

here. Petrarch, Erasmus, and Calvin may especially invite such treatment. But the general ambivalence of humanists makes clear the central importance for the movement of the tension between the two positions. It was literally in the hearts of the humanists themselves. At the same time this ambiguity also reveals that Stoicism and Augustinianism do not represent distinguishable factions within a larger movement but ideal polarities that help us to understand its significance as a whole....

Margaret L. King

Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance

The world of humanism was an almost exclusively male world, as King's article, "Book-Lined Cells," makes painfully clear. Her purpose in exploring this aspect of humanism, however, is not simply to decry the inequity but to use it to illuminate the nature of the movement as experienced by women. She begins by showing that a small but surprising number of women were active in the movement during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The numbers she cites for this period—three well-known figures, a dozen or so who could be easily named, perhaps another twenty who could be identified, and the likelihood of many nameless others—should be viewed in the context of a movement that, by the early fifteenth century, centered in each city on only a handful of men. Even as the movement gained in popularity in the course of the century, it never really appealed beyond the small circle associated with the ruling elite. So women, as King shows, had greater visibility than their absolute numbers would indicate.

From Margaret L. King, "Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance," in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1980).

Humanistically trained women showed tremendous promise in their youth, according to King, mastering with relative ease the difficulties of classical Greek and Latin. Yet this promise went largely unfulfilled, for most abandoned their studies when they married. The lack of opportunities for learned women no doubt accentuated this choice, but King maintains that even those who chose learning over marriage failed to meet expectations, and not just because they had little outlet for their talents.

In the selections below, King argues that learned women censored themselves, limiting their own achievements, because they had internalized the notion that they were the weaker sex, not only physically but morally. This attitude reflects a Judeo-Christian bias in Western culture, rooted in the story of Adam and Eve. But King goes farther and isolates a subtle disincentive to achievement that is more unique to the Renaissance. In their sometimes extravagant praise for their female counterparts, male humanists described them as, in King's term, "armed maidens." They had transcended not only the weakness of their sex but sex itself. They stood Athena-like, in cold, distant, solitary, intellectual perfection. And men—threatened and perplexed by the newly emergent figure of female learning—enthroned them in this way to isolate them. Of course, women did not withdraw from the world simply because men wanted them to, but humanist rhetoric conspired with the lack of opportunity and the omnipresent sense of inferiority to encourage women to retreat into their "book-lined cells."

... Remarkable people sometimes know they are remarkable. Laura Cereta did. She enjoyed her studies; she understood her talents; she delighted in describing to those who asked and to some who didn't how she had progressed to her present stage of knowledge. Gradually her talents emerged, she reported; as her mind acquired small particles of knowledge, she learned to supply words to adorn them; her mind yearned for studies even more challenging; as her understanding expanded, so did her diligence; she loved philosophy above all; she burned with desire for mathematics; she delved deeply into theology, and she found there knowledge not "shadowy and vaporous" but "perpetually secure and perfect." At birth she had been given the name Laura, who Petrarch had immortalized in his sonnets; now she labored in imitation of Petrarch to lend that name still grander eternity. Cereta was proud of her mind. She was unique.

Learned women more typically betray their fragile self-confidence. ... Isotta Nogarola apologizes not only for being a woman with pretenses

of learning but for being a woman at all, in a work which is, I believe, the most important written by a woman in the early Italian Renaissance: the *De pari aut impari Evae atque Adae peccato*, a dialogue on the relative responsibility of Adam and Eve for the fall of mankind from grace. Nogarola condemned Adam in this dialogue, but based her defense of Eve, paradoxically, on the weakness of female nature. Eve, who had been created imperfect, could not be held responsible for universal sin: "for where there is less sense and less constancy," Nogarola wrote, "there there is less sin; and this is the case with Eve, wherefore she sinned less." Eve's ignorance was natural and deliberately planted by God; but Adam had been created perfect and could be expected to behave perfectly: "When God created man, from the beginning he created him perfect, and the potencies of his soul he made perfect, and gave him a greater understanding and knowledge of truth, and also a greater profundity of wisdom." Nogarola's uncertainties about her role as a woman—put into question by her confrontation with the world of male learning—culminate here in the clear conviction that woman was in fact created inferior to man and that all women had to bear the burden of this first act of creation.

Nogarola gives voice in this dialogue and in her other works to a concern shared certainly to some degree by several and perhaps by all. Her success in the society of the learned was inhibited by her membership in the female sex. The acuity of her mind could be undermined by the frailty of her nature. Not surprisingly, learned women on occasion regretted having been born female and attempted to distance themselves from other women. Not surprisingly, other women despised them. . . .

