties of a wife discloses contemporary male anxieties about women’s behavior and the fear that women could potentially act against
the concerns of the family and household. Giannozzo, ever wary of impending doom, advises prudence in all matters concerning a man’s estate and honor, where even the wife must prove herself trustworthy in the service of the family. Giannozzo urges that *paterfamilias* practice constant vigilance over all wifely activities. This mistrust is taken to the extreme where Giannozzo insists that husbands keep secrets from their wives. For example, he forbids his wife to enter study and to read any formal documents written by or to him. Although the study was located within the walls of the home, its public function made it inaccessible to women. Thus, space alone did not determine women’s movement within the household, but the function and purpose of the rooms defined acceptable limits for women. Giannozzo prides himself on his judiciousness, recommending his rule, “never to speak with [his wife] of anything but household matters or questions of conduct, or of the children” (210). Only in keeping his wife ignorant of public (male) affairs and limiting her access to household spaces which served public function does Giannozzo feel assured of the stability of the household.

Restricting wives’ liberties was a fundamental tactic in maintaining authority and control over the household. Specifically, it is Alberti’s attention to luminal spaces of the home, such as the household windows, which reveals his meticulousness to matters of feminine conduct. Alberti expressly names the vice of women sitting at their household windows as counteractive to household economy and thrift upon which family governance depends. Compared with Barbaro, Alberti’s prescriptions are much more exacting, thus, answering the fifteenth-century call for precise law and order. For Alberti, windows were symbols of idleness and frivolity, the antithesis of the spindle and distaff which were long-established symbols of feminine productivity and virtue. Fulfilling the
early modern penchant for dichotomous comparison, windows become the attribute of the vice-ridden, lust-driven female the converse to the sewing needle of the industrious and dutiful wife and mother.

Alberti abhors idle activity and reveres time as a God-given asset with which man must utilize wisely; to be frivolous with time is a detriment to the family. Notably, the patriarch, Giannozzo is once again, the mouthpiece for Alberti, targeting the household window as catalyst for the unforgiveable female vice of misspent time. As he dictates instructions to his wife to carefully mind the household possessions, he maintains that in order for her to be dutiful, she “must not spend all day sitting idly by with [her] 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” (222). The image of the wife with sewing needle in hand while perched at the window sill, presents a visual paradox of both virtue and vice. The window negates any wifely virtue that might have been earned through the task of sewing. While the spindle, needle and distaff were common symbols of feminine virtue, here the window becomes the antithetical symbol of vice.

Evidence of spatially arranged conceptions of proper feminine conduct persists throughout the chapter. As the interlocutors, Giannozzo and Lionardo, discuss by what means men can effectively manage their household in both public and private matters, Giannozzo advocates allotting some of the ‘trifling’ household duties to the wife, “for to tell the truth, it would hardly win us respect if our wife busied herself among the men in the marketplace, out in the public eye” (207). When asked what he thought on the matter, Lionardo, the book-learned youth, responds that the ancients would agree with Giannozzo’s opinion of women’s nature and corresponding duties. Recalling the doctrine
of the ancients on what duties were appropriate for women and men, Lionardo replies:

“Nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging for men to bring things home and for women to guard them. The woman, as she remains locked up at home, should watch over things by staying at her post, by diligent care and watchfulness” (207). Lionardo elaborates on this premise of gendered responsibilities by reminding his listeners that men who occupy their time alongside the ladies and take part in the “minor matters” of the household should be scorned and labeled effeminate for neglecting their greater public, “manly and honorable concerns.” As Lionardo describes them: “They are contemptible in their apparent inclination to play the part of women rather than that of men” (208). Lionardo effectively transforms what the ancients understood as “natural” gendered assignments to contemporary and socially-determined constructions of masculine and feminine responsibilities. Alberti’s formula for the well-run household hinges on gendered separation of duties according to modes of public and private activity and acceptable social interaction. He asserts that it is imperative for the *paterfamilias* to receive support from all members of household in order for it to run smoothly. Wives especially, are obligated to assist their husbands, but necessarily must do so while remaining strictly confined to the home.

Giannozzo’s judgment of feminine duty largely confirms to what are the mainstream ideals of the fifteenth century that women are capable of fulfilling domestic roles within the home. However, in one instance, Giannozzo undermines his wife’s achievements in an acerbic remark that carries misogynistic undertones. Refusing his wife due credit where she deserves it, he decries her good work, claiming that she has only been effectual with her domestic tasks because he has provided her with excellent
instruction. Patriarchal ideologies entailed absolute authority for *paterfamilias*, and according to Giannozzo, it was much too early for equality between wife and husband.

One final passage describes proper discipline for wives who have gone astray. To correct wayward wives the *paterfamilias* must utilize the public sphere and pressure of public opinion to shame wives into reforming themselves. This tactic further establishes the fifteenth-century equation of the interior of the home with propriety and the outside realm with indecency. In nearly every regard, Giannozzo believes his young bride to be chaste and contented, but when she fails, Giannozzo is not shy to mete out public punishment. He recounts that on the few occasions he would “have her appear as she should in public, I made her open our own door and go outside practicing self-restraint and grave demeanor. This led our neighbors to observe her air of discretion and to praise her, which increased the respect of our own servants” (229). Because she has overstepped the bounds set forth by her husband, Giannozzo literally asks her to overstep the household boundaries to perform a public spectacle to earn back family honor with public favor. The occasions for which patrician women appear in public are rare, so that when women did appear in public they commanded attention. Giannozzo’s wife seldom enters into public view. Consequently, when she ventures out, her conduct needs to be carefully considered, moderate and decorous, exemplary of her honor and station. Giannozzo exploits the influential power of the public by making the streets a place in which she must go to reform herself. As the mother is the example for her children, the *donna della casa* is the role model for her servants and token of virtue for the household.

Civic morality, according to Barbaro and Alberti, depended on a complex system of familial mores where there exists an affinity between household and commonwealth.
Guido Ruggiero, studying relationships of sex and marriage in the sixteenth century, concludes that “as this discourse of civic morality became more and more of a given in Renaissance culture, it helped to formulate yet stricter gender stereotypes and increased pressure to restrict and place women firmly in a disciplined domestic space” (15). We may see this trend begin to evolve even in the few intervening decades between which Barbaro and Alberti wrote. With little difficulty, later moralists expanded on these basics values set forth by their forefathers to include increasingly precise prescriptions as to the sorts of activities appropriate for women, and thus, a throng of advice addressed specifically to the concerns about women’s activities at the window appear after the fifteenth century. Sixteenth-century conduct manuals continually warned women to stay away from the window or balcony lest they been seen in public view and warned men to become all the more cautious about the amount of time their women were permitted to be present in these luminal spaces surrounding the household. Later advice began to make more extreme, exacting claims such as this one found in Cardinal Antoniano’s advice to the parents of adolescents: “Do not let her hang out the window or balcony to show herself off or flirt with a passerby” (Antoniano, quoted in Bell 180). Bartolommeo de Medina’s similar recommendation in describing the ideal, virtuous wife admonishes that she should make her primary concern the children, not vanity and pomp in her own attire: “She must not hang out the window or otherwise let herself be viewed by outsiders as if she were for sale” (Medina, quoted in Bell 238). According to Medina, a woman showing herself in public is automatically soliciting herself to others. He blames the curious women, not the lust-driven men who seek them out, for the fault of inciting lust. Agostino Gallo’s widespread advice almanac describes “bad women” as those who “want
to hang out at the doorstep, all day or at the window like a crazy woman with no sense of shame, scandalizing the whole city” (Gallo, quoted in Bell 256). Gallo imagines that the actions of one flagrant woman who steps out of bounds will bring ill repute for the entire city, and her society should feel ashamed by her misconduct because, as women were thought to be morally inept, her poor behavior communicates society’s failure to discipline its women.

While civic humanists produced a vast number of treatises on conduct, religious leaders were amongst the most prodigious authors of advice on women’s sexual conduct and moral behavior. In The Catechism of the Council of Trent, church fathers, in a tone much like Barbaro’s who had earlier warned against the female gaze, were directed to lead their congregation to good, wholesome conduct, reminding them to be chary of the “‘eye,’ which is the most insidious inlet for lust” (Catechism, quoted in Bell 197). Their sermons aim to regulate women’s behavior according to proper moral and religious doctrine, each requiring that a woman stay far-removed from public view. These manuals recognize the prevalence of lust in society but misdirect their aims and affix this vice only to women. Rather than helping the lustful to absolve themselves, the advice manuals endeavor to make women invisible, erasing the problem at the source.

In addition to the fear that windows would encourage lust, windows were perceived as instruments through which one could inappropriately flaunt the wealth and the property of the household interior to those passing by, from which conceit and greed might ensue. Bombardo’s advice manual, Compania della Lesina, advises that a man should choose a wife who is small for the reason that “she will be too short to expose herself at the window, so she won’t need as many garments anyway” (Bombardo, quoted
in Bell 199). For Bombardo, having a short wife eliminates two problems: she will be too short to even be seen and lusted over by others; and, secondly, by virtue of this she will not develop a taste for fineries that he argues women naturally have when they enjoy attention and flattery from others. Bombardo fears windows are the cause of both women’s licentiousness and greed for expensive things. His solution is to make women feel plain, even ugly, so that their own insecurities and self-consciousness will urge them to hide indoors, as if confining women to austerity will cause them shame at being seen by others. The extent to which this solution might have been effective underscores the importance of the display culture during the fifteenth century in Tuscany.

