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Forms of interdiction in Isotta Nogarola: how to silence (or not) a woman in 15th-century Italy?[1]

Figuras do silêncio em Isotta Nogarola: como calar (ou não) uma mulher na Itália do século XV?

Bruna Ribeiro MARTINS
Doctoral student in Philosophy at UFMG/ Fapemig fellow
E-mail: brunaribeiromartins@gmail.com

RESUMO:

Neste artigo abordamos o percurso de Isotta Nogarola, humanista italiana do século XV, de modo a evidenciar a condição de marginalidade imposta às mulheres no período do Renascimento Italiano e os artifícios usados para impedir sua participação nos lugares de prestígio e de reconhecimento público. Tal esforço visa endossar o compromisso com a revisão do cânone na história da filosofia e a assimilação de outras tradições negligenciadas, no caso, a que se entende como estando associada à formação histórica de uma consciência feminista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Isotta Nogarola, Italian Renaissance, Interdictions, Women in Philosophy.

ABSTRACT:

This study aims to clarify the ways in which women were excluded from spaces of public prestige in 15th-century Italy, focusing on the struggles of Isotta Nogarola, an Italian humanist, to secure a place within the circle of literati. By examining the social structures and mechanisms of exclusion, we seek to shed light on her contribution in asserting a specific role for herself.

KEYWORDS: Isotta Nogarola, Italian Renaissance, Interdictions, Women in Philosophy.

CONSTRAINTS ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION

[1] An earlier version of this text was presented as a paper at the first national conference Pensadoras em Foco, held online from August 5 to 7, 2024, and broadcast on the YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/@PensadorasEmFoco). I am grateful to the organizers (Flávia Benevenuto, Mariana Lins, Mariana Santos, and Renata Dias) and the participants for the opportunity for dialogue, which greatly contributed to the development of this work. I extend special thanks to Flávia Benevenuto and Mariana Santos for their detailed feedback, which significantly shaped this article. Although I could not incorporate all their suggestions, they remain as guiding points for future improvements. My sincere gratitude to all.

In a period when any possibility of women's emancipation was systematically denied, and the inferiority of their nature was taken as a given[2], there were those who sought the right to a full education, which is, in itself, a herculean and, without a doubt, frustrated effort. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for each of them to be fully aware of their condition of discrimination, and they often confront this position through a sharp and forceful mode of expression. Some, like Christine de Pizan (1364–1431) and Laura Cereta (1469–1499), dared to openly defend virtue as an attribute of women[3]. Others, even while negotiating with the commonplace notion of the inferiority of our nature, challenged the *status quo*—such is the case of Isotta Nogarola, to whom the present article will be dedicated.

It is necessary, first of all, to clarify what the expected roles for women were during the Renaissance period[4]. Beyond those who were relegated to the exhaustive labor of fieldwork and craft guilds (in which they never held representative roles), women were exclusively tasked with domestic care duties, as well as the role of wet nurses, since young noblewomen typically did not perform this function due to the imposed occupation of compulsory pregnancy. For those whose future did not involve a life of poverty and exploitation, other forms of violence were imposed: marriage or the cloister. In the first case, many died during one of the subsequent childbirths, and in the second, they were doomed to a forced isolation from the world, with their lives understood as a burden to the men who tutored them. Widowhood, the only opportunity for women to experience some glimpse of freedom, albeit permanently controlled, was, in most cases, a stigmatized existence in which, finally alone but without a social place to welcome them, they were often left to abandonment and poverty, regarded as "objects of no value".

> Registered in the genealogies under the categories of *uscite* and *entrate* -those who had come forth and those who were admitted, for a time, to a privileged fellowship - women were "passing guests" in the male-headed households of the Renaissance. (King, 1991, p. 61-62)

Within this precarious framework, education reiterated this reality, or more precisely, it was also responsible for constituting all these inequalities. What was offered to women, when it was offered, was an education restricted to fulfilling their only possible role—household tasks. Domestic economy and sewing were the domains assigned to this gender, condemned to exclusion.

