

# **The Aristotelian Philosophies of Quattrocento Venice: The Effect on Isotta Nogarola's Humanist Career**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Isotta Nogarola's (1418–1466) path to becoming a prominent female Renaissance humanist scholar in early fifteenth-century Venice. In quattrocento Italy, some learned women entered the realm of Renaissance humanism through their literary works, which demonstrated they had a thorough knowledge of classical authors and their philosophies. The journey was not an easy one for Isotta, however, who lived under Venetian rule; she had to contend with the dominant Aristotelian gender ideal that she be silent and submissive as a wife and mother or enter conventual life. She abandoned her secular humanist career for a life devoted to God in 1441, primarily because of Venice's Aristotelian conservative assessment of women, but also because, as a holy woman, combining her humanist views with Biblical wisdom was the only socially acceptable way for a fifteenth-century, unmarried Italian woman to pursue humanism as a career and reject her culture's misogyny without being condemned. This paper will also compare Isotta's life to those of Hildegard of Bingen and Christine de Pizan, who enjoyed success writing about women's issues between the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance.

*Keywords:* Isotta Nogarola, Humanism, Renaissance, Venice, Aristotle, holy woman

## **Las filosofías aristotélicas del Quattrocento Venecia: el efecto sobre la carrera humanista de Isotta Nogarola**

### RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el camino de Isotta Nogarola (1418-1466) para convertirse en una prominente erudita humanista del Renacimiento a principios de la Venecia del siglo XV. En el quattrocento

de Italia, algunas mujeres instruidas entraron en el reino del humanismo renacentista a través de sus obras literarias, lo que demostró que tenían un conocimiento profundo de los autores clásicos y sus filosofías. Sin embargo, el viaje no fue fácil para Isotta, que vivió bajo el dominio veneciano; tuvo que lidiar con el ideal de género aristotélico dominante para que fuera silenciosa y sumisa como esposa y madre o entrara en la vida conventual. Ella abandonó su carrera humanista secular por una vida dedicada a Dios en 1441, principalmente debido a la evaluación conservadora aristotélica de Venecia sobre las mujeres, pero también porque, como mujer santa, combinar sus puntos de vista humanistas con la sabiduría bíblica era la única forma socialmente aceptable para un decimoquinto. siglo, mujer italiana soltera para perseguir el humanismo como carrera y rechazar la misoginia de su cultura sin ser condenada. Este documento también comparará la vida de Isotta con la de Hildegard de Bingen y Christine de Pizan, quienes disfrutaron con éxito escribiendo sobre temas de mujeres entre la Edad Media y el Renacimiento italiano.

**Palabras clave:** Isotta Nogarola, Humanismo, Renacimiento, Venecia, Aristóteles, mujer santa

## 十五世纪威尼斯的亚里士多德学派哲学：对伊索塔·诺加罗拉的人道主义事业产生的效果

### 摘要

本文研究了伊索塔·诺加罗拉（Isotta Nogarola，生于1418年，卒于1466年）在十五世纪早期的威尼斯成为著名文艺复兴女性人道主义学者的历程。十五世纪的意大利，一些有学问的女性通过其文学作品进入了文艺复兴人道主义领域，这些作品证明她们全面了解了经典作家及其哲学理念。然而，对于生活在威尼斯规则下的伊索塔而言，这条路并不轻松；她不得不挑战当时占主导地位的亚里士多德的性别观念，后者认为她在作为妻子、母亲或进入修道院的生活时应该保持沉默和温顺。她在1441年抛弃了世俗的人道主义事业，投身于上帝，主要是因为威尼斯亚里士多德学派保守党对女性的评价，但也因为作为一名圣洁的女性，将人道主义观点与圣经智慧结合，对这位生活在十五世纪的未婚意大利女性而言是唯一的可以被社会所接受的方式，以追求人道主义事业，同时在不被谴责的情况下对其文化中的厌女症说不。

本文还将伊索塔的生活与希尔德加德·冯·宾根、克里斯蒂娜·德·皮桑的生活进行比较，后两位女性在中世纪时期和意大利文艺复兴期间成功撰写了有女性问题的著作。

关键词：伊索塔·诺加罗拉（Isotta Nogarola），人道主义，文艺复兴，威尼斯，亚里士多德，圣洁的女人

Feminist historians herald Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466) as the first female humanist of the Italian Renaissance due to her vast epistolary exchange with prominent male humanists and claim her as the most learned female of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> While some learned women in quattrocento Italy participated in Renaissance humanism by circulating their writings, which demonstrated they had a thorough knowledge of classical authors and their philosophies, the journey was not an easy one for those who wanted to study humanism as a career, remain unmarried, and live under Venetian rule; they had to contend with the dominant Aristotelian gender ideal that they be silent and submissive as wives and mothers or enter conventual life as a nun. Although Isotta enjoyed early success as a humanist scholar in Verona and Venice, she suddenly abandoned her secular humanist career for a life devoted to God in 1441, primarily because Venice's Aristotelian conservative assessment of women pressured her to accept its dominant gender ideals, but also because, as a holy woman, combining her humanist views with Biblical wisdom was the only socially

acceptable way for a fifteenth-century, unmarried Italian woman to pursue humanism and reject her culture's misogyny without being condemned.

