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‘O DECUS ITALIAE VIRGO’,
or
THE MYTH OF THE LEARNED LADY
IN THE RENAISSANCE*

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Let me start by making it clear that, taken at face value, my title is entirely a piece of mischief: I am not about to disclose the fact that there were actually no learned women in Italy in the fifteenth century. Indeed, this paper is built around the careers and works of five distinguished women intellectuals of that period: Isotta Nogarola (1418–66); Costanza Varano (1426–77); Cassandra Fedele (c. 1465–1558);¹ Laura Cereta (1469–99); and Alessandra Scala (1475–1506).² There is, however, a serious point to my choice of words in the title. The point is that the ‘learned lady’ of the Renaissance (the cultivated noblewoman, beautiful, charming, gifted, ‘gentile’) has a mythic place in the secondary historical literature on humanism. From Isabella d’Este to Sir Thomas More’s daughters and the English Tudor princesses, the cultivated

* A first draft of this article was presented to Dr Charles Schmitt’s Renaissance Seminar at the Warburg Institute, London, in November 1983, and a second draft to Dr David Norbrook’s and Dr Blair Worden’s English and History Seminar at Oxford. I am grateful to the participants in both these seminar groups for their energetic questioning, which assisted me greatly in preparing the finished piece. I am extremely grateful to Professor Q. R. D. Skinner and Professor A. T. Grafton, who read this article in manuscript and greatly assisted me with their comments.

¹ Although this is the date of birth which stands in the standard works, it is clearly incorrect. G. Pesenti, in a footnote to his seminal article on Alessandra Scala, cites Cesira Cavazzana as responsible for suggesting 1465 as Fedele’s birth date, and indicates that this is a correction for the even less plausible 1456: ‘Cesira Cavazzana, *Cassandra Fedele, erudita veneziana del Rinascimento*, Venezia, 1906 (estr. dall’*Ateneo Veneto*). C’è chi drede che la F. nascesse nel 1456; ma la data più plausibile è il 1465; certa è invece la data della morte [1558]: cfr. *ibid.*, 13 sg.’ (G. Pesenti, ‘Alessandra Scala: una figurina della rinascenza fiorentina’, *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, LXXXV (1925), 241–67, 248. In a letter of 1488, Eleanora of Aragon calls Cassandra ‘femina adolescens’; she was regarded as extraordinarily precocious when she performed publicly in an oration and disputation in 1487. I think 1470 is a more plausible birth date. It still leaves her five years older than Alessandra Scala, who certainly treats Fedele as senior to her in their correspondence (Politian also refers pointedly to Fedele’s seniority over Scala). See Pesenti, ‘Alessandra Scala’, p. 243, for similar comments on the implausibility of the birthdate of 1450 proposed in the earlier literature for Alessandra Scala.

² For comprehensive bibliographical information on all five women see M. L. King, ‘Book-lined cells: women and humanism in the early Italian Renaissance’, in P. H. Labalme (ed.), *Beyond their sex: learned women of the European past* (New York and London, 1980), pp. 66–90; P. O. Kristeller, ‘Learned women of early modern Italy: humanists and university scholars’, *ibid.* pp. 91–116. I should like to take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude to Margaret King for the stimulus her fascinating and pioneering articles on fifteenth-century women humanists gave to my own work. My debt to Professor Kristeller will always remain immeasurable.

gentlewoman is the Beatrice or the Laura of some male humanist's circle, his adoring pupil, his inspiration, his idol.³ Scholars adopt a fondly indulgent tone when discussing the women, which carries the implication that their intellectual calibre, their actual standing as scholars and humanists, is not a real issue, is perhaps not in fact of any real substance (a figment, rather, of their male admirers' or suitors' imaginations). The single scholarly piece of any significance on the life and work of Alessandra Scala concludes with typical sentimental indulgence:

Her noble and elusive aspect – for no portrait of her survives, unless perhaps she smiles at us, unrecognised, in the guise of a saint or a goddess, from one of Botticelli's canvases, or that of some other Florentine artist – yet that aspect shines forth from the shadows of the past, and casts a beauteous and gracious light upon the discordant chorus of Florentine humanism at the end of the fifteenth century.⁴

In general, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars seem predisposed to treat the Renaissance learned woman as the object of their own amorous attachment (as well as that of Renaissance male colleagues), rather than a subject of serious study.

But Alessandra Scala, the subject of Pesenti's sentimental curiosity, was a real scholar, a pupil of Janus Lascaris and Angelo Politian.⁵ She was not a myth at all. Her Greek was widely admired, and publicly commended by Politian

³ See, for example, G. Portigliotti, *Donne del rinascimento* (Milan, 1927), which opens: 'Forse mai fiore femminile ebbe un'evocazione così tenere e dolce come Cecilia Gonzaga nella bellissima medaglia del Pisanello' (p. 3), and is illustrated with plates showing details of Botticelli's paintings (the Venus from the 'Primavera', the Graces, the Horae), to complement the 'learned ladies' of the text. R. Sabbadini, in his *Vita di Guarino Veronese* (Catania, 1896; reprinted in M. Sancipriano (ed.), *Guariniiana*, Turin, 1964), presents the Nogarola sisters, Ginevra and Isotta, as the chief ornaments of Guarino's circle of Veronese students and followers. P. Gothein begins his study of Isotta Nogarola's correspondence with Lodovico Foscarini: 'L'epoca del Rinascimento si segnala per parecchie famose amicizie fra uomo e donna. Oltre l'amicizia del Tasso e quella di Michelangiolo Buonarroti con Vittoria Colonna, che appartengono al Cinquecento, non è da dimenticare nella metà del Quattrocento un'amicizia fra due personaggi molto coltri, altrettanto eloquente che delicata nelle sue espressioni, e precisamente quella di Lodovico Foscarini... con... Isotta Nogarola' (L'amicizia fra Lodovico Foscarini e l'umanista Isotta Nogarola', *La Rinascente*, vi (1943), 394–413, 394). I should stress how strikingly such accounts are at odds with the (comparatively) straightforward incorporation of the women humanists by earlier historians. See for example the letter from Lodovico Cendratta, quoted in E. Cavrioli, *Delle historie Bresciane, libri dodici* (Brescia, 1585): 'Tu dei nato in q[ue]lla città ragioneuolme[n]te si puo dire Academia d'Huomini, & di Donne, perche ei conosceua benissimo, che non pure i nostri huomini ma alcune Do[n]ne ancora haueuano fatto professione di lettere.' Cavrioli also cites a letter from Girolamo Campagnola to Cassandra [Fedele?], 'Do[n]na dottissima', praising Brescia in the same terms (Laura Cereta came from Brescia, and is straightforwardly praised for her intellectual contributions on p. 239).

⁴ 'La sua figura gentile ed evanescente (chè nessun ritratto di lei ci rimane, ma forse ella ci sorride non conosciuta, sotto le sembianze di santa o di dea, da qualche tela di Botticelli o di altro pittore fiorentino), pure emerge ancora dall'oblio degli anni e sparge una luce di bellezza e di grazia sul coro discorde dell'umanesimo fiorentino dell'estremo Quattrocento' (G. Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala', p. 264). Aside from its thorough-going sentimentality, Pesenti's article is a good starting point for work on Scala.

⁵ See Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala'. Naturally both men become Scala's suitors in Pesenti's reconstruction of Scala's life.

himself.⁶ I take as the focus for the present paper the twofold *mythologizing* of the real intellectual competence of Alessandra Scala and her quattrocento sisters, first by the scholarly community in which they themselves actively participated, and then by historians of humanism. I shall argue that by unravelling that story, the story of what amounts to a reading in history of the textual evidence left by and about the women (which is, after all, all we have to go on), we can learn something not just about the nature of the intellectual woman's contribution to scholarly life in the fifteenth century, but also, in general, about the built-in assumptions which shape our twentieth-century understanding of fifteenth-century Italian humanism.⁷

I take as my starting point a surviving correspondence between the learned Cassandra Fedele of Venice and the distinguished male humanist Politian. Elsewhere I have discussed at some length a comparable correspondence between Isotta Nogarola and Guarino Guarini. I think this in itself requires a preliminary remark or two. The names of Isotta Nogarola and Cassandra Fedele survive in the histories of humanism precisely because they corresponded with great male humanists. Some of their letters therefore find a place amongst the surviving works of these men, and therefore the great Italian historians, notably Sabbadini and Del Lungo, scrupulously researched the women's lives and works, in order to footnote their work on Guarino or Politian.⁸ It might be argued, therefore, that I am falling into a trap laid, as it were, by male scholars of male humanism, in turning my attention to just those points in the comparatively rich remains of the women humanists at which their work intersects with that of prominent male colleagues. The fact is, however, that the transcriptions of sources provided by a scholar like Sabbadini are reliable to work with in a way that Tomasini's seventeenth-century editions of the works of Cereta and Fedele are not.⁹ Furthermore, as we shall see, if one wants

⁶ A. Ardizzoni (ed.), *Poliziano: Epigrammi greci* (Florence, 1951; reprinted in A. Politianus, *Opera omnia*, Turin, 1970), II, epigram xxviii (p. 20; Italian transl. p. 56); G. B. Pesenti, 'Lettere inedite del Poliziano', *Athenaeum*, III (1915), 284-304, letter IX (pp. 299-301).

