

Laura Cereta:
Letter to Augustinus Aemilius,

Curse against the Ornamentation of Women

Introduction

Laura Cereta wrote all the letters she published between July 1485 and March 1488, that is, when she was between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. The central event in her life during these years of letter-writing was her marriage to Pietro Serina, a local Brescian businessman, when she was fifteen. They had been married for only eighteen months when he died from the plague. Her letters are almost equally divided between those written before and those after his death. His death, and her reaction to it, provide one of the surest bases for dating her letters.

This particular letter was written about six months after her husband had died. She describes the scene at the beginning, but the grief is not so immediate as in some letters written nearer the time of his death. She recovered her spirits, as she says in another letter, not by weeping but by reason, that is, she immersed herself once again in writing, which she had temporarily abandoned after Pietro's death.

The three letters included in this anthology, though written as separate pieces, are all related and hence are grouped together. They reflect the values of a woman who has dedicated herself to learning and has to struggle against social pressures in doing so. Together they constitute one of the strongest assertions of women's intellects and the "right" of women to dedicate themselves to humanist studies to be found among learned women during the Quattrocento.

The body of this letter is taken up with a critique of the values of most of her peers who pay great attention to their looks (discussed here in great detail—with allusions to the satires of Juvenal). The last paragraph of the letter seems a complete turnabout, for Cereta apologizes for rather than berates her sex. The apology sounds very much like Isotta Nogarola's defense of Eve with which Cereta elsewhere shows herself familiar. The apology is, however, related to the beginning of the letter. The idea seems to be that just as Augustine should not praise her too highly, so he should not condemn others too harshly, for the same weak nature is operative in both. In this light, the critique which occupies the body of the letter must be read as a Christian complaint against pagan tendencies rather than as a brief in behalf of learning. This reflects the more religious posture Cereta admits she adopted for a time after her husband's death. In her subsequent letters, as we shall see, her attitude reflects much more her later return to learning as her major preoccupation.

The correspondent to whom this letter is written, Augustinus Aemilius, is unknown to us from other sources. Cereta wrote one other letter to him in addition to this one. The letter is written from the country, probably a country home belonging to her family. Why she was there we do not know. Perhaps it was to escape the innuendos of her critics, whom we shall meet in the following selection.

This translation is based on the Latin text published by J. F. Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae* (Padua, 1640), pp. 66-70.

Text

ALONE, I FLED TO THE COUNTRY, and in tranquil leisure delighted in [humane] studies. But you, meanwhile, were disturbed by my retreat, as if you seemed to consider me, a nonentity, important.'

I came at the end when my husband was feverish. Dying myself, I saw him half dead. I cheered him when he seemed to revive, I wept over him when he died, I fell lifeless on his dead body, and the fatal house which awaited me for marriage admitted me to lamentation. Thus one, and that an abominable year, saw me a girl, bride, widow, and pauper. These events were ordered by fate, not by you; you were mortal and died.