### **The Attack on Isotta's Humanist Career (1436–1441)**

In quattrocento Italy, it was customary for men entering humanist circles to correspond with statesmen, clergymen, and prominent male humanists in the hope that a good response of praise and encouragement, which would have been made public, would soon follow.<sup>2</sup> For women, it was customary to write within their “intellectual family,” which included male teachers, noblemen, clergymen, and other male intellectuals closely associated with the family.<sup>3</sup> Isotta Nogarola's humanist career began in Verona in just that way, when she was just eighteen years old. Yet, she pushed the bounds of what was considered customary and normal for her gender in quattrocento Italy.

It was considered inappropriate for women to write outside of their intellectual family,<sup>4</sup> but Isotta did just that. She wrote to men she did not know, like

Ermolao Barbaro (1410–1471), a clergyman, at the same time she wrote to her intellectual family. Writing to men not related to her was a bold act and the first indication that Isotta did not care to conform to the conventional rules of her society. No matter who she wrote to, however, Isotta demonstrated from the start that she had intellectual prowess. The correspondence within and outside her intellectual family was laced with classical references from Cicero, Petronius, Plutarch, and Virgil.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, she wrote in Latin. Those were characteristics of male intellectuals more than half her senior, not an eighteen-year-old girl.<sup>6</sup>

Then, Guarino Veronese (1374–1460), the distinguished humanist scholar of Verona, heard of Isotta's remarkable intelligence and eloquence in letters from her brother-in-law in 1436, praised her as a prodigy and knowledgeable in the classics, compared her to the heroines of antiquity, and said Verona should be proud of producing such an intelligent daughter.<sup>7</sup> Other prominent Veronese humanists also became aware of Isotta's remarkable intelligence and eloquence and praised her for it, even going so far as to say that "the whole female sex should rejoice and consecrate statues to Isotta as the ancient Egyptians had to Isis."<sup>8</sup> Then later in 1436, Isotta was invited to correspond with Guarino himself. Margaret L. King and Diana Robin stress that "by engaging in this correspondence with [Guarino] and his circle, Isotta became known to the leading humanists of northeastern Italy and also to groups beyond."<sup>9</sup> That would have been very important for

Isotta, who wanted to pursue a vocation as a humanist scholar, rather than being a wife and mother or entering a convent as a nun.<sup>10</sup> Humanist scholars were traditionally men who studied ancient and classical texts, philosophies, and rhetoric and applied their lessons to fourteenth and fifteenth century problems in order to promote moral character and civil service. They also used those texts to pursue the theoretical dilemma of whether or not women could be virtuous and fulfill their civic duty. Despite that tradition, Isotta pursued a career as a humanist scholar after the praise she earned as a teenager elevated her to a public platform outside of her intellectual family. Since she was unmarried, however, she remained an outsider in the humanist realm and to her society, yet Isotta was already seen as an outsider for being highly intelligent and educated in humanist studies.

As a daughter from a noble Veronese family in quattrocento Italy, Isotta's education took place in the private sphere of domesticity under the guidance of her parents.<sup>11</sup> She was taught the domestic arts, such as embroidery, and to read and write in the vernacular, preparing her for marriage and raising children. Her father, Leonardo Nogarola, a theologian and philosopher, however, also provided Isotta and her sisters with a humanist education from an early age.<sup>12</sup> A humanist education included the learning of classical languages, history, grammar, philosophy, and poetry, but for girls it was not to include classical oratorical practices or rhetoric; patriarchal ideology demanded that women be seen and not heard in pub-

lic.<sup>13</sup> However, Isotta's father must have educated Isotta and her sister Ginerva in classical oration and rhetoric for, as young girls, they were praised for their intellect and eloquence and gained notoriety as prodigies by rhetoricians in Northern Italy.<sup>14</sup>

Although considered rare, yet not unheard of in the Northern Communes, some young girls of the social elite were educated in humanist studies under the tutelage of a father or patriarchal figure for the purpose of educating future sons as male citizens; an advanced education beyond domesticity was more prevalent in dynastic or royal families in Northern Italy where a classical or humanist education prepared them for courtly life and the governance of their husband's land.<sup>15</sup> A noble daughter, such as Isotta, was never expected to be in a position of authority. Therefore, Isotta's advanced education in classical and humanist studies was the exception, not the rule. Ross has suggested that through the "intellectual family," fathers educated their daughters in humanist studies because it brought more honor to the family name, increased the family's social standing, and improved the girl's marriageability.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the education of young noble daughters in humanist studies was purely a choice made by the patriarch of the family in the early fifteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

