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### Self-Identity in Laura Cereta's Humanist Education

More often than not women are absent from the history of Humanism. Indeed, their written works do not appear in typical anthologies such as the *Portable Renaissance Reader*. Nor are their humanistic contributions recognized in the *Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, which focuses on humanistic study. Nevertheless, women did indeed participate in the humanist movement. Among them, Italian women like Laura Cereta, Cassandra Fedele and Isotta Nagarola pushed the social boundaries constructed by men with their intelligence and education. Nonetheless, the social boundaries were a powerful reality for women. And although some women in the Renaissance were given the opportunity for education, their learning was limited by what was acceptable in the eyes of their male tutors. The Italian women and family members of the nobility certainly received high praise for their education and were even encouraged for it, but they were seen as exceptions to the rule rather than representatives of their sex, because most men in power did not accept the idea that women were as capable as men in political and literary arenas. These women, who were usually educated by men, were seen as prodigies, even examples of men's accomplishments in directing their education.

From its beginnings in the fourteenth century, humanism was a male-dominated field. The foremost humanists at the time were men such as Francesco Petrarch, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Leonardo Bruni, writers whose works have contributed to the development of humanism and humanist education. One of the main things that humanism focused on was Greek philosophy, especially the philosopher Aristotle. Humanism involved a return to

classics, and for the earliest humanists, Aristotle seemed to epitomize classic learning. Thus, as Paul Oskar Kristellar writes, “practically every writer of the [Renaissance] period was acquainted with the main doctrines of Aristotelian ethics and was inclined to adopt them or to discuss them” (34). Of his many writings, Aristotle helped give form to the ideology that women were lesser beings than men. In fact, his view on the biology of women was that they “were inferior to men and defined them merely as childbearers and housekeepers” (Robin viii). Aristotle, however, is not considered the sole contributor to misogyny; but he did reinforce its belief. Thus, men who accepted Aristotle’s belief system eventually became the public professionals: the teachers, the orators, and the politicians. Women, in their view, were incapable of claiming their own voices.

Despite these beliefs, however, men’s authority on humanistic endeavors did not completely exclude women. In fact, education for all women was introduced as an extension of the evolving humanistic thought due to the humanist idea that learning led to a virtuous existence. It is interesting to note that men believed women could lead a virtuous existence; however it was according to their standards. Thus even those male humanists who questioned the traditional roles of women were unwilling to recognize the full potential of women. And those who recognized and praised women’s equality also, at the same time, undermined their status by creating the illusion that the reason exceptional women were learned was because they had been endowed with male attributes. Laura Cereta, for example, in her letter to Bibulus Sempronius, recognizes that behind his praise is “sly mockery” (75). Women could be learned but according to the dominant male’s fashion. Thus, a woman’s virtuous existence would seem in definition and application completely different from men.

Although women had the educational opportunity to become writers, their contribution often took the form of a supporting role. Humanist women were the patrons, the pupils, and most especially, the manifestation of male knowledge. In other words, female humanists were not taught to have minds independent of their male teachers. Women like Isotta Nogarola and Christine de Pizan shaped their voices and interacted with other male humanists. And though at times individual women were accorded the same reputation as men for their writing skills, women were not, as Albert Rabil and Margaret King write in their introduction to *Her Immaculate Hand*, “given public display of their learning” (15). They did write, however, even performing orations on occasion, but they could not build public careers for themselves. Thus, most of these women writers capitulated under the pressure of societal norms, avoiding means to further their education and even establishing their own identity.

However, although the majority of women complied with men’s restrictive boundaries, others went “beyond their sex,” so to speak. One such woman is Laura Cereta, a humanist of Quattrocento Italy. As a female humanist she struggled to create her own identity within a society that generally refused women their personal space, and for that matter believed that it negative to identify with female or maternal attributes. Diana Robin in her article, “Woman, Space and Renaissance Discourse” discusses Cereta creating her personal space. Referring to two of Cereta’s letters, Robin writes, “she builds her city of self, not among the walls and cramped streets of the town, but in the pastoral” (172). What Robin points out is that Cereta brings in the maternal motif into her writing, specifically the letter to her mother. Cereta’s letter to her mother is about how “the two of them spent [the day] together in the country after their long separation...analogous to her return to a utopic space

in nature” (Robin 172). Robin finding Cereta’s use of “pastoral” imagery with female imagery in the letter to her mother reveals her rewriting a place for women in history. Robin writes in reference to writers like Cereta, “it is time for women to respond to their attackers, to create a new place...for themselves in the world, and to build it through the writing of a history of their own” (172). And that is just what Cereta reveals in her writing: she is shown the reality of the world and then constructs her own self. Thus, although looking back to the history of the Renaissance one sees the confining walls of a woman’s world, through Laura Cereta’s writing one sees how she was able to break through them and develop her own identity.