Furthermore, evidence from the manuals suggest that there exists a mode of toleration that allows a woman to frequent windows based on her age, class, marital status and virginity. Apparently for some conduct manual-devotees there are certain women who face harsher repercussions because of their status, others less so. Women need men to guide and direct their actions to good ends, and single women, who lack male guardians are thought to be more susceptible to vice, crime and dishonor. Similarly, conduct manuals remind readers that virgin women should be strictly chaperoned so that they do not fall victim to the dreaded windows. Gozze explains this contemporary ideology where he admonishes that, “virgins should not be running from house to house, nor should they be lingering or chatting in the piazza. Once you have your daughter properly enclosed at home, see that she does not expose herself at the windows or hang out at the balcony” (168). Gozze conceives of the outdoors as a forbidding, dangerous place for virgins and the home a safe respite from the hazards abroad. However, even the home has its defects and families of young virgin daughters should not fall prey to the
false sense of security so long as windows still allow for even a modicum of interaction with public life.

Whether these manual authors’ motivations stem from mistrust of women and the fear of the adulteration of the patriliny, from dread of shame and dishonor, or from disdain of idle behavior and loss of family economy, they all pointed to the same end: that it would be unseemly, inappropriate and perhaps unforgivable if a lady wished to seat herself at her household window to look out onto the world beyond her home. The seriousness with which at least some of society considered this offense is expressed in the fifteenth-century manual, The Ten Commandments of Brother Cherubino, where the preacher advises men to use physical punishments sparingly:

“You should beat her, I say, only when she commits a serious wrong: for example, if she blasphemes against God or a saint, if she mutters the devil’s name, if she likes being at the window and lends a ready ear to dishonest young men, or if she has taken to bad habits or bad company, or commits some other wrong that is a mortal sin. Then readily beat her, not in rage but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beating will redound to your merit and her good.”

(O’Faolain and Martines 177, my italics)

Including women who enjoy spending time at their household windows amidst other serious feminine vices such as blaspheming against god or committing mortal sins, expresses the gravity with which the fifteenth-century consciousness regarded the problem of women’s breach of household boundaries and the strict confinement they entailed. As the weak points in the boundary between public and private spheres,
windows harbored the possibilities for women to subvert the patriarchal system and gain a degree of power and autonomy.

Certainly some women use their windows to effect very real offenses, but not all women who hang out of windows are guilty of committing unchaste acts. Rather, these women are guilty of the suspicion they garner from others near to them or for the potential to rouse impure feelings in themselves or others. The fact that this advice is so tediously repeated testifies to the difficulty with which women are able to accept moralizing doctrine. The nature of the advice is ambiguous and confusing to a culture that values opulent display and beauty. Scholars, who study the chivalric romances, painting, sculpture, poetry and literary traditions, agree that a culture of display drives societal values in the fifteenth century. On the one hand, women are ornaments to be admired, representing the very core of family virtue, honor and wealth. On the other hand, the hand that pens the prescriptive literature of the age, women are not to be seen by others. Women are to be hidden away so that only those who have rights to them are allowed to look their fill; with women safely contained within the walls of the home, proper patriarchal order is restored and maintained. The earliest form of the chastity belt is effectively in place and the husbands who hold the keys control their wives’ fates. To the women, and the lovers with whom they cavort, I now turn to continue examination of the discourse on proper social discipline through strict confinement of women in the fifteenth century.
Chapter Two:

Windows of Opportunity in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*\(^{15}\)

Since it was first circulated in the latter half of the fourteenth century, the *Decameron* has undergone continual analysis and re-evaluation and has been examined under numerous critical lenses. Across the great gulf separating the fourteenth-century world and our own, Boccaccio seems to taunt new generations of readers with his inscrutable narrative tone, capricious themes, and obscure meaning, delighting in the ability of his singularly famous work, a work intended (so he claims) for “pleasant distraction,” to confound any collective understanding.\(^{16}\) In response to his elusive

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\(^{15}\) All quotations are from the *Decameron*, Oxford Critical Edition, translated by Guido Waldman.

\(^{16}\) Critical interest in the *Decameron* began in Boccaccio’s own time where he discussed the merits of his work with fellow poet and mentor Petrarca and extant records of these letters serve for fascinating and valuable information. Shortly thereafter, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, interest in his writing continued with the works of contemporary biographers such as Filippo Villani, Giannozzo Manetti and Ludovico Dolce, but it wasn’t until the nineteenth century that serious critical scholarship was dedicated to Boccaccio’s work. Writing in 1826, Ugo Foscolo was amongst the first to examine Boccaccio’s work apart from its rhetorical accomplishments, urging historical analysis along with a championing of Tuscan literary style. Francesco De Sanctis (1871) interprets the *Decameron* as the antithesis of the strict doctrine of the clerical teaching of the Middle Ages, emphasizing the importance of human pleasure without moral consequence. As such De Sanctis interprets the culture in which Boccaccio’s writes as responding to early mystical culture and thus should not be read for moral or religious meaning. Charles S. Singleton (1944) reads the *Decameron* as nothing more than escapist literature. Alberto Moravia (1966) also rejects the concept of an overarching moral code as it would impede Boccaccio’s principle occupation with recounting human action. Vittore Branca (1973), like De Sanctis, recognizes the preoccupation with the worldly and human experience, but adds more specifically the centrality of the merchant class whose perspectives the stories assume. Aldo Scaglione (1963) argues that Boccaccio supported social institutions only where they complement natural order, and where scenery within the cornice is symbolic of morality. Thomas Bergin’s (1975) survey of the morality of the tales lauds the effort on behalf of the characters to maintain honest reputations, thus honoring, rather than flouting social conventions of the time. Wayne Booth (1961) distinguishes various moral codes within the *Decameron*, and hence Boccaccio’s use of literary strategy is necessary for guiding readers to proper interpretation. For Giuseppe Petronio (1957), the style of the *Decameron* assimilates communal culture with nostalgia for the earlier courtly tradition and is a transitional work between medieval and Renaissance societies. Love is the central theme for Louise George Clubb (1960), Mark Musa (1977) and Peter Bondanella (1977), while scholars such as Tzvetan Todorov (1969) and Robert J. Clements (1972) believe that structure unifies the
masterpiece and the wealth of critical erudition dedicated to it, I endeavor to proffer yet another possible interpretation: an examination of the material world of the *Decameron* and its contribution to discourse on civic morality and feminine conduct in fifteenth-century Tuscany.

While the *Decameron* may not offer historians an extrinsic moral program or didactic premise,\(^\text{17}\) intrinsically the stories are replete with material culture that communicates contemporary ideologies of conduct. Equivocal as his moral tone may be, his material subjects communicate directly, and when considered within the literary context, Boccaccio effects what David Rosand calls “an arena of interpretation: a hermeneutic space whose boundaries are defined by a complex of coordinates – historical, cultural, critical, phenomenological – a space filled with potential, latent with possibilities of meaning” (52). According to Rosand, we may better understand the nuances of Boccaccio’s style when we consider all prior elements of art and culture from which he may have borrowed. Boccaccio’s milieu of contemporary culture, which to my knowledge has been largely overlooked in critical scholarship until now, may allow for more complex interpretations. Alberto Moravia’s interest in the background details and literary props during the 1960s led him to conclude that “when seen through a magnifying glass... Boccaccio’s backgrounds, places and notations become arcane and suggestive... [and the text] gains depth, lucidity and mystery from those details that no

\(^\text{17}\) In the conclusion to the *Decameron*, Boccaccio recognizes both his readers’ disposition toward certain ends and his own helplessness to determine with certainty their responses: “Now whether those stories, for what they are worth ... prove wholesome or noxious depends entirely on the hearer... To the corrupt mind nothing is pure: and just as the corrupt derive no profit from virtuous conversation, so the virtuous cannot be corrupted by a touch of wantonness” (Waldman 683-84).
amount of serious moral intention could give it” (146). However, apart from his astute assertions, Moravia’s essays does little to promote critical analysis of the material culture and little scholarship has been dedicated to this purpose to date. In the spirit of Moravia’s observations, my thesis endeavors to investigate the motifs found in the stories which are in turn reflected in the tangible surroundings of the readers’ reality. These quotidian pieces of the mercantile society communicate to readers with unmistakable immediacy, projecting from the pages of fiction onto the walls and surroundings of the reader’s world. These spatial arenas filled with material symbolism are at the very heart, or shall I say “hearth,” of my interest.