[2] Among the relevant literature on this point, we suggest the following article for its precision: King, 1976. Complementary to it is the following publication: King, 1988.

[3] For interpretations that elucidate this issue in the authors, see: Benevenuto, 2021 and Tavares, 2024a.

[4] Among the Brazilian works already written on this issue that we would like to mention here are those by Benevenuto, 2024, and Tavares, 2024b. The emblematic work on this topic, which we will return to mention, is King, 1991.

> Training in needlework and spinning accordingly played a conspicuous role in the education of girls. Early in the fourteenth century, Francesco da Barberino praised such activities over reading: the daughters of merchants have to learn many household tasks and should not bother with reading; daughters of the working classes should know how to sew and spin, to cook and care for other household members. (King, 1991, p. 166-167)

When literacy was provided, it was in the vernacular language, which at the time was stereotypically understood as instrumental, and the literature circulating for this audience was that which reinforced the habits associated with the roles they performed. When women were responsible for education, it was at the primary level, corresponding to the care of early childhood and teaching the vernacular language—an undervalued space, from which boys, at the moment they were to 'become men,' were forced to distance themselves. Being educated by a woman at a moment of formation considered significant was viewed with suspicion.

> They were not normally taught Latin, the gateway to a broad literary education and any advanced subject matter, and major goals were the cultivation of sexual morality, silence, and deference; appropriately they were called "little schools," for little was taught. (King, 1991, p.172)

Some more refined instruction took place in convents, where one could learn some of the ancient languages, Greek or Latin, although these were understood only within a certain religious literature (as here, too, the authors were pre-selected to corroborate modest and circumspect behavior, in line with the development of what were accepted as 'virtues' for women: silence, chastity, and obedience), which constituted a significant limitation in the education offered within these spaces. In the aristocracy, where it was considered improper for women to be uneducated, the education provided, which could include some classical repertoire, focused on grammar, but never on rhetoric or dialectics, competences related to public discourse, a space that was, in any case, closed to women. In this sense, her education, also significantly restricted, was more of an adornment for the republics of men, who used their women as ornaments for their conquests[5].

> It is widely recognized that humanist education writers emphasised grammatical-literary education for women and correspondingly downplayed or prohibited the study of logic and rhetoric. Leonardo Bruni's well-known text makes the limitation explicit and its rationale obvious [...] *For if a woman throws her arms around while speaking, or if she increases the volume of her speech with greater forcefulness, she will appear threatingly insane and requiring restraint. These matters belong to men; as war, or battles, and also contests and public controversies. (Trans.. Grafton and Jardine 1986, 32-33)* [...] Juan Luis Vives (1972, 34, 54-55) similarly declares that because women do not participate in public affairs, they need less education and that of a different nature, omitting logic and rhetoric, while Agrippa d'Aubigne admits that such studies as logic may have utility, but only for women of the

[5] On this specific point, see King, 1976, p. 296 and Jardine, 1985.

> highest rank since for others it is both useless and dangerous, perhaps leading to contempt for domestic duties or arguments with husbands and companions. (Gibson, 1989 p.12)