Nogarola's literary ambitions had exposed her to the envy and hostility of her sex. Laura Cereta, too, was the object of fierce criticism by women. She responded with spirit, understanding both the envy that may have motivated the attacks and the self-destructiveness implicit in any attack on women by women: these women search out others who have risen above them by their genius and destroy them with poisonous envy, she wrote. . . .

Less pained than Nogarola by the attacks of other women, Cereta more easily defends herself and more aggressively turns on her enemies. She ruthlessly condemns empty women, who strive for no good but exist to adorn themselves and do not understand that their condition is one of servitude: these women of majestic pride, fantastic coiffures, outlandish ornament, and necks bound with gold or pearls bear the glittering

symbols of their captivity to men who are proud enough to be free. For Nogarola, women's inferiority derived from the order of things, from a divine decree asserted at the hour of creation; for Cereta it is derived from women themselves, who lacked the will to be good, to be learned, to be free: "For knowledge is not given as a gift, but through study. . . . The free mind, not afraid of labor, presses on to attain the good."

Nogarola and Cereta clearly reveal their attitudes toward themselves as women and as learned women; others speak less fully, but sufficiently to persuade us that the consciousness of womanhood in the quest for intellectual integrity was probably general. Being women, they were burdened. To succeed wholly, they would have had to cast off that burden—but it is a burden that cannot be cast off. Or they would have had to elevate the whole of their sex—but this they were powerless to do. The ambitions of the learned women of the Renaissance were thwarted *in part* because, being women, they were vanquished from within: by their own self-doubt, punctuated by moments of pride; and by their low evaluation of their sex, which undermined their confidence further and which was confirmed by the behavior of other women for whom the intellectual strivings of a few threatened their condition of comfortable servitude.

The learned women, conquered from within, capitulated and withdrew from battle. They withdrew from study altogether, into marriage, or into grief. They withdrew to convents and to good works and to silence. They withdrew from secular studies, where men excelled, and took up sacred studies, appropriate for women, and formed cloisters of their minds. They withdrew from friendships, from the life of their cities, from public view, to small corners of the world where they worked in solitude: to self-constructed prisons, lined with books—to book-lined cells, my symbol for the condition of the learned women of this age.

There, they fascinated men. Matteo Bosso recalled years later his after-school visits to Isotta Nogarola in her "libraria cella"—literally, her book-lined cell. Ludovico Foscarini was struck by the same image of that learned woman—by then committed to sacred study and religious exercises—in her solitude: "In my mind I see again your little cell [*cellulam tuam*] redolent of sanctity." Years earlier, Antonio Loschi had been inspired by a similar image of Maddalena Scrovegni: "Your virtues, your manner of life . . . so moved me, and a vision of your little cell [*sacellum*], that one place in your father's house which you had chosen and set aside for silence, for study, and for prayer, was so fixed

in my soul that it first gave birth to this mediation within me." Women enclosed themselves in studious solitude, and men applauded. And women sought their approbation. When learned women withdrew from the public discourse of the learned, they may have been moved in part by the powerful spur of male opinion. They were defeated, I have suggested, from within—but the attitudes toward them held by male contemporaries were sharp probes that could penetrate deep within the hearts where that battle raged that ended in surrender.

Male humanists praised learned women extravagantly. . . . In an age when learning was prized, learning in women was prized as well—all the more because it was rare.

But such praise is treacherous. For the women who competed with learned men and who had the boldness to equal or exceed them were not in recognition of their excellence admitted to the company of men—yet they were excluded from the company of women. Like divine miracles, they were both wondrous and terrible; as prodigies, they had exceeded—and violated—nature. Male by intellect, female in body and in soul, their sexual identity was rendered ambiguous: they were, to borrow Nogarola's imagery, rejected by donkeys and oxen alike, expelled from either stable, abandoned, restless, and sleepless. Not quite male, not quite female, learned women belonged to a third and amorphous sex.

The ambiguous sexual identity of learned women was assumed from the early age of humanism. In dedicating his book *De claris mulieribus* (*Concerning Famous Women*) to Andrea Accaiuoli, Boccaccio declared that learned woman to have so far exceeded the rest of womankind that her sexual being had in fact been transformed by a miraculous divine act. . . . Her very greatness, Boccaccio reasons, in which she equals male greatness, suggests that Andrea was not so much a talented female as a woman transformed by the Creator himself and made—not a man—but a being of compound and indefinite sexuality.