⁷ In a previous paper I have suggested that a close study of the career of the quattrocento woman humanist Isotta Nogarola sheds considerable light on our understanding of the assumptions behind the habitual pairing of 'learning' and 'moral uprightness' in studies of Renaissance humanism. See L. Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola: women humanists - education for what?', *History of Education*, XII (1983), 231-44. In general I believe that the study of women in history must lead to substantial reassessment of a good number of assumptions historians have made in studying the past without its female figures.

⁸ It is striking that of the five women I am considering, only Laura Cereta does not get an entry of her own in Cosenza's compendious dictionary of Italian humanists (M. E. Cosenza, *Biographical and bibliographical dictionary of Italian humanists and of the world of classical scholarship in Italy, 1300-1800*, 6 vols. (Boston, Mass., 1962-7; 2nd edn, revised)). Cereta is the only one who did not correspond with a 'great' male humanist; she does, however, figure in Cosenza's entries for Bonifacio Bembo and Cassandra Fedele, with both of whom she did correspond.

⁹ Recent, feminist-inspired interest in women humanists of the Renaissance is leading to fresh editorial work, but currently this falls substantially short of the impeccable editing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for instance, A. Rabil, *Laura Cereta: quattrocento humanist* (Binghamton, New York, 1981), which only provides synopses of letters already edited by Tomasini, adding full transcriptions of letters not included by the seventeenth-century editor.

to give close attention to the textual strategies employed by male humanists to cope with the female figures in their midst, one can find no finer, no more 'masterly' examples than those coming from the accomplished pens of Guarino and Politian.

Around 1491, Angelo Politian entered into a correspondence with Cassandra Fedele,¹⁰ a learned young woman already noted in humanist circles for her ability as a Latinist.¹¹ Fedele provoked the exchange of letters by addressing to Politian a letter of admiration – a suit for the prestigious man's attention.¹² That letter is now lost, although an equivalent one, addressed to Pico in 1489, survives, and gives us a good idea of the tone of Fedele's bid for intellectual support.¹³

Although I had for a long time had the intention of writing to you, yet I was almost deterred by the renown of your divine gifts (recognized by many, and above all by Lattanzio Tedaldi, most distinguished herald of your praises) and had rather determined to remain speechless than to appear deficient in brilliance and merely femininely pleasing when measured beside your achievements. But after your *Lucubrationes*, most rich in words and ideas, had been brought to me recently by that best of men, Salvius, and I had at length read them avidly, and had become acquainted with your intellectual skill and singular learning from them, I feared lest I might be reproved by many unless I celebrated your gifts (as I had learned of them) to the best of my feeble ability to all men, by whom you are held to be a miracle, you are praised and you are revered, especially as a result of the dissemination of your works. Because in those works are contained most clear expression, most serious meaning, brilliance, divine sublimity of interpretation, and finally, all things cohere harmoniously by divine influence.¹⁴

I did not get sight of M. L. King and A. Rabil, Jr. (eds.), *Her immaculate hand: selected works by and about the woman humanists of quattrocento Italy* (Binghamton, New York, 1983) until this article had been completed.

¹⁰ Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala', p. 248; see also W. P. Greswell, *Memoirs of Angelus Politianus, Joannes Picus of Mirandula, etc.* (London, 1805), p. 309.

¹¹ For Fedele's extant works see I. P. Tomasini (Tomasinus), *Clarissimae feminae Cassandrea Fidelis venetae epistolae et orationes...* (Padua, 1636); Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala' (fn. 1), pp. 266–7 (transcription of an unpublished letter from Fedele to Pico, 1489). On Fedele see most recently M. L. King, 'Book-lined cells'; P. O. Kristeller, 'Learned women', passim; see also C. Cavazzana, 'Cassandra Fedele, erudita veneziana del Rinascimento', *Ateneo Veneto*, xxix (1906), ii, 73–91, 249–75; Greswell, *Memoirs*, pp. 135–6; Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala', pp. 248–52.

¹² This was the standard way to establish a public reputation as a humanist.

¹³ Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala', pp. 266–7. Politian mentions his close friend Pico in both his extant letters to Fedele.

¹⁴ 'Etsi ad te iamdiu scribere proposueram, tuis tamen divinis virtutibus pene deterrita, perceptis a multis et maxime a Lactantio Thedaldo ornatissimo tuarumque acerrimo praecone laudum, potius obtumescere destinaveram, quam parum luculenter et femine(e) [sic] admodum tuas perlibare virtutes. Sed postquam his proximis diebus ab optimo viro Salvio tuae ad me lucubrationes ornatae verborum sententiarumque copiosissimae delatae essent, quas cum saepius lectitasset, ex his tui ingenii dexteritatem ac singularem doctrinam cognovissem, a multis reprehendi posse verebar nisi pro me viribus ingenioli tuas inauditas dotes celebrarem, quibus ut miraculum teneris, laudaris ac veneraris, praesertim tuo opere edito; cui quoniam insunt dilucida verba, sensus gravissimi, splendor, sublimitas interpretandi divina, omnia denique divinitus quadrant. [Nec mirum; nam in omni disciplinarum genere fulges ac splendes, virtutes ornas, homines ad litteras capessendas incendis, quin immo inflammas]' (p. 267).

Fedele here combines a display of Latinity with an indication of her serious and informed scholarship – she has already read Pico's latest theological work – and an extravagantly flattering exclamation of praise (which continues for a further half page), for the virtue, glory and honour to the age which Pico's intellect represents. We may take it that she wrote similarly to Politian.

Politian, who claims already to be familiar with Fedele's work and reputation (he had probably seen Pico's letter, and heard of her widely acclaimed performance in a public oration in 1487),¹⁵ replied with an extended, setpiece panegyric on her peculiarly womanly achievement. This letter was followed by a visit to the Fedele household in June 1491,¹⁶ during a trip to Venice with Pico. In public terms, the attention meant that Fedele's accomplishment was recognized in the Florentine humanist community, she had become accepted as a member.¹⁷

What had she become a member of? Well, essentially, a gentlemen's club of noble or nobly connected scholar-courtiers, who depended upon the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici.¹⁸ When Politian reported back to Lorenzo, after the visit to Fedele's family home, he did so in terms of Fedele's gracious and courtier-like acceptance of an invitation to become part of his entourage (or at least associated with his court), extended to Fedele by *Lorenzo*, in the form of a greeting:

Item Yesterday evening I visited that learned Cassandra Fedele, and I greeted her, excellency, on your part. She is a miraculous phenomenon, Lorenzo, whether in the vernacular or in Latin; most modest, and to my eyes even beautiful. I departed stupefied. She is a great admirer (follower) of yours, and speaks of you most knowledgeably, as if she knew you intimately. She will come to Florence one day, in any case, to see you; so prepare yourself to honour her.¹⁹

Modern historians are broadly in agreement that by the later decades of the fifteenth century the continuing support of the increasingly authoritarian Florentine ruling house for humanism pushed scholarly energies to the margins of real political debate, and into 'contemplative' rather than 'active' studies – providing ornamental and propaganda proof of the civility and moral probity

¹⁵ See King, 'Book-lined cells', p. 69. For the text of this oration see Tomasini, *Epistolae*, pp. 193–200.

¹⁶ The date is fixed by the account of the visit given by Politian to Lorenzo de' Medici in a letter written the following day. See below.

¹⁷ Just as Nogarola's fame was established in the humanist circle around Leonello d'Este at Ferrara by the exchange of letters between herself and Guarino. See Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola'.

¹⁸ For the characterization of the Florentine humanists of this period as scholar-courtiers, see L. Martines, *The social world of the Florentine humanists* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 5–6.

