Her Father’s Daughter:
Cassandra Fedele, Woman Humanist of the Venetian Republic

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This essay re-examines the life, self-presentation and contemporary reception of a famous Venetian humanist, Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558). The central claim advanced here is that Fedele’s success as a celebrated female participant in the male-dominant literary elite of Renaissance Italy is best understood within a model that I am calling the “father-patron/daughter-client relationship”, which comprises the initial education and support that a woman received from her biological father, as well as her subsequent use of familial rhetoric when approaching male patrons and colleagues. The historical recovery of early modern women writers continues apace, urging us to revise our previous interpretive emphasis upon their exceptionality and marginalisation. Accordingly, this essay ultimately presents the father-daughter dyad and filial persona not merely as the crucial ingredients in Fedele’s particular success, but also as the foundational components of a new explanatory model for the emergence of women intellectuals as a category.

“Your father, who was a great scientist and philosopher, did not believe that women were worth less by knowing science; rather, as you know, he took great pleasure in seeing your inclination to learning”.1 So Christine de Pizan (c. 1365–1431), a prolific author in the French vernacular and the first woman known to have made a living by writing, reassured herself in her Book of the City of Ladies (1405). The fifteenth century witnessed the emergence of a new category of women like Christine: women intellectuals, who were neither nuns nor courtesans. One of the challenges currently facing historians is to understand how this category, “woman as intellect”, was possible in the first place and why many early modern women writers were able to avoid opprobrium – despite the fact that their status as “public” voices challenged a vast quantity of prescriptive literature arguing that women’s place

was in the home and that silence was women’s greatest ornament. This essay contends that we can best understand the rise of the educated secular woman in the literary elite of fifteenth-century Italy within a model that I am calling the “father-patron/daughter-client relationship”, by which I mean the tutoring and support of a learned father, as well as women’s subsequent use of domestic rhetoric to fashion themselves as respectable family women when approaching male patrons.

The father-daughter dyad, in both its biographical and rhetorical dimensions, allowed ambitious women to negotiate the boundary between domesticity and publicity, thereby creating a legitimate space for the female voice in literary society. There are several examples of successful fifteenth-century women humanists who made use of the father-daughter paradigm in furthering their careers, but this essay will focus upon one of the most famous cases: the Venetian humanist, Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558). Trained partly by her father Angelo, an aspiring humanist, and partly by a humanist monk, Fedele was a prodigy of classical erudition by her early teens. Fedele’s contemporaries and biographers of subsequent centuries established a continuous tradition of praising her achievements as a prodigious writer of neo-Latin epistles and as an orator of considerable skill. The majority of this essay will argue that Fedele’s successful career and popularity resulted from her use of the father-daughter paradigm. I will consider in turn Fedele’s relationship with her father, her filial rhetoric and her place in the biographical compendia of Venice’s larger “civic family”. First, however, it may be useful to provide some historiographical background within which to situate Fedele’s particular experiences and strategies.

**Enlightened fathers, women humanists and the Hortensian hermeneutic**

Learned fathers sponsored and educated the first secular female intellectuals within the Western tradition. Fifteenth-century humanism, which made the study of classical antiquity the principal intellectual commitment of learned society, redefined the purpose of education itself. In previous centuries, serious instruction in letters constituted the necessary preparation for an ecclesiastical career. Beginning in the fifteenth century, however, education became the bedrock upon which to build a new conception of virtue in general and of “feminine” virtue in particular. Emphasising not only Christian morality, but classical notions of fortitude and accomplishment, the humanist redefinition of virtue left a fruitful ambiguity at the center of its educational program. It went without question that women should be “virtuous” in terms of Christian morality. The merged classical and Christian definition of virtue, however, prompted some humanists to follow a new logic: if men and women should be “virtuous”, and if education presented a principal means to that end, then women should be educated. Opinion on this point was divided. Yet one of the most influential of the quattrocento humanists, Leonardo Bruni, upheld the revolutionary logic in his treatise *On Studies and Letters* (c.1423–1426).² Later

proponents of this line of reasoning included other humanist luminaries, such as Juan Luis Vives, Thomas More and Erasmus. As Constance Jordan and Pamela Joseph Benson have noted, humanist theory in both Italy and England invented the notion of the “Renaissance woman”, at least in literary terms.\(^3\)

Humanist fathers began to wed theory to practice. In the mid-quattrocento, the Florentine chancellor, Bartolomeo Scala, trained his daughter, Alessandra, in all aspects of the \textit{studia humanitatis} and trumpeted the success of his experiment to the Latinate world. Later intellectual celebrities such as Francesco Barbaro and Pietro Bembo, and even English humanists including Thomas More and Sir Anthony Cooke, provided for their daughters’ serious instruction in Latin letters and ensured that these female prodigies of “learned virtue” received the attention of contemporaries. Humanist fathers made the educated woman not only possible, but suddenly plausible.