Boccaccio’s accommodation of contemporary society is especially pertinent since, in fourteenth-century Tuscany, there was a growing emphasis on personal reading and reflection rather than experiencing texts through the intermediaries of the educated elite and high priests. All of Boccaccio’s stylistic choices reflect his intention to address a lay audience and champion individual interpretation – he choose to write in the “vulgar tongue and in prose,” publish the stories without titles and “couch them in a humble, unassuming style” (Waldman 249). Additionally, he addresses an audience of idle ladies for the purpose of entertainment and obtaining solace from heartache, rather than instruction, and he features everyday subjects rather than the heroic or divine. This outward show of humility effectively excuses his writing from the reproof of high society and censure of the learned elite and allows readers the freedom from the solicited responses expected of this high culture and moralizing treatises. Thus, the Decameron appeals not only to a broader demographic but also solicits a broader range of emotional responses than did earlier secular literature.
To date, very little scholarship has identifies fifteenth-century discourses that take place between advice manuals and Boccaccio’s bawdy tales. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* was considered to be disruptive of the established moral system, yet it received popular acclaim and was widely circulated in the wake of the printing press. The differences between these oppositional paradigms brought tension between prescriptive behavior and changing cultural attitudes. Boccaccio was perceptive in that he could sense the society’s readiness for change and was able to appeal to his audience by giving them an alternative mode for social order and human conduct. There is much more to be said about how this paradoxical literature affected existing ideologies about women, both women’s own conceptions of feminine identity and those instituted by men. Before I begin, I want to recognize a few scholars who have undertaken scholarship which bears significant relevancy to my thesis and whose work has influenced my own.

Beginning in the fourteenth century, letters written between Boccaccio and Petrarca reveal contemporary anxieties about the gravity and reception of the *Decameron*. In his maturity, Boccaccio felt a change of heart as he adopted opinions more akin to those expressed by the learned elite against his work at the time it was written. In a bout of shame, doubting the integrity of his most famous work, he even considered burning the original manuscript and might have followed through had not Petrarca, his trusted friend and mentor, dissuaded him from destroying his *novelle* (Bergin 170). 18 In his response, Petrarca does not pretend that all of Boccaccio’s writing is noble and, in fact, excuses any

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18 Some scholars may view Boccaccio’s threats as rhetorical, yet Bergin, lecturing in 1975, believes so strongly in Boccaccio’s later transformation that he concludes that the *Decameron*’s “lascivious pages would have never been written had he [Boccaccio] met Petrarca a little sooner” (Bergin 158). Surely his letter to Petrarca in 1362 reflects some genuine anxiety about the lewd nature of his work as he consults his trusted friend on whether or not he should heed the warnings of a prophetic monk, Pietro of Siena, who urges him to repent his profane warnings in the name of God (Musa and Bondanella 173).
lapses in good judgment as effects of ill-informed youth. However, the high merits of one story in particular, the Griselda story, was so affecting that it elevated the whole collection of tales to a status deserving of praise and merit. It is significant that the one story Petrarca felt worthy of translation into Latin translation, thus conferring on it an elevated status, tells of tremendous feminine virtue: Griselda’s character is a gross exaggeration of prevailing feminine ideals where she faithfully performs wifely devotion, patience, humility and chastity, to such an extreme that today she might be considered a masochist. While certainly many elements of the story appealed to Petrarca, the extent to which the theme of womanly exempla, a popular theme within the learned compendia, played a part in earning praise for this singular tale above all the others, begs consideration.

More recently, several nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, far too many to survey in detail here, have perused the pages of the *Decameron* in search of a unifying moral premise. For now, it seems that scholars are content with the conclusion that while each story varies in its particular tone and purpose, certain overarching generalizations unify all hundred tales. In this thesis I combine the methods of three very different scholars Aldo Scaglione, Vittore Branca, and Pamela Benson who have each made tremendous contributions to the critical analysis of Boccaccio’s work, and whose conclusions serve as the foundations of this thesis.

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19 Similarly, many contemporary scholars ascribe social commentary and didactic program only to the stories of day ten wherein the tale of Griselda is told. Bergin, Musa, and Bondanalla all conclude that the stories of the tenth day were aimed at indoctrination, wherein the meaning of the entire work culminates on this final day of storytelling.

20 This inclination to do so is understandable considering that an absence of moral didacticism would have indeed seemed unusual during this time where the genre of exemplary literature was widely popular and ideals of civic humanism were spreading.
Scaglione, the earliest of these three scholars, argues in his article, “Nature in Love in Boccaccio’s *Decameron,*” for a relationship between place and morals in the *Decameron* with an analysis of the change of scenery in the cornice, the world of the *bella brigata,* or band of storytellers. For Scaglione, the *bella brigata*’s move from plague-ridden city, to the sanctuary of the church, and then finally to the morally neutral gardens of the Tuscan villas serves as a metaphor for a mediating naturalistic order which he supports. The villas in which these narratives take place are a naturalistic compromise between the bustling, over-populated (when not infected with the plague) atmosphere of the city, and the bucolic, wild lifestyle in the open nature. The splendid gardens, wherein much of the storytelling takes place, are by definition cultivated nature; they are neither overgrown nor rampant, nor are they artificial or synthetic. Like the *brigata,* who are organic intermediaries between the styles of medieval and Renaissance courtly traditions, the villas and gardens complement the naturalistic theme of the *Decameron.* Scaglione’s very interesting association of place, moral and natural tendency, however, does not extend to an examination to the population within the stories as they move about from home to church, from city to city, by land, sea, horseback, or foot, from enclosure to open-air, from private to public. Following the lead of Scaglione, I will probe the tales themselves in search of windows and other openings that are symbolic of fifteenth-century ideologies of moral and immoral domestic space.

Vittore Branca, preoccupied more with cultural than with moral meaning, deems Boccaccio the patron author of the Italian merchant class. In his book, *Boccaccio: The Man and His Works,* Branca determines that not only is the merchant class better represented than bourgeoisie and nobility, but the stories in which merchants are central
are some of the most poignant and memorable of hundred tales. The focus given to the merchant class in the *Decameron* is indicative of the historical importance of the merchant class for the Commune of Florence. According to Branca, mercantile society informs Tuscan culture through exposure to distant traditions and cultivation of a widespread passion for personal success, thus, with the writing of the *Decameron*, the quotidian adventure tales were born.

Pamela Benson’s *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, important to my studies because of her feminist method of inquiry, examines the presentation of women in Boccaccio’s much later work, *De Mulieribus Claris*. Her book argues that Boccaccio employs a “profeminist” tone, “inventing” women not in the modern sense, but as “a reuse of a woman who has always existed, but adapted for the time and place (2). She demonstrates Boccaccio’s assimilation of medieval mores through modern devices and moral implications of space: “The physical dangers of wild places [of the epic classics and medieval romances] are equivalent to the moral dangers of the social interaction of Boccaccio’s time” (24). For Benson, Boccaccio’s new woman exhibits a willing conformity to feminine ideals as opposed to the enforced obedience of the traditionally inferior woman, and this shift, she argues, is evidenced in the change of setting from the heroic and romantic traditions of the past to the social context of the present. For example, the ancient fields, forests, and battlefields which were once the arenas where women fought against evil, become the early modern churches, theaters and households where contemporary Italian women must fight for virtue (24).

While Scaglione lent to the moral place of the cornice, Branca contributed to the merchant class perspective of the *Decameron*, and Benson defined the women’s image in
*De Claris Mulieribus*, I hope to contribute to the women’s perspective within the tales and fourth day prologue of the *Decameron*. I am in search of the reinvented woman in the heyday of Boccaccio’s naturalistic mercantile society, unconcerned with the criteria of the learned compendia. Where we have already explored fourteenth-century Italy on the ship decks and saddlebacks of the adventurous merchants, I now wish to contemplate the life as women saw it, or rather didn’t see it, through their household windows.

Boccaccio’s treatment of the private-public divide and the practice of strict confinement of women as part of his literary illustration of material culture, is central and unique to my thesis.

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, there exists a tortuous list of restrictions defining where the fifteenth-century Italian woman could or could not go. There are the places outside of the home where under no circumstances a “lady” should venture: taverns, universities, centers of public discourse, government, law courts, battlefields, and the centers in town of ill-repute. There are places where she can go conditionally, such as the market accompanied by a chaperone or to church dressed according to sumptuary laws. There are places which always arouse serious concern, dances, concerts and festivals or anywhere alone at night. Women’s life-cycle determine their freedom to venture into the public: pregnant women are told that the crude sights that accompany busy squares may harm or disfigure their children, and widowed women are supposed disgraceful if they venture into public often. In general, almost any place outside of the home is excluded to the patrician lady, but the same is said of places within the home where there are limits to where women could venture: the *studiolo*, the courtyard during business hours and in some cases the servants’ quarters are restricted to
the ladies of the house. Finally, there are the places within the home which defy easy
categorization, like the household windows and balconies, very literal openings to the
physical barriers that separate one space from another, which were not as clearly morally
delineated and thus are feature prominently in prescriptive and popular literature.

Fifteenth-century conduct manuals reveal the fear and suspicion with which
Italian patriarchs viewed windows and balconies, but is there evidence of these same
convictions in Boccaccio’s Decameron? How does he stimulate discussion on the
confinement of women and the trespassing of this simultaneously real and moral
boundary? With the presentation of these ambiguous moral contexts, Boccaccio confronts
these social conditions without bias, allowing fair and equal assessment of the social
consequences.