¹⁹ *Item* visitai iersera quella Cassandra Fidele litterata, e salutai ec., per vostra parte. È cosa, Lorenzo, mirabile, nè meno in vulgare che in latino; discretissima, *et meis oculis etiam bella*. Partimi stupito. Molte a vostra partigiana, è di Voi parla con tanta pratica, *quasi te intus et in cute norit*. Verrà un dì in ogni modo a Firenze a vidervi; sicche apparecchiatevi a farli onore' (I. Del Lungo, *Prose volgari inedite e poesie latine e greche edite e inedite di Angelo Ambrogini Poliziano* (Florence, 1867), p. 81). 'Quasi te intus et in cute norit' is surely only decorous as a courtierly comment.

of the regime, rather than political expertise and practical support in government. Lauro Martines, who generally takes issue with Italian historians' characterization of humanism as 'civic' and politically influential in the late trecento and early quattrocento, agrees that where the late decades of the quattrocento are concerned, he and the school of Baron and Garin are in accord. Pooling his own and Garin's views, he provides the following sketch of Politian's own humanistic milieu:

'[Politian] lives and works in a time when the new [humanistic] culture is no longer an operative force in the city, in that very Florence of humanistic merchants and chancellors, now transformed into mere courtiers and professors, often courtier-professors.' The new type of chancellor, still a humanist, lost his political influence during the middle decades of the fifteenth century and became 'a solemnly ornamental figure like [the old] Poggio Bracciolini or a haughty administrator like Bartholomeo Scala'.²⁰

In this setting the rhetoric of humanism characterizes the power of Latinity and eloquence as actual power – as meshed with civic activity in a close and influential relationship. But individual humanists are increasingly pursuing the recondite and arcane in scholarship, as an end in itself. One might instance Politian's own dedication to Greek studies and textual problems in the last years of his life as evidence of this increasing preoccupation on the part of humanists retained in official posts *by* those in power with learning for its own sake.

The point in drawing attention to this flight from political engagement to grateful courtiership at the time of the exchange of letters between Politian and Cassandra Fedele is that Fedele was admitted to a club which could not afford to see the implications of the fact that she *could* become a member. In a period which afforded no power to a woman in her own right, a woman's achievement in a sphere which supposedly stood in some active relation to power could not be allowed to stand *as* woman's achievement.²¹ This, at least, is my tentative explanation for the fact that Politian assiduously *mythologizes* Fedele into not-woman: into an emblem of humanistic achievement which avoids confronting her sex as a problem.

Politian's first letter to Fedele, his *laudatio* of female scholarly accomplishment, opens with the passage from Virgil's *Aeneid* which figures in my title (a passage which has become, fascinatingly, a virtual synecdoche for the whole of Fedele's surviving reputation in later secondary literature on her):²²

²⁰ E. Garin, 'L'ambiente del Poliziano', *Il Poliziano e suo tempo, atti del IV convegno internazionale di studi sul rinascimento* (Florence, 1957), p. 24; Garin, 'I cancellieri umanisti della repubblica fiorentina da Coluccio Salutati a Bartolomeo Scala', *Rivista storica italiana*, LXXI (1959), 204; cit. Martines, *The social world*, pp. 5–6.

²¹ Female heirs *substitute* for absent men; they do not hold power in their own right, and the male line is reinstated as soon as possible. See L. Jardine, *Still harping on daughters: women and drama in the age of Shakespeare* (Brighton, 1983), ch. III.

²² See, for instance, Del Lungo's footnote against her name in the letter to Lorenzo quoted above.

O decus Italiae virgo, quas dicere gratis
quasve referre parem,

O virgin, glory of Italy, what thanks shall I try to utter or repay?²³

In the *Aeneid* this exclamation of rapt admiration is addressed to Camilla, supremely virtuous Amazon warrior maiden, whose appearance at the end of the procession of protagonists rallied against Aeneas fills Turnus with rapture:²⁴

a warrior-maid, never having trained her woman's hand to Minerva's distaff or basket of wool, but hardy to bear the battle-brunt and in speed of foot to outstrip the winds. She might have flown o'er the topmost blades of unmown corn, nor in her course bruised the tender ears...²⁵

Politian's celebration of Cassandra proceeds self-consciously to sustain the same tone of wonder. This accomplished practitioner of the *studia humanitatis* is a latter-day paragon of 'manly' virtue (manly because active and productive; virtuous because employed in those studies associated with probity of character):

What an astonishing impact it must make upon us, truly, that it was possible for such [letters] to be produced by a woman – what do I say, a woman? From a girl, rather, and a virgin. It shall therefore no longer be the exclusive privilege of antiquity to boast of their Sybils and their Muses, the Pythagoreans of their female philosophers, the Socratics of their Diotima or Aspasia; and neither will the relics of Greece proclaim those female poets, Telecilla, Corinna, Sappho, Anyte, Erinna, Praxilla, Cleobulina and the others. Now we shall readily believe the Roman account of the daughters of Laelius and Hortensius, of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, as matrons of surpassing eloquence. Now we know, truly by this we know, that your sex has not after all been condemned to slowness and stupidity.²⁶

²³ *Aeneid* xi. 508–9.

²⁴ If 'O decus Italiae virgo' became a catchphrase for a female representation of learning or chaste wisdom, that might explain the fact that Botticelli's 'Pallas and the Centaur' was known as 'Camilla' in the fifteenth century.

²⁵ *Aeneid* vii. 803–17; 805–8. This passage is picked out by Auerbach as the acme of Virgilian 'sublime' – female valour sublimely idealized. E. Auerbach, *Literary language and its public in late Latin antiquity and in the middle ages*, transl. R. Manheim (London, 1965), pp. 183–6.

²⁶ 'Mira profecto fides, tales proficisci a femina (quid autem a femina dico?) imo vero a puella, et Virgine potuisse. Non igitur iam Musas, non Sibyllas, non Pythias obijciant vetusta nobis secula, non suas Pythagorei Philosophantes feminas, non Diotimam Socratici, nec Aspaciam, sed nec poetrias illas Graeca iactent monumenta, Telecillam, Corinnam, Sappho, Anyte(m), Erinnem, Praxiham, Cleobulinam, et caeteras: credamus que facile Romanis iam Laelii, et Hortensij filias, et Corneliām Gracorum matrem fuisse matronas quantumlibet eloquentissimas. Scimus hoc profecto scimus, nec eum sexum fuisse a natura tarditatis, aut hebetudinis damnatum' (Tomasini, *Cassandrae Fidelis epistolae*, pp. 155–6). Guarino's celebratory letter in praise of Isotta and Ginevra Nogarola, which gave rise to the correspondence between himself and Isotta, is similarly extravagant in invoking ancient prototypes of outstanding female accomplishment; see E. Abel (ed.), *Isotae Nogarolae veronensis opera quae supersunt omnia* (Budapest, 1886), I, 55–60. See Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola', pp. 236–7. For further comment on the routineness of such clusters of 'exemplary' women in compliments to living women see D. M. Robathan, 'A fifteenth-century bluestocking', *Medievalia e humanistica*, fasc. II (1944), 106–11.

And still in the vein of Camilla he exclaims:

But truly in our age, in which few men indeed raise their head to any height in letters, you, however, stand forth as the sole girl who handles books in place of wool, a reed pen instead of vegetable dye, a quill pen instead of a needle, and who instead of daubing her skin with white lead, covers paper with ink.²⁷

Politian's enthusiasm culminates in an outburst of personal desire actually to confront this paragon of female virtue which, remember, precedes his ever having set eyes upon her. So vividly has he conjured up the warrior maiden from her literary productions that her physical person, like her intact virginity, are vividly present to him in them:

O how immediately transported, therefore, I should be if I might actually contemplate your most chaste visage, sweet virgin; if I might admire your appearance, your cultivation, your refinement, your bearing; if I might drink in your pronouncements, inspired into you by your Muses, as it were with thirsty ears; so that, finally, infused with your spirit and inspiration I might become most consummate Poet,

Not Thracian Orpheus, not Linus shall vanquish me in song though his mother be helpful to the one, and his father to the other, Calliope to Orpheus, and fair Apollo to Linus.²⁸

Here the personal homage – the cult of the virgin goddess – culminates in the final invocation of the Fates/the poet to the harbinger of the Golden Age (the return of the virgin Astraea, the age of the infant king): 'aspice venturo laetentur ut omnia saeclo! / o mihi tum longae maneat pars ultima vitae, / spiritus et, quantum sat erit tua dicere facta' (Behold, how all things exult in the age that is at hand! O that then the last days of a long life may still linger for me, with inspiration enough to tell of thy deeds!). From Camilla, warrior maiden, Cassandra Fedele, practising Latinist, has become virgin Muse, object of poetic cult of worship, herald of the Golden Age.²⁹

Encouraged by the significant amount of attention accorded by Politian to herself as female scholar, and on the strength of some verbal commitment made by Politian during his visit, that he would pursue the intellectual contact established, Fedele wrote again to Politian. This time Politian failed to reply. One must suspect that the *actual* exchange of letters and views and the *real* girl

²⁷ 'At vero aetate nostra, qua pauci quoque virorum caput altius in literis extulerunt, vnicam te tamen existere puellam, quae pro lana librum, pro fuco calamus, stylus pro acu tractes, et quae non cutem cerussa, sed atramento papyrus linas' (ibid.). See King 'Book-lined cells', p. 76.