When her father died suddenly, sometime before 1433, Isotta's mother, Bianca Borromeo, insisted that Isotta's humanist education continue and hired Martino Rizzio, a humanist student of Guarino, to tutor her. During that time,

Isotta became fluent in Latin, classical philosophy, rhetoric, the Scriptures, and theology.<sup>18</sup> It was highly unusual for her mother to further her daughter's humanist education, since a mother's duty was to educate her daughters in domesticity, but Virginia Cox posits that Isotta's mother may have continued her daughter's advancement in education after her husband's death to further ennoble the family and to secure marriage prospects for her daughter.<sup>19</sup> However, Isotta had no intention of marrying and made the conscious decision to follow the career path of a humanist scholar instead.<sup>20</sup> That made her even more of an outcast in Veronese society.

Highly educated or learned women of noble rank who were not married had no place in society; they were not respected. Once a woman reached sexual maturity, she was expected to set aside her intellectual pursuits and marry. If a woman wanted to pursue academics or humanist studies beyond adolescence and forge a successful career out of it, she had to have support from her father or her husband.<sup>21</sup> Women who did not marry and pursued humanist studies were considered as "exceeding their sex."<sup>22</sup> As a result, unmarried learned women were condemned and dragged down by both men and women in the upper and lower echelons of their society.<sup>23</sup> Ross suggests that was because "they counterargued centuries of biblical and Aristotelian antiwoman sentiment and the patriarchal structure of Western society."<sup>24</sup> By contrast, there was little to no evidence that unmarried learned women from dynastic families met resistance. It was only the unmar-

ried learned women of the noble class that encountered hostility. Therefore, as an unmarried learned noblewoman in Northern Italy in the quattrocento, seeking to join the male-dominated realm of humanism, Isotta was ostracized by her society, despite praise from prominent male humanists and being just as accomplished in humanist studies as men.

Even though there was social opprobrium against Isotta in Verona for being an unmarried learned woman, she was bolstered with Guarino's praise of her and moved to Venice in 1438, where she tried to establish herself as a humanist scholar with Venetian male humanists and other elite men in Renaissance society. However, nine months later, Isotta received a threatening message that would alter the course of the rest of her life. On June 1, 1439, she came under attack by an anonymous Venetian writer who called himself "Pliny." He made several accusations against Isotta, specifically, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, and incest:

Let us cease to wonder at all these things, when that second unmarried sister, who has won such praise for her eloquence, does things which little befit her erudition and reputation—although the saying of many wise men I hold to be true: that an eloquent woman is never chaste; and the behavior of many learned women also confirms its truth .... But lest you approve even slightly this excessively foul and obscene crime, let me explain that

before she made her body generally available for promiscuous intercourse, she had first permitted—and indeed even earnestly desired—that the seal of her virginity be broken by none other than her brother, so that by this tie she might be more tightly bound to him. Alas for God in whom men trust, who does not mingle heaven, when she, who sets herself no limit in this filthy lust, dares to engage so deeply in the finest literary studies.<sup>25</sup>

The letter was a clear indication of the negative attitudes of Venetians towards unmarried learned women who dared step out of the private sphere of domesticity and into the public sphere in Venice. Combined with her pursuit of becoming a humanist scholar and her intelligence, while remaining unmarried, Isotta was vilified like a criminal. Her gender and her society's ideas about her gender played too significant a role for her to be a humanist scholar, a career that men dominated.

Isotta was condemned even further for reaching out to Guarino in an attempt to repair her reputation. She lamented to him in a letter about how she was "jeered throughout the city, my sex mocks me, nowhere do I have a restful place ..."<sup>26</sup> King suggests that those women mocked Isotta out of jealousy for going against her culture's gender ideals.<sup>27</sup> Isotta begged him to "put a stop to these cruel tongues that call me a tower of audacity and say that I should be sent to the ends of the earth."<sup>28</sup> His immediate response was to admonish

her for feeling humiliated, and he lost his admiration for her because of it.<sup>29</sup> He believed that there should be no room in her life for femaleness and went on to tell her that she must be manlier.

Although Isotta vehemently denied the allegations made against her, which were also publicly denounced by Niccolo Barbo, a prominent Venetian patrician and humanist, the damage had been done to her reputation. Isotta Nogarola went silent in all of her communications between the publication of the “Pliny” letter and her letter to Guarino from 1439 to 1441. During that time, a humiliated Isotta must have realized that if she wanted to continue her pursuit of scholarly learning as a humanist, she would have to make a great sacrifice and conform to Venetian society’s gender ideal of women, for in 1441, at the age of twenty-three, five years after she entered Veronese and Venetian humanist circles, Isotta moved back to Verona and took up the life of a holy woman, devoted her life to sacred studies, pledged virginity, and lived life in semi-solitude.