I thank you for esteeming me so highly, and more so than I deserve, for I cannot be compared to women like Sarah, Esther, Sephora and Susanna, any more than a glowworm shining at night can be compared to the brilliant stars in heaven. I fear that your lofty opinion of me may spring from some other source than a carefully balanced judgment. Conjure up in your mind an ordinary woman, drab of face and drably dressed—for I care more for letters than for flashy clothes. Moreover, I have committed myself absolutely to that cultivation of virtue which can profit me not only when alive but also after death. There are those who are captivated by beauty. I myself should give the greater prize to grey-haired chastity, since in the lovely company of comely youth blaze up enticements to passion. For virtue excels the brilliance of beauty, elaborate polished artifice, and precious flowers of every tenderness. Let Mark Antony be attracted by bejeweled Cleopatra; I shall imitate the innocence of Rebecca) Let Paris seek the wandering Helen; I choose to imitate the modesty of Rachel. Wives are bewitched by rich display; more witless still are those who, to satisfy the appetite of their wives, destroy their patrimonies. Today men's love for women has made our commonwealth the imitator or rather the plunderer of the East. Luxury has thrived in this age, more than all others prodigiously vain. Let those who do not believe me attend the services of the church. Let them observe weddings packed with seated matrons. Let them gaze at these women who, with majestic pride, promenade amidst crowds through the piazzas. Among them, here and there, is one who ties a towering knot—made of someone else's hair—at the very peak of her head; another's forehead is submerged in waves of crimped curls; and another, in order to bare her neck, binds with a golden ribbon her golden hair. One suspends a necklace from her shoulder, another from her arm, another from neck to breast. Others choke themselves with pearl necklaces; born free, they boast to be held captive. And many display fingers glistening with jewels. One, lusting to walk more mincingly, loosens her girdle, while another tightens hers to make her breasts bulge. Some drag from their shoulders silken tunics. Others, sweet-scented with perfumes, cover themselves with an Arabian hood. Some boost themselves with high-heeled shoes. And all think it particularly modish to swathe their legs with fine soft cotton. Many press softened bread on their faces, many artificially smooth their skin, stretched with wrinkles; there are few whose ruddy faces are not painted with the lustre of white lead. In one way or another they strive by means of exquisite artistry to seem more beautiful than the Author of their beauty decreed. The impudence of some women is shameful. They paint

their white cheeks with purple and, with furtive winks and smiling mouths, pierce the poisoned hearts of those who gaze on them. O the bold wantonness of lost modesty! O the weakness of our sex, stooping to voluptuousness! We have only to hang from our ears little ornaments trembling with precious stones and emeralds, and we shall not differ from pagans. Was it for this, by chance, that we were begotten, that we might worship in shameless devotion the idols of our mirrored faces? Did we renounce display in baptism so that, as Christian women, we might imitate Jews and barbarians?

Even the feeblest desire [for honor] should make us blush over this longing for magnificence. These insane and lustful cravings, born of arrogance, should frighten us. Mindful of the ashes from which we come, we should renounce sins born from desires. How will our lamentations prevail if heavenly anger and indignation should rage against us miserable women? If those who rebel against the king commit their necks to the axe, why should we women marvel, rebels, indeed, warriors against God, if, to avenge our sin, an army rise up against us? Rome mourns to this day the Gauls' assault. Italy, vanquished, bewails the Gothic sword. Greece suffers Mahomet's tyranny. These vicious devastations are not caused by human might but ordained by heaven [as a punishment for sins]. Let each woman dress and heal the wound from which we languish. We should seek the adornment of honor, not vulgar display and we should pursue this life mindful of our mortality. For God the Father has decreed that the good die well.

Therefore, Augustine, you have had ample opportunity to see that I consider this splendid magnificence foolish, and I wish you would pay no attention to my age or at least my sex. For [woman's] nature is not immune to sin; nature produced our mother [Eve], not from earth or rock, but from Adam's humanity. To be human is, however, to incline sometimes to good, but sometimes to pleasure. We are quite an imperfect animal, and our puny strength is not sufficient for mighty battles. [But] you great men, wielding such authority, commanding such success, who justly discern among your number so many present-day Brutuses, so many Curiuses, Fabriciuses, Catos, and Aemiliuses,¹⁰ be careful: do not therefore be taken by the snare of this carefully arranged elegance. For where there is greater wisdom, there lies greater guilt." February 12 [1487]

Laura Cereta to Bibulus Sempronius:
Defense of the Liberal Instruction of Women

Introduction

As mentioned in the introduction to the preceding selection, Cereta recovered her spirits after her husband's death by immersing herself ever more deeply in her literary studies. These efforts, in turn, brought forth critics, both male and female, who, jealous of her accomplishments, belittled her work. Two principal charges were brought against her: that a woman could not be learned and that her father had written her letters for her. She turned against her critics with a ferocity at least equal to theirs. One of her surviving letters is an invective against two males whom she had known since childhood. But here we find, addressed to a man, as reasoned and thorough a defense of learned women as was penned during the Quattrocento. The letter is particularly interesting for its

suggestion that the correspondent was disguising his contempt for women in singling out Cereta for praise.