²⁸ 'O, quis me igitur statim sistat istic, ut faciem virgo tuam castissimam contempler, ut habitum, cultum, gestumque mirer, ut dictata, instillata tibi a Musis tuis verba quasi sitientibus auribus perbibam, denique ut afflatu instinctuque tuo consu[m]atissimus repente Poeta euadam, nec me carminibus vincat, aut Thracius Orpheus, aut Linus: huic mater quamvis, atque huic pater adsit, Orpheo Calliopea, Lino formosus Apollo. (*Eclogues* iv. 55–7)'

(Tomasini, *Cassandrae Fidelis epistolae*, p. 157).

²⁹ For an interesting footnote on such 'becomings', see M. R. Lefkowitz, 'Patterns of women's lives in myth', in her *Heroines and hysterics* (London, 1981), pp. 41–7.

ranked rather low on his list of intellectual priorities.³⁰ After a suitable wait Fedele wrote again, this time a poignant letter of reproach, and in 1493 Politian replied, with a letter which keeps perfect decorum with the *topos* of 'lament' (woman abandoned) of her second letter.³¹ Politian claims as his excuse that Fedele's intellectual performance on the occasion of his visit had rendered him absolutely tongue-tied – incapable of utterance. He makes this state vivid with another quotation from the *Aeneid*, this time a passage from Book three. Aeneas recounts to Dido the tale of his encounter with Andromache, whom he found passionately weeping and lamenting on her dead husband Hector's tomb. Aeneas' appearance further intensifies her grief, since it reminds her of the Troy that was, and she exclaims passionately to him. Confronted with this spectacle of majestic female fortitude in adversity, Aeneas is struck speechless:

'Hector ubi est?' dixit lacrimasque effudit et omnem
implevit clamore locum. vix pauca furenti
subicio et raris turbatus vocibus hisco.

'Where is Hector?' she spake, and shedding a flood of tears, filled all the place with her cries; to her frenzy scarce can I make a brief reply, and deeply moved gasp for broken words.³²

Aeneas' reaction to Andromache's lament is particularly poignant, since it is to be closely followed by Dido's own passionate lament when Aeneas himself abandons her. The passage encapsulates male admiration 'deeply moved with broken words', faced with the enormity of female grief 'manfully' endured.

In Politian's case it is, supposedly, awe and a sense of his own inadequacy at Fedele's superb Latinity and general cultivation which has left him thus rapt, but the implicit tone of contrition is elegantly appropriate as a response to female reproach.³³ I say supposedly, because we must surely feel that the choice of excuse is a choice of literary *topos*. In an exactly similar situation (having made the same social gaffe of failing to reply to a letter from the

³⁰ Just as Guarino's correspondence with Isotta Nogarola rated sufficiently low on his list of priorities for him also to overlook replying to her in good time. See M. L. King, 'The religious retreat of Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466): sexism and its consequences in the fifteenth century', *Signs*, iii (1978), 807–22; King 'Book-lined cells'; Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola'.

³¹ This is the same pattern as that followed in the exchange of letters between Guarino and Nogarola. Both women claim to have been publicly shamed by their male correspondents' prolonged silence, although undoubtedly such men habitually failed to reply to letters from less distinguished male colleagues. The shame is clearly *social* – the woman's overture if ignored is deemed forward. Later, in 1494, when she herself failed to answer a letter of Politian's promptly, Fedele wrote a humorous letter excusing her tardiness ('Tibi debeo, ecce persoluo sero. tamen; sed melius sero quam nunquam'). Tomasini, *Cassandrae Fidelis epistolae*, pp. 159–60.

³² *Aeneid* iii. 312–14.

³³ It should be remarked that contrition was not a character trait in evidence anywhere else in Politian's public career aside from his studied dealings with female scholars; he was renowned for his ability to quarrel with other humanists, for example, with Alessandra Scala's father Bartolomeo and her future husband Marullus. On Politian's life see F. O. Mencken, *Historia vitae et in literas meritum Angeli Politiani*... (Lipsiae, 1736). On his relations with Bartolomeo Scala see A. Brown, *Bartolomeo Scala, 1430–1497, chancellor of Florence: the Humanist as bureaucrat* (Princeton, 1979), pp. 211–19.

Veronese woman humanist, Isotta Nogarola), Guarino Guarini chooses another plausible *topos* – the exhortation to the woman beset with adversity to remain ‘virilis animi’: it was Isotta’s ‘manliness of mind’ which persuaded him he could treat her as a man. And even if the vulgar crown abuses her as a woman, her manly fortitude of spirit should allow her to rise above it:

This evening I received your letters, full of complaints and accusations, in which you render me uncertain as to whether I should feel pain for you or congratulate myself. For when I saw fit to give my attention to that outstanding intellect of yours, with its attendant embellishments of learning, I was accustomed besides to express strongly my opinion that you were manly of spirit, that nothing could happen which you would not bear with a courageous and indomitable spirit. Now, however, you show yourself so cast down, humiliated and truly womanish that I am able to perceive nothing which accords with my previous magnificent opinion of you.³⁴

This *topos* allows Guarino to reprove Nogarola for allowing social convention (femaleness) any place in her scholarly life – how could a mere intermission in their correspondence threaten her womanly honour?³⁵

Like Guarino’s with Nogarola, Politian’s relationship with Fedele is established entirely within the world of letters; confronted (physically) with her ability, he responds with the awe appropriate to a Muse or Goddess:

For when some time ago I had come to your house for the purpose of seeing and greeting you (which was the chief reason for my visit to Venice), and you had presented yourself to me with your long-awaited aspect, endued with a kind of beauty exceeding the most beautiful itself, like a nymph emerging from the woods before me, and when then you had addressed me compellingly with ornate and copious words, and, truth to tell, with a kind of echo of the divine about them, then my soul was of a sudden (as I think you remember) struck senseless at such a miracle and such rarity, so that, as Aeneas reports of himself, ‘I gasped with broken words’, and could scarcely even apologize for my inability to speak... When therefore I returned to Florence, full of these impressions and totally overwhelmed by it all, I received from you your spectacular letters, to which when at length I tried to reply, I know not how, my very writing fingers faltered, the very pen dropped from my hands. For I did not dare to submit to the unequal contest, whereby I was obliged to fear more the charge of insolence and baseness if I replied, than that of idleness or lack of courtesy if I remained silent. My failure to reply has

³⁴ ‘Hoc vesperi tuas accepi litteras querimoniae plenas et accusationis, quibus incertum me reddidisti tibi magis condoleam an mihi ipsi gratuler. Nam cum tuum istud perspexisse viderer ingenium adiunctis doctrinae ornamentis insigne, te adeo virili animo et opinari et praedicare solebam, ut nihil accidere posset quod non forti et invicto ferres pectore. Nunc autem sic demissam abiectam et vere mulierem tete ostentas, ut nihil magnifico de te sensui meo respondere te cernam’ (R. Sabbadini, *Epistolario di Guarino Veronese*, II (Venice, 1916), 306–7).

³⁵ There is, I think, a distinctly hollow ring to Guarino’s protestations that Isotta’s ‘virility’ of temperament precludes the possibility of attaching social blame to her actions. ‘Cum enim intelligeres tuum in me pro litteraria inter nos necessitudine officium fecisse scriptis ad me tam suavis tam ornatis tam laudatissimis litteris (nam sicut ex studiis arrogans esse non debes, ita bonorum tuorum aestimatrix non ingrata fias oportet) quid tibi obiectari potuit quod matronalem constantiam labefactaret?’ (ibid.)

not therefore come about out of negligence but out of bashfulness: not from contempt, but reverence.³⁶

At this point Politian intensifies the 'literary' quality of his celebration of the woman of letters. He introduces the figure of *another* young, beautiful and learned woman, the Florentine Alessandra Scala. Too awestruck to answer Fedele's letters, Politian tells her, he took them instead to Alessandra Scala, and recreated the experience of Fedele's combination of learning and loveliness by having Scala read them aloud to the assembled company. Bartolomeo Scala, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola praised their accomplishment.