In the wake of Joan Kelly’s controversial contention that women “did not have a renaissance, at least not during the Renaissance”, scholars have wrestled with explaining the increasing presence of women in letters and the arts as the Renaissance era progressed.\(^4\) In attempting to answer the question of how women were able to make their contributions in the first place, scholars began by looking at the role of the father. Margaret King tentatively observed that, “one small group of men at least sincerely believed in the female capacity for advanced education. They are the fathers of learned women whose actions themselves testified to their high estimation of their daughters’ intelligence”.\(^5\) Margaret Rosenthal notes that the woman writer able to avoid opprobrium often had an influential male patron, or father, who provided her education and also “assist[ed] in her literary projects”.\(^6\) The issue at this stage is to consider the ways in which women capitalised on their good fortune in being born to a forward-thinking father as their careers proceeded.\(^7\) Is it even conceivable that the learned woman might prosper alone?

The daughter \textit{topos} derived its utility, in part, by association with the learned daughters of the classical tradition. Early modern women’s writings and writing about women often evince what I term the “Hortensian hermeneutic”, or an instinct

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7 Ingrid de Smet has begun to examine the father as an important figure in the lives and rhetorical strategies of several women intellectuals of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but she focuses upon women’s writing in textual terms instead of upon the father-daughter relationship as such – or as a sustained rhetorical technique. See Ingrid de Smet 1997. “In the Name of the Father”: Feminist Voices in the Republic of Letters. In Michel Bastiaensen (ed.) \textit{Lettered Women in the Renaissance. Proceedings of the International Conference, Brussels, 27–29 March 1996}. Brussels: Peeters, esp. 196.
to situate women’s writing and speech within a father-daughter dyad. Following Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* (*Concerning Famous Women*, 1362), in which Hortensia appears as part of a collection of ancient women whose excellence in academic, literary and military terms went “beyond their sex”, Renaissance authors made frequent reference to Hortensia. Daughter of Quintus Hortensius, one of Rome’s greatest orators and a friend of Cicero, Hortensia famously embodied her father’s excellence in the forum when she successfully campaigned against a tax that the triumvirs had sought to impose on patrician matrons.

The impulse on the part of Renaissance intellectuals to understand learned women as “their fathers’ daughters” parallels what classicist Judith Hallett has found in the ancient Roman context. Hallett contends that “filiafocality” was one of Rome’s great contributions to Western society – that is, the “high valuation of individual Roman daughters by their fathers, the elaboration of the daughter role in various Roman social institutions and the Roman emphasis upon ties of blood and marriage through and to men’s female children”. In particular, Hallett demonstrates that Roman authors represented women of the elite as “manifest[ing] and perpetuat[ing] the talents and qualities of their fathers and individual blood kinsmen, especially those traits that secured such kinsmen public recognition”. One of Hallett’s principal examples is Hortensia. Another is Tullia, Cicero’s daughter, whom he called “the image of my countenance, speech and mind” (“effigiem oris, sermonis, animi mei”) in a letter to his brother, Quintus. Cicero’s *Familiar Letters*, in which appear both the above quotation and several references to enjoying his daughter’s conversation and trusting her “good sense” (*prudentia*), was a bestseller throughout the Renaissance era.

The father-daughter dyad offered a new and socially acceptable framework for non-aristocratic women intellectuals, whose presence had hitherto been restricted to the convent, or else to the *demimonde* of courtesans. As an honourable daughter, the woman intellectual could be understood as at once “public” and “chaste”. Unlike the learned courtesans of their era, Fedele and other women humanists received little or no public criticism from contemporaries. Familial association, literal and discursive, shielded them from the deleterious classical equation of learning with

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10 Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin have noted 84 editions of Cicero’s letters printed in the fifteenth century alone, of which many were the *Epistolae ad familiares* in particular. See Lucien Febvre & Henri-Jean Martin 1997. *The Coming of the Book*. Translated by David Gerard. London: Verso, 255.

promiscuity. Unlike the learned nuns of their era, these secular female talents enjoyed greater “publicity”, but one legitimised by the putative male supervision that father, or father-patron, afforded.