The correspondent is unknown to us from other sources and may well be fictitious. "Bibulus," which we have not found elsewhere among the names of this period, means "drunkard." No other letter is addressed to such a correspondent.

This translation is based on the Latin text in Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae*, pp. 187-95.

Text

MY EARS ARE WEARIED BY YOUR CARPING. YOU brashly and publicly not merely wonder but indeed lament that I am said to possess as fine a mind as nature ever bestowed upon the most learned man. You seem to think that so learned a woman has scarcely before been seen in the world. You are wrong on both counts, Sempronius, and have dearly strayed from the path of truth and disseminate falsehood. I agree that you should be grieved; indeed, you should be ashamed, for you have ceased to be a living man, but have become an animated stone; having rejected the studies which make men wise, you rot in torpid leisure. Not nature but your own soul has betrayed you, deserting virtue for the easy path of sin.

You pretend to admire me as a female prodigy, but there lurks sugared deceit in your adulation. You wait perpetually in ambush to entrap my lovely sex, and overcome by your hatred seek to trample me underfoot and dash me to the earth. It is a crafty ploy, but only a low and vulgar mind would think to halt Medusa with honey.' You would better have crept up on a mole than on a wolf. For a mole with its dark vision can see nothing around it, while a wolf's eyes glow in the dark. For the wise person sees by [force of] mind, and anticipating what lies ahead, proceeds by the light of reason. For by foreknowledge the thinker scatters with knowing feet the evils which litter her path.

I would have been silent, believe me, if that savage old enmity of yours had attacked me alone. For the light of Phoebus cannot be befouled even in the mud. But I cannot tolerate your having attacked my entire sex. For this reason my thirsty soul seeks revenge, my sleeping pen is aroused to literary struggle, raging anger stirs mental passions long chained by silence. 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 is our possession of this inheritance, come to us from a long eternity of ages past.

[To begin], we read how Sabba of Ethiopia, her heart imbued with divine power, solved the prophetic mysteries of the Egyptian Salomon.' And the earliest writers said that Amalthea, gifted in foretelling the future, sang her prophecies around the banks of Lake Avernus, not far from Baiae. A sibyl worthy of the pagan gods, she sold books of oracles to Priscus Tarquinius. The Babylonian prophetess Eriphila, her divine mind penetrating the distant future, described the fall and burning of Troy, the fortunes of the Roman Empire, and the coming birth of Christ. Nicostrata also, the mother of Evander, learned both in prophecy and letters, possessed such great genius that with sixteen symbols she first taught the Latins the art of writing. The fame of Inachian Isis will also remain eternal

who, an Argive goddess, taught her alphabet to the Egyptians! Zenobia of Egypt was so nobly learned, not only in Egyptian, but also in Greek and Latin, that she wrote histories of strange and exotic places. Manto of Thebes, daughter of Tiresias, although not learned, was skilled in the arts of divination from the remains of sacrificed animals or the behavior of fire and other such Chaldaean techniques. [Examining] the fire's flames the bird's flight, the entrails and innards of animals, she spoke with spirits and foretold future events! What was the source of the great wisdom of the Tritonian Athena by which she taught so many arts to the Athenians, if not the secret writings, admired by all, of the philosopher Apollo? The Greek women Philiasia and Lasthenia, splendors of learning, excite me, who often tripped up, with tricky sophistries, Plato's clever disciples Sappho of Lesbos sang to her stone-hearted lover doleful verses, echoes, I believe, of Orpheus' lyre or Apollo's lute. Later, Leontia's Greek and poetic tongue dared sharply to attack, with a lively and admired style, the eloquence of Theophrastus I should not omit Proba, remarkable for her excellent command of both Greek and Latin and who, imitating Homer and Virgil, retold the stories from the Old Testament. The majesty of Rome exalted the Greek Semiamira, [invited] to lecture in the Senate on laws and kings. u Pregnant with virtue, Rome also gave birth to Sempronia, who imposingly delivered before an assembly a fluent poem and swayed the minds of her hearers with her convincing oratory. Celebrated with equal and endless praise for her eloquence was Hortensia, daughter of Hortensius, an oratrix of such power that, weeping womanly and virtuous tears, she persuaded the Triumvirs not to retaliate against women." Let me add Cornificia, sister of the poet Cornificius, to whose love of letters so many skills were added that she was said to have been nourished by waters from the Castalian spring; she wrote epigrams always sweet with Heliconian flowers. I shall quickly pass by Tulliola, daughter of Cicero, Terentia, and Cornelia, all Roman women who attained the heights of knowledge. I shall also omit Nicolosa [Sanuto] of Bologna, Isotta Nogarola and Cassandra Fedele of our own day. All of history is full of these examples. Thus your nasty words are refuted by these arguments, which compel you to concede that nature imparts equally to all the same freedom to learn.