However, before inviting discussion about social mores Boccaccio must first
reach all of society, including the ladies, his intended audience, despite the fact that many
sought to interdict the tales’ accessibility to women. Literature, a kind of “window” to the
imagination, was prohibited along the same grounds that actual windows were: each
provided access to worlds outside the home. Manual writers attacked bawdy fiction, the
Decameron in particular, fearing that these works would incite women’s lust and
encourage indecorous behavior. Attacking the genre of popular literature as a whole,
many conduct manuals began to proscribe literature thought to be inappropriate for the
lady, effectively producing an early form of the “banned book list.” During the fifteenth
century, with the advent of the printing press, it was common for prescriptive authors to
make general warnings about ladies’ access to popular literature, but by the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries when specific authors and titles were named, the Decameron,
despite its now centuries-old publication, was frequently included at the top of these lists.

One such eighteenth-century scholar, Juan Luis Vives, one of the most widely-read and respected authors on the subject of women’s education in Europe, deemed Boccaccio, and other such secular writers, as “otiose, lazy, [and] without humanity, given to vices and deceit” (King 165). Bergin traces these sentiments all the way into the late nineteenth century: “The *Decameron* was considered by many to be a “dirty book” and was read rather furtively by all save the emancipated as recently as a generation ago” (Bergin 170).

Even before the completion of his work, Boccaccio was well aware of the negative reactions to his *novelle*, and felt compelled to defend himself against his detractors. Before having finished even a third of his labor, Boccaccio breaks with the narrative flow in order to deliver a defense in an impassioned prologue to the fourth day of storytelling. Therein, he addresses the onslaught of “taunts” and “pinpricks” from those who have “savagely buffeted [him] by the stormwinds... torn [him] up by the roots” (Waldman 249). No doubt, even in these early stages, the public felt uneasy about the nature of Boccaccio’s stories in his radical “human comedy”\(^\text{21}\) and his contemporaries reacted fervently.

In order to demonstrate the folly of his attackers, Boccaccio recounts the tale of Filippo, an overcautious father whose parenting methods are proven ineffectual against nature’s power. At the outset of the tale, we learn that Filippo is heartbroken because of the early and unexpected death of his wife. In hopes of preventing his young son from experiencing the pain that accompanies life amidst society, Filippo “held his child to this

\(^\text{21}\) Francesco De Sanctis presents *The Decameron* as piece of hallmark literature that ushered in a new nationalistic sentiment. His article, “Boccaccio and the Human Comedy” describes this revolutionary new interest in human experience and worldly affairs over preoccupation with the afterlife, exemplified in the highly successful work of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. 42
life [of solitude and religious devotion] for many a year, never letting him out of the cell, never permitting him the sight of any but himself” (Waldman 251). In the few short passages that follow, Boccaccio goes on to describe the son’s maturation and resultant curiosity that leads to his first experience of society: the sighting of the city of Florence, its architecture, the townspeople, and especially, his natural affections for women. Filippo, worried by his son’s attraction to women, hopes to delude him by telling him that the name given to women, these never-before-seen, yet captivating creatures, is “goslings” and advises him to guard himself against them, urging his son to keep his “eyes down my boy…don’t look at them – they’re no good at all” (Waldman 251). It is here, amidst the hustle and bustle of the city, where Filippo recognizes that for the first time his son is indisposed to his fatherly counsel. His last words reveal his regret at having allowed his son to accompany him to Florence, an utter feeling of dejection made all the more heartrending, because, as Boccaccio stops the story short in this moment, Filippo will forever remain in this state of despair.

In the opening lines of the defense, just before he begins to tell the story of Filippo, Boccaccio excuses the unfinished tale because, in his own words, “far be it from me to presume to incorporate any story of mine into those of a company as excellent as the one I have described to you [his male detractors]” (Waldman 250). However, his sardonic tone throughout the proem indicates that his reasons for not disclosing the ending are other than those he claims. One can sense, in these brief passages, a metaphor for what many contemporary scholars believe to be the universal meaning of the Decameron: a focus on the temporal world rather than fixation with the heavenly. Just as Wayne Booth affirms that Boccaccio’s “artistry lies not in adherence to any one supreme
manner of narration, but rather in his ability to order various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing” (Musa and Bondanella 249), with this proem Boccaccio is prepared to *show* the struggle between a boy’s natural feelings for women and those forces trying to repress them, as he is later prepared to *tell* us that “to defy the laws of Nature requires no little strength and those who try will often do so not merely to purpose but even to their own severe detriment” (Waldman 255). In order to press his message to his readers, Boccaccio first prefaces his didactic declaration with a fictional narrative which serves as an example, and proof, of this declaration.

In addition to the system of “telling” and “showing” which he employs to deliver this diatribe and underscore the folly of stubborn, straight-laced pendants, Boccaccio introduces comedic elements that instruct. Boccaccio’s lasting humor provides his tales with a vitality and spirit admired and beloved as much today as it was for contemporaries. Far be it for Boccaccio to deny an opportunity for humor even as he issues an invective against his adversaries; in fact, it is the comedic element – telling his son that women are called “goslings” – where the stubborn feel the tinge of irony as a result of their inability to curb natural human appetites. Filippo hopes to repress his son’s natural fondness for women, but soon learns it is futile to wage war against natural human tendencies.

Through explicit, implicit, and comedic means, Filippo’s tale functions as a metaphorical scenario for which his detractors may determine a moral. This technique, the literary equivalent to the popular motif used in painting where the interlocutor invites the audience into the scene through the outward gaze, or “nod” to the audience, allows his readers to judge the scenario objectively, and by extension, deduce that their
situations, in that they are much like Filippo’s, are similarly misguided and doomed for failure.

More importantly, while Boccaccio pretends to leave the story completely in the hands of his audience to interpret as they will, in fact, he does provide very clear indications as to what their conclusions should be. In the final line of the embedded narrative, Boccaccio reveals that Filippo comes to a heartfelt understanding: “And it dawned on him that his providence was no match for Mother Nature” (Waldman 252). Boccaccio hopes that Filippo’s own resolution will solicit similar ones from his readers, and through non-abrasive suggestion – remember that Filippo is a character expressing himself within narrative embedded within his prologue and does not necessarily express the author’s views – an inculpable fictional character may serve as his mouthpiece and provide moral instruction. With Filippo’s humbling conclusions, and Boccaccio’s own methods of telling and showing, the lesson to be taken from this story is forcefully implied, and certainly his contemporaries would have also recognized the sarcastic quality to his opening remark that the story’s “very incompleteness will bear sufficient witness that it has nothing to do with theirs [the stories of his attackers]” (Waldman 250).

Tzvetan Todorov’s method of structural analysis may provide us with yet one more clue as to how Boccaccio sought to influence his audience’s conclusions. In his article, “Structural Analysis of a Narrative,” Todorov explains that all plots progress according to the law of equilibrium where the author must affect an imbalance of order and then create a means for its restoration. This structure is punctuated as follows: X violates the law $\rightarrow$ Y must punish X $\rightarrow$ X tries to avoid being punished $\rightarrow$ Y violates the law OR Y believes that X hasn’t violated the law $\rightarrow$ Y does not punish X. When applied
to our story, Filippo’s son is represented by X and Filippo with Y. The law which the son violates initially is his father’s which requires that he submit to an ascetic lifestyle and reject all worldly affairs. In this case “violates” is a bit harsh because Filippo permits his son to accompany him into the city, so in fact both characters violate the law which Filippo himself enacted. Filippo, then, is forced to punish his son’s curiosity by dissembling the truth about the nature of women and insisting that he keep his distance. His son attempts to avoid this punishment with pleas that he be allowed to take a “gosling” home with him to keep. As the story ends short, we cannot assign the next episodes to fit Todorov’s plot structure, however, this point of departure aligns with Todorov’s model at a critical moment. According to Todorov, the next episode in the plot, if it were to continue, would have one of two possible outcomes, the only time in the structural sequence where Todorov notes diverging outcomes: either X violates the law OR Y believes that X has not violated the law. So, we know that either Filippo will then “violate” or retract his law of seclusion and join a life amidst a society along with his son, OR his son will continue to placate his father by pretending to avow again, to a hermetic existence, meanwhile finding ways to visit the city and its ladies behind his father’s back. As stated earlier, this moment is critical because Boccaccio’s plot has ended here precisely where there is a decision to be made, each with its own implications about social order, and only the audience may conclude the story for themselves, as Boccaccio has refused to do so. Either path ultimately yields the same result according to Todorov, X’s exoneration; Filippo will not punish his son for his “transgression” and the order of equilibrium (in this case life amidst society) is restored. Centuries before Todorov’s article, perhaps Boccaccio understood, either consciously or subconsciously, this
formulaic and universal plot structure and relied on the audience to make conclusions accordingly.