Indeed, the father-daughter paradigm appealed even to those who did not join the ranks of authors arguing in favor of women’s education. For instance, Luigi Dardano, a humanist and chancellor of the Venetian Republic, in his 1554 Charming and Learned Defense of Women in Verse and Prose, did not advocate instructing women in anything other than household skills and religion. Yet he cites with approval the example of learned women such as Cicero’s daughter Tullia, “whom Cicero so loved/of whose rare doctrine he filled his pages,/ and who perpetuated her father’s honour”.12 Dardano also cites Hortensia, approving her rhetorical success as a perpetuation of her father’s intellectual honour: “She, eloquent, with talent immense,/Because she maintained her father’s excellence/ Negated the law with marvelous sense”.13 Dardano evinces the appeal of the Hortensian hermeneutic, even in the mental landscape of a man whose “syllabus” for women included praying, cooking and childbearing. He would not teach women to write Italian, let alone speak Latin, but he could still admire the female orator as “her father’s daughter”. As subsequent sections of this essay will demonstrate, however, ambitious women also made clever use of the Hortensian hermeneutic to suit their own purposes.

Fedele and her father

Cassandra Fedele’s family belonged to the middling ranks of urban Venice. Working for patricians, rather than themselves patricians, the male members of the Fedele family included a bishop, lawyer, physician and banker.14 Several scholars have posited that Fedele’s father taught her Latin and promoted her career as a public orator in the hope of increasing his family’s intellectual and social prestige.15 Angelo Fedele, a minor humanist himself, might well have seen the prodigious talent of his daughter as a means to bring greater cultural cachet to his family. Bishops and lawyers had prestige in terms of learning, but this was less certain in the case of

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12 Luigi Dardano 1554. La Bella e dotta difesa della donne in verso, e prosa. Venice: Bartholomeo detto l’Imperatore, sig. B4v: “Tullia, iaqual Ciceron tant’amava/Di sua rara doetrina empi le carte,/ Et del padre l’honor non oscurava”. All translations from the Italian and Latin are my own, unless otherwise noted.

13 Dardano, La Bella e dotta difesa della donne in verso, e prosa “Ella eloquente con favor’ immenso/ Perche dal padre non digenerava/ Ruppe la legge con mirabil senso”.


physicians and bankers. Whether or not Angelo chose to educate his daughter for reasons of family honour (affection, though never suggested, seems an equally plausible explanation), Cassandra Fedele’s case attests to the fact that advanced education for women was not restricted to noble families.

Nor did Cassandra occupy the place of a surrogate son: she came from a large family and had brothers as well as sisters. By virtue of her talent, she enjoyed paternal preference. Angelo tutored her in the classical languages, to the extent of his own abilities, until she turned twelve. At this point, he arranged for her to study with the Servite monk and classicist, Gasparino Borro. With Borro, she was able to advance in her studies of Greek, as well as philosophy, the sciences and dialectics. At sixteen, her studies completed, she began her epistolary and oratorical career.

Filial rhetoric: a recipe for success

Cassandra Fedele was fortunate in being born to a forward-thinking father, but she capitalised upon this good fortune by using domestic rhetoric to solidify her position in learned society. Previous scholars have asserted that women humanists constituted sexual anomalies. By exceeding the boundaries of normative female capability, women intellectuals went, in Patricia Labalme’s influential phrase, “beyond their sex”.16 Even their admirers felt compelled to transform these figures into abstract icons of the liberal arts, or else into secular nuns inhabiting quasi-monastic “book-lined cells”.17 Either way, according to this school of thought, women humanists were not understood as women and therefore failed to provoke a revision of gender categories. As will be shown later, Fedele’s reception problematises this model; for the moment, however, it is important to emphasise that the filial role that she adopted both accommodated and transformed gender expectations. The role of “daughter” satisfied notions of hierarchy, but also presented her a means to emphasise her femininity, instead of effacing it. Here, in short, was an intellectual who was also a human female – not yet part of the reproductive economy, but eligible for it – and, as such, no abstraction.

Fedele entered the humanist republic of letters by establishing contact with a wide network of learned correspondents. She introduced herself to some of her more important contacts by rhetorically invoking the father-daughter relationship. An emphatic assertion of the father-daughter paradigm appears in her approach to Bartolomeo Scala, who was not only a humanist but also the Chancellor of


Florence. Her letterbook reveals a rich exchange in 1492 with Bartolomeo and his daughter, Alessandra – another young woman who had recently begun to attract attention for her classical erudition.

