

Heather Sakaki

Dr. David Livingstone

LBST 390: Art, Architecture, & Politics

22 June 2023

Nogarola the Renaissance Influencer

My illustrious lordship, I'll show you what a woman can do.

-Artemisia Gentileschi

By the time Isotta Nogarola rose to fame, the female virtuoso was still considered a cultural novelty in the West (Heiti). Representing one of the first generations of women to receive a humanist education, Nogarola's life and literary achievements were a testament to the power of this new educational program and what a successful application of it looked like. It would soon become apparent however, that Nogarola's growth could not easily be replicated, in part because her literary style and success evolved alongside the rule of the Medici Family whose influence stretched far beyond the Florentine Republic. Their force was unique because it was propelled by the minds of bankers — precision, astuteness, opportunism, and in some cases, aggressiveness — would be seen as admirable traits during their political reign which inspired a unique type of *virtù* in artists and intellectuals alike. And although classical conceptions of *virtù* were originally associated with male power and virility, Nogarola was able to benefit from a redefined, Medici-inspired understanding of this concept, thus reaching her full potential in writing and scholarship. Once she had gained the trust and respect of her male counterparts, she was able to use her courage and cleverness to leverage her influencing power during the Renaissance, becoming one of the prime movers and shakers of this revolution.

It is often said that *virtù* was the characteristic most revered during the Renaissance, yet it

was a term that had less to do with virtue than it did with bravura and motivation (Fleming 215). “What worked in their worlds of scholarship, government, diplomacy, and religion were speaking and writing with Ciceronian rhetorical eloquence in Latin — the prime vehicle of Renaissance knowledge and communication — in order to delight, persuade, and move people into action” notes Loren Partridge in his book *Art of Renaissance Florence, 1400-1600*. In essence, “Renaissance men [and women]” were as much influencers as they were thinkers because one of their main goals was to *move* the people around them, thus, “persu[asion]” was not seen as a deceitful act, but rather a *seductive* one. Guileful perhaps, but in a good way. It was not of great importance to them that their methods were morally sound — If their long-term goals were directed toward the common good, they considered their methods to be virtuous. And although the Catholic church was losing authority during this time, Fleming says that it would be inaccurate to refer to the Renaissance as an “anti-Christian” movement because the Medici’s were not religious skeptics by any means (211). Fleming instead defines Lorenzo de Medici (who ruled Florence shortly after Nogarola’s death in 1466) as a “political realist”, more likely to celebrate the rebellious spirit than condemn it. Luckily, these were conditions that future secular female writers would be able to thrive in.

William Fleming notes that “from Lorenzo’s time through the early 16th century, the greatest artists were intellectuals” (215). Nogarola was an influencer of this change because she used her creativity and training in rhetoric to harness her intellectual power *before* Lorenzo’s reign, therefore, helping to transform writing into an artform whilst paving the way for “the greatest artists [and] intellectuals” to follow in her path. And like other art forms, writing had a cumulative effect. Indeed, the timeline of Nogarola’s influence is in sync with other markedly unconventional future publications such as the all-female anthology of poetry in 1559 and the

biographical dictionary of women writers in 1620 (Heiti). Moreover, artists were being inspired by political leaders and political leaders were being inspired by artists which meant that political treatises such as Machiavelli's *The Prince* would also change the conception of virtù for Renaissance artists seeking fame. His readers had an "extended" sense of the term you might say. They understood that the Christian conception of virtue could lead one to happiness, just not glory. If Renaissance artists wanted to be "glorious" like the prince, they too would need to embrace their animal nature within, namely, the lion and the fox. Secular female writers, especially, stood to benefit from this combination of ferociousness and resourcefulness.

Because Nogarola was born in the early 1500s, her education was influenced more by humanism than it was by scholasticism which allowed her to benefit from new sex and gender studies that challenged traditional essentialism* (Heiti). These modern anti-essentialist beliefs inspired Renaissance women to question the social and cultural boundaries of their time and develop interdisciplinary skills traditionally reserved for men. Furthermore, this feminist theory challenged gender essentialist ideas that reinforced the fixed attributes of men and women, supporting instead the position that male superiority was simply a matter of custom that needed to be nullified. Nogarola can be considered a prime mover in this pursuit because rather than using her humanist education for self-seeking purposes, she instead, used it to empower her sex, by helping to demolish the female inferiority myth that had been so successful in keeping women down for so long.

To do this, Nogarola looked to another ancient myth, *The Book of Genesis*, to help find evidence that would strengthen her position and used her training in rhetoric to design a debate that would help to expose the fallacy of male superiority. In her most notable publication *Of the*

*The term "essentialism" within feminist ideology refers to the outdated theory which suggests that men and women have fixed attributes that are both naturally occurring (rather than socially and culturally constructed) and distinct from each other.

Equal or Unequal Sin of Adam and Eve, Nogarola explores the deficiencies within the biblical construct of “original sin” and looks critically upon the weight of responsibility given to Eve. Interestingly, it is one of Nogarola’s fellow scholars and friends, Ludovico Foscarini, who (voluntarily) assumes the role of her foolish male opponent in this dialogue, and not only falls into every linguistic trap that Nogarola sets out for him but also opens the debate with a distinctly invalid argument.