Within a few carefully considered pages, Boccaccio both provides a parable about the futility of parents’ unnatural expectations for their children’s conduct and fulfills his more overt aim to defend his freer style of writing, which he argues is only answerable to the laws of nature. This prologue was a necessary component of the *Decameron*, wherein Boccaccio feels it is important to inform his readers of the manner in which they are intended: that they be considered as a realistic portrait of the varied and individual human behaviors that naturally occur within society. Fifteenth-century patriarchs would recognize their own likenesses in Boccaccio’s portrait of Filippo. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was advisable that fathers take strict measures with their young, marriageable daughters, restricting their freedoms and confining them to their bedrooms with little access to the public scene. Like many fifteenth-century Italian *paterfamilias*, Filippo too believes that to avoid potential ruin, he must confine his child to the home where he will be closely monitored and the order of the household maintained.

Filippo’s story is important for my thesis because it is the first of the tales to address the matter of patriarchal confinement of those subordinate to him as a form of protection against lust and sexual promiscuity. In the two stories that follow, that of Lizio and Caterina (V.4), and Sismonda and Arriguccio, (VII.8), Boccaccio returns to the more traditional theme of man’s control over women, in the former, that of a father over a daughter, and in the latter, of husband over wife. In both stories, the men’s control over their women is challenged by the natural will of these women. Rather than an interest in the paternal concern for a son’s emotional wellbeing, as was the case in Filippo’s story,
these stories address fears that manifest themselves in the need to regulate the female body, woman’s sexuality and chastity, a practice that is further complicated at the private spaces of home which allow for public access.

I will first examine Philostrato’s tale on day five of the *Decameron*, in which we meet Lizio da Valbona, a knight from Romagna, his wife, and beautiful daughter Caterina. Within the very first lines of the tale, Philostrato assures his audience of the worthiness of Lizio’s family, piquing our interest in their success through the description of their diligence and attentiveness accorded to Caterina’s upbringing.\(^{22}\) Philostrato tells us that Caterina is very carefully minded and well-bred, and that indeed she is “the apple of her parents’ eye: her father and mother spared no efforts in bringing her up, with a view to making a splendid match for her” (Waldman 340). Although we know little else about Caterina, it is enough to know that she is beautiful and chaste, and therefore, desirable for marriage. Like most Italian women during the fifteenth century, Caterina’s worth depends on her ability to attract a proper husband and to honor both households through the prosperous union of two prominent families. As parents of a young daughter, it is Lizio and Giacomina’s responsibility to ensure that she is well-bred for just such a marriage.

Having established the positions of the protagonists and prompted our desire for their success, Ricciardo, a young and handsome friend of Lizio’s, enters the scene as if on cue. The abrupt introduction of his character signifies Ricciardo’s potential to interrupt the ordered family dynamic. Moreover, he appeals to readers’ romantic sentiments, as we

\(^{22}\) Wayne Booth argues this is a necessary element of the novella, where in order for readers to derive pleasure in the comic outcome of our heroes, the “main characters must be established with great precision” (Musa and Bondanella 245). Similarly, Alberto Moravia recognizes Boccaccio’s penchant for terse character introductions, claiming that as a man of action, Boccaccio hurries through the psychologies and emotions of the characters so as to allow for the action to dominate the rest of the plot.
are told he is young, handsome, and available. From our privileged position as readers we are privy to the latent and destructive qualities of having Ricciardo as close friend to the family. Lizio and his wife, on the other hand, are oblivious to all the warning signs, and are described as being “as much at ease with him [Ricciardo] as if he had been their own son” (Waldman 340). As a result they become more lenient with Caterina, and soon the young couple falls in love. Their brief, innocent meetings in the beginning allow for the arrangement of their secret love affair. Recalling her parents’ usual vigilance, Caterina cautions Ricciardo, “look at the way they keep their eye on me: I really can’t see how you can do it [meet with me in private]” (341). As the mouthpiece of all Italian daughters, the unfortunate victims of unjust surveillance in the name of family honor and reputation, Caterina’s statement reflects a common state of affairs in fifteenth-century households.

Happily, Caterina and Ricciardo find recourse to a low-risk meeting place, a middle-ground that is both within the boundaries of the home, and accessible to Ricciardo from the outside: the balcony off Lizio’s bedroom. Caterina convinces her parents that because the hot summer months have prevented her from sleeping at night, she should be able to sleep outside where the cool breeze will pacify her to sleep. Braving the difficult climb, Ricciardo comes to Caterina that evening on the balcony where the young couple takes every advantage of their time together, making love into the early morning hours.23 However, the clandestine affair is short-lived. Exhausted from the night’s activities, the young couple oversleeps and Lizio discovers the two still lying together in a naked embrace the following morning.

23 Boccaccio’s euphemism “going after nightingales,” in place of the more direct references to sex, add another comic element to the tale.
If we refer back to Philostrato’s introduction as he prepares to tell the story to the *brigata*, we recall that he referred to this moment as the “only touch of misadventure… a few sighs, a moment’s panic tinged with shame, but [the story] has a happy ending” (Waldman 340). Certainly, this instant, where a father had found that his daughter recklessly squandered her most valuable asset, her chastity, would spell one of grave circumstance, “tinged with shame,” for many contemporaries. Caterina’s virginity has been lost, her reputation tarnished, and the prospects for a respectable marriage are now grim. Luckily for Lizio’s family, they are able to easily remedy the situation with the marriage of Caterina to Ricciardo, so that their shameful act is mitigated through proper and legal union. Lizio's crisis is averted with relative ease. However, first in fifteenth-century mentalities is the realization that external factors may not have allowed for such a quick and easy solution. Had the affair been an adulterous one, or one across feuding families or social stations, marriage may not have been a preferable or even a possible option.

Again, if we apply Todorov’s structure here, we find that the point where the X violates the law occurs on the balcony, where the “law” of Caterina’s chastity is violated. Up to this point the tale took place totally within the confines of the home and Caterina had retained her virginity. Philostrato’s tale, enhanced with comedy and clever wordplay, in essence provides a very realistic scenario to which many Italian families in the Quattrocento would relate. Whether readers concluded that the lesson from the story be that parents should be increasingly wary of their daughters’ freedoms, or that daughters, no matter how much their parents guard their freedoms, will find ways to break the laws that restrict them, Boccaccio does not make clear. (This is a variation on Todorov’s
allowance for multiple outcomes, here dependent on the way in which readers interpret the moral). What is clear is that these ambiguous outdoor-indoor spaces lie at the crux of either conclusion. On the one hand, they enable transgression of the boundaries established within the home, and on the other hand they release women from the bonds of total enclosure. Should the balcony then be reinforced as an element belonging to the public sphere and thus off-limits for women, or does it invariably belong to the home of which women are a part, and thus society must consider integrating public presence into the daily lives of women? As we consider these questions, let’s turn to another story in which Boccaccio recognizes the problems of socially ambiguous moral spaces.

In the eighth story of day seven, for which the theme of the day is stories that recount “the tricks women have played on their husbands, whether in the pursuit of their amours or to protect themselves, and whether or not they have been found out” (Waldman 417), Neiphile relates the story of Florentine Arriguccio Berlinghieri and his wife Sismonda. Immediately the narrator earns the audience’s favor for Sismonda, as Booth informs us he must, by describing a number of social taboos of which Arriguccio is guilty. Neiphile describes Arriguccio as “a merchant of enormous wealth…who had the absurd notion of 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” (Waldman 451). 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 whatever future action Sismonda will take against him.

Reduced to loneliness, Sismonda soon finds a lover in a handsome local man, Ruberto. The lovers easily carry out an affair for some time, until finally, Arriguccio
suspect’s his wife’s infidelity. He abruptly transforms himself from neglectful ignoramus to jealous husband, paying considerably more attention to his wife’s conduct. 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 dissolve 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 of the night, the neighbors complain of Arriguccio’s recklessness, banishing him back to his home without having avenged his honor. Meanwhile, 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 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 who is publicly shamed and deemed incapable of disciplining his wife.

Neiphile’s story met the criteria of the day’s stories – that the tales recount tricks that women play on their husbands – yet to determine any moral agenda is problematic; a woman’s clever trickery hardly merits her induction into the assembly of feminine exempla. While we admire Sismonda for her cunning, quick wit and daring to do as she pleases, her utter disregard for womanly virtues certainly tarnishes her reputation.24 Her status as “heroine” of the story is credible only because she is surrounded by even poorer company. In other words, by default she earns the title of the best amidst all the evil because she gets away with her misdeeds. As we assess the crimes of our motley crew of sinners, we have Sismonda, the adulteress who scapegoats her maid and lies to her family, who comes out on top; Ruberto, who sleeps with another man’s wife and then challenges him to a duel in the street; Arriguccio who is a neglectful and jealous husband,

24 Boccaccio applies a similar strategy in his cataloging of women in De Claris Mulieribus, where he praises those women most highly where they are chaste as well as meritorious in other aspects, and reduces those women who lack this quality to a lesser degree of virtue.
who brings misfortune upon himself for marrying above his station; and finally the poor beaten maid, who, through virtue of her obedience and suffering, earns our sympathies, but her low station provides her with no recourse to autonomy in the hierarchical system; thus, she becomes a momentary and opportune helpmeet for her lady who works to restore herself at the top of the social structure.