Other men in the next century would, like Boccaccio, in the rhetoric of praise question and transform the sexual identity of intelligent women. Lauro Querini found that Isotta Nogarola had attained greatness by overcoming her biological nature. . . . Pietro Dabuson said of Cassandra Fedele that she was the "miracle" of the age; for a male soul had been born in one of female sex. Angelo Poliziano understood that Fedele had, by attaining deep learning, detached herself from her sex, abandoning symbolic objects associated with women in favor of those

associated with men: instead of wool, books; instead of a needle, a pen; instead of white dyes to blanch the skin, black ink to stain the page in the process of poetic creation. . . . The learned women of the Renaissance, in the eyes of their male contemporaries and friends, ceased, in becoming learned, to be women.

Whatever they were—and shortly I shall sketch the image I believe was applied to them—they aroused fear and anger in male contemporaries, who then joined to constrain these brilliant creatures perceived as threats to the natural and social order. Perhaps the most brutal attack was an anonymous one upon Isotta Nogarola: she was accused of incest. . . .

Other women were the victims, not of overt hostility, but of kind persuasion: male friends urged them to retreat from full participation in intellectual life, offering advice perhaps as inimical to their progress as heated opposition. Leonardo Bruni, in outlining for the daughter of Battista Montefeltro a program of humane studies, cautioned against the study of rhetoric—the one discipline the knowledge of which would enable a woman to participate publicly in intellectual discourse: "To her [i.e., the woman student] neither the intricacies of debate nor the oratorical artifices of action and delivery are of the least practical use, if indeed they are not positively unbecoming. Rhetoric in all its forms . . . lies absolutely outside the province of woman."

Learned women, then, were sometimes attacked, and sometimes urged to achieve less than could be expected of their talents and their hopes. They were also urged to be chaste. Cassandra Fedele and Isotta Nogarola were praised for their chastity; the latter, clearly influenced by men who preferred that she, as a learned woman, maintain her chastity, voluntarily committed herself outside the boundaries of organized religious life to celibacy. Now, the social function of chastity in the Italian Renaissance is a complex problem that calls for serious exploration. I hesitate to generalize, but given that the theme of chastity in relation to the learned women is so prominent, I feel a tentative hypothesis is required. I would suggest that when learned women (or men, for that matter) themselves chose a celibate life, they did so at least in part because they sought psychic freedom; when, on the other hand, men urged chastity upon learned women, they did so at least in part to constrain them. These fearful creatures of a third sex threatened male dominance in both the intellectual and the social realm. Chaste, they were perhaps less awesome. And chastity suited the stony asexuality that they possessed, or that they were seen as possessing. Learning and chastity

were indissolubly linked—for in undertaking the life of learning women repudiated a normal life of reproduction. *She* rejected a sexually active role for the sake of the intellectual life; *he* insisted on her asexuality because by means of intellect she had penetrated a male preserve. Chastity was at once expressive, I propose, of the learned woman's defiance of the established natural order and of the learned man's attempt to constrain her energies by making her mind the prison for her body. In the first case, chastity is a source of pride and independence; in the second, it is an instrument of repression.

The tension between these two facets of chastity in relation to the learned woman is evident in Antonio Loschi's poetic tribute to Maddalena Scrovegni. Scrovegni, widowed while still young, had returned to her father's house in Padua and undertaken a life of study there in a small *sacellum*, as I mentioned earlier. There Loschi, a young humanist, had conversed with her, and impressed by her learning and virtue, was inspired to write a poem, accompanied by a dedicatory letter and exposition, in her honor. Struck by the image of this learned woman in her book-lined cell, Loschi built for her, as he put it, "on poetic foundations," a grander edifice, in which she might sit and reign. He called this larger and worthier edifice the Temple of Chastity, and Scrovegni herself the personification of chastity. The temple was perched on a mountain; the mountain itself rose from a broad plain; the broad plain, an island, was bounded by sea; temple, mountain, plain, and sea were set in the frozen land of Scythia, the home of the Amazons. The temple was huge, white, immaculate, symbolic of virtue. Within the temple's deepest recess was a room—reminiscent of Scrovegni's cell—on the walls of which were carved images in relief of ancient and mythological figures noted for their chastity. Like the mind itself, one of whose principal functions is memory, this cave contained images of the past—for it was in fact the analogue, not only of Scrovegni's studious cell, but of her mind as well, by both of which she was enclosed. There in the center she sat imperious on a crystal throne, surrounded by her handmaidens Modesty, Virginité, Frugality, and others. A powerful, monumental figure, she dominates the space around her—and yet she is dominated by it. She is queen within her own domain, but she is constrained: rigid on her throne, engulfed by the massive weight of temple walls, denied access to the realm of sensation and pleasure by the very guard who, defending her, repels the assaults of Venus and her son, isolated on an uncharted island in a remote and frigid land. Loschi's tribute to Scrovegni

is ambivalent indeed: as it honors her for that virtue concomitant with knowledge, it confines her to a timeless and frozen desert.