As the eldest of six of an aristocratic family, Laura Cereta was sent to a convent at seven and then returned home when she was nine where she was then educated by her father, Silvestro (King and Rabil 23). But it is important to note that Cereta’s first teacher was a woman. In her letter to Nazaria Olympica she writes about her teacher: “a woman highly esteemed both for her counsel and sanctity, whose learning habits, and discipline I, who was to be educated, intently absorbed” (Cereta 25). From an early age, women set the example for learning. It is no wonder that she felt that women were equal to men in terms of intelligence. Moreover, under her father’s tutelage, Cereta learned Latin and Greek; she even showed interest in mathematics. From her learning, “Petrarch became her model, and she yearned to emulate him” (King and Rabil 23). At fifteen she married Pietro Serina, a businessman. At this point, when women usually ceased to learn, Cereta wrote and studied constantly. Her passion for learning reveals an identity marked with the determination to follow in the footsteps of other well-known humanists.

Thus, like other women humanists before her, Cereta immersed herself in her education. But unlike male humanists, women's writing was mainly oriented towards religious and moral spheres. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine's *From Humanism to the Humanities* takes Leonardo Bruni's letter to Battista Malatesta as an example of the attitudes towards women writers. In his letter he writes that public debate "belong to men...A woman will not, therefore, study any further what to speak either for or against witnesses...not will she busy herself with *loci communes*, or devote her attention to dilemmatic questions or to cunning answers; she will leave finally, all public severity to men" (Grafton and Jardine 33). Their education, then, was designed to fit the idea of how a woman should behave. These women who were given a humanistic education were not to be given its natural rewards: to be in control of their lives, to claim a sense of their own identity. It is amazing to see Laura transform gender roles through her writing.

Much of what is known about Laura Cereta's life is in her letterbook, a compilation of letters meant to "showcase the author's learning and social connections" (Robin 3). Kristellar explains that "the private letter was not merely a vehicle of personal communication; it was intended from the beginning as a literary composition to be copied and read" (8). Cereta's letterbook *Epistolae familiares* had been seen by "prominent scholars in Brescia, Verona, and Venice [but] her work remained outside the mainstream of humanist letters...and did not find a publisher until the middle of the seventeenth century" (Robin 3). Her letters reveal a familiarity for it expresses her more intimate and personal feelings, which a reader can easily relate to. Her letterbook, as well, is unique in itself in that it doesn't conform to the standard of the letterbooks of male humanists. It is more personal, addressing

“family members and friends” (Robin 3). Her more intimate tone suggests how open she was about her feelings, revealing the trust and respect she gave her family and friends. For example, her life story to Nazaria Olympica touches on how the death of her husband still affects her deeply, for she writes, “and although all things grow old and die, nonetheless it is not wrong to mourn the things we love, nor does the reason for mourning easily leave the heart” (Cereta 28). Cereta makes herself vulnerable when she reveals her feelings yet she understands and embraces her sadness, which expresses her inner strength to handle difficult situations. Cereta’s letterbook is evidence that she has defined her own path of what it means to be a humanist, and most especially what it means to be her own person. Her writing expresses a self-awareness that can come with the therapeutic hand of writing. Cereta’s personal letters reveal not only the extent of her learning, but her love of life and her deep passion for writing.

The extent of Cereta’s learning is manifested through the many subjects on which she has written. One reads in her letters that Cereta’s learning encompasses a wide range of knowledge, for she explains to Olympica, “I devoured the mellifluous-voiced prophets of the Old Testament and figures from the New Testament” (27). But she has attained wisdom beyond her years, which expresses her understanding of the world around her. And Cereta’s understanding isn’t merely scholastic based; her experiences have also made her wise, for she writes, “I assumed the responsibility for almost all of the household duties myself. Thus it was my lot to grow old when I was not far from childhood” (27). Being given the responsibility of caring for her family at the age of eleven opened her eyes to the realities of her world. Virtually taking a leader-like role in her family affairs prepared her for other difficult situations.