It is certainly tempting to try to read possible moral agendas into the story, as many scholars have attempted to do with Boccaccio’s tales, yet, we know that separate conclusions will be made, discrepancies of which Boccaccio was fully aware. The precariousness of its reception is made all the more so as there are several social and marital problems addressed here for the audience’s reflection: initially, there is the problem of his social climbing; her ennui that stems from marriage for reasons other than love, eventually causing her concupiscence for another; his inability to control his wife’s behavior; his uninhibited jealousy; her deceit and impunity; and finally his relinquishing power over to his wife in the end. If we apply Todorov here, as with Caterina, the law is violated with the help of the window. The window facilitates the breaking of marital bonds and the resultant deviant behavior. All the emotional, psychological and ideological problems which comprise the myriad of issues for these characters can be reduced to this one significant, material place, where action prevails. If his readers’ can identify what the window permits, inhibits, and signifies for both Sismonda and Arriguccio, then they can apply this meaning to the government of contemporary society.

At the heart of all three of these tales, Boccaccio is concerned with the means through which patriarchs constrict, both ideologically and physically, subordinate members of the household and limit their movement through confinement to domestic
space. That he returns to this theme throughout the novelle, presenting it through several different familial relationships, suggests that strict confinement is a common practice amidst fifteenth-century Italian households, a practice which is the consequence of various social concerns. The window-balcony motif provided a tangible, convenient, although at the same time realistically problematic, element through which to consider the justness of confining women to a wholly private existence, removed from contact with life outside the household walls and denied even the sight of the public sphere.

While Boccaccio’s contentious tales may not yield enough concrete evidence as to which side of the public-private partition he stood on this matter, his ability to delineate these ambiguous and luminal realms as the source of both stern reservation and the potential for liberation, shows his willingness to proffer this space as one worthy of more careful consideration. Are the conduct manual writers wrong to refuse these spaces to women’s use? Perhaps the confinement of women is counterintuitive, only causing women to feel a stronger need to rebel, and hence enforces the self-fulfilling nature of women’s captivity? If women were given the same freedoms as men, are they capable of maintaining their chastity? The answers to these questions, which Boccaccio may have considered himself as he wrote the Decameron for the enjoyment and pleasure of idle ladies, may become clearer as we examine one further source that was highly aware of the problematic nature of open spaces in the home, the Italian paintings of Sandro Botticelli and Fra Filippo Lippi which employ windows motifs in their secular portraits.
Chapter Three:

“La Finestra: A New Convention for Portraiture”

In the previous chapter, I have shown that Boccaccio offered an alternative reading to the didacticism and heavy-handed advice of fifteenth-century conduct manuals. In this chapter I will demonstrate, with the survey of portraiture that visual art also participates in this discourse of social discipline through the strict confinement of women. Through examination of the portraits of Fra Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli which give credence to the spatial metaphor of the window, we may better understand the extent to which women’s movements were contained in an effort to regulate their sexual conduct. Thus far, I have argued that the prevalence of the window motif in both moralizing treatises and popular fiction supports the idea that there exists a very real fear that windows could provide an outlet for women’s insubordination. Within this chapter, I argue that this theme persists in the visual art as well.

When understood within the precepts described in the conduct manuals, two seemingly traditional Florentine portraits of women disclose the same concern for women’s transgressions made possible because women were allowed to frequent their household windows. The two portraits I will examine here, the first by Lippi, Woman with a Man at a Window (Fig. 1), and the second by Andrea Botticelli, Woman at a Window (Fig. 2), were both painted during the latter half of the fifteenth century, commensurate with one of the most fruitful years in Florentine printing, when moralizing
treatises began to circulate more widely. Both Lippi and Botticelli abandon the standard conventions of female portraiture, allowing the window motif to add moral dimension to a genre typically understood for the purposes of boasting wealth, beauty and nobility in the present and recording likenesses for posterity.

Both Lippi and Botticelli have already received scholarly attention for the beauty and technical ingenuity of their work. Lippi’s *Woman with Man at a Window* (Fig. 1) is an important artifact for art historians because it achieved many firsts for the genre of portraiture. Despite disagreement for the dating of this portrait, *Women with a Man at a Window* is one of the earliest surviving Italian portraits to feature a woman, as well as it is the first independent Florentine portrait to survive to date. Furthermore, according to Jeffrey Ruda, a seminal scholar on the life and work of Lippi, it is the earliest surviving Italian portrait to include a background, either scenic or landscape. Finally, this portrait is undisputedly recognized as the earliest surviving double portrait including both man and woman.

For historians of material culture, *Woman with a Man* is a treasure trove and visual feast in sumptuary display and contemporary fashions of the Florentine Quattrocento. Despite these notable accomplishments, Lippi’s painting has received little

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26 Jeffrey Ruda writing in 1999, dates this portrait much earlier than some of his colleagues in the timeframe of 1435-37. David Alan Brown, curator of Renaissance art at the National Gallery dates the portrait in 1438.

27 See Pope-Hennessy “Secular Painting in 15th-Century Tuscany: Birth Trays, Cassone Panels, and Portraits” “Most paintings in this time were conceived as diptychs or pendants and are painted on separate panels. It is the first double portrait and one of the earliest European portraits with a domestic setting.’ pp. 61.
Figure 1. Fra Filippo Lippi. *Woman with a Man at a Window*, c.1438. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston.

Source: David Alan Brown, *Virtue and Beauty*, page 107
Figure 2. Sandro Botticelli. *Woman at a Window*, c.1470. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Source: David Alan Brown, *Virtue and Beauty*, page 173.
critical attention until just recently and much of this scholarship has been undertaken by German scholars, currently without English translations of their work.  

Similarly, Botticelli’s *Woman at a Window* (Fig. 2) is a revolutionary Quattrocento portrait, yet it is seldom studied for its realistic and historical merit. *Woman at a Window* is amongst the first paintings to depict a woman in three-quarter length and frontal view, two characteristics rarely seen in female portraiture during this time. This very early work, only recently attributed to Botticelli, is dated in the early 1470s. As a young painter, Botticelli had not yet fully developed his individual style that would later earn him fame; in the retinue of his many great works, this one has gone relatively unnoticed by scholars and art critics alike.

Because these works have not been explored within the discourse of the contemporary conduct manuals, a significant element of analysis is lacking. As I discussed in the first chapter, conduct manuals that circulated during this time heavily ostracized those women who regularly spent their time using their household windows for pleasure-seeking and idly passing time. Despite this stigma, both of these accomplished painters chose window scenes as the setting for their female patrons. Lippi’s *Woman with a Man at a Window* and Botticelli’s *Woman at a Window* are more interesting and complex when one understands the weight with which the window was regarded as an acceptable meeting place for women, and these complications become more apparent as the conventions of portraiture clash with the rigor of the conduct manuals.

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29 Where I there has been interest in this painting, it is usually to debate the significance of the lady’s guarnello, a transparent overdress thought to be worn by women during their pregnancy.
Both Lippi’s and Botticelli’s sitters are shown within the domestic setting, as was traditional for women’s portraiture, but have been provided an outlet, or escape into the world beyond the threshold of the home through their windows present in the frame. As Lauro Martines notes of contemporary custom; “[w]hen kept mostly indoors, girls and women of the comfortable classes… must have regarded windows as their eyes to the outside world” (Martines 213). Both Lippi’s sitter, Angiola di Bernardo Sapiti and Botticelli’s sitter, Smerelda Brandini, are provided these “eyes.” Before we can attribute meaning to this given liberty, we must first engage in deeper analysis of each of these paintings. First, I will begin with description and analysis of Lippi’s now well-known double portrait found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The second half of this chapter will focus on Botticelli’s work, attempting to note consistencies and discrepancies in the treatment of the window convention, before finally connecting this study of portraiture to my observations of the works in the previous chapters.

In Filippo Lippi’s double portrait *Women with a Man at a Window*, also known as *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*, the “lady,” elaborately clad in French fineries of brilliant reds inlaid with precious stones and pearls, takes up the larger space of the frame. She is the paragon of beauty at a time when the beauty of women was a popular topic of discussion in Florence. Her blonde hair is tightly pulled back under her magnificent *sella*, or headdress, revealing her broad forehead and pure white complexion. Her poise and restraint exhibits her noble upbringing and chaste demeanor. She folds her hands demurely at her waist, holds her head high and upright, and faces to the left of the frame.

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30 Discourses on women’s beauty were widely popular during this time, and through the use of publications like Firenzuola’s *On the Beauty of Women*, the detail and specificity with which women’s facial features and deportment were discussed was widely circulated.
picture frame, as was common in female portraiture.\textsuperscript{31} In addition to her beauty and poise, her attire and accessories are figural advertisements of her family’s wealth, an important function of the portrait which modern scholars have thoroughly noted. Quattrocento Tuscany was rooted in a culture of display, where the raiment, decorum, property, and possessions all confer the social status and honor of the family. The rich jewels and fine fabrics, along with the word \textit{LEALTA}, meaning “loyalty” inscribed on the left cuff of her sleeve, all articulate the nobility of Sapiti family. However, the extent to which this painting conforms to social conventions ends here, with the formal and iconological details of the painting. Lippi’s choice of setting for this portrait is unique and revolutionary to the period.