Fedele’s filial rhetoric incorporated her into Scala’s intellectual family. Her introductory letter congratulates him on Alessandra’s progress in the humanities and acknowledges the important role that he played in legitimising his daughter’s intellectual pursuits. She thanks him, “a man of irreproachable virtue, for having dedicated your daughter, the soul of virtue, to the study of letters”. Ingratiating herself further with this famous father-daughter pair, Fedele presents herself as his discursive daughter: she shares his joy in the triumphs of “our Alessandra”, expresses gratitude for the praise that he has directed toward Fedele herself, and finally assures him that “I will never stop loving you like a father”. Rhetorical facility brought Fedele a place of considerable prominence in the society of mutual compliment which rotated around Scala and his patronage networks. As Fedele’s letterbook as a whole (like most letterbooks of the day) shows her to have been principally concerned with securing recognition and appreciation from the brilliant and the powerful, her filial strategy seems to have accomplished what she intended.

The most sustained use of the father-patron/daughter-client topos, however, appears in Fedele’s correspondence with male humanists unconnected to her immediate circle of patrons and colleagues. She deemed it especially important in these instances to circumvent the potential impropriety of their interchange by making fathers of them. In May of 1487 she wrote to a certain Doctor Ambrosius Miches, apologising for her long delay in responding to his letters. Reassuring him that her tardy reply did not signify a lack of respect, she stated that her intention was to seek his friendship. Friendship (amicitia), in the Ciceronian formulation adopted by the quattrocento humanists, connoted an equal relationship between men, but also served as a code-word for patronage. Either way, the terms of “friendship” required significant modification to accommodate a female participant. Fedele turned to the father-daughter theme:

I implore you to look after me with fatherly affection. Indeed, I love and honour you precisely as a father. So, send instructions and assignments to your daughter Cassandra: my role as daughter will be to fulfill your commands to the letter. It is a small wonder that you have praised me to the stars, because I know this to have been the effect of paternal duty. You are kindling with praise your daughter’s passion for literary studies

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19 Fedele, Epistolae et Orationes. Ed. Tomasini, 166: “[...] te uti patrem amare nunquam defuturam [...] velim”.

[...] And so I give you prodigious thanks, and beseech you to cherish me with paternal love.21

Diana Robin has demonstrated that Fedele’s self-presentation employs a strategy of detraction, emphasising all the things that she is not, in contrast to the contemporary male technique of prosopopoeia, or mask-making in the positive sense.22 Yet the “dutiful daughter” image, while humble, constitutes an articulated persona. The language of filial deference, sanctified on both classical and Christian grounds, satisfied the hierarchical organisation of the patriarchal establishment, while at the same time invoking the reciprocal obligation inherent in the concept of domestic pietas. The Roman historian Richard Saller, for one, defines this concept as “reciprocal affectionate duty” shared between children, who were expected to display both obedience and affection, and fathers (in particular), who were obligated on moral and emotional grounds “to care for the interests of their children”.23 Fedele marshaled the filial simile when she wished to assure her correspondent of her respect and admiration and to remind him of his “paternal” duty with regard to her devotion.24

Fedele’s daughter persona, while humble, should not be understood as her assumption of female inferiority. Instead, it constituted a rhetorical strategy to be deployed when necessary. Her letterbook as a whole provides evidence of her conscious use of this strategy. When she wrote to women patrons, for instance, she used the sparest form of political rhetoric. She was their “humble servant” only. This suggests that she felt a certain degree of safety when communicating with women – even powerful women sovereigns, such as the Queen of Aragon. These queens and courtly patronesses, themselves learned women, responded to her in uniformly cordial ways, grateful to have received the attention of an illustrious woman humanist, correspondence with whom underscored their own importance to Renaissance culture. Similarly, Fedele’s correspondence with the illustrious Florentine humanist, Angelo Poliziano, evinces a more flexible syntax of friendship. Poliziano ranked among Fedele’s earliest admirers and encomiasts, and perhaps for this reason, as well as the fact that he was not a politician, she did not deem it necessary to use filial rhetoric.

Nor should we see domestic rhetoric as exclusively the woman’s part in these constrained conversations. An illuminating use of the father-daughter paradigm


24 See also Fedele’s letters to Cypriano and Arnulfo Arculani; Fedele, Epistolae et Orationes. Ed. Tomasini, 52 and 32 respectively.
by a male admirer is the letter of a Modenese humanist and poet, Panfilo Sasso (pseudonym for Sasso da Sassi, c.1450–1527). Sasso was unmarried and childless when he wrote to Fedele (c.1493) and she, by this point, was twenty-eight years old – well past the customary age of marriage. It was dubious enough for men and women unrelated by blood or kinship networks to correspond, but in this case the problem was compounded. The quattrocento had no obvious category for a mature woman who was not married, widowed or a nun. The daughter-persona constituted a linguistic device helpful at various stages in a woman's intellectual career. In the event that she could not invoke motherhood or widowhood as supplementary personae, however, the daughter image became more important; yet, with advancing age, more incongruous.