Through her learning, Cereta also expanded her social connections, which allowed her a small entrance into the public world of humanism. One of her letters is to Sigismondo de Bucci asking for patronage. Appealing to Bucci's sense of duty, the letter expresses her want to be a responsible wife and daughter. Cereta writes, "I'm torn between my desire to help settle my father's affairs and my responsibilities as a wife...I want, alternatively to be in both places" (31). While her desire to be a good daughter and wife is admirable and expresses her heartfelt desire to be both things, it would also seem that she is very aware of using her writing skills to market herself. Her ability to express her strengths and weaknesses without sounding like a sycophant on paper to Bucci bespeaks her confidence and skill as a writer asking for patronage. What is special about Cereta is that she takes her writing seriously. She is so determined about her writing that she bemoans her lack of time, for she writes, "I have no leisure time for my own writing and studies unless I use the nights as productively as I can" (31). And she does use the nights to write, for further into her letter to Bucci she describes how she becomes "a thief of time, sequestering a space from the rest of the day..." (32). Cereta values every moment she gets to write, a passion she takes to its most intimate level.

Cereta's passion for writing not only gives us access to the details of her life, but it signifies the attempt of a humanist writer to touch on the reader's more personal feelings. The humanists were known for their rhetorical and writing skills, proclaiming their scholarship in many subjects. Kristellar writes, "the humanists thought of themselves as orators and poets... [and] for them, poetry was largely the ability to write verse" (12). While some humanists show off their learning, Cereta writes with a touching vulnerability that emphasizes her love for writing. In the letter *To her cousin, Bernardino di Leno*, she writes

of her aspirations to become a famous writer. She writes, “I shall write with an elegant enough work about the things I do know. And with you as my judge, this work can win a place for me, a woman writer, among the most highly praised of our ancestors” (51-52). Cereta talks about using her knowledge to gain fame, but more importantly gaining it would mean a woman earning a place in a male-oriented field. Her desire to be well known and her love for writing reveals her complexities as a person. Desiring a name for herself among other great writers does not make her sound selfish or egotistical. Rather her desires show courage. Her writing also reveals her love for learning, for she writes, “I have completely transferred my passion for feminine things to the love of literature” (51). While her statement may reveal her perception that writing is generally not equated with being a woman, Cereta demands greatness from herself which breaks the social norm of being passive.

Realizing that a woman should not be defined or confined to one thing, Cereta finds that glory in its spiritual and permanent sense is found elsewhere. She seeks not to immortalize herself through the grandeur of dress, for she writes, “I took on all this work [literary studies] myself so that the name of Laura, so wondrously celebrated by Petrarch, might be preserved in a second and quite new immortality—in me” (49). Robin notes that “immortality in the eyes of posterity is her [Cereta’s] ultimate goal (Robin 49). Cereta grew up admiring Petrarch, for Robin writes that her letters “particularly those on classical themes, are thoroughly grounded in the humanism of her age and that of her predecessors” (Robin 17). For Petrarch, according to *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, is “often considered to be the father of humanism and certainly the outstanding scholar and creative writer of his generation” (Mann 8-9). Cereta’s admiration for Petrarch and her desire to be

like him already rejects the social norm that women could only be housewives and childbearers.

Laura Cereta was among the many learned women who forged an identity of her own. She lived in humanistic thought, defending the idea that learning leads to a virtuous existence. Cereta also defined that learning in its totality should not be confined to men. Cereta's writing breaks from the behavioral model that men have created for women.

Thus, rather than following the criteria for men's definition of a "female humanist" she embarks on her own ideas. In fact, when her husband dies after only "eighteen months of marriage" Cereta still continued to write. Perhaps, even her husband's death proved a step towards the realization that life has more meaning than living under the shadow of men. One could suppose that his death and her consequent passage, as she writes in a letter, from "a girl, bride, widow, and pauper" in little over a year all the more points out the brevity of life. In that sense, Cereta's return to her studies after the mourning of her husband seems to be a celebration of life. It would be so simple to think that is all she wanted: to live her life to its highest potential. And maybe it is that simple. Of course, at the time the dominating definition of living life to the fullest meant to live like a man.

For Cereta, acquiring knowledge and virtue was a way, as she writes, to "profit [her] not only when alive but also after death" (Rabil and King 79). The idea of obtaining virtue through knowledge is humanistic. For Cereta, the idea would seem most significant, considering that a woman's path to virtue was ordained through chaste living without necessarily having to learn anything. Her love of learning is evident. And even more evident is the idea that she will not allow herself to be seen as an object. She questions the reality that women are dealt with when she asks in her letter, "was it for this...that we were

begotten, that we might worship in shameless devotion the idols of our mirrored faces” (Rabil and King 79-80). By arguing that women shouldn’t exist for the sole purpose of looking pretty, Cereta breaks away from the paradigm men have created. Consequently, she defines her own identity, refuting men’s constructions of women. Furthermore, she urges women to lead a more meaningful and substantial existence when she writes, “we should seek the adornment of honor, not vulgar display, and we should pursue this life mindful of our mortality” (Rabil and King 80). Cereta recognizes that women’s lives has less worth when they place the utmost importance on physical beauty and superficial trappings.

