Her Immaculate Hand

Selected Works By and About The Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy

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Medieval & Renaissance texts & studies
Binghamton, New York
1992

First edition 1983

Second edition, revised
First paperback edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Her immaculate hand : selected works by and about the women humanists of Quattrocento Italy / edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr.
p. cm.
Translations from Latin.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0–86698–124–1 (paperbound)
1. Latin literature, Medieval and modern—Women authors—Translations into English. 2. Latin literature, Medieval and modern—Italy—Translations into English. 3. Authors, Latin (Medieval and modern)—Italy—Correspondence. 4. Women—Italy—History—Renaissance, 1450–1600—Sources. 5. Italy—Civilization—1266–1559—Sources. 6. Renaissance—Italy—Sources. 7. Humanists—Italy. I. King, Margaret L., 1947– . II. Rabil, Albert.
[PA8163.H47 1992]
305.4'0945'09024—dc20 92–22550
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

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Women on Women and Learning

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To the magnificent and glorious Lady Cecilia Gonzaga, Costanza Varano sends greetings and salutes you

Introduction

This letter is something of a *tour de force*. The writer focuses her entire attention on her dilatoriness in writing, providing a variety of excuses: her rusticity, the sickness of her mother for whom she has to care, the death of the Archbishop of Patras which has caused her great sorrow. All of these excuses are meant at the same time to explain the poverty of her Latin style. Nonetheless, the excuses themselves are offered in the most florid Latin, certainly intended to demonstrate the opposite of what the letter actually asserts—a striking example of the triumph of form over content, characteristic of much writing by Renaissance humanists, both male and female.

The letter was probably written in 1444 prior to Costanza's marriage (December 8) and prior also to Cecilia's entry into a convent, of which no mention is made.

This translation is based on the Latin text edited by Lamius, *Catalogus*, p. 147. For another version, see the Bettinelli edition cited in "Book-Lined Cells," p. 83.

Text

ALTHOUGH I DISREGARDED MY GREAT ADMIRATION for your countless virtues, noble erudition, and unique eloquence, and instead preferred to pursue the great error of ambiguous silence or talkativeness, yet now, trusting in your prudence and in our mutual tie of consanguinity,[1] I finally have decided to put an end to my long silence. I realize that I have made a major mistake, and I admittedly deserve stinging reproof rather than kindly forgiveness. For I have [neglected to] nourish with frequent letters your benevolence, hope, and charity, which I have enjoyed from the cradle on, not because I have deserved them, but because you are kind. Yet it is necessary [to insure] that these charming virtues of yours not vanish from the recesses of your heart, but that they always firmly endure. Nor will the vast expanse of time ever cause me to lose the affection I feel toward you. But embarrassed by my own ignorance and clumsiness, and [aware] of your indescribable vir-

tue and great knowledge of rhetoric, I did not write more quickly, and a considerable delay was occasioned. I hoped my work would become capable of a more ornate style; it was not so much that I wanted to conceal my rustic speech by speaking little, but that I wanted your gentle ears to hear letters written with a most lucid and clear eloquence. Certainly I feared to deafen them with my usual trivialities. But realizing that I am unable to write with enough art, I have thrown myself entirely into the arms of your humanity and have decided to write to your Highness this inelegant letter, full of spiritless words and disordered thoughts, lest you label me with all the titles of ingratitude regardless of how often in times past I had determined to discharge my epistolary duty. But the consuming weakness and poor health of my magnificent mother took my mind from those tasks [to the point where] my soul, tied up with cares and diverse anxieties, drew back from literary studies. Then on April 21, an unexpected, unintelligible, and tragic calamity occurred, the death, that is, of the dearest Father in Christ, D. D. Pandolfo, the Archbishop of Patras, by whose providence this very city was justly governed.[2] Whence it happened that, overcome by tears and inconsolable sorrow, I put letters behind me. My pen fell from my hand, and every thought was so barred from my mind that it became quite stripped of invention. Now, however, with newly resumed strength, I have been better able, I believe, to send you this letter composed utterly without beauty. I pass by in silence, then, your virtues so rare, so glorious, finally, so nearly divine. For they would demand not the brevity of a letter but the length of a book, as is expressed in this line of Virgil's: "Day would lie locked in heaven before the end!"[3] I see that I have wandered further than I first thought I would. For this reason, I have decided to put an end to my words, humbly praying and imploring you that if you find anything [in this letter] rough, unpolished, and unadorned, you will not disdain to render it improved and refined. If you will do this, I will be most pleased. Farewell.

9

Costanza Varano sends greetings to Isotta Nogarola

Introduction

Costanza Varano is the only female admirer of Isotta Nogarola from whom a letter survives. The letter is notable in its praise both of Isotta's asceticism and of her learning.

Costanza makes reference to Isotta's self-imposed religious retreat (1441) when she says that Isotta has forsaken the needs of the body in reaching out for the immortal fame of the writer and scholar. She uses interesting language in making this point, asserting that it is more "fruitful" for women to forsake the needs of the body in seeking goods that fortune cannot destroy. Is she using the word ironically here? In any case, we must believe she was aware of the conflict between intellectual activity and the generativity usually associated with women. She cites Lactantius, Cicero, and Quintilian, who had praised those who rejected physical goods to live the life of the mind. Costanza understood that only through denial of the body could a woman achieve the intellectual goals Isotta sought.

Costanza's praise of Isotta is extravagant. Isotta is related to an historical chain of learned women through the ages, some of whom are named. Even more strikingly, in a poem accompanying this letter (not translated), she is said to surpass even the most learned men of her age.[1] No man ever honored Isotta for this (though Angelo Poliziano later praises Cassandra Fedele in such terms: selection 23). Isotta is clearly perceived as a model for those women who aspire to intellectual achievement. But her life is also a testimony to the price exacted for it: self-imposed isolation and denial of sexuality. It was not a path designed to draw very many into its orbit!

The probable date of the letter is 1443 or 1444.