### **Aristotelian Venice**

Venice was unlike any other city-state in Italy during the Middle Ages (500–1500) and the Italian Renaissance (1300–1600). Beginning in 1204, Venetians created a unique government that shared the combined traits of a monarchy, an aristocracy, and a republic, which focused solely on trade. Conversely, the other Italian city-states were republics, like Florence, or principalities, like Naples.

Venetians did everything in their power to show that Venice was superior to all other Italian city-states in every way, especially in the functionality and stability of its government. However, Venice was similar to all other Italian city-states during the Middle Ages in that they incorporated Aristotle’s (384 BC–322 BC) philosophies on logic, physics, ethics, and metaphysics into their culture, due to their close contact with the Greek culture, which had been deeply entrenched in Aristotelian philosophy since the fourth century.<sup>30</sup> Through his philosophies, Aristotle’s concepts and arguments on women and their place in the *polis* made a slow and steady integration into religious philosophy over several hundred years and then was infused even more into the Italian culture through the scholastic curriculum at the Universities of Paris and Padua, where men who ran the Italian governments received their education, beginning in 1250.<sup>31</sup> Those men then spread the Aristotelian concept of women beyond academia into their societies through their governance, private dialogues, and literary works.

One of the primary Aristotelian philosophies that the medieval Italian city-states incorporated into their culture was that men were superior and dominant over women because women were inferior by nature. Prudence Allen called this superiority and dominance of one sex over another “gender polarity.”<sup>32</sup> According to Aristotle’s *Politics* (350 BCE), “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all

mankind.”<sup>33</sup> Women were deemed to be too emotional and, therefore, incapable of rational thought and judgment; they could not make reasonable decisions about public affairs and this disqualified them from full citizenship. Only men could be full citizens. Therefore, women were to have no role in the *polis*; they could not participate in government matters, nor could they be lawyers, teachers, or administrators. According to Aristotle, they were expected to remain “silent,” stay in the private sphere of domesticity, and marry to maintain alliances and raise children.<sup>34</sup> As a patriarchal society, both in the private and public spheres, submission and silence were, therefore, a woman’s virtue while eloquence was a man’s virtue, according to Aristotle, for eloquence would help a man run the government. By contrast, any woman who displayed eloquence, like Isotta, was as an anomaly and deemed socially destructive.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, an eloquent woman disrupted the social norms of society and was seen as usurping male virtues and claiming power, which was only meant for men. Only men were allowed to display their eloquence in public, where women were banned. Although historians Francis Sparshott and Irina Deretic have recently argued that Aristotle did not devalue women and disregard their position in Italian society,<sup>36</sup> his philosophies about the positions and contributions of men and women in society were taken literally in medieval Italy, since they had been woven throughout the culture since the fourth century and the scholastic curriculum since the thirteenth century. However,

that all changed around 1300 in Florence, when humanism attempted to reform Aristotelianism with Platonism.

Florence was the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance after intellectuals rediscovered ancient and classical texts in 1300. Its main cultural movement was humanism, which reinforced the principles from classical antiquity and emphasized an anthropocentric worldview, rather than the theocentric one that dominated the Middle Ages. Humanism influenced many aspects of Italian culture, from education to art and literature. It also redefined familial roles, court and public life, and reexamined Aristotle’s misogynist perceptions of women, which had been embedded in the Italian culture for centuries. Achievements by women were celebrated for the first time as a result of that reexamination, such as in Giovanni Boccaccio’s (1313–1375) *Corbaccio* (1365). The “woman question,” which asked if women could be virtuous, if women could perform noble deeds, and if women were the same as men, was also heavily debated.<sup>37</sup> This also resulted in an increase in knowledge about Plato and his philosophies on life. Kenneth R. Bartlett posits that with that increase of knowledge “came an incentive to replace the now despised Aristotelianism of the scholastics with another, more humanistically-oriented philosophical system” and Platonism did that well.<sup>38</sup>

Although Plato and Aristotle were equally respected as classicists during the early Renaissance, according to Bartlett, Platonism proved to be a good replacement for Aristotelianism because there was no hostility to-

ward it, it had not been overanalyzed by scholars—unlike Aristotelianism—and it closely aligned with Christianity through the immortality of the soul.<sup>39</sup> Plato believed the soul was asexual and reincarnated after death, which led him to take the stance in *Timaeus* (c. 360 BCE), which was translated into Latin (c. 45 BCE) and available to early humanists, that women could contribute the same as men in serving as Guardians of the *polis* and therefore deserved the same education as men.<sup>40</sup> Allen calls that “gender unity” and posits that “all those who read [*Timaeus*] tended to conclude that Plato actually supported the equality and non-differentiation of men and women in the world itself.”<sup>41</sup> His *Republic* (360 BCE) and *Laws* (360 BCE), which also contained arguments that supported gender unity,<sup>42</sup> was available to humanists in Latin from 1450. Despite inconsistencies throughout his work about women’s equality to men in the *polis* and in education, which has led scholars to debate Plato’s gender unity theory for hundreds of years,<sup>43</sup> Renaissance humanists in Florence began an open dialogue about women and their role in society. As a result of that dialogue, a new concept of woman based on Plato’s gender unity theory emerged.