Cereta’s letters reveal her antagonism towards the excessive attentions paid to fashion and dress, which reflect her defiance to conformity. Fashion, at the time, was very ornate. According to Jacqueline Herald’s study on Renaissance costume, Gian Galeazzo Visconti “published a series of laws in 1396...which began with a condemnation of all excesses of vanity” (58). Fashion seemed to reach such an intensity that it would be plausible for people, especially the nobility to get lost in what they wore just to prove their self-worth. In her letter to *Sigismondo de Bucci, Doctor of Laws* she writes, “the demand by women for luxury items and their fascination with the exotic...has increased to such and extent in our society that there is no end today to the public display of such merchandise” (Cereta 32). The fashion in Italy was quite elaborate. Jacqueline Herald writes that “the clothes of the late Gothic and early Renaissance are not simply moulded around the human anatomy but rather, they become sculptural forms in their own right, transforming men and women into larger-than-life creatures” (50). Like today’s fashion, we are categorized by what we wear. And the efforts to be well-known and popularized through fashion’s creative power still affect our self-esteem and confidence.

Cereta, however, abandons fashion's status quo and devotes herself to her learning. Cereta writes to Sigismondo de Bucci, "An aversion to moderation is characteristic of women everywhere," implying that she is unlike those who believe that excessively ornate dress bequeaths importance (32). Cereta also writes about how time is wasted by those who focus too much attention on dress. She realizes that fashion's power to praise is only temporary. But for Cereta, embroidery is a fine art, and like writing, she is passionate about it. In her letter to Bucci, she describes in detail her needlework: it is a "shawl for a woman, and displayed in the middle of it is a savage leopard with a vast array of spots" (Cereta 32). While she is modest about her "little piece of linen," one feels through her description of her work the pride and labor of love with which she spent working on it. Robin writes that in telling Bucci about her needlework "she demonstrates palpably, with her ancient models, that a woman can be both a thinker and spinner, both a historian and an artisan" (31). Cereta breaks the mold that men have created by proclaiming that she cannot be defined by one thing.

Cereta's humanistic education was within a society that did not accept when women rejected the social construction enforced upon them. Nevertheless, they were educated because they were of the elite class, and especially because humanistic thought gave them some leeway for these women to be educated. And when these women continued their education through their writing, they elevated themselves. They were seen as prodigies, anomalous prodigies to be more exact. Ironically though, they were prodigies whose educational endeavor reached its limit as soon as they grew older. And by that time, these women became silent either from marriage or pressure from societal norms. Cereta, on the other hand, continued to pursue her education. Indeed, she is the exception among

exceptions. In her letter to a supposedly fictional character named Bibulus Sempronius, she writes that “the free mind, not shirking effort, always soars zealously toward the good, and the desire to know grows ever more wide and deep” (King and Rabil 83). The letter is defending the education of women. Moreover, the last few words of her sentence seem quite timeless. It resonated throughout the Medieval and Renaissance Ages as people pursued the limits of knowledge. She is saying that knowing more actually leads to goodness. It is in our nature that we are inquisitive. Not that women are nosey but inquisitive. Her “free mind, not shirking effort,” reinforces her strength. In addition, the “free mind” emphasizes her need and desire to be an individual without the restraints of men’s attitudes. The fact that she continued to write in the face of criticism reveals her determination to prove that she deserved to be called a humanist.

As a result of her emerging identity from her education, Cereta has the foresight to see that men’s praise can be masks of their condescending attitudes. In the letter to Bibulus Sempronius she writes, “you pretend to admire me as a female prodigy, but their lurks sugared deceit in your adulation” (Rabil and King 81). Cereta recognizes that as a learned woman she is bound to have her intelligence questioned and even envied. And she defends her identity by claiming that there is already a tradition of women writers. She writes, “with just cause I am moved to demonstrate how great a reputation for learning and virtue women have won by their inborn excellence, manifested in every age as knowledge, the [purveyor] of honor. Certain, indeed, and legitimate....” (King and Rabil 82). Cereta argues that it is no marvel that she is a learned woman. She is only part of a continuing legacy of women who break the status quo. In listing all the great women of the past, she points out that she is only

part of that legacy. Cereta rewrites history by claiming these women as part of a great tradition.