This translation is based on the Latin text in *Isotae Nogarolae Veronensis opera quae supersunt omnia . . .*, ed. E. Abel, 2 vols. (Vienna and Budapest, 1886), 2:3–6. Other versions of the text may be found in the editions of Varano's works by Lamius and in Bettinelli, cited in "Book-Lined Cells," p. 83.

Text

AFTER I HAD READ REPEATEDLY YOUR ELEGANT LETTERS, most learned Isotta, letters redolent of that ancient dignity of the Romans, letters in which the embellishments are as suited to the thoughts as to the words, I became aware of how much I am affected with love for you, [and I was] moved by your eloquence to tell you so in my letter, although my words are unpolished, partly because of the poverty of my mind and part-

ly because of the inadequacy of my training in eloquence. But why do I speak of training when I have scarcely begun the first lesson? Hence I congratulate you, for you have advanced to the highest peaks, to the great splendor and glory of your name. For nothing could be more expedient and fruitful for women than to forget the needs of the body and to reach out strenuously for those goods which fortune cannot destroy. You have obeyed from earliest infancy that injunction of Lactantius Firmianus, not the least among theologians. Those who neglect the goods of the soul and desire those of the body, he says, spend their lives in shadows and death.[2] This statement from our Cicero's work *On Duties* you have also respected: For we are all drawn and led to the desire for knowledge and science, in which we think it fine to excel, but [consider it] shameful and base to falter, wander, be deceived and ignorant.[3] This does not escape that shrewd orator Quintilian in his *Oratoria institutio*: For just as birds are born for flight, horses for the race, wild beasts for savagery, so to us is distinctive a certain vitality and swiftness of mind.[4] All these maxims you have gathered to your breast always and guarded diligently. This being so, you must be judged the equal of those most excellent learned women of whom in antiquity there was no small multitude. Such were Aspasia,[5] Cornelia, Scipio's daughter,[6] Elphe,[7] and others of whom this is not the place to speak. Indeed you, who for some considerable time have excelled in studies, know this far better than I. I cannot express in words how much I admire you; [whatever I say] falls short of what is in my mind. And please believe that there is nothing which contributes to the sum of your merit which, I promise, I shall not willingly undertake with all my strength to perform.

I have explained my views with these few words, both because I was ordered not to exceed the paper [you] sent me, and because I speak to you who are most learned. For I do not wish to be a guide on such a road to you for whom, because of your great goodness, all things stand open in the brightest light. I, indeed—a single man and a mere mortal, as it were, a reflection of the celestial life—have only pointed a finger, so to speak, in the direction of the sources. And although others may find that my writings suffer from the defect of obscurity, if you, most brilliant, accept them and join them to what you and I have already written, our views will become very evident and clear, and will shine amid the shadows. And if what I have written is clumsy, by your skill you will make it worthy of your mind, virtue, and glory. For you march forward to new battles to the sound of sacred eloquence (as do soldiers to the clamor of trumpets), always more learned and more ready. And you march forward against me, who has applied the whole sum of my thinking to my reading, all at the same time, and to my writing, that I might present my case and defend myself against yours, although the many storms and floods of my obligations toss me about at whim. Farewell.

II

Oration of Cassandra Fedele, Maiden of Venice, in the University of Padua, for Bertucio Lamberto, Canon of Concordia, Receiving the Honors of the Liberal Arts

Introduction

In 1487, when Cassandra delivered this oration, she was twenty-two years old and culminating her classical education. It was one of the crowning achievements of her studies, and well it might have been, for it is one of the earliest precedents for women's involvement in university life. There is not a little irony in the fact that Cassandra was invited to address a body of scholars among whom she was not allowed to study.[1] In addition to this oration, Cassandra delivered several others during the same period.

Although Cassandra says that a good education is one which tends toward religion and piety, there is not one religious reference in this address. All her citations

are from classical Greek and Roman sources, as the notes indicate. The content of the oration places it in the genre of moral philosophy. All her references to the advantages of studying philosophy suggest that the purpose of philosophical study is to enhance one's resources for living well.

Bertucio Lamberto, in whose honor the speech is delivered, is unknown to us from other sources.[2]

This translation is based on the Latin text in *Cassandra Fidelis epistolae et orationes*, ed. Tomasini, pp. 193–201.[2a]

Text

If I were permitted to be afraid as I bravely start to speak, honorable fathers, governors of the university, and most illustrious gentlemen, then faced with these ranks of learned men I would falter, bow and bend. But it behooves me, I know, to be brave. And so I shall contain my timidity—although I know it might seem to many of you audacious that I, a virgin too young to be learned, ignoring my sex and exceeding my talent, should propose to speak before such a body of learned men, and especially in this city where today (as once in Athens) the study of the liberal arts flourishes. However, the bond of duty and blood which joins me to Bertucio has forced me to undertake this task against my will, since I prefer to be called too bold rather than, by shirking my duty to a relative to whom I owe loyalty, diligent service and respect, to be too hard. There are other considerations which almost discouraged me from beginning; now, however, they in particular incite and impel me to undertake this task. So relying on your singular kindness and your rare courtesy, I dare to advance to speak. I knew that your kindness would absolve me if, in the course of my speech, I said something inelegant or unlearned. Indeed, I believe that you are endowed not only with this virtue but all others. Of these I would gladly speak if I were not afraid that needlessly to detain you with a long oration would be wearisome and unwise and that it would be exceedingly rash to judge that I could praise your virtues as much as I ought. So I will not assume that task, though I will touch on the matter, since it would be more difficult for me to end your praises than to begin them. So with this encouragement, I shall set my sails on a new course. I must speak of my [cousin], or appear to shirk my duty. I shall speak briefly.