A POSSIBLE TRAJECTORY? SEARCHING FOR GAPS AND ENCOUNTERING BARRERS

Despite the numerous obstacles, there were exceptions, and they were possible for several reasons. Pizan and Cereta were able to dedicate themselves to writing due to their condition of widowhood, as well as personal trajectories in which their parents, with full education, encouraged their daughters' interest in various fields of knowledge[6]. In the case of Nogarola, a series of unusual choices made her path unique and her way of acting distinctive[7]. Her mother, a widow, which is noteworthy, as it was the only condition that granted women some degree of freedom in decision-making, chose to offer her daughters an education equivalent to that of their male siblings. Thus, Isotta, like her sister Ginevra, was instructed by a tutor, a disciple of Guarino Veronese, the leading figure of the Venetian humanist circle at the time. Isotta and Ginevra, due to their excellent performance in studies and letters, attracted the attention of their humanist peers while still young. Confident in her skills and genuinely engaged in her education, Isotta took advantage of the fame generated by the first circulation of her writings alongside her sister's, to seek an independent space within the learned circle. At this point, her sister had already married and, consequently, withdrew from her studies, and Isotta, in yet another unusual position throughout her path, decided on what would become her professional dedication to this commitment. What followed from this attempt was an uncomfortable silence, and shortly thereafter, slander, which took on a sexual connotation[8]. The relationship between public appearance and lack of chastity is emblematic, as it represents a common form of censorship directed at women who dared to enter spaces unauthorized for their presence[9]. The silencing, which was the siege imposed on them, when broken, revealed other factors intertwined with it, namely, harassment and sexual violence. Chastity, as an expression of patriarchal control, exerted its force not only on discourse but also on bodies[10]. After being humiliated, Isotta lived a long period of seclusion. This breaking point is also relevant to the trajectories of other Renaissance women, who were forced to withdraw from the public sphere when they declared

[6] See King, 1991, pp. 194-219; Lerner, 1993, pp. 28-29.

[7] King, 1978, 1988; King; Robin in Nogarola, 2004, p. 1-19.

[8] The details of this definitive circumstance will be addressed in the following section. What we aim to present for now is a broader overview of the ways in which difficulties arise when attempting to claim parity and have her contribution acknowledged within the learned community.

[9] On how the supposed virtue of chastity remains a mode of restricting women's freedom for centuries to come, see: Perry, 1980; Santos, 2024. Regarding how the reiteration of masculinity stereotypes (strength and reason) is related to the control of women's behavior and the justification of violence against women, see: Foyster, 1996. Also, on how in Italian humanism an implicit expectation of morality tied to women's performance appears, see: Jardine, 1983.

[10] I understand that this point has many nuances and developments, warranting attention in future works to come.

their intent to conquer it on their own terms and through their own intellectual and communicative resources.

Isotta's retreat from public life is unusual for the period in which she lives. She neither marries nor enters a convent. What happens—most likely against her brothers' wishes but with her mother's support—is that she decides to devote herself entirely to her studies. Since it was not possible to do so publicly as a humanist, she moves in with her mother, as it was inconceivable at the time for a woman to live alone. This arrangement, imposed by a context of significant social restrictions, allows her to pursue continuous intellectual development—a situation not entirely different from a cloister, though with certain particularities. During this long period of silence, the image of Isotta, previously vilified, comes to be revered—through a new form of discrimination—as a learned virgin[11]. Being in a state of seclusion that ensures no public intervention, her intellectual work is accepted and authorized, though it would be inaccurate to say it is fully recognized, except in a discreet and almost covert manner. The association of this new condition with the cloister is not coincidental, as Christian readings begin to prevail, and the type of literature she engages with changes[12]. However, this does not necessarily imply her acceptance of this new framework of dedication. The most significant work from this phase is the dialogue she wrote, titled *Dialogue on the Equal or Unequal Sin of Adam and Eve*[13] (*De pari aut impari Evae atque Adae peccato*), in which she subtly defends the latter while her interlocutor criticizes Eve. At the core of the discussion is the question of the nature of women[14]. This dialogue became emblematic within the field of debate known as the *Querelle des Femmes*[15], or the *Debate on Women*, which sought to argue that women were capable of virtue. The importance attributed to this work within that tradition leads me to interpret it as a forceful response to the very situation in which Isotta was placed, regardless of her intellectual competence[16]. The dialogue is based on her correspondence with Ludovico Foscarini, an important Venetian politician and humanist, with whom she maintained her most intimate and enduring relationship—a relationship not without ambiguities, given that such frequent exchanges lacked a clear

[11] On the prevalence of the construction of this image during this period, see Jardine, 1985.

[12] The way Isotta engages with this new context and continues to respond to the new constraints is a matter that warrants particular attention. However, we will not have the opportunity to explore it at this time and will, therefore, limit ourselves to making a brief reference.