Evidence of that dialogue and the new concept of women in Renaissance Italy could be found in fourteenth-century stories of women from Dante (1265–1321), Petrarch (1304–1374), and Boccaccio, in which “women were presented as full of self-discipline and engaging in the development of virtue, and also willing and able to lead men to greater heights of wisdom and virtues

as well,” according to Allen.<sup>44</sup> Other evidence could be found in the writings of religious women, such as Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), who disregarded the traditions of her time and successfully wrote about men’s manipulation of women in marriage alliances, albeit with a theological element.<sup>45</sup> They proved they had authority, reasoned, and wrote with wisdom, and they showed that women could be equal to men. Plato’s theories were in direct contrast to Aristotelianism, however. Venetians were closed to any idea of a new concept of woman and intensified Aristotelianism when they became a *terra firma* empire in the late fourteenth century, coming into contact with Florence’s civic humanism.

Venice was able to expand onto mainland Italy and become a *terra firma* empire after its triumph over Genoa in 1381. Then, between 1404 and 1406, it absorbed the city-states of Padua, Vicenza, and Verona, where they sent representatives, equipped with their strong Aristotelian values, laws, and government practice, to each government council. Therefore, when Isotta was born in Verona in 1418 and entered its humanist circles in 1436, it was under the rule of Aristotelian Venice. It was during Venice’s mainland expansion and occupation that the intelligentsia, or the all-male intellectual elite (patriarchs) who ruled and ran the governments of the Venetian empire, came into contact with Florence’s humanistic movement. However, they were uninterested in developing a civic humanist culture for their empire and strengthened Aristotelianism instead.

Florentine humanism and, thereby, Platonist philosophies on gender unity failed to develop throughout Venice's empire in the early fifteenth century for two reasons. First, Venice was focused only on the preservation of its political stability, which Florence's humanism threatened to destabilize if they adopted Florentine humanism; Venice did not have a history of internal strife and the classes were harmonious, unlike in Florence. The second reason was that the intelligentsia, who used Aristotelian philosophy to maintain the superiority of Venice, simply were happy with the way things were.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the quattrocento generation of Venetians was more concerned with trade and politics and upholding their traditional social and political values than with incorporating Platonist ideas into their world, like Florence and other Italian city-states had been doing for more than century. King argues, however, that since the intelligentsia found some aspects of humanism appealing, especially as a luxury for patricians, quattrocento Venetians were "open to novelty but closed to change ... welcomed new texts but abhorred new meanings ... praised eloquence but stifled criticism"; therefore, the intelligentsia meshed some of the ideologies of humanism with their deeply-rooted Aristotelian values and created patrician humanism.<sup>47</sup> However, that did not change their conservative Aristotelian views of women.

In patrician humanism, Venetians intensified their Aristotelian philosophies while doing it in human-

ism's language of Latin and style of classical learning, albeit without Platonist gender unity ideologies. Patrician humanism would, therefore, not weaken their mainland empire and strengthen the superiority of Venice. Furthermore, anthropocentrism, prevalent in civic humanism, was absent in patrician humanism in order to continue unapologetically celebrating Venice. That intensification was clearly problematic for Isotta, as she stepped out of the private sphere and into the public sphere of humanism in the 1430s. Since Venice's empire was solidly Aristotelian in the quattrocento, it was evident why Isotta, who was born in Verona just twelve years after it was absorbed into the Venetian empire and chose the career path of a humanist scholar, which was solely reserved for men in the Venetian empire, was viciously attacked between 1436 and 1439. By choosing a career path outside of domesticity and remaining unmarried, Isotta simply did not conform to Venice's Aristotelian philosophy that she be submissive and silent, marry, and have children.

Moreover, since Isotta received a humanist education, it would have been reasonable that she studied Plato and his gender unity theories in *Timaeus* and connected with them. That was especially evident when she wrote to men outside her intellectual family, such as Ermolao Barbaro, in 1436. According to Luka Borsic and Ivana S. Karasman, that correspondence was an indication that she believed herself equal to men.<sup>48</sup> That went completely against Aristotelian philosophy, align-

ing with Platonism instead, and would have, therefore, made her a target for condemnation by her culture.

Isotta was also eloquent, which was publicly acknowledged by Guarino and other male humanists in Verona and Venice. Since that was only a characteristic acceptable in men, according to Aristotle, that was a challenge for Isotta. She knew her eloquence did not follow the customs of her city but was eloquent anyway; she told Ermolao and Guarino that she could not “stay silent” just to prove to everyone that she was wrong.<sup>49</sup> Even though her eloquence marked her as a highly intelligent humanist scholar, in 1430s Venice she was perceived as an aberration of female nature, a threat to male propriety, a female claiming power in a realm solely reserved for men, and a threat to Venice's superiority.