The ostensibly simple task of praising Fedele thus became for Panfilo an exercise in linguistic diplomacy. He tested several possible modes of constructing the woman he wished to praise, calling her a “mother to be honoured for her learning and wisdom”, as well as a “dearest daughter”.25 Also with a view toward propriety, he made a swift transition from emotive to political declarations: “such is my love for you – or rather, loyalty – that although the whole world is full of your name, nonetheless among all the learned men I know, I am the greatest and most ardent of your devotees”.26

Panfilo opted, in the end, for the safest ground: the father-daughter dyad. Enclosing some epigrams written in Fedele’s honour by (he said) another man who had been inspired by Panfilo’s praise of her, he noted that this man “has appointed himself among many literary men as your adoptive father”.27 The “other admirer” was Panfilo himself. His abrogation of responsibility for the poems exemplifies a common humanist practice of making one’s authorship clear, but not explicit. He goes on to state that, in lieu of producing brilliant children of his own, he has “adopted” Cassandra:

Behold, Cassandra, what glory I will pursue among mortals before I die, since indeed the stars smile so kindly upon me that, while I would have been happier in producing natural children of genius, yet still I derive satisfaction from the voluntary adoption (or appropriation) of other parents’ children, as you and Pamphilus – terrestrial stars – are related.28


26 Fedele, Epistolae et Orationes. Ed. Tomasini, 184: “tantum esse amorem erga te meum, ne dicam pietatem, quod etsi nominis tui terrarum sit orbis plenus, attamen apud omnes, quos viros doctissimos novi tuarum laudum sum altissimus, et indefessus preco”.

27 Fedele, Epistolae et Orationes. Ed. Tomasini, 185: “Ille vero duo occlusa haec Epigrammata tuum in honorem scriptis, sequre per antea scripta me aliquid faciens multos inter literatissimos in adoptivum patrem ulterdelegit”.

28 Fedele, Epistolae et Orationes. Ed. Tomasini, 185: “Ecce Cassandra, quam gloriam sum inter mortales ante cineres consequuturis, quandoquidem tam benigna mihi arrideant astra, quod nedom naturae genium in edendis in lucem liberis mihi tam faeliciter faveat, verum etiam in aliorem parentum natorum, ut tu & Pamphilus terrestria quidem sidera spontanea adoptione, arrogationeve benigna corresponsante”.

212
Panfilo's awkward shifts between the first and third person suggest the difficulty that he experienced in finding a legitimate framework within which they might become friends and correspondents. That he ultimately chose the father-daughter model suggests that the familial paradigm was the best means of classifying this new relationship – intellectual exchange between an older man and a younger woman, who were not blood kin.

The end of the story: a woman on the margins?

Cassandra Fedele remained a daughter in discourse, but not in life. In 1499, she married a physician from Vicenza, Gian-Maria Mappelli. She was 34 at the time, and it has been suggested that this marriage took place because her career had stalled once she was no longer appealing as a “child prodigy”.\(^{29}\) No extant work exists for her twenty married years (Mappelli died in 1520) and she does not seem to have had any children. Yet the decision to marry may also suggest an attempt to shift into another legitimising framework.

Fedele's own comments suggest that she was proud of having married a learned man. Although a physician's education would not necessarily have been literary, she represents Mappelli as something like a peer in two documents written after his death. In a petition to Pope Leo X seeking widow's aid (1521), she mentioned not only her husband's good conduct and piety, but also his "erudition" (dottrina).\(^{30}\) In an altogether different medium, her final will of 1556, she underscored Mappelli's intellectual honour once again. Fedele categorizes herself as the widow of Gian-Maria Mappelli, “Doctor of Medicine” (Dottore in medicina), thereby claiming a more exalted status for him than that of a mere physician.\(^{31}\) Had she wished to indicate a merely standard level of education, she would likely have used the term “medico”.