This effects the metamorphosis of the individual talented woman into a *genus* of representatives of female worth, and it brings Politian to the substantial part of his letter; the offering, as it were, to Cassandra. On the occasion of a previous visit to the Scala household, he had joined the audience for a private performance, in Greek, of Sophocles' *Electra*, in which Alessandra Scala took the title role.³⁷ The central setpiece in Politian's letter is a description of the impression her performance made upon him:

But let me return to Alessandra. She busies herself day and night with the study of both Latin and Greek. And the other day, when the Greek tragedy of Sophocles was performed in her father's house, for which the greatest number of learned men had been assembled...she took the part of Electra, virgin of virgins, and performed with such talent, art and grace, that all fastened their eyes and minds upon her. There was in her words that Attic charm, utterly genuine and native, her gestures everywhere so prompt and effective, so appropriate to the argument, so covering the range of the various feelings, that they added greatly to the truth and believableness of the fiction. Nor was she so mindful of Electra that she forgot Alessandra. Altogether humbly and modestly, her eyes were not simply downcast to the ground, but firmly fixed there at all times. To see her you would have said how much the role of actress and mime suited her, yet how that of the innocent and virginal suited her also. For though she satisfied the requirements of the stage, yet she was in no way theatrical, as if she produced her gestures not for just anyone, but only for the learned and the upright.³⁸

³⁶ 'Nam cum te olim domi visurus salutaturusque venissem, qua maxime causa profectus Venetias fueram, tuque te diutius expectanti habitu quodam pulchro pulcherrima ipsa quasi nympa mihi de silvis obtulisses, mox ornatis copiosisque verbis atque ut verissime dicam divinum quiddam sonantibus compellasses, ita mihi animus repente (quod te arbitror meminisse) miraculo illo tanto et rei novitate obstupuit, ut quod de se ait Aeneas, 'raris turbatus vocibus hiscerem', vixque illud saltem meam tibi excusare infantiam potueram... Harum igitur imaginum plenus, atque hac undique rerum facie circumfusus, ut Florentiam sum reversus, litteras abs te mirificas accepi; quibus cum respondere saepius tentassem, nescio quo pacto digiti ipsi scribentes haesitabant, ipse de manibus calamus excidebat; nec enim subire impar certamen audebam, quasi magis mihi timendum crimen esset arrogantis et improbi, cum respondissem, quam desidis ac parum officiosi, cum tacuissem. Non igitur neglegentia factum est ut non rescriperim, sed verecundia, non contemptu, sed reverentia' (Pesenti, 'Lettere inedite', pp. 299-300).

³⁷ This performance also provided the occasion for Politian's first Greek epigram addressed to Alessandra Scala. See below.

³⁸ 'Sed revertor ad Alexandram. Dies ea noctesque in studiis utriusque linguae versatur. Ac superioribus diebus, cum graeca tragoedia Sophoclis in ipsius paternis aedibus maximo doctorum conventu virorum exhiberetur... ipsa Electrae virginis virgo suscepit, in qua tantum vel ingenii

The point here is that it is, once again, not simply Alessandra's Greek competence which is at stake. What Politian celebrates is the *spectacle* of Alessandra performing as antique womanhood of supreme virtue (as his Greek epigram addressed to Alessandra herself on the occasion of this performance confirms).³⁹ It is the symbolic impact of the woman 'verecunde omnia et pudenter, non modo ad terram demissis sed pene in terram semper defixis oculis'. The ideal nature of her performance is not her impeccable Greek grammar and pronunciation (hardly at all, as Politian describes it), but almost entirely her modesty, the probity of her person, her 'chastity' (that predictable invoking of virginity).⁴⁰ Alessandra/Electra is beauty/purity itself, a figure talismanic of the revival of Greek learning and culture which Politian and his colleagues are undertaking. And Politian closes his letter to Fedele by joining her and Scala in a single image of the exemplary learned woman:

Alessandra Scala alone, therefore, is now talked of here, the Florentine Electra, a girl of undoubted worth, whom you, most learned Cassandra, may call sister, inasmuch as she alone of all our age, I shall not say, attains to your stature, but certainly follows in your footsteps.⁴¹

His letter here comes, as it were, full circle. From an encounter with a learned female Latinist, whose reproach allows him to applaud her typical pose of virtuous grief (whether or not expressed in impeccable Latin), to the claim that Alessandra the Hellenist and Cassandra the Latinist are sisters in learning, thereby once again sidestepping the need to assess their *real* intellectual achievement, while for the time being celebrating 'female humanism' as a phenomenon worthy of the age.⁴²

vel artis vel gratiae adhibuit, ut omnium in se oculos atque animas una converteret. Erat in verbis lepos ille atticus prorsum genuinus et nativus, gestus ubique ita promptus et efficax ita argumento serviens, ita per affectus varios decurrens, ut multa inde veritas et fides fictae diu fabulae accederet. Nec tamen Electrae sic meminit ut Alexandrae sit oblita. Verecunde omnia et pudenter, non modo ad terram demissis sed pene in terram semper defixis oculis: sentire illam diceris quid ludiae alicui et mimae, quid ingenuae rursus ac virgini conveniret; nam cum scaenae satisfaceret nihil de scaena tamen sumebat, quasi non cuilibet, sed doctis tantummodo et probis ederet gestum' (Pesenti, 'Lettere inedite', pp. 300-1).

³⁹ For the epigram see Ardigizone *Epigrammi greci*, p. 20 (Italian transl., p. 56): 'When the girl Alexandra took the part of Electra, she, virgin, the Sophoclean virgin girl, all were struck with utter amazement...'

⁴⁰ Quentin Skinner has suggested to me that in their somewhat bizarre insistence on the virginity of the women humanists, the male humanists are 'doing the best that their moral vocabulary allowed them' by way of praising their *virtus* – for which chastity is the strict female equivalent. 'Virtus', the supposed product of the *studia humanitatis*, is a quality of a 'vir'; in substituting the more appropriately female 'chastity' in the case of a woman we have gender creating a clear case of textual difficulty.

⁴¹ 'Sola igitur nunc in ore omnibus apud nos Alexandra Scala, hoc est florentina Electra, digna nimirum puella quam tu, doctissima Cassandra, sororem vocas, utpote quae sola omnium nostra aetate, non dicam tecum contendat, sed tuis certe vestigiis insinat' (Pesenti, 'Lettere inedite', p. 301).

⁴² Guarino encouraged a correspondence between Isotta Nogarola and Costanza Varano, as Politian does one between Fedele and Scala, thus actually effecting a kind of merging of the female scholars into a composite figure of intellectual 'worth'.

Now, like Alessandra Scala, Cassandra Fedele was, on the evidence of her published letters and orations, an accomplished humanist and scholar. And the problem which Politian's letters appear both to raise, and astutely to evade, is, What could such accomplishment be *for* in a woman? I shall devote the remainder of this paper to framing a tentative answer to this question, basing my argument on the considerable body of printed orations, dialogues and letters of the five fifteenth-century women I introduced at the beginning. The preliminary answer I shall offer is that each of these women fulfilled *to the letter* the ideals of humanist learning. And I shall argue that if that is the case, then it must call into question the tight relationship which modern scholars of 'civic' humanism maintain existed in the fifteenth century between a humanistic programme of instruction and well-defined civic roles which its graduates were expected to fill.⁴³ (It must call it into question because under no circumstances could fifteenth-century gentlewomen be expected or intended to fill civic office.)

The letters, poems, orations and dialogues of Isotta Nogarola, Costanza Varano, Cassandra Fedele, Laura Cereta and Alessandra Scala are in every way similar to those of a contemporary male humanist of equivalent standing – that is to say, a middling male humanist.⁴⁴ They are accomplished Latinists (or, in Scala's case, Hellenists).⁴⁵ They display the same virtuoso command of Latin idiom, the same easy incorporation of citation as evidence of wide classical reading, the same close familiarity with classical texts and ancient culture, as their male colleagues. They are able to turn their hands to a wide range of genres, to adopt different tones and levels of address, to write

⁴³ I have in mind particularly the theses of Garin and Baron. For another treatment of this issue see A. T. Grafton and L. Jardine, 'Humanism and the school of Guarino: a problem of evaluation', *Past and Present*, xcvi (1982), 51–80. See also L. Martines, *Power and imagination: city-states in renaissance Italy* (London, 1980), ch. xi.