Those notions did not change for eloquent women in Northern Italy until 1480, when learned ladies were no longer deemed a threat to society; civic humanism had finally broken through the barrier of Aristotelianism.<sup>50</sup> According to Aileen Feng, a learned lady by 1500 “was a familiar and sanctioned enough figure to have been [designated] as kind of a national treasure, routinely boasted of by compatriots as an honor to her city and kin.”<sup>51</sup> For instance, Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558) was considered an exceptional woman and a symbol of Venetian superiority in 1490 for her success and intelligence as a humanist scholar. Additionally, Laura Cereeta (1469–1499), who argued that all women, as human beings, had a right

to an education, was also a celebrated female humanist in Northern Italy in the late quattrocento. Unlike Isotta, however, Cassandra and Laura were never condemned for breaking into the male-dominated realm of humanism because, by that time, Venetian men welcomed learned ladies in society.<sup>52</sup> By 1600, female humanists throughout Italy were common and widely accepted; they were no longer considered an anomaly.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, the attitudes in early quattrocento Venice were significantly less welcoming. Consequently, Isotta was mocked, disrespected, debased, and called unchaste for being an unmarried learned lady and not conforming to her society's rules for the female gender. Being called unchaste was the ultimate offense for women in the quattrocento and since “Pliny” claimed Isotta as such, even with no evidentiary support, she was ultimately pushed to abandon her secular humanist career for one that was more acceptable to her society.

Since antiquity, chastity had been the quintessential virtue in a woman.<sup>54</sup> Chastity was a virtue all girls and women were required to follow because the society of men believed it ensured the continuity and legitimacy of the male line after marriage. Therefore, being unchaste was the worst sin a female could commit; it would have ruined not only her honor, but also that of her entire family and even her city. She was also accused of incest, which was claimed to be the “most monstrous of all” sins, since the Church associated it with witchcraft and demons, according to Allison Levy.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, Isotta's

eloquence and accusations of sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, and incest were damning. Even though Isotta was never accused of witchcraft, being called unchaste and accused of incest was bad enough that it would have been something she would have wanted to avoid at all costs. Consequently, combined with her culture's intensification of Aristotelian philosophies in early quattrocento Venice and being called unchaste through sexual deviance as she entered the public sphere of humanism, Isotta was ultimately defeated by the Aristotelian-saturated society in which she lived.

By 1441, rather than facing daunting obstacles by continuing her pursuit in secular humanist studies, she was forced by the deeply-entrenched Aristotelian philosophies of her society, scorn, and the foul accusations made against her from 1436 to 1439 to follow a path deemed more appropriate for her gender, so as not to upset her society's traditions and values, prove she was not a threat in any way, and save her reputation. That path was that of a holy woman.

### **Isotta Nogarola: Holy Woman and Humanist Scholar (1441-1466)**

**A**s a noble Renaissance woman living in the Venetian empire in the early quattrocento, Isotta had two career paths before her: become a wife and mother or enter the convent as a nun. King's research shows that most Renaissance women, no matter their class, chose to marry and be-

come mothers, as it was ingrained in them that it was their sole mission in life to bear children, thus preserving their husband's familial line and wealth.<sup>56</sup> The alternative career to the burden of motherhood was that of a nun.

Since the founding of Christianity, young girls and women have pursued a life in imitation of Christ. By the Middle Ages, conventual life required those girls and women to take three irreversible vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. According to the Benedictine Rule, a woman entering conventual life also had to give up her worldly possessions, pray daily for her sins and the sins of others, stay silent, live in seclusion, and live an ascetic life. Although many women entered conventual life due to a spiritual calling, some women entered conventual life to further their education.

Convents provided women with an education that was not provided at home. A nun was required to be literate in a variety of topics other than domesticity and religion, such as economics. Nuns had to be able to read, write, and translate sacred texts from Latin into the vernacular; therefore, women were trained in Latin, which happened to be the language of Renaissance humanism. Consequently, convents became the setting for women pursuing higher education. Kathryn Hinds suggests that convents were "often the only place where an intelligent woman was allowed to pursue an education."<sup>57</sup> As a result, women became scholars, authors, and scribes, offering them a power that was typically denied to them as a wife and mother. They wrote plays, devotional

literature, and histories and biographies about ancient and mythological heroines, female saints, female chastity, and the “woman question,” defying the Aristotelian tradition that women should remain silent. One such woman who became a scholar and defied Aristotelian tradition was Hildegard of Bingen.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was much more than a twelfth-century nun; she was a counselor, physician, theologian, and scholar. She entered the convent when she was eight years old and became an abbess in 1136, a time when no woman was to have any power over a man. However, Hildegard defied that command and wrote about the unjust inferiority of women to men.