The ambivalence discernible in Loschi's encomium of Scrovegni is characteristic, I believe, of male attitudes toward learned women. At the very moment that they praised learned women, learned men undermined them. They perceived such women as desexualized, or of distorted sexuality, as neither male nor female, but as members of a third sex; and these creatures of a third sex aroused in them fear and anger that provoked, sometimes hostile retaliation, and sometimes sweet persuasion to passive roles and to the ultimate passivity of chastity. For the phenomenon of the learned woman, whose learning destroyed the integrity of her sexual identity, they fashioned a fitting image: that of the armed maiden, a fusion of the icons of Athena, the chaste goddess of wisdom, and the Amazons, fierce warriors ruthless to men. Male admirers repeatedly likened learned women to the Amazon queens and to other female warriors of myth and history. . . . And behind these visions of female warriors lay the vision of Athena, martially armed, unnaturally born, coldly virginal, and though female, defined not by sex but by intellect. The chill refinement of the symbol of wisdom coalesced with the ferocity of the Amazons. These images from antiquity were invested with fresh meaning when they were jointly applied to the learned woman: they expressed the relation men perceived between wisdom in women and preternatural aggression. Learned women fascinated learned men, and men applauded, *of course*, their retreat to quiet studies apart from male society. There, in solitude, they were both magnificent and chained: fierce goddesses in book-lined cells. Thus confined, it is no wonder that they won no battles.

Let us not leave her there, but reflect for a last few brief moments on the achievement of the learned woman of the Renaissance. She received no degrees. She wrote no truly great works. She exerted no great influence on emerging trends in the history of ideas. She was probably unhappy. But she was perhaps the earliest figure of the type of the learned woman who is still with us. She was educated and excelled in the highest tradition of learning available to male contemporaries—not in needlework, not in graceful conversation, not in tinkling accomplishments, but in the languages and literature that were the vehicles of the most profound thoughts the age produced. And she exercised her knowledge publicly, at least at some point in her career—not in the cloister, not in hermitage,

nor merely within the well-insulated walls of domesticity—but in the marketplace, for the learned to hear and to judge.

The achievement of the learned women of the Renaissance, I suggest in closing, was enormous, and has not wholly been surpassed. Certainly, many more women are educated now than were educated then; many more seek careers in the public realm; and many are successful in attaining positions of authority—success that no Renaissance woman I know of enjoyed. But the inward experience of today's learned women is perhaps no more tranquil than that of the women I have discussed. Many learned women still doubt themselves—more than men do. Many men still view learned women with hostility—and their hostility is still often blended with fascination. Many women still choose between marriage and learning; and many, many must adjust their expectations of love, of marriage, of motherhood in order to pursue an active intellectual life, or, in order to permit themselves the warmth of these relationships, must adjust their intellectual goals. Few women, in my experience, have *not* had to face these choices; few men, in my experience, have had to. This is perhaps the last barrier to the achievement of female equality in the society of the learned—and it is obstinate. What the learned women of the Italian Renaissance attained, we have attained, in greater quantity; but what they suffered we have not escaped. We have confined their demons in a Pandoran box, from which they erupt to haunt us: book-lined cells; armed maidens; the thwarting of ambitions.

PART

III

Humanism and Politics

Recall that in identifying the special character of the Renaissance, Burckhardt distinguished between the unique political situation in Italy and its development of the individual on the one hand, and the revival of antiquity and humanism on the other. He insisted that the former features defined the Renaissance, which in principle could have occurred without the latter. In practice, though, the two intertwined so closely as to be almost inseparable. And on this account, Burckhardt saw in the humanists some of the finest examples of untrammelled individuality, in which classical culture served the interests of a self-presentation free of traditional constraints. Although Burckhardt had a deep appreciation of the classical influences on modern culture, influences that received powerful impetus in the Renaissance, his view of humanism relegates the movement to secondary status in defining the Renaissance and essentially reduces its classicism to the level of personal and cultural adornment.

Hans Baron (1900–1988) challenged this assessment of humanism in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955; revised ed. 1966), which is the next most influential interpretation of the period after Burckhardt's. A strong supporter of the Weimar Republic, Baron left Germany with the rise of Hitler, first for Italy and then for the