Fedele’s marriage also urges a reconsideration of the notion that the learned woman occupied a place in the contemporary imagination “beyond her sex”. A man of considerable learning had chosen to marry her – even at her advanced age, with the expectation of children at least somewhat diminished. While the persistent scholarly model insists that women humanists, by virtue of their learning, were classified as dangerous Amazons, or asexual holy women, this was evidently not the attitude of the men who married them.\(^ {32}\) In addition to Fedele, we have the example

\(^{31}\) Venice, Italy. Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Notarile Testamenti, Atti Baldigara, busta 70, n. 50 (28 August 1556).

of Laura Cereta (1466–1499), whose husband was a merchant, but nonetheless able to correspond with her in Latin. Women intellectuals of the succeeding era, such as Moderata Fonte (1555–1592) and Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653), also married educated men. Marinella married a physician, Girolamo Vacca. Fonte married a tax lawyer, Filippo Zorzi, who also possessed some literary skill, to judge by the poems he provided as prefatory material for some of Fonte’s publications. This pattern of endogamy within the sector of society defined by its education (albeit with distinctions) militates against the notion that women intellectuals were relegated to the margins of their social worlds.

Scholars have interpreted Fedele’s marriage as the event which precipitated her withdrawal from humanist endeavour, but this argument must also be qualified. She and her husband lost all of their possessions in a shipwreck in 1520, which might explain the lack of compositions dating to her married years. And we cannot assign a date to Fedele’s treatise On the Order of the Sciences, to which biographers uniformly refer, but which has either been lost or not yet recovered. Further evidence that she continued to hone her skills well into her dotage is the final oration commissioned by the Venetian doge in 1556, which she delivered as a tribute to the visiting Queen of Poland. Fedele clearly still had prestige, at least when the issue was impressing a woman sovereign.

Margaret King once claimed that learned women, failing to move beyond their roles as child prodigies and curiosities, ultimately “withdrew from friendships, from the life of their cities, from public view, to small corners of the world where they worked in solitude […] to book-lined cells”. Cassandra Fedele, however, attests to her continuing presence in the life of her city as prioress of the orphans at the church of San Domenico – a position she secured by petition to Pope Paul III – and to having formed enduring friendships within her extended kinship networks. Her final will indicates that she was especially close to the notary Benedetto Baldigara, who was also her nephew and universal heir, and to his wife. Of particular significance for an intellectual, Fedele bequeathed to Baldigara’s children “all my books that are here in the priory”. Although she had lost her father-patron and indeed much

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33 Fedele and Gian-Maria lost all of their possessions in a shipwreck on their return to Venice from Crete, where he had been practicing medicine. See Fedele, Letters and Orations. Ed. and trans. Robin, 6.

34 For discussion of this treatise, see Fedele, Letters and Orations. Ed. and trans. Robin, 3.

35 King, Book-Lined Cells, 74.

36 ASVe, Test. Not., Atti Baldigara, b. 70, n. 50: “che mei libri che sono qui in priorado siano de li fioli del deto messer benetto”.

214
of her natal family by the time she herself died (1558), Fedele's will shows that she had balanced these losses by forging other important relationships within her extended family.

The Senate provided one final assertion of Cassandra Fedele's enduring membership in the Venetian cultural elite: a state funeral held at the Church of San Domenico. A century later, biographers still commemorated this ceremony. “Following the custom for learned people”, recorded one seventeenth-century scholar, her bier was covered with her most cherished books and her head was decorated with a laurel wreath, “an eternal symbol of literary virtue”.  

Fedele had been famous throughout Italy as an orator, poet and member of the res publica litterarum. It is small wonder that the Venetian citizenry should have gathered to mark the passing of this woman humanist, a contributor to their collective civic honour.

Filial virtue and the “civic family” of Venice

Early modern biographers emphasised Cassandra Fedele's success as an orator, in addition to praising her skill with the written word. Admirers, routinely citing Fedele's orations to the studio of Padua and the Venetian Senate, made it clear that she had been a public figure. Eager to point out that Fedele was anything but a “public woman” in the way that courtesans were, however, encomiasts simultaneously invoked her filial virtue.

Among the most popular sixteenth-century collections of female biography was Giuseppe Betussi's translation of Boccaccio’s Famous Women (De mulieribus claris, 1362), which enjoyed at least four editions from 1545 to 1596. Betussi's text not only brought Boccaccio's Latin biographies of ancient heroines to an Italian audience, but also included 49 new biographies of contemporary women who excelled in a variety of fields, including humanism. For Betussi, Cassandra Fedele does not constitute a “unique” case; rather, he positions her as an especially admirable figure among a considerable group of female cultural contributors. By 1609, one biographer reckoned the total population of illustrious and talented women from antiquity to modern times at 845; in 1620, another biographer attested to the presence of 499 specifically learned women, who proved women's preeminence and the nobility of their sex.  