I have chosen as the subject of my praise the threefold tradition of Cicero, Plato, and the Peripatetics, who believed that men derived true honor from the goods of the soul, the goods of the body, and from those goods which some prominent philosophers ascribed to fortune.[3] Therefore, I beseech you, illustrious gentlemen, to pay close attention, although I know that you expect no profound insights from me. Lest you think that I speak ostentatiously (which I am striving particularly not to do), I shall use humble, everyday words, which

I am sure will please you. However brilliant one's origin, it is granted highest praise, as you know, only when the record of one's virtues achieves the level of one's nobility. These virtues alone add glory to one's family name and make people truly noble and truly famous. For what is the point of praising my relative's [Bertucio's] origin more than his character and learning, his quick, versatile, and receptive disposition, his tenacious memory or his remarkable love of the good arts? It would mean little, indeed, to have been born among the Venetians in the most celebrated marketplace of the whole world, if there were not added [to that merit] an education inferior to none with respect to religion and piety. And he has many friends, many admirers, many supporters of his glory. [Yet] the more he is praised, the less is he arrogant and overbearing. Look upon his skillfulness and dignity of form: how innocently and piously he has spent his youth is clearly evident. A youth more obedient to his parents does not exist, nor ever did. In all, to sum up, to that degree that he seems to be green in age, he is ripe, you will discover, in virtue. All this is obvious, or I would not have dared to mention it before so great an assembly. But now I shall turn to more serious matters.

Riches, bodily strength, and other such things pass away in a brief time. Deeds of genius, by contrast, are immortal, as is the soul, while goods of the body and of fortune [are snatched away]: the end is like the beginning. Neither money nor, I believe, magnificent houses nor wealth nor other pleasures of that kind which many pursue, should be counted as good things. Never, indeed, is such hungry craving satisfied, never filled. For who can deny that our weak and changeable flesh is fleeting? Yet where now is magnificent Thebes, adorned with such a luxuriance of buildings?[4] Where is the splendor of the Persians and their Cyrus?[5] Where is Darius?[6] Where are the Macedonians with their kings Philip and Alexander?[7] Where are the Spartans with their Lycurgus?[8] Where is the strength of invincible Hercules?[9] It was not beauty preserved which made Spurina famous, but beauty ruined, [his] face [scarred] by wounds for the sake of chastity.[10] Who can possess these [fleeting goods] securely? Necessity appoints [their fate] equally to the greatest and the least. Was not even Croesus, king of the Lydians, deprived of an immense treasure of wealth and riches by Cyrus?[11] Then a cheap little woman robbed Cyrus in turn of both kingdom and life.[12] And Xerxes, who roared across land and sea with a great fleet of ships, fled back to his kingdom, content with the wood of one little ship, his whole army lost.[13] I could go on and on. Where is Rome, that tamer of barbarians and ruler of the Greeks? Clearly, all these things have withered away. Terrible death attends all fleeting things. But those things which are produced by virtue and intelligence are useful to those who follow.

In the same way now here our Bertucio, having with keen mind and excellent memory devoted all his attention and studies to eloquence from his earliest

years, now flourishes, [possessed of a] fluency and singular grace in speech. These very studies also add much honor and ornament to the advantages of fortune and of the body. For it is in speech that men excel beasts. What is so uncultivated, so unpolished, so unintelligible, so base, that it cannot be set aglow and, so to speak, ennobled by a carefully wrought oration? What is more praiseworthy than eloquence, more outstanding, or more lovely, whether [greeted] by the admiration of listeners or the hope of those in need or the thanks of those who have been defended? Nothing, moreover, is so incredible or difficult that it cannot become acceptable and easy through speaking. And how much more humane, praiseworthy and noble do those states and princes become who support and cultivate these studies! Certainly for this reason this part of philosophy has laid claim for itself to the sweet name of "humanity," since those who are rough by nature become by these studies more civil and mild-mannered. But I am here to praise the youth [Bertucio], pursuing the study of philosophy, which [branch of] knowledge has always been thought divine among the wisest men, and rightly so. For the other disciplines deal with matters related to man; this one teaches clearly what man himself is, what he must strive for, what he must flee. There is no understanding of life, no outstanding principle, and, finally, nothing which pertains to living well and happily, which does not result from the study of philosophy. Has anyone ever plunged into error who was imbued with philosophy? These studies refine the mind, intensify and strengthen the force of reason. The minds of men who have lapsed into error are set straight by this rudder. For this reason Stratonicus rightly calls philosophy the true security.[14] Our minds striving, by means of philosophy, we are able to discover truth and to know hidden things; she is the perfect craftsman and teacher of happiness. For what is more fruitfully useful? What [contributes] more to dignity, what more happily to righteous pleasure, or more aptly to the glory of cities than the branches of philosophy? For this reason Plato, a man almost divine, wrote that republics are blessed when their administrators have been trained in philosophy, or when men trained in philosophy have undertaken to administer them.[15]

Various inventors of this holy discipline of wisdom are reported.[16] The Africans cite Atlas; The Thracians cite Orpheus or Zamolxis; the Thebans cite Linus; the Egyptians Vulcan; the Gauls their Druids; others cite other men who were the first to lay down the foundations of philosophy or to build on them to some extent. Philosophy, whether its origin is traced to Zoroaster, prince of the Magi, or to the Gymnosophists of the Persians and Chaldaeans, is divided into rational, moral, and natural philosophy.

It is not easy to describe the careful diligence with which [Bertucio] has spent a lifetime in these studies. As much time as others are accustomed to devote to celebrating festive days, to the pleasures of the spirit, to the repose of the

body, so much time has he devoted to the cultivation of these studies. Now indeed the reward, the dignity, he has earned by means of these labors and vigils, I need not mention to you, most worthy men, since you, in your wisdom, have judged that he should be awarded the insignia of philosophy; although it must not be doubted that he will attain still higher rewards in the future.