Although she is shown in profile, with eyes demurely cast away from the viewer, conforming to the traditional pose in portraiture at the time, Sapiti is positioned before an open doorway, a portal to the outside world and escape from the confines of the home.\textsuperscript{32} Captured in a moment of rest, it appears as if Sapiti contemplates passage through this open doorway. Outside the frame of the portrait, we can imagine the scenery just beyond the frame’s limits within Sapiti’s line of vision. Whereas in the case of Alessio Baldovinetti’s early 1400s \textit{Portrait of a Lady in Yellow} (Fig. 3), or Paolo Uccello’s 1460s painting, \textit{Young Lady of Fashion} (Fig. 4), where all background details are completely absent, Lippi clearly includes the details of the window casing and the open expanse of

\textsuperscript{31} For more on the conventions of profile portraiture for women, see Tinagli, \textit{Women in Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation and Identity}, and Simons, “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture.”

\textsuperscript{32} I assume that this doorway is open because of the light that shines on her hands and face suggesting the opening as a principle light source.

Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alessio_Baldovinetti
Figure 4. Paolo Uccello. *A Young Lady of Fashion*, c.1460. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

Source: David Alan Brown, *Virtue and Beauty*, page 113.
scenery seen beyond the window in the background. The suggestion of the scenery beyond provides Sapiti with a focus, making her position here more natural than if she were shown in an ambiguous enclosure, positioned in a corner. She focuses her gaze outside through the open doorway, just as we focus our gaze on her through the frame of the painting. Sapiti is cognizant of the world beyond this small interior space, but at this moment she remains within the comfortable domestic interior represented here only by the warm, rich wood walls and ceiling. Lippi places Sapiti in reach of, and aware of the outside world, but hesitant to show her as a part of it. I know of only one earlier individual portrait showing a woman poised in front of outdoor scenery, Pisanello’s *Ginevra d’Este* (Fig. 5) found at the Musée du Louvre in Paris, and even here the floral and greenery have been identified as tapestry embossed with leaves and floral that emulates the Virgin’s *hortus conclusus*. Tapestries depicting flora and fauna, like *Camera dei Pavoni* or “Peacock Room” seen in the well preserved Davanzati palace of Florence, were common amongst fifteenth-century homes. This trend to bring the beauty of the outdoors in may, in part, result from the very little exposure women had to the outdoor, rural environment and, hence their desire to have these scenes recreated where they would daily experience them.

However, the window in Lippi’s portrait is meant to represent a real window. Sapiti is turned away from this window, but the audience is given primary view, where the scene revealed shows a bustling town and waterway, symbols of commerce and government, exploration and conquest. Although Lippi paints just enough of this scene to

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Figure 5. Pisanello. *Ginevra d’Este*, c.1430. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

provide us with a small glimpse of the landscape seen through the window, the landmarks are symbolic so that we understand this as a patriarchal domain, a world in which Sapiti is not free to participate.\textsuperscript{34} Within this frame, she is aligned with the landscape, the household and the fineries. They are all displayed together, oriented for one audience (a male audience), as collection of family wealth and possession.

As I have described thus far, Sapiti is presented standing in a space where she faces an open doorway in front of her and where there is an additional open window in the background to her right. There are two additional open spaces from which the lady is viewed, perhaps the two most important, so that Sapiti stands within a space that pushes the limit of domestic/enclosed interior. The window, painted on the same wall as the doorway, allows for a second character, a man commonly regarded as either her suitor or husband, to be seen barely peeping into the home’s interior, and as such, is the woman’s space. Brown, editor of \textit{Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo’s Ginevra de’ Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women}, has noted that the ominous male figure, who peeps through the window in this portrait, is like many in a long line of “intruder” figures who are common in Lippi’s paintings (106). While the male certainly seems to encroach on the central space of the painting, to label him as an intruder, in any form of social sense rather than merely the spatial orientation he occupies within the picture plane, might ally this male figure with the cunning male seducers of the \textit{Decameron}, a connection, although tempting, I do not, nor do I think Brown, wishes to make. However, Brown’s observation is interesting as one of many with which modern scholars attempt to determine the occasion for which this unique double portrait was painted. The reason that

\textsuperscript{34} Pope-Hennessy suggests that the chapel and gardens shown in the background through the window may also record actual property of these prestigious families pp. 61.
Lippi’s portrait was commissioned still remains to be decided with certainty, but one detail not yet considered is the metaphorical meaning of the window.

The intruding male figure marks his presence in this portrait by resting his folded hands on the window sill as he approaches from the outside. Underneath the man’s hands, Lippi has painted a family coat of arms, a historically significant detail which has enabled scholars to identify the man as Lorenzo di Ranieri Scolari. Simons, like most scholars, accepts the couple as Sapiti and Scolari, and suggests that this portrait commemorates Sapiti’s exchange ceremony in which the daughter was transferred from her natal home to her husband’s (Simons 43). Others have also entertained the possibility that this portrait was painted some time after the marriage or upon the birth of the couple’s first son.35

Equipped with the knowledge of what conduct manuals communicated about women’s relationship with windows, I agree with Simons that “only at certain key moments could she be seen whether at a window or in the ‘window’ of a panel painting, seen and thereby represented. These centered on her rite of passage from one male house to another upon her marriage” (42). Simons reconciles the unconventional setting for the portrait with the circumstances that may have allowed for a woman to be present at the window, facing a man found on the other side. Furthermore, her elaborate dress, inscribed motto LEALTA on her sleeve, and headdress are all emblems used in the ceremony for which a woman could show reverence to her new family. As the conduct manuals assert, it was inappropriate for a woman to be out unless accompanied by her

husband. Knowing that the man is just on the other side of the wall to receive her assures the audience that she will be under constant supervision.

The two figures, although they share the same setting, barely interact with one another. It is as if the two were painted separately, posed for this space at separate times and only afterwards superimposed with one another in the final product. Simons says that the portrait genre has the ability to manipulate reality and create a finished product that represents values other than what was socially acceptable. In this fantasy realm “woman can wear cosmetics and extravagant decoration forbidden by legal and moral codes. There this orderly creature was visible at or near a window, yet she was explicitly banished from public appearance at such windows” (45). Lippi understands painting’s license to create unrealistic scenes. He allows his female protagonist to overstep socially accepted boundaries of woman’s space, showing herself here, in a milieu of entrances and exits wherein she may be viewed from four different perspectives: the three open spaces within the painting, and of course, the frame itself which provides us with our view of the couple and the scene which unfolds before us. We see Sapiti in profile, but are not permitted to see any of the scenes which unfolds under her line of vision. The gaze of the woman is of lesser importance than that of all who gaze upon her. What is beyond the doorway in front of her is left to our imagination. Had Lippi reversed the situation, grounding the scene outside, in Lorenzo’s space with Sapiti’s head barely peeping outside from within, an entirely different effect would have resulted, one making Sapiti the active agent of the portrait, intruding upon Scolari’s space and making him the object of our gaze. This effect would have been very radical of Lippi at this time, but even in this early Quattrocento piece the use of the window motif shows the promise of
changing portrait conventions and the collapse of the separation between men and women’s space.

The background landscape, as seen through the windows, most often appears in the portrait paintings of the nobility, where the window scene was incorporated as an aesthetic element used by artists to display their skill in the art of landscape painting while at the same time adhering to the portrait specifications commissioned by the patron. A well-known example is Piero della Francesca’s 1466 double portrait of the duke and duchess of Urbino (Fig. 6), which shows off the great expanse of land owned by these Italian elite and depicts the material fineries displayed in their costume and jewelry. Patron and artist had found a realistic means for displaying both the public and personal wealth of the sitter without losing any of the aesthetic beauty of the autonomous genres of landscape and portraiture, and has done so within the small dimensions of the average Florentine portrait painting. Unlike Francesca’s portrait, Botticelli’s *Woman at a Window*, is curious in that it employs the window motif for a wholly separate agenda outside of purposes for record and display.

Expounding upon the techniques and conventions of his predecessor and mentor, Lippi and painting just a few decades later, Botticelli uses the window motif to render a scene like those related in the *Decameron*. *Woman at a Window*, accepted as having been painted 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 bedroom windows. Contrary to learned advice on proper feminine conduct, Brandini holds the shutter open with her right hand while she boldly returns the
Figure 6. Piero della Francesca, *Pendant Portraits of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, c.1466. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Source: David Alan Brown. *Virtue and Beauty*, page 75.
gaze of her spectators who look at her from below. Her twinkling eyes, subdued smile, and the faint dimple which appears on her left cheek are subtle indications of her lively intellect and spirit which she attempts to conceal through stifled expression. Her thumb protrudes into the viewer’s 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 he may have wished to overcome the limitations of
the static profile in an attempt to convey the physical and psychological presence of the sitter” (172). 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 a 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 restrictive portrait conventions advocated a similar breakdown of those contemporary social conditions which limited women’s movement.