Hildegard was attracted to Bible passages about women and morality. She was specifically drawn to the passages about Wisdom, “God’s feminine consort and collaborator in the works of creation,” who earned the praise of a goddess.<sup>58</sup> Using the Scriptures, Hildegard analyzed the relationship between men and women and found through the feminine parts of the Bible that women were not frail and meek creatures and that men and women could have an equal partnership.<sup>59</sup> She was a Renaissance woman before the Renaissance. Although her views of women were considered unfeminine at the time, as a nun, Hildegard was never condemned for them. By combining her feminist views with theology, she successfully wrote about the hostility that women faced in a male-dominated world. Another woman who successfully wrote about men’s misogynist views on women was Christine de Pizan.

Christine de Pizan (1365-1431) was a Venetian who moved to France and became an author who rejected the gender polarity of Aristotle. She received a humanist education from her father, who was a physician to King Charles V of France. Although she was not a nun, she wrote numerous works combined with a theological dimension. That allowed her to successfully write about the “woman question” and argue that the inferior treatment of women by men had to stop.

Similar to Hildegard, Christine also used the biblical figure of Wisdom to challenge the misogynist attitudes toward her gender, justifying the idea that women and men were equal. She also used the Holy Trinity as female figures in her works, such as *L'epistre Othea* (1400), in which Christine promoted women’s wisdom and intellect. Christine received opposition for her works, but she was also supported by theologians for writing about feminine topics in a religious way. She effectively affirmed women’s worth, heralded female achievements, and argued for the equal treatment of women to men, all the while proving that she was a learned lady. Therefore, it can be concluded from the experiences of Hildegard and Christine that any woman who wrote about secular topics and the “woman question” was never condemned by society, if her works were combined with wisdom from the Bible, figuratively or literally. Based on the opposition she received between 1436 and 1439, Isotta had to choose between marrying or entering a convent, if she wanted to be a learned lady, study humanism, and

write about the “woman question.” However, Isotta chose neither.

Some women who did not want to enter conventual life or marry, like Isotta, were called tertiaries or holy women. Holy women made vows comparable to a nun, but they were reversible, simpler, and more personal. They made no permanent vows, followed some of the Benedictine Rules, supported themselves, and interacted with the world, while remaining celibate. That allowed her to leave conventual life and re-enter society, if she wished, with her chastity intact. In addition, as a holy woman, she would have been allowed to study Latin. Moreover, she would not have been subjected to a man, thus giving her some control over her life. Since Isotta had no desire to marry and be under the authority of a husband nor did she want to be subjected to a father superior as a nun, and since her culture could not accept her as an unmarried intellectual, especially as one who was claimed as unchaste, it can only be supposed that the only path left for her, in which she could continue her pursuit as a humanist scholar without further condemnation, was that of a holy woman. As a holy woman, Isotta could choose to live like a nun and continue her pursuit of humanist studies while proving that she was not a threat as a learned lady. She could also prove that she was chaste without being condemned by society.

In 1441, Isotta abandoned her pursuit of secular humanist studies, took a pledge of virginity, devoted herself to God, and studied sacred texts, yet

did not take a conventual vow. She lived a hermitic life, rarely leaving her bedroom in her mother’s home and living ascetically.<sup>60</sup> She did not have any intention of reversing her vows, however; the treatment she received prior to 1441 demanded that she live the rest of her life as a virgin dedicated to God. Even though Isotta did not enter a convent, her new religious lifestyle was accepted, applauded, and even encouraged by Northern Italian society.

Veronese and Venetian men and women saw Isotta’s self-imposed religious exile as her acceptance of the traditional Aristotelian values of their society. In her new role as a holy woman, they encouraged her to pursue advanced philosophy and become a “woman intellectual” because a religious life required her to be learned.<sup>61</sup> For instance, humanist Lauro Quirini (1420-1479) advised her to only study Aristotle in order to “have knowledge of [humanist studies], as well as [philosophy and theology].”<sup>62</sup> Costanza Varano (1426–1447) applauded Isotta for taking up the traditional role of “woman religious,” but also encouraged her to continue her intellectual pursuit now that she had pledged herself to God.<sup>63</sup> That was completely the opposite of how she was treated between 1436 and 1439, when she pursued a secular humanist career as an unmarried woman. As long as she remained committed to her pledge of virginity and devoted herself to God as a holy woman, Isotta was, therefore, allowed to pursue humanist studies and be a learned lady. The life of a holy woman was so similar to that of a nun that Isotta did not pose a threat to

the continuity of her deep-rooted Aristotelian society. It was as a holy woman that Isotta wrote her most philosophical works.<sup>64</sup>

Like Hildegard and Christine, Isotta incorporated texts from the Bible, such as Genesis, Exodus, Jeremiah, and the Song of Solomon, into her literary works in her new role as a holy woman. In addition, she meshed those Biblical texts with classical references from Aristotle, possibly as a way to show that she was not a threat to the Aristotelian traditions of Venetian society. Prior to 1441, Isotta never incorporated religious texts in her epistolary; she only made references to classical texts.<sup>65</sup> However, like Hildegard and Christine, Isotta could only study and write about humanist topics and also undermine Aristotle's gender polarity, without being condemned by her society, by including scriptural texts. From 1450 to her death in 1466, Isotta wrote an oration for Pope Nicholas V and Bishop Ermolao Barbaro, a lecture on St. Jerome, a sermon for Pope Pius, and a eulogy for Jacopo Marcello's son, but the best example to show that she conformed to her Aristotelian culture, while at the same undermining it, can be seen in her *Dialogue on Adam and Eve*.

