Did Women have a Renaissance?

How did women engage and participate in the public sphere of the Renaissance?

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In recent decades, a focus on Renaissance and early modern Europe has shifted towards a discussion and examination of gender, and the place of women in the social and cultural spheres of the Renaissance. Such an examination of the past has resulted in the historicising of women by feminist historians; questions of agency, women’s place and position in society, and how changing gender ideals occurred, are asked. Most significantly, changing gender ideals are evident in the changing way in which masculinity and femininity was understood and expressed in literary texts and art. At the core of the historiography—and the impetus for this essay—is the article published in 1977 by Joan Kelly titled ‘Did Women have a Renaissance?’ that disputed Jacob Burckhardt’s conclusion that Renaissance women had the equivalent status of men.¹ This seminal text posits the question of what was the role of women if any, in the cultural and socio-political developments that occurred throughout the Renaissance.² In order to respond to the question posed by Kelly, ‘Did Women have a Renaissance?’ the inquiry of this essay is thus, how did women engage and participate in the public sphere in the Renaissance? The nature of this question is broad as is the period, therefore this essay will narrow the parameters of the inquiry to examine women’s participation in the cultural sphere of the communes of Northern Italy, and in particular, through the fifteenth-century figure of Isotta Nogarola. It will be argued that undeniably the dominant ideals of gender in the Northern communes of Italy such as Venice perceived and understood gender as a binary. This binary characterised both masculinity and femininity and relegated women to the private sphere. Significantly, women were understood in relation to their role and position as daughter, wife or mother. Therefore, the necessary prerequisite for women such as Isotta Nogarola to participate in the public sphere was a humanist education that allowed them to appropriate their femininity and

² Joan Kelly, ‘Did Women Have a Renaissance?’ in Feminism & Renaissance Studies, pp. 33, 45.
utilise their roles as daughters. Isotta Nogarola thus was able to engage in the cultural manifestation of the fifteenth century, usually denied to women by the dominant notions of gender, and to participate in the public sphere.

In order to discuss women’s agency in this period, it is necessary to examine the gendered construction of Renaissance masculinity and femininity, as these concepts are fluid in nature and are impacted by social, cultural and political contexts. The Renaissance household was a crucial social unit that prescribed certain roles and obligations to the individual. The humanist text ‘Della Famiglia’ written during the 1430s by Leon Battista Alberti, offers a commentary on the duties and expectations the male as the head of the household had towards his wife, servants and children. At the start of the text, the character of Lionardo sets up a binary between men and women, ‘The character of men is stronger than that of women and can bear the attacks of enemies better, can stand strain longer, is more constant under stress. Therefore men have the freedom to travel with honour in foreign lands.’ By contrast, ‘Women on the other hand, are almost all timid by nature, soft, slow . . . It is as though nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging for men to bring things home and for women to guard them.’ The contrast created by the adjectives describing women and men highlight the social view of women as the opposite of men, so that while men were considered to have virtue and strength and expected to lead an active civic life, women were relegated to the private sphere. The cultural construction of gender relied heavily on the gender ideals of antiquity that considered chastity as a virtue pertaining solely to women, and that was firmly tied with the integrity of the household. A daughter’s chastity was a requirement for her marriage and this attribute tied in with the household’s honour, serving to ensure that women were bound to the private sphere and excluded from obtaining the masculine right to power. Women were thus excluded from holding political office, as citizenship was seen exclusively as a masculine right. Masculine identity and honour has also been identified as tied with the ‘paternal authority’ a man displayed over his dependants, and such a perspective on gender emphasises the

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significance of a marriage to the formation of masculinity in opposition to femininity, for men in the period.