His character begins by listing three reasons why Eve’s sin is more blameworthy than Adam’s and deliberately uses wording that will provoke a response in his opponent. For example, in his first claim, Ludovico refers to God as a “just judge” who has dealt Eve the more burdensome punishment and uses this as evidence to suggest that her sin was greater than Adam’s. This argument is invalid because it appeals to a power that has no expertise in the subject and because there has been no agreement among authorities that God is a “just judge” in this case. By presupposing the legitimacy of God’s word, not only is Ludovico’s first reason a fallacious appeal to authority but also an irrelevant premise within the argument (Waller 143). Next, he claims that Eve’s sin made her more guilty because she ate the forbidden fruit with the knowledge that she would “be like God” in doing so. Ludovico argues that this transgression makes her guilty of pride, which he says “is in the category of unforgiveable sins according to the holy spirit (58). Not only is this premise fallacious, since pride is, in fact, a redeemable sin according to Christian doctrine, but it also misrepresents the story of Genesis because he does not acknowledge the serpent’s role in these events. Lastly, Ludovico claims that since Adam’s sin was “enticed” by Eve, rather than the other way around, Eve should be held more accountable for their fall. However, according to how the story is presented in the bible, Eve simply “gave some [fruit] to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (New International Version, Gen

2.6) which does not imply any deceitful persuasion on Eve's part whatsoever. By making her male character, Ludovico, initiate the debate with weak and fallacious argument, Nogarola's female character, Isotta, is free to set up her counterargument in a way that will force Ludovico to defend the "ignorance" that Isotta presupposes in Eve.

In addition to being accomplished in letter writing and Latin prose and poetry, Nogarola was also trained in public speaking, her most notable speeches being *the Oration to the Very Reverend Lord Ermolao Barbaro* and her *Oration in Praise of Saint Jerome* (Heiti). Due to her exploration of different literary mediums and fluency in writing she would soon find herself keeping company with some of the most distinguished male intellectuals and politicians of her day and was instrumental in making the most of these interactions. It was not long before Nogarola became comfortable with this new, dominant position which not only allowed her to control the thrust of the debate, but also enabled her to dictate the speed and depth of it. Furthermore, this role reversal with an uncommonly learned woman gave otherwise commanding Renaissance men the chance to enjoy a more submissive position during this communication, while gently merging the female into male culture. Her recorded correspondence with male humanist scholars and lifelong devotion to literary studies not only provided proof that women were indeed interested in the intellectual world, but that they could partake at an equal level to men as well. Because of her uniquely educational upbringing and her versatility in communication Nogarola was able to lay the groundwork for a more gender-neutral culture that would be more willing to welcome women into traditionally male-dominated learning spaces.

Artemisia Gentileschi was one Renaissance woman who would benefit from this succession, receiving a level of artistic training previously unavailable to females. Her natural talent and achievements in painting allowed her to empower her sex using a slightly different method than Nogarola, skillfully highlighting heroism in the women through her shadowy and

realistic images of female domination. Like Nogarola, Gentileschi also searched for inspiration in ancient scripture, and drew upon the story of Judith slaying Holofernes from *The Book of Judith* to devise one of her most famous creations (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Artemisia Gentileschi's Painting of Judith Slaying Holofernes

Tullia d'Aragona was another female scholar and linguist who would also find liberation through the art of writing. Trained as a virtuosa (Heiti), d'Aragona likely drew inspiration from her predecessor's work, using the same literary device as Nogarola in her *Dialogue on The Infinity of Love*. Unwilling to let her gender define her, d'Aragona was also active in pushing past the conventional social and cultural boundaries of her time and was determined to make the most of her classical humanist education.

Although, Isotta Nogarola's life and literary achievements did not get the recognition it deserved either during or after her time, it is still important to consider her a fundamental influencer of the Renaissance because of how inspirational her writing was for the future female artists who would follow in her footsteps and for the role she played in equalizing the sexes. And while it may be true that she did not become as universal in her abilities as some of her male Renaissance counterparts, like Alberti or Brunelleschi perhaps, Nogarola did, arguably, possess

equal, if not greater levels of courage than such men because she was working against the grain of society in her endeavors and persevered in these endeavors even when she was faced with antagonism and public ridicule. Cunning in letters and not afraid to harness her masculine energy, Nogarola can and should be admired for her Renaissance virtù and the way she maneuvered history during this era. Her life and level of influence shows us why the Machiavellian conception of “virtù” is sometimes necessary when advancing a human right as relentless as gender equality and the brainpower required to accomplish such a goal.

Works Consulted

Fleming, William. “Florentine Renaissance Style” *Arts and Ideas*, 6th ed. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980, pp. 210-215.

Gentileschi, Artemisia. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. The Uffizi Gallery.

Heiti, Warren. “Lecture on Nogarolo.” *Italy Abroad Intersession*, 19 May 2023, Online, Florence.

Heiti, Warren. “Lecture on Aragona.” *Italy Abroad Intersession*, 19 May 2023, Online, Florence.

Holy Bible, New International Version. <https://www.biblegateway.com>. Accessed 26 June 2023.

Nogarola, Isotta. “Of the Equal or Unequal Sin of Adam and Eve. Her Immaculate Hand:

Selected Works by and about woman humanists of Italy.” Edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. New York. Pp. 57-69.