Only the question of the rarity of outstanding women remains to be addressed. The explanation is clear women have been able by nature to be exceptional, but have chosen lesser goals. For some women are concerned with parting their hair correctly, adorning themselves with lovely dresses, or decorating their fingers with pearls and other gems. Others delight in mouthing carefully composed phrases, indulging in dancing, or managing spoiled puppies. Still others wish to gaze at lavish banquet tables, to rest in sleep, or, standing at mirrors, to smear their lovely faces. But those in whom a deeper integrity yearns for virtue, restrain from the start their youthful souls, reflect on higher things, harden the body with sobriety and trials, and curb their tongues, open their ears, compose their thoughts in wakeful hours, their minds in contemplation, to letters bonded to righteousness. For knowledge is not given as a gift, but [is gained] with diligence. The free mind, not shirking effort, always soars zealously toward the good, and the desire to know grows ever more wide and deep. It is because of no special holiness, therefore, that we [women] are rewarded by God the Giver with the gift of exceptional talent. Nature has generously lavished its gifts upon all people, opening to all the doors of choice through which reason sends envoys to the will, from which they learn and convey its desires. The will must choose to exercise the gift of reason.

[But] where we [women] should be forceful we are [too often] devious; where we should be confident we are insecure. [Even worse], we are content with our condition. But you, a foolish and angry dog, have gone to earth as though frightened by wolves. Victory does not come to those who take flight. Nor does he remain safe who makes peace with the enemy; rather, when pressed, he should arm himself all the more with weapons and courage. How nauseating to see strong men pursue a weakling at bay. Hold on! Does my name alone terrify you? As I am not a barbarian in intellect and do not fight like one, what fear drives you? You flee in vain, for traps craftily-laid rout you out of every hiding place. Do you think that by hiding, a deserter [from the field of battle], you can remain undiscovered? A penitent, do you seek the only path of salvation in flight? [If you do] you should be ashamed.

I have been praised too much; showing your contempt for women, you pretend that I alone am admirable because of the good fortune of my intellect. But I, compared to other women who have won splendid renown, am but a little mousling. You disguise your envy in dissimulation, but cloak yourself in apologetic words in vain. The lie buried, the truth, dear to God, always emerges. You stumble half-blind with envy on a wrongful path that leads you from your manhood, from your duty, from God. Who, do you think, will be surprised, Bibulus, if the stricken heart of an angry girl, whom your mindless scorn has painfully wounded, will after this more violently assault your bitter words? Do you suppose, O most contemptible man on earth, that I think myself sprung [like Athena] from the head of Jove? I am a school girl, possessed of the sleeping embers of an ordinary mind. Indeed I am too hurt, and my mind, offended, too swayed by passions, sighs, tormenting itself, conscious of the obligation to defend my sex. For absolutely everything— that which is within us and that which is without —is made weak by association with my sex.