⁴⁴ For Isotta Nogarola's works see Abel, *Opera*; for secondary works on her see the extensive bibliography at the end of King's 'Religious retreat', and Jardine 'Isotta Nogarola'. For the works of Costanza Varano see T. Bettinelli (ed.) [other bibliographies mistakenly cite this as the work of Lazzaroni; Kristeller cites it as by D. A. Sancassani], *Orationes et epistolae*, in *Miscellanea di varie operette*, vii (Venice, 1743), 295–330; B. Feliciangeli, 'Notizie sulla vita e sugli scritti di Costanza Varano-Sforza (1426–1447)', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, xxiii (1894), 1–75 (texts, 50–75); for her life see Feliciangeli, 'Notizie'. For the works of Cassandra Fedele see above, fn. 11. For the works of Laura Cereta see I. P. Tomasini (ed.), *Laurae Ceretae Brixensis feminae clarissimae epistolae*; for her life see Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala' (op. cit.). It makes no sense to ask the question Alessandra Scala's extant works (one Greek epigram and letters to Fedele) see Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala', p. 255; Ardizzoni, *Epigrammi greci*, p. 37 (Italian transl., p. 66); Tomasini, *Cassandrae Fidelis epistolae*; for her life see Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala' (op. cit.). It makes no sense to ask the question why none of them rises to the stature of a Politian or a Guarino. Or rather, to ask is to ask the same question as 'Why has no woman author risen to the stature of Shakespeare?' See A. Carter, 'Notes from the front line', in M. Wandor (ed.), *On gender and writing* (London, 1983), pp. 69–77: 'So there hasn't been a female Shakespeare. Three possible answers: (a) So what?... (b) There hasn't been a male Shakespeare since Shakespeare, dammit. (c) Somewhere, Franz Fanon opines that one cannot, in reason, ask a shoeless peasant in the Upper Volta to write songs like Schubert's; the opportunity to do so has never existed. The concept is meaningless' (p. 76).

⁴⁵ In Scala's case, unfortunately, only the single Greek epigram and her letters to Fedele survive.

imaginatively in prose and verse,⁴⁶ to argue a tightly rigorous and complex dialectical case,⁴⁷ either at will, or as an exercise for a tutor.⁴⁸ In other words, they actually are, and are apparently allowed by contemporary society to be, minor humanists along with all the other minor figures who move in the shadow of the great male, career humanists like Guarino and Politian. A fair test of this is that each of the women I have mentioned (with the exception of Laura Cereta, who for the reason I mentioned earlier gets overlooked) takes up the same sort of space in Cosenza's *Dictionary of Italian Humanism* as a minor male humanist like, say, Bonifacio Bembo.⁴⁹ I do not claim any more for them than that, but I will not settle for any less.

It is, of course, possible to gain the contrary impression, simply because of the interest shown in the women's work (for reasons which are beginning to appear distinctly dubious) on the part of outstanding career humanists – humanists devoting their life to classical studies, and earning a very considerable living from their teaching and scholarship. Because Cassandra Fedele and Alessandra Scala corresponded with Politian, author of the *Miscellanea*, monument to humanist lexical and linguistic expertise; because Isotta Nogarola and Costanza Varano corresponded with Guarino, founder of the greatest quattrocento humanist school, and tutor to Leonello d'Este (Alexander to Guarino's Aristotle), one tends to detect, by contrast, a curious *absence of productive purpose* in the women's extant works.⁵⁰ I think this represents simple bias on our own scholarly part. Although the major part of the *opera* of the women humanists consists (as it does for the men) in demonstration set-pieces – the occasional oration and the publishable letter – the small sample preserved for us also contains characteristic instances of active participation in

⁴⁶ Cereta is a particularly imaginative and lively prose writer. See, for instance, her letter to Fedele describing a dream in which she descends to the underworld (Tomasini, *Cassandreae Fidelis epistolae*, letter 35 (summarized in Rabil, *Laura Cereta*, pp. 83–4)), and the way she revivifies a conventional attack on the decadence of women's fashions and lifestyle by precluding it with a vivid account of her personal grief at her husband's deathbed (Tomasini, *Cassandreae Fidelis epistolae*, letter 31 (summarized in Rabil, op. cit. pp. 82–3)). Varano writes a competent verse to Nogarola (Abel *Opera*, II, 7–8); Scala's Greek epigram to Politian shows her an extremely able composer of Greek verse.

⁴⁷ Politian commends Fedele for her argumentative skill; Quirini writes to Nogarola with advice on logical and philosophical reading (see Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola').

⁴⁸ Pesenti presents documentary evidence which suggests rather strongly that Lascaris helped Scala with her Greek epigram for Politian (though Pesenti chooses to turn a blind eye to the implication): 'Strana cosa è che nel vatic. greco 1412, fra le minute dei vari epigrammi del dotto profugo bizantino [Lascaris], ci compaia anche (fo. 62a), anonimo e anepigrafo, il noto epigramma di Alessandra in risposta al Poliziano...con parecchie varianti' (Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala', p. 258). But even here, a *male* humanist under the tuition of a renowned Hellenist might equally well have had his tutor polish the final offering.

⁴⁹ Cosenza, *Dictionary*. I choose Bonifacio Bembo because he corresponded with both Cereta and Fedele; one could, of course, find any number of other examples of competent Latinists with a modest output in letters and setpiece orations.

⁵⁰ Fedele and Scala are also associated with Ficino and Pico; Scala married Michael Marullus, and was Bartolomeo Scala's daughter. They kept, as it were, too distinguished company for the good of their later reputation.

the process of retrieval of the residue of antiquity, and growth of learning. There is an exchange between Guarino and Costanza Varano – of which, unfortunately, only Guarino's letter survives – in which, in 1444, he approaches her as an acclaimed humanist to enlist her help in acquiring a copy of a commentary by Cornutus on Juvenal's *Satires*, which he gathers is in the possession of two local physicians.⁵¹ Nogarola exchanges advice with a number of correspondents on books and manuscripts.⁵² This is the standard kind of involvement of the non-professional – the accomplished – humanist.

The idiosyncrasies of the female humanists' works/performance are, in my view, directly the product of the predicament in which each achieving woman finds herself vis-à-vis the male community: she is competent to craft a product which earns her a place in the scholarly community. But to recognize that fact, the fact that she can actively participate, was to countenance female *transgression* at the social level. Politian's evident anxiety in his account of Alessandra Scala's 'public' performance as Electra acknowledges the problem: Alessandra/Electra is timeless virtue, but can Alessandra *perform* as Electra and remain virtuous? For, as Bruni explains in his letter of advice to Battista Malatesta:

If a woman throws her arms around whilst speaking, or if she increases the volume of her speech with greater forcefulness, she will appear threateningly insane and requiring restraint. These matters belong to men; as war, or battles, and also contests and public controversies.⁵³

So Scala managed to act so that her gestures were 'everywhere so prompt and effective, so covering the range of the various feelings, so appropriate to the argument', and yet at the same time 'humbly and modestly in all things, her eyes were not simply downcast to the ground, but firmly fixed there all the time'. Isotta Nogarola's 'transgression' was simply publicly to exchange letters with Guarino and command his scholarly attention; yet an anonymous pamphleteer translated the fact that she 'dare[d] to boast of her abilities in the finest literary studies' into a charge that 'the seal of her virginity [was] broken by none other than her brother'.⁵⁴

At the same time, to recognize the woman humanist's work as equal in worth to that of her male colleagues was to undermine the vital quattrocento fiction that these essentially academic and learned writings were actually meshed in with active public life. The status of humanism as an adjunct to Florentine or Venetian power politics depended on its apparently guaranteeing the suitability for office of the individual who had mastered its techniques – Latin and Greek composition and oratory.⁵⁵ But a female 'master' clearly was not

⁵¹ R. Sabbadini, *La scuola e gli studi di Guarino Guarini Veronese* (Catania, 1896; reprinted in M. Sancipriano (ed.), *Guariniana*, Turin, 1964), pp. 104–5. For the text of the letter see Sabbadini, *Epistolario*, pp. 446–8; Feliciangeli, 'Notizie', pp. 57–9.