I would speak at greater length if I did not know that Johannes Regius, whom you heard a little while ago, had spoken with greater elegance.[17] Since that is so, distinguished gentlemen, lest by a longer speech I turn your joy to boredom, I shall pass over the rest. I attend instead to my particular duty, to extend thanks particularly to you, illustrious magistrates of this city, and to you, excellent fathers and distinguished men, because you have deigned to lend your welcome presence in a distinguished assembly to honor my relative. For no one is so ungrateful or insensitive or crude that he would neglect to praise you for this recent favor. But, to tell the truth, there could hardly be an orator so consummate and with such discerning judgment who could—I do not say recount all your merits (for this cannot be done)—but even touch lightly upon them. Happy, therefore, are you, Cassandra, that you happened to be born into these times! Happy this age and this excellent city of Padua, overbrimming with so many learned men. Now let everyone cease, cease, I say, to marvel at the ancients! The highest and greatest God has wished the studies of all peoples to flourish in this place, and to be commended and consecrated to eternity. For age will exhaust and devour all things, but your divine studies will flourish daily more and more and will free themselves from all danger of oblivion.

But I return to what I set out to say, that I thank you abundantly for being present today in such great numbers for my speech and for Bertucio, my kinsman, and for seeing fit to honor both of us with your illustrious presence. I promise that our unfailing loyalty and respect will never flag for you distinguished men as long as we both live. (1487)

12

Cassandra Fedele: Oration in Praise of Letters

Introduction

Even more clearly in this oration than in the preceding one, Cassandra identifies the study of the liberal arts with the improvement of character. She accepts the classical definition of human beings as rational. It is our ability to learn which distinguishes us from beasts. The more we learn the less like beasts we are, for it makes us gentle, helpful to others, modest and pleasant. Using the example of Philip of Macedon, she also identifies success in military prowess with learning. Even though these two effects of learning might appear contradictory, Cassandra was describing a combination that actually existed in numerous figures in Renaissance Italy. One recalls also the military imagery applied to learned women, making even stronger the analogy between learning and maleness.

In this latter connection the end of Cassandra's oration is poignant. She recognizes that the study of letters offers no reward or dignity for a woman. She seems already, in her early twenties, to have understood that there was no place for her to go with her learning. Nonetheless, she loves it enough to say that, even so, a woman should devote herself to learning. The pleasure and internal reward that come from it are enough.

This translation is based on the Latin text in *Cassandra Fidelis Venetae epistolae et orationes*, ed. Tomasini, pp. 201–7.

Text

GIORGIO VALLA, THAT GREAT ORATOR and philosopher,[1] who found me worthy of his attention, most serene Prince, Senators, and learned men, encouraged and exhorted me—as I considered how women could profit from assiduous study—thereby to seek immortality. Aware of the weakness of my sex and the paucity of my talent, blushing, I decided to honor and obey him inasmuch as he was demanding [something] honorable, in order that the common crowd may be ashamed of itself and stop being offensive to me, devoted as I am to the liberal arts. No one should be surprised, then, if the mind and heart of her who now speaks hesitate a bit and falter. For when I reflected upon the magnitude of the matter about which I had decided to speak to this most distinguished and splendid assembly, I realized that nothing could be so eloquent, distinguished and polished, even if presented by the most eloquent speaker, that it would not seem threadbare, obscure, and mean in comparison with the greatness of your knowledge and excellence. What woman, I ask, has such force and ability of mind and speech that she could adequately meet the standard of the greatness of letters or your learned ears? Thus daunted by the difficulty [of the task] and conscious of my weakness, I might easily

have shirked this opportunity to speak, if your well-known kindness and clemency had not urged me to it. For I am not unaware that you are not in the habit of demanding or expecting from anyone more than the nature of the subject itself allows, or than a person's own strength can promise of them. Moreover, I am persuaded to speak on this matter by that which at first deterred me, your welcome courtesy and kindness, which encourages me to believe that no speech could be more pleasant and more agreeable to eloquent men (for you are all eloquent) and to those yearning for edification than one which in some way attests to and celebrates liberal arts and letters. Therefore, moved by these thoughts and by your attention to me, let me explain very briefly how useful and honorable the investigation of the LIBERAL ARTS is for man, and also how delightful and splendid.

Even an ignorant man—not only a philosopher—sees and admits that man is rightly distinguished from a beast above all by [his capacity of] reason. For what else so greatly delights, enriches and honors both of them than the teaching and understanding of letters and the liberal arts? Teaching and understanding indeed not only separate man decisively from beasts, but so clearly distinguish the man educated as befits a freeborn gentleman from ignorant and crude persons, that certainly, in my mind, portraits and shadows are no more distant from the living and real men they depict than are educated men from the unlearned and unskilled. Moreover, simple men, ignorant of literature, even if they have by nature this potential seed of genius and reason, leave it alone and uncultivated throughout their whole lives, stifle it with neglect and sloth, and render themsleves unfit for greatness. For like wanderers they walk in darkness to all [life's] actions, and through imprudence, ignorance, and clumsiness, they are beset with calamities and, in a way, live a life of chance. These are they who make Fortune their goddess, place all their trust in her, and when she is favorable commend her [and] kiss her warmly, but when she is unfavorable, loudly accuse her and wail.

> Soldiers, who have conquered the worlds and on whom my destiny depends, behold the chance of battle you have so often prayed for. Prayer is no longer needed; with your swords you must now summon fate. So true to her bargains did fortune continue to the end the prosperity of Magnus; so true to her bargain she summoned him at his death from his pinnacle of glory and ruthlessly made him pay in a single day for all the disasters from which she protected him for so many years. And Pompey was the only man who never experienced good and evil together: his prosperity no god disturbed and on his misery no god had mercy. Fortune held her

> hand for long and then overthrew him with one blow. He is tossed on the sands.[2]