[13] Nogarola, 2004, p. 145-158.

[14] For an interpretation aligned with our perspective on the nature of Isotta's position in the dialogue in question and the consistency of her stance in her correspondence—considering a marked use of irony as a form of critique—see: Borsic and Karasman, 2015.

[15] For the relationship between the *Querelle des femmes* and the historical construction of feminism through the struggle for women's political rights, see: Kelly, 1982.

[16] To understand how the dispute over the interpretation of the scriptures played an important role in what can be understood as the construction of the authority of women's discourse and their intellectual autonomy, see: Lerner, 1993.

mode of social acceptance at the time[17]. After the death of her mother, Isotta, once again benefiting from extraordinary circumstances, received a lifelong pension and was welcomed into the household of her main interlocutor, Ludovico Foscarini. This arrangement defied the authority of the men in her family, to whom women were commonly— and even legally—subjugated. Finding refuge in the home of a man with whom she established an independent relationship represents yet another atypical and exceptional circumstance—an opening amidst the barriers.

THE CLAIM FOR RECOGNITION, ISOLATION AS A PLACE OF OSTRACISM

Having briefly alluded to Isotta's trajectory and what allowed a learned woman to emerge in 15th-century Italy, I now turn to some of the most decisive passages in her correspondence, which make explicit the non-place of a woman as a humanist. To this end, I will focus on the first cycle of correspondence—a period dedicated to her quest for renown—particularly on the reception of Isotta's writings by Guarino Veronese, an emblematic case of both the reach and the limitations of her intellectual efforts. I will also extend my analysis to the critical moment of this initial attempt to establish a career: the occasion of her slander.

Between the ages of 18 and 23, Isotta and Ginevra Nogarola were already known for their expressive abilities and were gaining fame within an increasingly significant circle of humanists. This period marks the most emblematic phase of Isotta's public correspondence. In their efforts to secure patronage to sustain their literary pursuits, the Nogarola sisters directed their writings to prominent figures of the time, including Jacopo Foscari, who maintained regular exchanges with key intellectuals such as Bruni, Bracciolini, and Veronese. It is through this form of mediation that Foscari informs Veronese about the writings of the Nogarola sisters. Veronese responds in a curiously laudatory manner: surprised by the young women's performance, he chooses to highlight, among their competencies, their formal proficiency in Latin—a skill related solely to the study of grammar which, as previously mentioned, concerned itself more with an ability for stylistic refinement rather than true eloquence. Furthermore, in this supposed praise[18], the Nogarola sisters are referred to as daughters of Verona, daughters of a republic in which they were not permitted to participate and, therefore, as achievements of a space over which they held no authority. Their intellectual accomplishments were framed as a triumph of the men of Verona, rather than as a result of their own distinction. Yet another trap of praise lies in the choice of ancient figures to whom Isotta and Ginevra are compared—among them Penelope,

[17] The particularities of this relationship are a separate chapter in the interpretation of Isotta's trajectory and deserve attention in their own right.
[18] King; Robin in Nogarola, 2004, p. 41.

Arachne, Camilla, and Penthesilea. The first two are associated with waiting and weaving, skills repeatedly linked to a position of subjugation. The latter two, warrior women associated with the Amazons, evoke a sense of otherness so profound that they challenge the very established image of what it means to be a woman[19]. The explicit revelation, ultimately, of the perverse nature underlying what appears as praise occurs when Veronese challenges his male disciples by stating the following words: "Are you young men behaving like women, and that woman like a man? " (Veronese in Nogarola, 2004, p. 42). Isotta and Ginevra appear here as threats to their male humanist counterparts. This becomes even clearer in the events that follow, as will be examined in the forthcoming discussion.