⁵² See Robathan, 'A fifteenth-century bluestocking', p. 107.

⁵³ Cit. Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola', p. 233.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 240.

⁵⁵ See Martines, *Power and imagination*; Grafton and Jardine, 'Humanism and the school of Guarino'.

suitable to hold public office; the possibility was so inconceivable as not even to require discussion.⁵⁶ She might discharge her domestic duties more competently than a woman without education – Cereta corresponds with her family lawyer, while her husband is away from home on business, about family litigation she is conducting in his absence, for which her knowledge of Latin was invaluable.⁵⁷ Such a wife was an asset; she could not, however, be regarded as a potential contender for her husband's job.

In the event, the women themselves connive in a general tendency to merge their individual talents into a composite *topos* of 'O decus Italiae virgo', female accomplishment *allegorizing* humanistic competence as such.⁵⁸ They give way to the encouragement of male humanists to correspond with one another, in celebration of the 'worth' of the female scholar: at the very moment when Politian himself is engaged in bitter polemic with his intellectual detractors, he encourages Cassandra Fedele and Alessandra Scala to exchange letters in which they compete in each other's flattery, and flatter in precisely the idealizing terms favoured by their male mentors.⁵⁹ Alessandra, the younger of the two women, writes to Fedele:

Whoever arrives here from Venice proclaims your virtue, so that amongst us here too it is held in the highest regard. Your intellect, ability, habits are reported to be worthy to command our admiration, and to be almost incredible. For which I congratulate you, and thank you, not just for bringing glory to our sex, but also to the age.⁶⁰

Precisely similar exchanges are to be found between Varano and Nogarola,⁶¹ and between Cereta and Fedele.⁶² These exchanges of letters become themselves symbolic exemplifications of the transcendent achievement of the age.

⁵⁶ Although where a woman *had* to substitute for a missing man, such 'mastery' obviously helped give her personal authority. See, for instance, the discussion of the Tudor princesses' erudition in relation to power in R. M. Warnicke, *Women of the English renaissance and reformation* (Westport, Connecticut and London, 1983), chs. vi and vii.

⁵⁷ Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae*, letters 4, 7 and 9 (summarized in Rabil, *Laura Cereta*, p. 61).

⁵⁸ For an account of the iconographic availability of female abstract representations of the active male arts see M. Evans, 'Allegorical women and practical men: the iconography of the *artes* reconsidered', in D. Baker (ed.), *Medieval women* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 305–29.

⁵⁹ It has also to be confessed that the female humanists disparage the abilities of other women in precisely the same terms as their male colleagues. See, for example, Cereta's letter 'against women who disparage learned women' (Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae*, letter 54, summarized in Rabil, *Laura Cereta*, pp. 95–6).

⁶⁰ 'Quicumque istinc huc ad nos proficiscuntur virtutem tuam praedicant, ut apud hos quoque, iam nomen tuum summa in admiratione sit. De ingenio tuo, doctrina, de moribus nobis admiranda quaedam et fere incredibilia afferuntur. Quare tibi gratulor, agoque gratias, quod non nostrum modo sexum, sed hanc quoque aetatem illustraveris' (Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala', p. 249). The female members of ruling houses with whom Fedele corresponds (see below) all thank her for enhancing the reputation of their sex, and for contributing to the lustre female accomplishment is adding to the glory of their age. See, for example, the letter from Isabella of Spain of 1488: 'Alterum quod sexum, et aetatem nostram non minus per te literariae laudis consecuturam confidimus, quam quondam militaris gloriae per Panthesileam Amazonas fuerint consecutae' (Tomasini, *Cassandrae Fidelis epistolae*, p. 19).

⁶¹ Abel, *Opera*, II, 3–8.

⁶² Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae*, letter 35. A letter of Cereta to Bonifacio Bembo later in the same year (1487, the year of Fedele's public triumph with her oration at the University of

The way in which the intellectual achievement of the women humanists can be redeployed to provide emblematic confirmation of the transcendent glory of a historic period and a particular political regime is shown in exemplary fashion in some of Cassandra Fedele's published letters. At the height of her reputation as a humanist and scholar, Fedele exchanged letters with several prominent female members of the ruling houses of Aragon and d'Este, celebrating their cultivation and female worth, and offering her own female achievement to enhance further their female reputation (and the reputation of the state each woman adorns).⁶³ One such exchange is with Isabella, Queen of Spain: Fedele offers her own intellectual reputation as peculiarly appropriate homage to the woman in a public position of power; Isabella responds in Latin, praising Fedele's exemplary prowess as comparable to any military victory of Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, in its contribution to the glory of the age. Eleanora of Aragon, Duchess of Ferrara, writes with similar virtuosity on the theme of Fedele's female symbolic value.⁶⁴ The woman accidentally distinguished by rank is studiously associated for purposes of compliment and public acclaim with the one distinguished by humanistic learning, and both become celebratory of a civilization in which power resides in the hands of the men (even if occasionally a woman makes a supporting contribution by her rank-power, her beauty, or her reputation for cultivation). Furthermore, the *value* thereby invested in women is astutely redeployed as *virtue*: both Cassandra and Eleanora are elevated in ethical terms by this deflection of their gender into symbolic purity.

So we have the normality, as it were, of the women's performance as quattrocento humanists, and then we have the contrivedness of the figurative manipulation of their performance (both by male colleagues, and in their own accounts of themselves), and I suggest that in the tension between these two we are seeing a tension between two possibilities for inserting humanism itself into a quattrocento civic context: *accomplishment* and *profession*.

The women humanists are accomplished; their accomplishment is celebrated by their male correspondents in terms of an abstract intellectual ideal (warrior

Padua) vehemently attacks Fedele for publicly doubting that Cereta's work was her own (Bembo corresponded with both women). Several of the women were accused by *men* of having their Latin works written by a father or tutor. It is ironical that the charge should here have apparently been levelled by another woman. (Letter 53 in Tomasini, with 'Gismunda' substituted for Fedele. See Rabil, *Laura Cereta*, pp. 89-90.)

⁶³ Fedele corresponded with Queen Isabella of Spain (Tomasini, *Cassandrae Fidelis epistolae*, letters 11 (Cassandra to Isabella, n.d.), 12 (Isabella to Cassandra, 1488), 13 (Cassandra to Isabella, 1487), 60 (Cassandra to Isabella, 1492), 66 (Cassandra to Isabella, 1495)); with Beatrice, Queen of Hungary (sister of Eleanora of Aragon and d'Este) (letters 21, 1488; 71, 1497; 78, n.d.); with Beatrice Sforza (letter 57 (Cassandra to Beatrice, n.d.), 58 (Beatrice to Cassandra, 1493)); and with Beatrice Sforza's mother, Eleanora of Aragon, Duchess of Ferrara, letter 105 (Eleanora to Cassandra, 1488). All these women were notable patrons of the arts, and Fedele presumably approached them with an eye to possible patronage (she was invited to Spain in 1488). Kristeller comments that on the whole patronage was sought for *vernacular* works from these female patrons. See Kristeller, 'Learned women', pp. 93-4.

⁶⁴ Tomasini, *Cassandrae Fidelis epistolae*, pp. 161-2 (1488).

/maiden, 'virilis animi'; grieving spouse, majestic in suffering), or in terms of a social ideal (chastity, obedience, modesty, constancy, beauty). Guarino combines the two when he writes of the Nogarola sisters, Isotta and Ginevra (whom he has never met), on the strength of their display pieces of Latin prose:

Why do the poets not honour these so modest, so noble, so erudite, so eloquent women?... What are you doing, you noble young men of our city?... Do you not fear that common outburst against you: 'for indeed you young men display a womanish mind; while that virgin displays a virile one' [*De officiis* 1].⁶⁵

On the other hand, humanistic accomplishment in the quattrocento is notionally the means of access to humanism as a *profession*, leaving aside for a moment whether what is envisaged is a political career, or a teaching career, or even a courtier's. When Isotta Nogarola writes to Guarino and receives a eulogy in reply, or when Fedele is successful in eliciting a congratulatory response from Politian, they have apparently crossed the threshold from promising student to accomplished practitioner. The same might be said to be the implication of Politian's Greek epigram addressed to Alessandra Scala on the occasion of her performance as Electra: 'you have made it into the ranks of those honoured by society for their achievement as Latinists and Hellenists, those, that is, to whom our society looks as civic leaders and figureheads of the civilized community'. All three women certainly reacted to the great men's attention *as if* this had happened: Scala replied (as any male humanist would have done) with a competent Greek epigram praising Politian in his turn;⁶⁶ Nogarola and Fedele wrote letters in response to their mentors, which assume an active and fully participating correspondence will now ensue. Fedele and Nogarola reacted to the subsequent rebuff with a personal and passionate intensity which suggests that they themselves had been well and truly deceived – that they had really expected to be treated from now on as equal intellectuals, not as forward women, or amorous encounters.⁶⁷

It is this confusion on their part that I find deeply suggestive for our assessment of quattrocento Italian humanism as a whole. Within the humanist confraternity [*sic*] the accomplishment of the educated women (the 'learned lady') is an end in itself, like fine needlepoint or the ability to perform ably on lute or virginals. It is not viewed as a training *for* anything, perhaps not even *for* virtue (except in so far as all these activities keep their idle hands and minds busy).⁶⁸ As signs of *cultivation* all such accomplishments satisfactorily

⁶⁵ Sabbadini, *Epistolario*, pp. 293–4. Guarino used this same passage from the *De officiis* in his complimentary letter to Varano (see Sabbadini, *Vita*, pp. 157–8).