But learned men, filled with a rich knowledge of divine and human things, turn all their thoughts and motions of the mind toward the goal of reason, and thus free the mind, [otherwise] subject to so many anxieties, from all infirmity. No longer subject to the innumberable weapons of fortune, they are fully prepared for living well and happily. They follow reason as a leader in all things, considering not only their own welfare in any situation, but also that of others, helping both privately and publicly, with diligent action and [sound] advice. Hence Plato, a man almost divine, wrote that those republics would be blessed either when those who administer them have been trained in philosophy or when those trained in philosophy undertake their administration.[3] He observes, I believe, that men upon whom fortune has bestowed physical well-being or wealth are much more prone to vice and more often swayed by evil than those who have not been so privileged, and the goods of the mind inborn by nature, if not cultivated through study, are wholly deficient; wherefore he did not consider the ignorant suited to conduct public business.[4] And rightly so. The study of literature polishes intelligence, illuminates and shapes the force of reason, either nearly erases or completely washes away every blemish of soul, and richly perfects its endowments, and adds great ornament and beauty to the advantages of fortune and body. States and princes, moreover, who favor and cultivate these studies become much more humane, pleasing, and noble, and purely [by doing so] win for themselves a sweet reputation for humanity. Those whose minds are crude and rough naturally become more civilized and polished by means of these studies, and often those who are boastful, impudent, and wanton because of external goods [they have obtained] or goods bestowed on them by nature, acquire from [the study of] the liberal arts modesty, gentleness, and a certain wonderful kindness toward all men. For just as places by nature rough and wild lie idle, but by the work and care of men become not only fertile and fruitful but even delightful, likewise our minds are refined, polished, and glorified by the good arts. Philip, King of Macedon, understood this very well, by whose virtue and industry the Macedonians had gained a rich empire and begun to rule over many peoples and nations. In a letter to Aristotle the philosopher, in which he announced that a son, Alexander, had been born to him, he said honorably and wisely that he rejoiced far more that the child had been born at that period of Aristotle's life than that he had begotten the heir to so great an empire.[5] O excellent utterance and worthy of so great a ruler! O weighty imperial judgment! For that king and emperor, exceptional for having spent the whole of his life engaged in the business of war and victories, knew well that an empire could

hardly be rightly, prudently, and gloriously governed by one who had not been steeped in the best arts. Alexander proved this [principle] in his own case a little later. Instructed in liberal studies by Aristotle, he greatly excelled all princes and emperors either before or after him in ruling, maintaining, and increasing an empire. For this reason the ancients rightly judged all leaders deficient in letters, however skillful in military affairs, to be crude and ignorant. As for the utility of letters, enough said. Not only is this divine field, abundant and noble, amply useful, but it offers its copious, delightful, and perpetual fruits profusely. Of these fruits I myself have tasted a little and [have esteemed myself in that enterprise] more than abject and hopeless; and, armed with distaff and needle—woman's weapons—I march forth [to defend] the belief that even though the study of letters promises and offers no reward for women and no dignity, every woman ought to seek and embrace these studies for that pleasure and delight alone that [comes] from them.

13

Laura Cereta: Letter to Augustinus Aemilius, Curse against the Ornamentation of Women

Introduction

Laura Cereta wrote all the letters she published between July 1485 and March 1488, that is, when she was between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. The central event in her life during these years of letter-writing was her marriage to Pietro Serina, a local Brescian businessman, when she was fifteen. They had been married for only eighteen months when he died from the plague. Her letters are almost equally divided between those written before and those after his death. His death, and her reaction to it, provide one of the surest bases for dating her letters.

This particular letter was written about six months after her husband had died. She describes the scene at the beginning, but the grief is not so immediate as in some letters written nearer the time of his death. She recovered her spirits, as she says in another letter, not by weeping but by reason, that is, she immersed

herself once again in writing, which she had temporarily abandoned after Pietro's death.

The three letters included in this anthology, though written as separate pieces, are all related and hence are grouped together. They reflect the values of a woman who has dedicated herself to learning and has to struggle against social pressures in doing so. Together they constitute one of the strongest assertions of women's intellects and the "right" of women to dedicate themselves to humanist studies to be found among learned women during the Quattrocento.

The body of this letter is taken up with a critique of the values of most of her peers who pay great attention to their looks (discussed here in great detail—with allusions to the satires of Juvenal). The last paragraph of the letter seems a complete turnabout, for Cereta apologizes for rather than berates her sex. The apology sounds very much like Isotta Nogarola's defense of Eve with which Cereta elsewhere shows herself familiar. The apology is, however, related to the beginning of the letter. The idea seems to be that just as Augustine should not praise her too highly, so he should not condemn others too harshly, for the same weak nature is operative in both. In this light, the critique which occupies the body of the letter must be read as a Christian complaint against pagan tendencies rather than as a brief in behalf of learning. This reflects the more religious posture Cereta admits she adopted for a time after her husband's death. In her subsequent letters, as we shall see, her attitude reflects much more her later return to learning as her major preoccupation.

The correspondent to whom this letter is written, Augustinus Aemilius, is unknown to us from other sources. Cereta wrote one other letter to him in addition to this one. The letter is written from the country, probably a country home belonging to her family. Why she was there we do not know. Perhaps it was to escape the innuendos of her critics, whom we shall meet in the following selection.

This translation is based on the Latin text published by J. F. Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae* (Padua, 1640), pp. 66–70.

Text

ALONE, I FLED TO THE COUNTRY, and in tranquil leisure delighted in [humane] studies. But you, meanwhile, were disturbed by my retreat, as if you seemed to consider me, a nonentity, important.[1]

I came at the end when my husband was feverish. Dying myself, I saw him half dead. I cheered him when he seemed to revive, I wept over him when he died, I fell lifeless on his dead body, and the fatal house which awaited me for marriage admitted me to lamentation. Thus one, and that an abominable year, saw me a girl, bride, widow, and pauper. These events were ordered by fate, not by you; you were mortal and died.