A similar concept of polarity is also evident in the gendered commentary of Francesco Barbaro’s humanist treatise ‘On Wifely Duties’ that was written as a wedding gift for Lorenzo de’ Medici, and as such, lays out the woman’s role in a marriage. This treatise exemplifies the importance of a good marriage to the Venetian aristocracy. As Stanley Chojnacki notes, in the Venetian patrician class status was entwined with marriage and as it became more exclusive, women and family’s importance in creating and maintaining alliances was crucial. Through Barbaro’s interpretation of the ideal woman, a gendered distinction is evidenced by the role of each gender in the private and public sphere. Women were expected to maintain a standard of behaviour of Modestia, and throughout the treatise modesty is mentioned many times, as is the expectation of wives to be chaste, to defer to their husbands’ wills and most significantly, to be silent: ‘the speech of women never be public; for the speech of a noble woman can be no less dangerous than the nakedness of her limbs.’ The restriction on women’s speech in public further polarises the gender as each is prescribed a role in the public sphere: men as active participants and women as passive spectators. As passive spectators, Ann Rosalind Jones has argued most effectively that women’s speech was equated with their bodies and thus outside the household, women’s speech was seen as closely linked to the ‘scandalous openness of her body.’ The link thus established between the body and speech highlights that the ideal woman in the Renaissance was identified by what she could not do. Furthermore, Barbaro also identifies the key duty of women in the private sphere as the education of children that he considers as the ‘most serious of a wife’s duty’ as they (the children) as the successors of the family inherit the wealth and influence of a family. Therefore, an examination of the gender constructions formulated by the dominant humanist masculine discourse, highlights the ways that women were allocated to a negative position and were prescribed a lack of

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8 Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Surprising Fame: Renaissance Gender Ideologies and Women’s Lyric,’ in *Feminism & Renaissance Studies*, p. 320.

agency. The regulation of women to the private sphere resulted in women being viewed, and their subsequent value in society understood, in relation to these constructions.

The discussion thus far has identified the implications for both genders of the gendered discourse on women. However, there is a distinction between being the subject of the discourse, and utilising the discourse to challenge and gain some degree of agency. Jones’ discussion of female poets of the Renaissance period interestingly notes that rather than directly challenging the gendered discourse that silenced women, female poets gained recognition through subtly appropriating dominant notions of femininity. Such a subtle rebellion shows that challenges to cultural and social norms need not be direct; the appropriation of ideals can open a space for discussion and future change. The appropriation of dominant notions of femininity is clearly evident in the case of early fifteenth-century literary contributors to the cultural manifestations of the Renaissance. Isotta Nogarola was one of the first female contributors to the public sphere in the Renaissance, and an examination of her life and work permits for the questioning of the conclusion that women lacked has survived as a result of her extensive literary correspondence with prominent male humanists.

Such a correspondence necessitated a humanist education. Martino Rizzoni, a Veronese scholar, was hired by Nogarola’s mother Bianca to tutor her daughters Isotta and Ginevra, who utilised their education to participate in the humanist discourse of the fifteenth century firstly through the epistolary form. The emergence of secular learned women occurred within the ‘Intellectual Family’ as Sarah Gwyneth Ross has labelled it, to express the phenomenon of fathers who sponsored or educated their daughters. Despite the death of Nogarola’s father at an early age, the long-standing tradition of education in her family legitimated the education of the female members. The cultural legitimacy offered by the ‘patriarchal sanction’ was a tool that allowed female authors to publish their work and was a useful device in establishing ties with scholars through a familial

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10 Jones, ‘Surprising Fame,’ p. 322.
12 Margaret L. King and Diana Robin, ‘Volume Editors’ Introduction,’ in Isotta Nogarola: Complete Writings, ed. Margaret L. King and Diana Robin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 3.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
rhetoric. The appropriation of the ‘Intellectual Family’ framework permitted women like Isotta Nogarola to engage in the humanist discourses of the fifteenth century at a time when the female voice was generally silenced as a result of gender constructions. Although women were excluded from speaking publicly as previously mentioned, the publishing of correspondences and the use of the family rhetoric was a method through which women could participate in the public sphere and in cultural manifestations that did not greatly challenge the prescribed gender ideals. The education of the daughters of a family of rank in the Northern Communes was considered as socially ennobling. In a poem praising Nogarola, Constanza Varano stated that she had enhanced her family’s image and cultural standing with her ‘elegance equally of manners and sweet wisdom,’\(^\text{16}\) as had her Aunt Angela Nogarola through her own education.\(^\text{17}\)