Whereas Lippi regarded the window as an element which provided a more complex scene for the ‘actors’ to participate with one another, the window in Botticelli’s portrait is actually the agent through which we are able to meet this woman face to face. Her thumb, which protrudes into the viewers’ space, the outdoors, is similar in gesture to the man’s in Lippi’s portrait, whose hand rests on the window sill. In both cases, the gestures suggest transgression of boundary lines. In Lippi’s portrait, Scolari, the male
suitor, intruded upon the domestic space of the home from the outside in. In Botticelli’s case, Smerelda, the beloved, creeps out of the dreary household shadows, from behind the shutters and out into the public outdoors. The face to face exchange with Smerelda is bold; she is not objectified as was Sapiti and most other earlier female sitters, thus she refuses to stand idly by to be the object of another’s gaze.36

Like Lippi’s painting, the landscape at which the lady gazes is not pictured within the parameters of the frame, but because of the perspective, we understand that we occupy this space. The audience, the artist, and the patrons, all make up her public for whom she is now eternally cast as spectacle. While she remains frozen in time, the ever-changing and growing public passes by her window to catch a glimpse of her. Just as the conduct manuals warned, one cannot control the number of peering eyes that can look upon a lady who shows herself at her window.

Another intriguing detail about this portrait is Brandini’s simple dress, which makes it difficult to argue that this lady is participating in a monumental ceremony, as is the case argued for Sapiti. She is shown wearing an outfit with very little ornamentation, well suited for domestic duties, but not for posing for an expensive portrait painting. Her loose-fitting white camicia, or chemise, is worn over her gamurra, and her accessories consist of only a basic collar around her neck. Her hair is pulled back in a simple coif under a light-weight cap. Contrast this with the elaborate dress of Lippi’s lady and glaring differences are readily apparent. Certainly, Botticelli had reasons separate from Lippi’s as he made the choice to render this austere portrait, closely resembling the sober ladies of the Northern Dutch genre paintings. Perhaps Brandini’s plain dress is meant to

exemplify her obedience to strict sumptuary laws that resulted from the religious and moral reform during the Quattrocento. Her unadorned attire recalls Barbaro’s comment wherein he advised men to keep their wives plainly dressed so that they would not feel themselves tempted to venture to the windows where they could be seen. Either way, it seems that Botticelli desired to portray a woman bearing a great deal of restraint from material desires. In this regard she 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 detail included in the background, it seems as if Botticelli intended to capture a spontaneous, more candid scene of daily life. The space in which Brandini stands is suggestive of a terrace or loggia, and in the background there is an open door, a reminder of the interior space where she would be 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 one 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 what conduct manuals have instructed.

Stripped of all the fineries of dress and wealth, Smerelda stands in the window as a figure of individuality and independence, a woman engaged in daily activity, however inappropriate and forbidden it may have been for her to do so. She has not taken the time out of her day to be groomed and poised to have her likeness painted and later displayed as if she were a mannequin whose only purpose is to model the family wealth. The
absence of a husband, or any family for that matter, supports the idea that another sort of intimate relationship exists here, but her enigmatic facial expression leaves us with fewer clues upon which to decipher this relationship. For as many different spectators who stop to who behold her there at her window, Brandini responds with just as many exchanges. It is this ambiguity which builds the narrative and adds depth to Botticelli’s painting. The viewer can no longer passively view the woman in the portrait for the simple pleasure of witnessing feminine beauty and honor, but must contemplate her individuality, personality and motives. She is actively taking part in her fate and engaging with the public. She opens the window and thus controls when, where, and from what angle we see her. Moreover, we are not allowed to look at her without her exercising the same privilege in return. She is aware of her audience, and as she stands there she invites spectators on her own terms of display and exchange. The power Brandini commands over the way in which she is perceived is one of the principle fears of fifteenth-century Italians, and their concerns found numerous outlets of expression through the publication of contemporary conduct manuals.

In both Lippi’s and Botticelli’s works examined here, the window motif adds an interesting, yet puzzling element to the portrait narrative. Rather than simply displaying the wealth, virtue, and beauty of these women, as was the focus of many contemporary female portraits, these two works suggest a deeper narrative: a narrative that by virtue of the windows present, opens the scene to include others beyond those of simply the sitter and her patron. The windows reduce the physical and metaphorical wall space built up around the Tuscan women of the fifteenth century, and when present in portraiture, the
window motif flirts with this fine line of what was considered to be an acceptable boundary between women and the public.
Conclusion:

During the fifteenth century, prescriptive literature was coveted and esteemed, as is made evident through the wide variety of different exhortatory forms of literature. Courtesy books, conduct manuals, catalogs of exemplum, broadsheets, emblematic works, moralizing essays, and letters providing advice to family and friends were all embraced by a public greedy for regulated forms of proper conduct by which to measure Tuscan identities and normative behavior. Feminine morals and conduct, particularly sexual mores, were of utmost concern in the collective ideologies of the period, and the implications for women were often harsh. Conduct manuals, despite their philanthropic intentions, ceaselessly circulated fears and anxieties about women’s unbridled sexuality and reckless regard for chastity. From the thirteenth century onward, these anxieties were internalized, and as a result, *paterfamilias* developed ever-inventive modes for disciplining women’s sexual conduct.37 Certainly other external social pressures, some of which are unique to this particular period in Tuscany, contributed to the need to firmly establish a unified structure of discipline for wives and daughters and refine proper conduct. For example, the increasingly competitive marriage market, rise in dowry funds, localized honor codes, culture of display, and finally, existing gender ideologies all worked together to form a cultural consensus that women needed to be contained and protected in order to safeguard their valuable chastity. With the new emphasis on the

family at the heart of the state, ushered in by the treatises of Barbaro and Alberti, domestic matters were meticulously conditioned and women’s movement increasingly limited. As a result, the home was codified as a place of honor and virtue and paterfamilias vigilantly surveyed transgressions of these established boundaries.

I posit that we might trace, from these early treatises on the family to the seventeenth-century, an increase in more qualified, specific lists of proper behavior deemed appropriate for women along with growing lists of those activities to be avoided. Included amongst this regulatory program was the abhorrence of women who frequented their household windows. These women, from their supposedly protected position within the household, sought to breech these boundaries of the home at the windows, doors and balconies, interstices in these carefully constructed architectural chastity belts.

Boccaccio, Lippi and Botticelli, honored in their own time and ours, each capture the material quality of the era by including familiar settings and spaces in their work – although Botticelli’s painting studied here is more anomalous than typical of his work – and their interests in such real settings allowed them to comment on contemporary social institutions. It is difficult to imagine that with the stigma surrounding household windows as improper places for women to appear, that these artistic geniuses, all noted for their social consciousness and moralizing programs, would have chosen to use these windows and openings ignorant of their cultural symbolism. Undoubtedly, there are more popular artists who would join their ranks, of whom I have neglected to note here.38 Perhaps some of these artists would have incorporated the window motif in their works with similar

38 Lauro Martines’s “Seduction and Family Space” is a thorough study of the theme of seduction in 14th- to 16th-century popular fictions and plays, along with a helpful chronological list of authors and dates, wherein he concludes that ‘women and windows were obsessively linked in the corpus of tales’ and that the tales are constructed on historical and cultural accuracies (213).
intentions of capturing contemporary practice and exploiting socially constructed systems of discipline, morals and conduct.

Much has already been written about the public-private divide in studies of medieval and Renaissance culture. It is also true that these studies have already been met with challenges as to the validity of such a structural base for sociological and historical investigation.\(^39\) I am hesitant to abandon such a framework, relatively young as it is, and believe that a better understanding of the means through which the society defined and constructed this gender divide will provide us with more insight into actual experiences of men and women in Quattrocento Tuscan cities, and elsewhere in Europe.

If we are to consciously look for windows to appear in popular culture between the fifteenth century and today, many tales, songs, and films readily come to mind. For example, the balcony scene in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has become iconic as a clandestine meeting place between star-crossed lovers who fatefully meet their tragic end. Similarly, in a moving and integral scene of the classic Italian film, *Cinema Paradiso*, Peppino courts Elena outside of her bedroom window for several days and in horrible weather conditions to win back her affections. The popular fairy tale *Rapunzel* hinges on the heroine’s ability to escape the confines of the tower by growing her hair long so that her valiant prince may rescue her through the one and only window at the top of the tower. I could certainly name several others here, and I am sure that my readers may think of several other instances on their own, but this brings me off topic. My point here is that the windows and the other openings in the walls of the home persist as metaphors.

or symbols for transgression, deviancy, and secrecy, and an examination of these symbols may even reveal some of our own contemporary conceptions of moral consciousness. Of course, young daughters do not experience the same degree of confinement and discipline today as did in fifteenth-century women, at least I hope not, but what child hasn’t been “grounded,” “restricted” or placed in “time-out” (although it might more appropriately be called “time-in”) in order to learn right from wrong? Similarly, what parent hasn’t contemplated window locks so that teenagers do not “sneak out” at night or leave without permission? These fears and anxieties are remnants of an earlier and highly conscious society who had clear ideas of gendered space which connoted proper morals. Windows and other openings literally and figuratively blur and weaken the boundary between public and private, masculine and feminine, impure/broken and chaste/intact, and as such they were targeted by moralizing writers and exploited in popular culture. The sheer volume of the window motif in all forms of learned and popular culture is a testament to fifteenth-century tensions regarding sexual discipline of women, and amidst the wealth of discourse on feminine chastity and confinement a few dissident voices emerge eager to redress the harsh implications which the requirement of chastity held for women.
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