I thank you for esteeming me so highly, and more so than I deserve, for I cannot be compared to women like Sarah, Esther, Sephora and Susanna,[2]

any more than a glowworm shining at night can be compared to the brilliant stars in heaven. I fear that your lofty opinion of me may spring from some other source than a carefully balanced judgment. Conjure up in your mind an ordinary woman, drab of face and drably dressed—for I care more for letters than for flashy clothes. Moreover, I have committed myself absolutely to that cultivation of virtue which can profit me not only when alive but also after death. There are those who are captivated by beauty. I myself should give the greater prize to grey-haired chastity, since in the lovely company of comely youth blaze up enticements to passion. For virtue excels the brilliance of beauty, elaborate polished artifice, and precious flowers of every tenderness. Let Mark Antony be attracted by bejewelled Cleopatra; I shall imitate the innocence of Rebecca.[3] Let Paris seek the wandering Helen; I choose to imitate the modesty of Rachel.[4] Wives are bewitched by rich display; more witless still are those who, to satisfy the appetite of their wives, destroy their patrimonies. Today men's love for women has made our commonwealth the imitator or rather the plunderer of the East. Luxury has thrived in this age, more than all others prodigiously vain. Let those who do not believe me attend the services of the church. Let them observe weddings packed with seated matrons.[5] Let them gaze at these women who, with majestic pride, promenade amidst crowds through the piazzas. Among them, here and there, is one who ties a towering knot—made of someone else's hair—at the very peak of her head;[6] another's forehead is submerged in waves of crimped curls; and another, in order to bare her neck, binds with a golden ribbon her golden hair. One suspends a necklace from her shoulder, another from her arm, another from neck to breast. Others choke themselves with pearl necklaces; born free, they boast to be held captive. And many display fingers glistening with jewels. One, lusting to walk more mincingly, loosens her girdle, while another tightens hers to make her breasts bulge. Some drag from their shoulders silken tunics. Others, sweet-scented with perfumes, cover themselves with an Arabian hood. Some boost themsleves with high-heeled shoes. And all think it particularly modish to swathe their legs with fine soft cotton. Many press softened bread on their faces,[7] many artificially smooth their skin, stretched with wrinkles; there are few whose ruddy faces are not painted with the lustre of white lead. In one way or another they strive by means of exquisite artistry to seem more beautiful than the Author of their beauty decreed. The impudence of some women is shameful. They paint their white cheeks with purple and, with furtive winks and smiling mouths, pierce the poisoned hearts of those who gaze on them. O the bold wantonness of lost modesty! O the weakness of our sex, stooping to voluptuousness! We have only to hang from our ears little ornaments trembling with precious stones and emeralds, and we shall not differ from pagans. Was it for this, by chance, that we were begotten, that we might worship in shameless devotion

the idols of our mirrored faces? Did we renounce display in baptism so that, as Christian women, we might imitate Jews and barbarians?

Even the feeblest desire [for honor] should make us blush over this longing for magnificence. These insane and lustful cravings, born of arrogance, should frighten us. Mindful of the ashes from which we come, we should renounce sins born from desires. How will our lamentations prevail if heavenly anger and indignation should rage against us miserable women? If those who rebel against the king commit their necks to the axe, why should we women marvel, rebels, indeed, warriors against God, if, to avenge our sin, an army rise up against us?[8] Rome mourns to this day the Gauls' assault. Italy, vanquished, bewails the Gothic sword. Greece suffers Mahomet's tyranny. These vicious devastations are not caused by human might but ordained by heaven [as a punishment for sins]. Let each woman dress and heal the wound from which we languish. We should seek the adornment of honor, not vulgar display,[9] and we should pursue this life mindful of our mortality. For God the Father has decreed that the good die well.

Therefore, Augustine, you have had ample opportunity to see that I consider this splendid magnificence foolish, and I wish you would pay no attention to my age or at least my sex. For [woman's] nature is not immune to sin; nature produced our mother [Eve], not from earth or rock, but from Adam's humanity. To be human is, however, to incline sometimes to good, but sometimes to pleasure. We are quite an imperfect animal, and our puny strength is not sufficient for mighty battles. [But] you great men, wielding such authority, commanding such success, who justly discern among your number so many present-day Brutuses, so many Curiuses, Fabriciuses, Catos, and Aemiliuses,[10] be careful: do not therefore be taken by the snare of this carefully arranged elegance. For where there is greater wisdom, there lies greater guilt.[11] February 12 [1487]

14

Laura Cereta to Bibulus Sempronius: Defense of the Liberal Instruction of Women

Introduction

As mentioned in the introduction to the preceding selection, Cereta recovered her spirits after her husband's death by immersing herself ever more deeply in her literary studies. These efforts, in turn, brought forth critics, both male and female, who, jealous of her accomplishments, belittled her work. Two principal charges were brought against her: that a woman could not be learned and that her father had written her letters for her. She turned against her critics with a ferocity at least equal to theirs. One of her surviving letters is an invective against two males whom she had known since childhood. But here we find, addressed to a man, as reasoned and thorough a defense of learned women as was penned during the Quattrocento. The letter is particularly interesting for its suggestion that the correspondent was disguising his contempt for women in singling out Cereta for praise.

The correspondent is unknown to us from other sources and may well be fictitious. "Bibulus," which we have not found elsewhere among the names of this period, means "drunkard." No other letter is addressed to such a correspondent.

This translation is based on the Latin text in Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae*, pp. 187–95.

Text

MY EARS ARE WEARIED BY YOUR CARPING. You brashly and publicly not merely wonder but indeed lament that I am said to possess as fine a mind as nature ever bestowed upon the most learned man. You seem to think that so learned a woman has scarcely before been seen in the world. You are wrong on both counts, Sempronius, and have clearly strayed from the path of truth and disseminate falsehood. I agree that you should be grieved; indeed, you should be ashamed, for you have ceased to be a living man, but have become an animated stone; having rejected the studies which make men wise, you rot in torpid leisure. Not nature but your own soul has betrayed you, deserting virtue for the easy path of sin.

You pretend to admire me as a female prodigy, but there lurks sugared deceit in your adulation. You wait perpetually in ambush to entrap my lovely sex, and overcome by your hatred seek to trample me underfoot and dash me to the earth. It is a crafty ploy, but only a low and vulgar mind would think to halt Medusa with honey.[1] You would better have crept up on a mole than on a wolf. For a mole with its dark vision can see nothing around it, while

a wolf's eyes glow in the dark. For the wise person sees by [force of] mind, and anticipating what lies ahead, proceeds by the light of reason. For by foreknowledge the thinker scatters with knowing feet the evils which litter her path.