Upon learning that her fame had also been acknowledged by Veronese, Isotta felt encouraged to write to him directly, expressing her gratitude for the recognition and showing interest in securing his contribution to the public endorsement of her dedication. This letter was met with silence from the humanist. Here occurs the first clear denial of the possibility of a woman's belonging to this civic space of education and scholarship. Veronese's silence is perceived as a public humiliation of Isotta, who, in her position, would have acted indecorously by addressing him directly[20]. Isotta does not refrain from expressing her indignation and responds to Veronese's silence by highlighting his failure to prevent her from being exposed to ridicule, after having suggested her recognition: "There is no safe shelter for me in this city. The asses tear me apart with their teeth, the bulls charge me with their horns." (Nogarola, 2004, p. 54). She demands a public retraction so that her reputation, also vilified by other women who considered her behavior impertinent, can be restored, despite the cruelty of those who demean her. The only position that Guarino expresses after this appeal is a recurrence of his categorical manner of slandering the female sex: Isotta must have a "manly soul" (Veronese *apud* King; Robin in Nogarola, 2004, p.42-43) and not "be abject, 'so like a woman'" (Veronese *apud* King; Robin in Nogarola, 2004, p. 43); it is her awareness of her own achievements that should make her proud of herself and, therefore, confident. In short, the recommendation offered is as follows: "you must create a man within the woman" (Veronese *apud* King; Robin in Nogarola, 2004, p 43). I see nothing more paradigmatic of a

[19] Regarding the evocation of the Amazons as figures that destabilize the normalization of male and female roles during the Renaissance, see: King, 1991, pp. 188-193. For the listing of illustrious women as a site of contestation between feminists and antifeminists in the construction of a memory of women's virtuous deeds, see: Lerner, 1993, pp. 256-264. For an analysis of the pitfalls embedded in the supposed praises of women by renowned men, see Tavares, 2024a.

[20] Here, the difference in the interpretation of the same act becomes evident when referring to individuals whose authority is corroborated in distinct ways: Veronese's silence demonstrates his contempt for Isotta's behavior, considered inappropriate, and reaffirms his position of prominence and influence; for her, the same silence is an open embarrassment, a ridicule of her conduct, and a censorship of her free expression, making clear her impossibility of being genuinely accepted and valued for her contribution. She was forbidden from projecting herself into a circle of men, within which only their achievements were deemed valuable. It was Flávia Benevenuto who drew our attention to the unique role of silence when uttered by a man as opposed to a woman, and we owe the observation of this point to her insight.

sexist stance at this moment than the refusal to acknowledge the importance of fame—public attribution of value—as relevant to the construction of prestige, once it became clear that the only thing absent for such recognition was something arbitrary: being born a man.

Still, Isotta's determination drives her to persist in her pursuit of continuing her dedication to studies and securing a place within the circle of humanists—an eminent space for such intellectual engagement. From this point onward, however, she will persist alone. Ginevra, having married, withdrew entirely from literary pursuits. Now, even more exposed—especially as she approached an age when her persistent quest for an independent intellectual life was no longer seen as a refinement but as an impropriety and an affront—she would still manage to claim further spaces of recognition, with her name becoming known across much of northeastern Italy. The achievement of a broader sphere of influence, however, did not come without new and, this time, decisive retaliation. At this point, it is slander that will be responsible for Nogarola's permanent withdrawal from the public sphere of correspondence. This attack was built on what were considered deviant sexual behaviors: incest and promiscuity.

> 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 with earth nor the sea with heaven, when she, who sets herself no limit in this filthy lust, dares to engage so deeply in the finest literary studies. ("Plínio Veronese" *apud* King; Robin in Nogarola, 2004, p. 68-69)

IN CONCLUSION, A REITERATION

For now, we would like to conclude this exposition by having clarified the reasons behind an interrupted trajectory, fully aware that we have shed light on some of the key themes in the construction of misogynistic discourse without having addressed them exhaustively. The example of Isotta Nogarola's journey strikes us as emblematic of the historical erasures that continue to profoundly shape the limitations of our contemporary intellectual framework. Bringing this case to light is a commitment to each voice that has not been properly heard or recognized as worthy of debate. We hope that the effort undertaken here contributes to the reversal of these persistent omissions and stands as a gesture of restitution.

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