I, therefore, who have always prized virtue, having put my private concerns aside, will polish and weary my pen against chatterboxes swelled with false glory. Trained in the arts, I shall block the paths of ambush. And I shall endeavor, by avenging arms, to sweep away the abusive infamies of noisemakers with which some disreputable and impudent men furiously, violently, and nastily rave against a woman and a republic worthy of reverence. January 13 [1488]

Laura Cereta to Lucilia Vernacula: Against Women Who Disparage Learned Women

Introduction

Not only did Cereta have to deal with carping men, she also had to contend with other women who attacked her out of envy and perhaps also because her accomplishment, so unusual for a woman, could easily be seen as socially deviant. Her departure from the norm of female existence invited resentment. This is perhaps why her tone is more violent here than in the preceding letter addressed to a man. Whereas in the preceding letter she appears to concentrate more on the issue at hand, here she focuses more on the persons involved. She regards learning as growing out of virtue, the external manifestation of an inward state. In effect she is saying that those who do not love learning have no inner direction of their own but are directed by things outside them.

Thus, although virtue and learning are not the same thing, virtue will lead to learning rather than to the kinds of lives led by the women who criticize her.

This is the only letter addressed to this correspondent, who is unknown to us from other sources. Here again, the name may be fictitious. Vernacula can mean "common slave," perhaps "hussy."

This translation is based on the Latin text in Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae epistolae*, pp. 122-25.

Text

I THOUGHT THEIR TONGUES should have been fine-sliced and their hearts hacked to pieces—those men whose perverted minds and inconceivable hostility [fueled by] vulgar envy so flamed that they deny, stupidly ranting, that women are able to attain eloquence in Latin. [But] I might have forgiven those pathetic men, doomed to rascality, whose patent insanity I lash with unleashed tongue. But I cannot bear the babbling and chattering women, glowing with drunkenness and wine, whose impudent words harm not only our sex but even more themselves. Empty-headed, they put their heads together and draw lots from a stockpot to elect each other [number one]; but any women who excel they seek out and destroy with the venom of their envy. A wanton and bold plea indeed for ill-fortune and unkindness! Breathing viciousness, while she strives to besmirch her better, she befouls herself; for she who does not yearn to be sinless desires [in effect] license to sin. Thus these women, lazy with sloth and insouciance, abandon themselves to an unnatural vigilance; like scarecrows hung in gardens to ward off birds, they tackle all those who come into range with a poisonous tongue. Why should it behoove me to find this barking, snorting pack of provocateurs worthy of my forbearance, when important and distinguished gentlewomen always esteem and honor me? I shall not allow the base sallies of arrogance to pass, absolved by silence, lest my silence be taken for approval or lest women leading this shameful life attract to their licentiousness crowds of fellow-sinners. Nor should anyone fault me for impatience, since even dogs are permitted to claw at pesty flies, and an infected cow must always be isolated from the healthy flock, for the best is often injured by the worst. Who would believe that a [sturdy] tree could be destroyed by tiny ants? Let them fall silent, then, these insolent little women, to whom every norm of decency is foreign; inflamed with hatred, they would noisily chew up others, [except that] mute, they are themselves chewed up within. Their inactivity of mind maddens these raving women, or rather Megaeras, who cannot bear even to hear the name of a learned woman. These are the mushy faces who, in their vehemence, now spit tedious nothings from their tight little mouths, now to the horror of those looking on spew from their lips thunderous trifles. One becomes disgusted with human failings and grows weary of these women who, [trapped in their own mental predicament], despair of attaining possession of human arts, when they could easily do so with the application of skill and virtue. For letters are not bestowed upon us, or assigned to us by chance. Virtue only is acquired by ourselves alone; nor can those women ascend to serious knowledge who, soiled by the filth of pleasures, languidly rot in sloth. For those women the path to true knowledge is plain who see that there is certain honor in exertion, labor and wakefulness. Farewell. November 1 [1487]