In this sense, Betussi began a critical process of confronting the exceptionality tropes which often attended women humanists.

Betussi also took an argumentative stance very different from Boccaccio’s. Whereas Boccaccio did indeed relegate female excellence in the arts and letters (no less than in political or military affairs) to a transgressory realm “beyond their


sex", Betussi highlighted the femininity and propriety of his subjects. With this aim in view, the figure of the father and the “chastity" of the female subject were as important for Betussi as they were for women humanists themselves. Betussi’s most distinctive formulation was what might be termed “learned virtue", which fused the values of classical erudition and sexual morality consistently separated by Boccaccio.

Although modern readers might view this “domestication" of the woman orator as a reflection of the surrounding misogynous culture, this is better understood as part of an emergent feminist sentiment. The “debate on women" (querelle des femmes) had been raging for 150 years by the time that Betussi embarked on his revision of Boccaccio. Defenses of women, aiming to redraw the boundaries of normative female capability and activity, continued to pour out of Italian presses. Biographers of women took pains to emphasise that Fedele and her peers were socially normal, and therefore worthy not only of admiration but in fact emulation.

To judge by Betussi’s frequent authorial intrusions, Cassandra Fedele was his favorite among the new biographies which he included. And, eager to legitimise Fedele’s scholarly virtues, Betussi first adduces the father-daughter dyad. He begins by alerting the reader to her status as the learned daughter of Angelo Fedele, and underscores the father-daughter theme by noting that she exceeded even the famous oratrix Hortensia: “with both a sure facility in composition, and also a great aptness for oratory, she was judged to have exceeded both Hortensia and all the other ancient and most eloquent Roman women". Fedele proved, then, that both the eloquence and the daughterly pietas of the ancients had returned.

Betussi underscores the father-daughter theme again when discussing Fedele’s invitation by the Venetian Senate to perform a Latin oration. He mitigates the potentially unsavoury implications of a young woman declaiming at an assembly of older men by noting that “she came together with her father […] into the presence of many orators, philosophers and theologians, who had also been invited".


remove any remaining sense of impropriety, he adds that “the wise and learned
young woman, blushing in the pleasing hues of chastity and modesty, made a Latin
oration with such grace and fluency that we remember it even to this day”. A visual
representation that reflects this rhetorical image exists in a portrait made of Fedele
at the age of 16, around the time of this oration (fig. 1). The image instantiates
Betussi’s themes: Fedele’s clothing is both classical and austere; her eyes are
modestly downcast; and her hair is well-ordered and tightly bound.

This almost obsessive concern with feminine modesty in word and image might
be seen as analogous to the “mythologizing” tendency explicated by Lisa Jardine.
Yet the father-daughter paradigm and even Betussi’s references to chastity
functioned differently. Betussi did not transform Fedele into an abstraction of the
liberal arts. On the contrary, his purpose in providing “modern” examples of learned
women to supplement Boccaccio’s catalogue of goddesses and classical heroines
was in fact to historicise a mythological tradition. In particular, Betussi emphasises
the reality of Fedele’s case by citing encomia written in her honour from “many
learned and scholarly men” and pointing the reader to her letterbook for examples.
He also places Fedele in a long tradition of ancient women philosophers and poets
— familiar names, but scantily documented — and avers that she, in contrast to her
predecessors, belongs to the historical record: “she enjoyed writing and has left a
record of the truth of the things that she found”.

Another aspect of Betussi’s historical enterprise was his placement of Fedele
within her civic context. Not only did she belong within her biological father-daughter
dyad, but she was incorporated into the Venetian “civic” family. In his view, Fedele’s
mastery of philosophy and theology, as well as public disputation, brought honour
to herself and to “Venice, in which was born such a rare and excellent woman”.

Subsequent biographies would follow Betussi in emphasising Fedele’s role as a
virtuous civic contributor. In 1547, the year that Betussi’s text went into its second
Venetian printing, Ludovico Dolce (also Venetian) published his dialogue On the
Education of Women. Dolce’s purpose (unlike Betussi’s) was not to recount the
biographical details of as many learned women as possible, but rather to argue

pudico con tanta gratia, & con tanto facondia fece una oratione Latina, che fin’hoggidi ne dura la
memoria”.

44 For a useful discussion of visual tropes indicating women’s chastity and sobriety, see Mary
Renaissance Quarterly 47, 556–622.