This output and contact with male intellectuals first commenced within the circle of acquaintances and kin that were in contact with the Nogarola family.\(^\text{18}\) Ross has noted the significance of these letters that were written within the framework of the ‘extended household’ in allowing for Nogarola to maintain the feminine propriety that was expected of women whilst engaging in public discourse.\(^\text{19}\) When addressing her male correspondents the trope of the familial rhetoric is evident as in Nogarola’s in letter of Introduction to Ermolao Barbaro. She states,

\begin{quote}
I am afraid the same could be said of me, most reverent father, who, although I have barely sampled a taste of the study of the of the humanities, would not hesitate to expose my own writings-or really my foolishness- to be examined by critics and even to write to an accomplished man such as you who are endowed with such a degree of dignity, modesty...But my sex will provide the greatest excuse for me among some men.\(^\text{20}\)
\end{quote}

The use of the domestic rhetoric in her letter to Barbaro highlights the strategic approach utilised by Nogarola to legitimate the correspondence, as does the tone of humility throughout the letter when Nogarola discusses her study of the humanities. Thus, the tone of humility in conjunction with the utilisation of the intellectual family legitimated Isotta Nogarola’s initiation into the literary culture of the fifteenth century, and allowed for her continued education and career.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., pp. 5-6.
\(^{19}\) Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, p. 32.
Despite her growing career as a humanist and the flourishing of her participation in the public sphere, gender continued to play a significant role in the way Nogarola addressed male intellectuals, in their responses to her, and the public’s perception of her. Humanism in the fifteenth century was identified as necessary for participation in active public life and for holding office. As female humanists were excluded due to gender ideals, Lisa Jardine has suggested that there was a tension between accomplishment and profession in the understanding of the role of humanism in civic life. Women’s accomplishment was recognised in regard to two ideals, the intellectual and the social, by male humanists, effectively excluding female humanists from attaining a civic role. Guarino is one such male humanist, who received Isotta and Ginevra’s works sent by Jacopo Foscarì, and replied by praising their scholarly accomplishment, yet doing so in the framework of the ideals mentioned previously. He states, ‘If earlier ages had borne these virgins, with how many verses would their praises be sung...Would they not have honoured these modest, noble, erudite, eloquent women?’ Their accomplishments are expressed through their virtues and articulated in their status as virgins. He uses adjectives such as ‘modesty’ that have been connoted as exclusively feminine virtues, rather than stressing their civic capabilities. Once more women’s humanist contributions in the public sphere were established in relation to their gender. As highlighted by Margaret King, Nogarola’s accomplishments were distinguished not by her humanist output, but as a result of her sex, and her literary work was compared to other women’s, excluding a comparison to the male majority.

The binary of gender continued to impact the way in which others responded to Nogarola and she experienced public slander that has been of interest to historians of her career. This slander came in the form of a pamphlet that implied a link between her scholarly work and her sexuality. The author of the pamphlet accused Nogarola of being promiscuous and incestuous and stated, ‘she, who sets herself no limit in this filthy lust, dares to engage so deeply in the finest literary studies.’ Such an association highlights the negative attitudes the general male public had towards female inclusion in the public sphere.