The *Dialogue on Adam and Eve* (1451) began as an exchange of correspondence between Isotta and the Venetian governor in Verona, Ludovico Foscarini, in which they debated who was to blame for original sin, Adam or Eve. Isotta opened the exchange with the traditional view that Eve was the guiltiest, a burden that women carried

for centuries. However, Isotta quickly defended Eve, saying that "Adam must be judged more guilty than Eve because God commanded him not to eat the fruit, and he, in greater attempt, broke this command."<sup>66</sup> In other words, according to the story in Genesis, God created man to be perfect and rational; therefore, Adam was the guiltiest. Conversely, Ludovico countered that Eve was the guiltiest because of her pride. Throughout the dialogue, however, Isotta interwove the traditional gender polarity texts of Aristotle with classical text references and scriptural texts to prove that man was guiltier of original sin, due to his moral inferiority.<sup>67</sup> Isotta successfully used centuries of Aristotelian theories against Ludovico and won the debate.<sup>68</sup> Although that was controversial to conclude in the quattrocento, Isotta was not criticized or condemned for it. She earned praise and recognition as a learned lady by Venetian and Veronese societies and was even called a saint by Ermolao Barbaro.<sup>69</sup> The *Dialogue on Adam and Eve* was arguably Isotta's best and most important literary work, as it challenged her culture's misogyny.

Despite the praise and admiration, Isotta was unhappy. She had to sacrifice bodily comforts and live in isolation, prove that she had conformed to the Aristotelian gender ideals of her society, and prove that she was chaste and wholly devoted to God in order to be a learned lady and humanist scholar. King alleges that it was plausible that Isotta was chronically ill and suffered from "pains in the stomach and body" as she succumbed to the prejudices of

her Aristotelian culture, never rejoining society to marry, based on letters between Foscarini and Isotta beginning in 1453; he acknowledged that she held a “contempt for life” when she “chose to be dissolved with Paul and to be one with Christ.”<sup>70</sup> A later letter by Foscarini to Isotta mentioned that she, who was “constantly occupied in sacred studies,” was in “poor health” because she was “neglectful of herself.”<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, Isotta showed strength and resolve and continued to produce some of the most sophisticated philosophical works of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>72</sup> Including the *Dialogue*, she significantly contributed to the humanist intellectual movement. As a result of that contribution, Isotta Nogarola became not only the most learned female of the Renaissance, but also the first female humanist of the Italian Renaissance.

The path to becoming a humanist scholar in early quattrocento Venice was not an easy one for Isotta Nogarola. The Venetian empire was solidly entrenched in Aristotelian philosophies from the Middle Ages to the late fifteenth century, which held that women were to be silent, submissive, and relegated to the home or convent, due to their inferior nature. Although Platonism opened up a dialogue between humanists about a new concept of woman, noblewomen who did not marry or enter the convent were social deviants and seen as exceeding their sex. Consequently, when a single Isotta entered the male-dominated realm of humanism in Verona and Venice between 1436 and 1439, she was forced, through condemnation and vilification, to abandon her career as a

secular humanist scholar for one devoted to God. Isotta, therefore, accepted the conservative traditions of her society and chose a more socially acceptable career path. As a holy woman, Isotta was able to continue her pursuit of becoming a humanist scholar by successfully combining Biblical wisdom with views of gender unity and classical references. In the end, it was only as a holy woman that Isotta Nogarola became the most celebrated female humanist of the Italian Renaissance.

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## Notes

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- 9 Nogarola, 40.
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- 13 Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance, A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*, 77-86.
- 14 Myers-Mushkin, 17.
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- 26 Nogarola, 53-55.
- 27 King, "The Religious Retreat of Isotta Nogarola," 810.
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- 44 Allen, 660.
- 45 Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, eds., *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, trans. by Margery J. Schneider (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4-6.
- 46 Allen, 717. See also Margaret L. King, "The Patriciate and the Intellectuals: Power and Ideals in Quattrocento Venice," *Societas* 5, no. 4 (1975): 296, [https://www.academia.edu/1125549/The\\_Patriciate\\_and\\_the\\_Intellectuals\\_Power\\_and\\_Ideas\\_in\\_Quattrocento\\_Venice\\_1975\\_](https://www.academia.edu/1125549/The_Patriciate_and_the_Intellectuals_Power_and_Ideas_in_Quattrocento_Venice_1975_).
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56 King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 2.

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62 Nogarola, 104.

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