There story of Pygmalion by Ovid parallels the idea that women's education was an extension of male knowledge,. The parallel between Pygmalion and some male humanists is that they construct and define beauty and femininity. There is this emerging sense of possession as both Pygmalion and male teachers shape women to their liking. But by claiming her own identity, Cereta rejects men's Pygmalion attitude. In Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion is a Greek myth that illustrates men's desire to create their ideal woman. A king of Cyprus, Pygmalion finds himself dissatisfied with all women. As a result, he creates a statue that fulfills his desire for a beautiful woman and eventually falls in love with it. When Cyprus prays to Venus his creation comes to life. In the end, he literally marries the girl of his dreams (bk. X, 281). In the same way, male humanists have created their ideal woman by enforcing social rules and defining the way they should live. In fact, male humanists would seem full of self-pride in shaping women much in the same way that Pygmalion was proud of his work as creator. This role as god/creator also assumes the role as owner. Because it was his statue that he created, Pygmalion must have felt that he owned Cinyras even after she came to life. Male humanists, too, of course felt that they had authority on what was best for a woman, especially an educated woman. And an educated woman is seen as something more than human, for as Grafton and Jardine write, "only if mythologised can the woman humanist be celebrated without causing the male humanist professional embarrassment" (57). Thus, women writers cannot be placed in men's reality. They have to assume a more grand and deity-like role.

Cereta further asserts her individuality by arguing that knowledge isn't the possession of men's who have the power to bestow it upon women. Cereta realizes that "knowledge is not given as a gift, but [is gained] with diligence" (*Her Immaculate* 83). In so establishing her will to make her own choices and to continue her studies, she ultimately escapes men's construction of the ideal woman. And rather than be the manifestation of men's tutorial achievements, she becomes her own educator. Cereta understood that no one could give her virtue. In the text titled *Laura Cereta to Lucilia Vernacula: Against Women Who Disparage Learned Women*, she writes, "virtue only is acquired by ourselves alone...for those women the path to true knowledge is plain who see that there is certain honor in exertion, labor and wakefulness" (*Her Immaculate* 86). For Cereta, self-identity meant a self-wrought existence, fully participating in what life had to offer. What is especially significant about Cereta is that she is aware of knowledge and reason as an entity on its own, undefined by men. In her letter *To Cardinal Ascanio Maria Sforza*, she writes, "Each person should display her own particular gifts for study. For no one is safe who strives beyond her abilities; and thus it is safer to trust in reason than in men's opinions" (Cereta 40). Her not trusting in "men's opinions" reveals a strength and faith she had not only in knowledge but also in herself. And the fact that she writes this letter to a man reinforces her determination and courage to be a great writer thereby breaking the sound barrier imposed by men.

But as strong a woman as Cereta was, she, too, fulfilled the unfortunate pattern where women writers, soon after pressure from societal standards, gave up writing. It was a letter from a priest and friend, Fra Tommaso, that convinced her to put down her pen. However, Fra Tommaso had in his earlier letters praised her for her learning. Why he sought to discourage her in his letter dated November 4, 1487 is probably because he found that her

identity did not conform to how a “proper” woman should behave. In fact, Fra Tommaso advises her to be modest for she has become egotistic, an unchristian trait that is unbecoming to a woman. If she has become as he writes, “driven to fury in such trivial matters by her admirers,” it would seem that she is defending herself on the basis of pride and egotism rather than for the good of God (*Her Immaculate* 125). I would think that Fra Tommaso’s accusations are exaggerations, for Cereta merely defends herself just as in her letter to Bibulus Sempronius. Nonetheless, Cereta heeds his advice of “blunt your pen and temper it with the file of modesty” (*Her Immaculate* 125). I would like to think that Cereta’s silence is not entirely the result of the restrictive forces that men place upon women. Perhaps, Cereta’s silence was partly her decision, owing to her religious faith. Throughout her letters, Cereta exhibits her religious belief. She writes to Nazaria Olympica, “God is one and the same everlasting and omnipotent being...I myself believe that to investigate God’s judgment regarding the future is the mark of foolish curiosity rather than of a heart that is faithful” (Cereta 29). Although there is a wide time gap between writing this at the age of seventeen and then giving up her pen two year later, Cereta seemed always religiously faithful.

Laura Cereta definitely pushed the social boundaries. By furthering her education she was able to realize that we never know enough and that we should never be arrogant with the knowledge we have attained. But we should strive to reach that virtuous existence, understanding that the continuous pursuit of knowledge gives us a sense of our own humanity and mortality. Even her silence towards the end of her life calls out to us to acknowledge that our learning is the passage to self-awareness. It is not that Laura Cereta surrenders her identity to be completely forgotten. On the contrary, she still exists, at least to

us in the present day. Her silence only emphasizes the reality that men's attitudes governed society and the need to break the construction that confines women to mere shadows.

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