⁶⁶ See above.

⁶⁷ See above, and King, 'Religious retreat' and 'Book-lined cells'; Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola'.

⁶⁸ A point regularly made in favour of education of girls by Erasmus and More. See, for example, More's letter to his daughter Margaret: 'Quaeso te, Margareta, fac de studiis vestris quid fit intelligam. Nam ego potius quam meos patiar inertia torpescere, profecto cum aliquo fortunarum mearum dispendio valedicens aliis curis ac negociis, intendam liberis meis et familiae' ('I beg you, Margaret, tell me about the progress you are all making in your studies. For I assure you that, rather than allow my children to be idle and slothful, I would make a sacrifice of wealth, and bid adieu to other cares and business, to attend to my children and my family'). E. F. Rogers

connote a leisured life, a background which regards the decorative as adding lustre to rank and social standing, and the ability to purchase the services of the best available teachers for such comparatively useless skills. And there is supposed to be an evident discontinuity between such accomplishment and the world of the professional humanist, be he teacher, adviser or holder of public office. But that discontinuity is in practice, it appears, precariously established – sufficiently precariously for it to cause misunderstanding, puzzlement, uneasiness and textual difficulty in the letters exchanged between accomplished women and professional men, as the one strives for recognition, the other to evade it. Following receipt of Scala's Greek epigram, for instance, Politian addresses a succession of Greek epigrams to 'Alessandra poetess' which transforms the exchange from one between Greek virtuosi into a series of formalized lover's addresses to an absent beloved, hoping for some substantial sign of favour ('To me who desire fruit, you, however, send only flowers and leaves, signifying that I labour in vain').⁶⁹ Scala is thus effectively excluded from the exchange altogether, in spite of Politian's continuing protestations of admiration.⁷⁰ Only if her femaleness is mythologized into the acceptable form of muse or inspiring goddess, apparently, can the woman humanist be celebrated without causing the male humanist professional embarrassment.

But if the gap between accomplishment (the ability of the noble, leisured pupil) and profession (the learned training of the active civic figure) is problematic in the case of women, might it not be so for men in a comparable position? That is to say, do the exchanges of letters between Guarino and Leonello d'Este or between Politian and Lorenzo de' Medici prove anything more about the noble pupil/patron than that he is accomplished in currently validating social terms? I suggest that for the noble man also, who did not in practice earn a living or pursue a career, humanist learning provided the male equivalent of fine needlepoint or musical skill: it provided the fictional identity of rank and worth on which the precarious edifice of the fifteenth-century

(ed.), *The correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton, 1947), letter 69 (p. 134), transl. E. F. Rogers, *St. Thomas More: selected letters* (New Haven and London, 1961), p. 109. More makes the explicit point, in writing to Margaret after her marriage, that her learning is intended for *no other audience* than her father and her husband: 'Sed tu, Margareta dulcissima, longe magis eo nomine laudanda es, quod quum solidam laboris tui laudem sperare non potes, nihilo tamen minus pergis cum egregia ista virtute tua cultiores literas et bonarum artium studia coniungere; et conscientiae tuae fructu et voluptate contenta, a populo famam pro tua modestia nec aucuperis nec oblatam libenter velis amplecti, sed pro eximia pietate qua nos prosequeris satis amplum frequensque legenti tibi theatrum simus, maritus tuus et ego' (But, my sweetest Margaret, you are all the more deserving of praise on this account. Although you cannot hope for an adequate reward for your labour, yet nevertheless you continue to unite to your singular love of virtue the pursuit of literature and art. Content with the profit and pleasure of your conscience, in your modesty you do not seek for the praise of the public, nor value it overmuch even if you receive it, but because of the great love you bear us, you regard us – your husband and myself – as a sufficiently large circle of readers for all that you write'). Rogers, *Correspondence*, letter 128 (p. 302), transl. Rogers, *St. Thomas More*, p. 155.

⁶⁹ Ardizzoni, *Epigrammi greci*, epigram xxxii (p. 22) (Italian transl. p. 58).

⁷⁰ A number of humanists wrote Greek 'love' poems addressed to Alessandra. One of them, Marullus, eventually married her. See Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala'.

power structure of the Italian city state depended. It *read out* as 'valour', 'manliness', 'fortitude', 'benevolence', the male equivalents of 'modesty' and 'chastity', but less readily discernible to our modern eye as culturally constructed 'moral' attributes. That, at least, is what I believe we begin to see when we 'look to the ladies' in the humanist case.

It might be objected that this is not how it looks when we follow the impeccable scholarly literature on humanism of Garin and Kristeller and their schools. There we cannot detect the kind of slightly absurd bias in reading which I am suggesting forms the basis for the nineteenth-century Italian argument that learned quattrocento women were (by virtue of their studies, and perhaps to compensate for them) chaste saints, while the men were (following an identical programme in classical reading) valiant warriors and statesmen. The final point I want to make, therefore, returns us to that 'love affair' I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of humanism and the women humanists of the fifteenth century. Because unlike our current account of quattrocento Italian *social history*,⁷¹ the modern history of humanism builds squarely on their foundations.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians whose work on humanism laid the groundwork for the great intellectual assessments of twentieth-century scholars like Garin and Kristeller have a good deal to say about the women humanists I have discussed in this article. There are long learned articles on Costanza Varano, Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele and Alessandra Scala, full of that meticulously researched archival detail we have come to take for granted in scholars like Sabbadini and Del Lungo. But that material has lain unstudied because it is impossible to use. And it is impossible to use because in every case the tone of awed adoration which is adopted, the glaringly question-begging hypothesis of romance between the learned women and their male correspondents, makes it so. Pesenti heads consecutive sections of his seminal article on Alessandra Scala: 'L'amore del Poliziano' and 'Un altro adoratore di Alessandra: Giano Lascari'.⁷² Gothein's study of the published dialogue by Isotta Nogarola, *De pari aut impari Evae atque Adae peccato* becomes hopelessly embroiled with the possible amorous undertones in the correspondence between Nogarola and Lodovico Foscarini (the second participant in the dialogue),⁷³ as does her editor Abel.⁷⁴ The fact is, all that survives of these women besides their 'reputation' (in the strict fifteenth-century sense of a public persona of chastity and probity of character), is their writings. The rest is elaborate fiction, manufactured to the taste of the contemporary reading public. Del Lungo, the distinguished editor of Politian, published a work on historic Italian womanhood entitled *La donna fiorentina del buon tempo antico*,⁷⁵

⁷¹ For instance Martines, *The social world* and *Power and imagination*.

⁷² Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala'.

⁷³ P. Gothein, 'L'amicizia fra Lodovico Foscarini e l'umanista Isotta Nogarola', *La Rinascita*, vi (1943), 394-413.

⁷⁴ Abel, *Opera*, preface.

⁷⁵ (Florence, 1926; first edn of Part II, 1893.)

entirely devoted to such sentimental fiction. But that, surely, must lead us to ask the question whether in fact the reconstructions by these same scholars of the lives of the Italian *male* humanists are any more to our modern taste (and therefore compatible with our modern historical approaches). Whether, that is, we are taking on trust the self-evident equivalence of scholarly competence in Latin and Greek (which quattrocento humanism offered) and *civic* competence (‘valour’, ‘magnanimity’, ‘sprezzatura’, and the other ‘manly’ qualities appropriate to the ‘new men’ of the city states), which in fact is based on a set of nineteenth-century assumptions about the man of worth, the man of rank and distinction.