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21 Jardine, ‘“O decus Italiae virgo”,’ pp. 813, 815.
22 Ibid., p. 816.
24 Jardine, ‘“O decus Italiae virgo”,’ p. 816.
and the subsequent impediments there were for female humanists. King has also noted that Nogarola’s address to Guarino, and the lack of response to the letter, led to criticism from the women of Verona. A second letter shows her lamenting her gender and the effect his lack of response has had on her reputation, ‘For I am ridiculed throughout the city’.27 This response confirms the precarious nature of her position in society and the resulting humiliation of not receiving a response due to her gender. Guarino’s subsequent response to the second letter further highlights the gendered response to her humanist career as he urges her to dissociate herself from her sex, ‘and should create a man within the woman, so that you may laugh at whatever may occur,’28 as a way to deal with the negative attitudes and attacks against her. Therefore, the responses from the male public and the women of Verona as articulated by Nogarola herself emphasise the significance of gender in the way in which Nogarola was perceived, so much so that even sympathetic correspondents continued to view her in the framework of her gender.

The latter stage of Nogarola’s life was characterised by her scholarly and religious retreat into the ‘book-lined cell’29 out of which came her most significant literary composition, a gender debate named the ‘Dialogue on the Equal or Unequal Sin of Eve and Adam’. The dialogue occurs between the characters of Nogarola herself and the Venetian humanist Foscarini. It questions the fundamental nature of men and women, with the former representing the traditionally misogynistic hierarchy of gender, whilst the latter posit an alternative argument to the question of who had greater guilt, Adam or Eve.30 Both Virginia Cox and King have noted the paradox evident in this dialogue; Nogarola argues that Eve sinned less by stating that women are inferior to men.31 Nogarola states, ‘For where there is less intellect and less constancy, there is less sin; and Eve lacked sense and constancy and therefore sinned less.’32 Eve’s culpability is further lessened by Nogarola’s argument that God commanded Man only as ‘he esteemed the man more highly than the woman’ and that Eve ate the fruit not to be like God but rather ‘because she was weak and

29 King, *Humanism*, p. 66.
30 King and Robin, *Isotta Nogarola*, p. 139.
31 Cox, *Women’s writing in Italy*, p. 11.
inclined to pleasure.\textsuperscript{33} Nogarola cleverly draws upon Biblical references to explicitly suggest female inferiority in order to defend Eve’s actions. Such a paradox challenges the cultural assumptions of female inferiority, as the features of the dialogue allow for differing arguments to be represented; the respect the two characters have for each other’s ideas is evident. The concluding speech by Foscarini is particularly evocative of the equality of the characters in their literary skill and scholarly capacity: ‘Although others may find that my writings suffer from the defect of obscurity, if you who are more brilliant accept them and join them to who and I have already written, our views will become known and will sparkle and shine.’\textsuperscript{34} Thus Nogarola’s gendered debate is an attempt to contribute to the cultural flourishing of the Renaissance. The paradox of her argument, and the equal footing of the two characters, challenge the assumption of female inferiority through the appropriation of femininity.

In concluding, one must return to the core question posited by Joan Kelly: ‘Did women have a Renaissance?’ It is evident that despite the dominant cultural understanding of gender that relegated women to the private sphere, there was some space in the fifteenth century that allowed for women to participate in the public sphere, and significantly, for their literary output to be a component of the cultural manifestation of the Renaissance. Isotta Nogarola, one of the first female voices of the Renaissance, established her place in the public sphere through the utilisation of the cultural legitimacy afforded by the ‘Intellectual Family’ framework, and in doing so created a space in which her humanistic education was acceptable to the male public. Although she was accepted to a degree, her gender continued throughout her life to play a part in the way in which she was understood and discussed. The paradoxical argument evident in Nogarola’s dialogue on Adam and Eve emphasises the appropriation of dominant notions of femininity that allowed for Nogarola to challenge women’s exclusion from the private sphere within the confines of the culture of the Renaissance. Thus, Isotta Nogarola is an example of a female voice engaging in the public sphere through her education and subsequent literary output, including her letters to various significant figures. Furthermore her questioning of women’s place in the social hierarchy occurred within the cultural boundaries and a framework acceptable to Renaissance society.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 158.
Bibliography

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