46 Betussi, Libro di M. Gio Bocaccio, 173b: “Da molti dottissimi & studiosissimi huomini con epistole,
& versi fu salutata, onde il testimento di cio fin’hoggidi chiaro si vede d’infinte epistole a lei scritte, &
in molte pore dove e celebrata & ricordata”.

47 Betussi, Libro di M. Gio Bocaccio, 174b: “molto si dilettò di scrivere, & lasciar memoria della
verità delle cose da lei trovate”.

48 Betussi, Libro di M. Gio Bocaccio, 173b: “honore di Vinegia nella quale nacque così rara, &
eccellente Donna”.

217
Figure 1. Portrait of Fedele as it appears on the frontispiece of Cassandra Fedele 1636. *Clarissimae Feminae Cassandra Fidelis, Venetiae: Epistolae et Oratones.* Ed. Jacopo Filippo Tomasini. Padua: Franciscus Bolzetta. Tomasini mentions in his prefatory remarks (44) that Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516) painted a portrait of the sixteen-year-old Fedele; the location of this portrait is now unknown, but it probably served as the model for this etching. Image courtesy of the Princeton University Library.
for the full instruction of women in the humanities. In Dolce's text, the quattrocento women humanists live on as proof positive that advanced education produces exemplary morality in women, no less than in men. After noting that many queens and courtly patronesses have been famous for their learning, Dolce makes an abrupt transition to Cassandra Fedele's contribution to the Venetian civic family. The first woman in his list of "women of private station" who exemplify learned virtue is "Cassandra Fedele of my city". Dolce thereby presents the coupling of erudition and morality in non-regal women as a Venetian specialty. A few decades later, in 1586, Tomaso Garzoni would follow suit, producing in his defense of women the canonical list of female worthies celebrated by Boccaccio and Betussi, but giving pride of place to Fedele.

Rather than abstracting Fedele or consigning her to a "book-lined cell", then, biographers treated her as a historical reality. Fedele appears as a woman humanist who, by virtue of being at once an intellectual and a woman, proved women's potential to excel in the hitherto male domain of learning (Betussi) and the desirability of offering women advanced education (Dolce, Garzoni). In short, Fedele provoked an initial revision of gender categories – a revision made possible only because she and her admirers emphasised her filial virtue.

The querelle des femmes and the interest in learned women both accelerated in the century after Fedele died. Capitalising upon these trends, a historian named Jacopo (or Giacomo) Filippo Tomasini (1595–1655) wrote extensive biographies of both Cassandra Fedele and her younger contemporary, the Brescian humanist Laura Cereta. Tomasini once again staked the legitimacy of women humanists on a dual foundation: the father-daughter dyad and their honourable place in the Venetian "civic family". Tomasini's innovation, however, was to move beyond the genre of the biographical compendium toward the modern critical edition. His editions of Fedele (1636) and Cereta (1640) took Betussi's historicising instinct to the next level: Tomasini include their complete works, a wealth of contemporary comment and etchings taken from their portraits.

Tomasini, like his predecessors, aimed to prove that the woman intellectual, while unusual in terms of scholarly excellence, was socially normal. He therefore comments at length upon the father-daughter relationship, noting in particular that Fedele's talent was always fostered by "Angelo, the best sort of father and a man famous for his expertise in the languages among princely men of great authority."
Then, highlighting her filial devotion, Tomasini observes that she devoted herself to studying Latin and Greek with the single aim in view of “complying with the hopes of her father, who marvelled at her surpassing genius”. Tomasini observes in addition that Angelo was concerned that Cassandra’s mind be developed to the fullest, but only “alongside domestic duties” (“inter domesticos labores”) and underscores this point by mentioning that Fedele also bowed to her father’s wishes in marrying. In other words, being a good scholar and being a good woman were not mutually exclusive.

The father-daughter paradigm disarmed potential criticism of women intellectuals, new characters in literary culture. Condescending as this strategy of persuasion might appear to modern readers, it made a subversive point in its own time: the woman humanist was not a transgressor “beyond her sex”, but rather an exemplary member of her sex. The father-daughter relationship, natal and discursive, facilitated women humanists’ careers, which in turn brought them membership in a wider civic community and an honourable place in the historical record. Women of subsequent centuries enjoyed a broader range of possibilities for negotiating gender categories, but the household context in evidence here provided the initial enabling paradigm. By the time that the Venetian citizenry mourned Cassandra Fedele, there was an honoured place in the res publica litterarum for laywomen intellectuals that had not been there before – a place initially secured “in the name of the father”.

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Her Father’s Daughter

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