I would have been silent, believe me, if that savage old enmity of yours had attacked me alone. For the light of Phoebus cannot be befouled even in the mud.[2] But I cannot tolerate your having attacked my entire sex. For this reason my thirsty soul seeks revenge, my sleeping pen is aroused to literary struggle, raging anger stirs mental passions long chained by silence. With just cause I am moved to demonstrate how great a reputation for learning and virtue women have won by their inborn excellence, manifested in every age as knowledge, the [purveyor] of honor. Certain, indeed, and legitimate is our possession of this inheritance, come to us from a long eternity of ages past.

[To begin], we read how Sabba of Ethiopia, her heart imbued with divine power, solved the prophetic mysteries of the Egyptian Salomon.[3] And the earliest writers said that Amalthea, gifted in foretelling the future, sang her prophecies around the banks of Lake Avernus, not far from Baiae. A sibyl worthy of the pagan gods, she sold books of oracles to Priscus Tarquinius.[4] The Babylonian prophetess Eriphila, her divine mind penetrating the distant future, described the fall and burning of Troy, the fortunes of the Roman Empire, and the coming birth of Christ.[5] Nicostrata also, the mother of Evander, learned both in prophecy and letters, possessed such great genius that with sixteen symbols she first taught the Latins the art of writing.[6] The fame of Inachian Isis will also remain eternal who, an Argive goddess, taught her alphabet to the Egyptians.[7] Zenobia of Egypt was so nobly learned, not only in Egyptian, but also in Greek and Latin, that she wrote histories of strange and exotic places.[8] Manto of Thebes, daughter of Tiresias, although not learned, was skilled in the arts of divination from the remains of sacrificed animals or the behavior of fire and other such Chaldaean techniques. [Examining] the fire's flames, the bird's flight, the entrails and innards of animals, she spoke with spirits and foretold future events.[9] What was the source of the great wisdom of the Tritonian Athena by which she taught so many arts to the Athenians, if not the secret writings, admired by all, of the philosopher Apollo?[10] The Greek women Philiasia and Lasthenia, splendors of learning, excite me, who often tripped up, with tricky sophistries, Plato's clever disciples.[11] Sappho of Lesbos sang to her stone-hearted lover doleful verses, echoes, I believe, of Orpheus' lyre or Apollo's lute.[12] Later, Leontia's Greek and poetic tongue dared sharply to attack, with a lively and admired style, the eloquence of Theophrastus.[13] I should not omit Proba, remarkable for her excellent command of both Greek and Latin and who, imitating Homer and Virgil, retold the stories from the Old Testament.[14] The majesty of Rome exalted the Greek Semiamira, [invited] to lecture in the Senate

on laws and kings.[15] Pregnant with virtue, Rome also gave birth to Sempronia, who imposingly delivered before an assembly a fluent poem and swayed the minds of her hearers with her convincing oratory.[16] Celebrated with equal and endless praise for her eloquence was Hortensia, daughter of Hortensius, an oratrix of such power that, weeping womanly and virtuous tears, she persuaded the Triumvirs not to retaliate against women.[17] Let me add Cornificia, sister of the poet Cornificius, to whose love of letters so many skills were added that she was said to have been nourished by waters from the Castalian spring; she wrote epigrams always sweet with Heliconian flowers.[18] I shall quickly pass by Tulliola, daughter of Cicero,[19] Terentia,[20] and Cornelia,[21] all Roman women who attained the heights of knowledge. I shall also omit Nicolosa [Sanuto] of Bologna, Isotta Nogarola and Cassandra Fedele of our own day.[22] All of history is full of these examples. Thus your nasty words are refuted by these arguments, which compel you to concede that nature imparts equally to all the same freedom to learn.

Only the question of the rarity of outstanding women remains to be addressed. The explanation is clear: women have been able by nature to be exceptional, but have chosen lesser goals. For some women are concerned with parting their hair correctly, adorning themselves with lovely dresses, or decorating their fingers with pearls and other gems. Others delight in mouthing carefully composed phrases, indulging in dancing, or managing spoiled puppies. Still others wish to gaze at lavish banquet tables, to rest in sleep, or, standing at mirrors, to smear their lovely faces. But those in whom a deeper integrity yearns for virtue, restrain from the start their youthful souls, reflect on higher things, harden the body with sobriety and trials, and curb their tongues, open their ears, compose their thoughts in wakeful hours, their minds in contemplation, to letters bonded to righteousness. For knowledge is not given as a gift, but [is gained] with diligence. The free mind, not shirking effort, always soars zealously toward the good, and the desire to know grows ever more wide and deep. It is because of no special holiness, therefore, that we [women] are rewarded by God the Giver with the gift of exceptional talent. Nature has generously lavished its gifts upon all people, opening to all the doors of choice through which reason sends envoys to the will, from which they learn and convey its desires. The will must choose to exercise the gift of reason.

[But] where we [women] should be forceful we are [too often] devious; where we should be confident we are insecure. [Even worse], we are content with our condition. But you, a foolish and angry dog, have gone to earth as though frightened by wolves. Victory does not come to those who take flight. Nor does he remain safe who makes peace with the enemy; rather, when pressed, he should arm himself all the more with weapons and courage. How nauseating to see strong men pursue a weakling at bay. Hold on! Does my name alone

terrify you? As I am not a barbarian in intellect and do not fight like one, what fear drives you? You flee in vain, for traps craftily-laid rout you out of every hiding place. Do you think that by hiding, a deserter [from the field of battle], you can remain undiscovered? A penitent, do you seek the only path of salvation in flight? [If you do] you should be ashamed.

I have been praised too much; showing your contempt for women, you pretend that I alone am admirable because of the good fortune of my intellect. But I, compared to other women who have won splendid renown, am but a little mousling. You disguise your envy in dissimulation, but cloak yourself in apologetic words in vain. The lie buried, the truth, dear to God, always emerges. You stumble half-blind with envy on a wrongful path that leads you from your manhood, from your duty, from God. Who, do you think, will be surprised, Bibulus, if the stricken heart of an angry girl, whom your mindless scorn has painfully wounded, will after this more violently assault your bitter words? Do you suppose, O most contemptible man on earth, that I think myself sprung [like Athena] from the head of Jove? I am a school girl, possessed of the sleeping embers of an ordinary mind. Indeed I am too hurt, and my mind, offended, too swayed by passions, sighs, tormenting itself, conscious of the obligation to defend my sex. For absolutely everything—that which is within us and that which is without—is made weak by association with my sex.

I, therefore, who have always prized virtue, having put my private concerns aside, will polish and weary my pen against chatterboxes swelled with false glory. Trained in the arts, I shall block the paths of ambush. And I shall endeavor, by avenging arms, to sweep away the abusive infamies of noisemakers with which some disreputable and impudent men furiously, violently, and nastily rave against a woman and a republic worthy of reverence. January 13 [1488]

15

Laura Cereta to Lucilia Vernacula: Against Women Who Disparage Learned Women

Introduction

Not only did Cereta have to deal with carping men, she also had to contend with other women who attacked her out of envy and perhaps also because her accomplishment, so unusual for a woman, could easily be seen as socially deviant. Her departure from the norm of female existence invited resentment. This is perhaps why her tone is more violent here than in the preceding letter addressed to a man. Whereas in the preceding letter she appears to concentrate more on the issue at hand, here she focuses more on the persons involved. She regards learning as growing out of virtue, the external manifestation of an inward state. In effect she is saying that those who do not love learning have no inner direction of their own but are directed by things outside them. Thus, although virtue and learning are not the same thing, virtue will lead to learning rather than to the kinds of lives led by the women who criticize her.

This is the only letter addressed to this correspondent, who is unknown to us from other sources. Here again, the name may be fictitious. *Vernacula* can mean "common slave," perhaps "hussy."

This translation is based on the Latin text in Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae*, pp. 122–25.

Text

I THOUGHT THEIR TONGUES should have been fine-sliced and their hearts hacked to pieces—those men whose perverted minds and inconceivable hostility [fueled by] vulgar envy so flamed that they deny, stupidly ranting, that women are able to attain eloquence in Latin. [But] I might have forgiven those pathetic men, doomed to rascality, whose patent insanity I lash with unleashed tongue. But I cannot bear the babbling and chattering women, glowing with drunkenness and wine, whose impudent words harm not only our sex but even more themselves. Empty-headed, they put their heads together and draw lots from a stockpot to elect each other [number one];[1] but any women who excel they seek out and destroy with the venom of their envy. A wanton and bold plea indeed for ill-fortune and unkindness! Breathing viciousness, while she strives to besmirch her better, she befouls herself; for she who does not yearn to be sinless desires [in effect] license to sin. Thus these women, lazy with sloth and insouciance, abandon themselves to an unnatural vigilance; like scarecrows hung in gardens to ward off birds, they tackle all those who come into range with a poisonous tongue. Why should it behoove me to find this

barking, snorting pack of provocateurs worthy of my forebearance, when important and distinguished gentlewomen always esteem and honor me? I shall not allow the base sallies of arrogance to pass, absolved by silence, lest my silence be taken for approval or lest women leading this shameful life attract to their licentiousness crowds of fellow-sinners. Nor should anyone fault me for impatience, since even dogs are permitted to claw at pesty flies, and an infected cow must always be isolated from the healthy flock, for the best is often injured by the worst. Who would believe that a [sturdy] tree could be destroyed by tiny ants? Let them fall silent, then, these insolent little women, to whom every norm of decency is foreign; inflamed with hatred, they would noisily chew up others, [except that] mute, they are themselves chewed up within. Their inactivity of mind maddens these raving women, or rather Megaeras,[2] who cannot bear even to hear the name of a learned woman. These are the mushy faces who, in their vehemence, now spit tedious nothings from their tight little mouths, now to the horror of those looking on spew from their lips thunderous trifles. One becomes disgusted with human failings and grows weary of these women who, [trapped in their own mental predicament], despair of attaining possession of human arts, when they could easily do so with the application of skill and virtue. For letters are not bestowed upon us, or assigned to us by chance. Virtue only is acquired by ourselves alone; nor can those women ascend to serious knowledge who, soiled by the filth of pleasures, languidly rot in sloth. For those women the path to true knowledge is plain who see that there is certain honor in exertion, labor, and wakefulness. Farewell. November 1 [1487]

16

An Exchange of Letters between Cassandra Fedele and Alesandra Scala

Introduction

Although these two letters are not responses to one another, they are related. The first letter shows the admiration in which Alessandra held Cassandra, which would have prompted her to ask the advice given in the second letter. Apart from a Greek epigram addressed to Angelo Poliziano, this letter is the only writing we know of from the pen of Alessandra.[1]

The question addressed in the second letter—whether marriage or studies is to be preferred by a learned woman—suggests that Alessandra had asked Cassandra to advise her. Cassandra's advice is interesting: choose that alternative to which nature more inclines you. The letter thus addresses directly the conflict learned women felt between learning and marriage—a conflict no learned man had to face.

This translation is based on the Latin text in Tomasini, *Cassandra Fidelis Venetae epistolae et orationes*, pp. 163–64 and p. 164 respectively.

Text

16A: Alessandra Scala to Cassandra Fedele: Congratulates her on her gifts of learning and promises equal dedication

Whoever comes to [Florence] from [Venice] celebrates your virtue, so that now your name is revered here as much as there. Admirable and almost incredible things are told us about your intellect, learning, and manners. For this reason I congratulate you and give thanks, because you have made illustrious not only our sex but also this age. Florence, October 6, 1492

16B: Cassandra Fedele to Alessandra Scala: Whether marriage is to be preferred to studies by a learned woman

From your elegant letter I saw and was pleased that you valued my good will, since you not only wished that I know all things about you but you also wished to consult me about a personal concern. And so, my Alessandra, you are of two minds, whether you should give yourself to the Muses or to a man. In this matter I think you must choose that to which nature more inclines you. For Plato states that all advice which is received, is received in proportion to the readiness of the receiver.[2] You

must certainly be prepared to make a sound judgment and not act impetuously.. February 15, 1492