Leonardo Bruni on Women and Rhetoric: *De studiis et litteris* Revisited

Abstract: It is often claimed that Italian humanists disapproved of the study of rhetoric for women, seeing it as transgressing the social-ethical norms that reserved the public virtue of eloquence for men. A key piece of evidence adduced for this view is a passage in Leonardo Bruni’s *De studiis et litteris*, which appears to exclude the study of rhetoric for women on precisely these grounds. This paper challenges the conventional interpretation of this passage, arguing instead for a satirical reading. Far from proscribing rhetorical study for women in *De studiis*, it is suggested here, Bruni advocates an innovative humanistic model of rhetorical education, using the choice of a female addressee to underline the novelty of this ideal.

Keywords: Leonardo Bruni; Battista da Montefeltro; women and rhetoric; Italian humanism; educational treatise

Leonardo Bruni’s treatise *De studiis et litteris*, variously dated by scholars to between 1405 and 1429, has long been recognized as one of the most important literary statements of the educational ideals of Italian humanism. Among its numerous claims on our attention—the relative earliness of its composition, its distinguished authorship, its formal elegance and

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incisiveness—*De studiis et litteris* is of interest as the first of only a handful of humanistic educational treatises to address themselves to women. Bruni’s treatise is cast in the form of a letter directed to Battista da Montefeltro Malatesta (1384–1450), the wife of the lord of Pesaro, in the Marche, a woman celebrated from an early age for her classical learning and literary interests, as well as for her exemplary piety. *De studiis et litteris* presents itself explicitly as a customized guide to the studies appropriate for a high-born and intellectually gifted woman, either Battista herself, or, if we assume a later date of composition, perhaps her daughter Elisabetta Malatesta Varano (1407–77). This gives Bruni’s treatise—which, like others of his works, circulated widely—\(^2\) a peculiar importance from the perspective of cultural history, as a document of humanistic attitudes to women and to women’s intellectual potential. Seen in this light, as an educational program directed at a woman, Bruni’s treatise is remarkable for the period in its breadth and ambition, encompassing as it does a comprehensive study of Latin literature, moral philosophy, theology, and history. The study of Greek is not envisaged, but there is nothing patronizing or jejune about the Latin curriculum proposed in *De studiis*: among theologians, for example, Bruni recommends Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Cyprian, and Lactantius, while his list of approved historical reading comprises Livy, Sallust, Tacitus, Curtius, and Caesar. Where literature is concerned, the curriculum of *De studiis* suffers gender-related curtailment only in respect of the more salacious of Roman satirists and writers of comedy; this is presented, however, as a concession to moralizing critics, and one of relatively little moment, in that it affects only what Bruni disdainfully characterizes as “the lower ranks of the poets” (*vulgus poetarum*), leaving the literary aristocracy of tragedians and epic poets intact.\(^3\) We are far, with *De studiis*, from the “damage limitation” model of some later humanist works on women’s education, such as Juan Luis Vives’s *De
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institutione feminae christianae (1524), which seek to ensure women’s moral safety by keeping them to the most restricted reading diet possible. Bruni, by contrast, casts his ideal female pupil in a heroizing mold, commending her in one passage for the ambition to “hold the whole world as her province.” Study for a woman is seen in the treatise as morally perfecting, rather than morally corrosive, precisely as it would be for a man.

Despite its commendable “liberalism,” however, one curious omission may be noted within the program of study advocated in De studiis. When he comes to discuss rhetoric, generally conceived of as pivotal to the studia humanitatis, Bruni unexpectedly proclaims that his pupil would do well to ignore it. His grounds for this decision are essentially social, rather than intellectual: women have no cause to study rhetoric as their duties do not demand it, while the exercise of oratory, specifically, with its element of exuberant public display, is inimical to feminine decorum. This striking exclusion of women from the study of rhetoric has not escaped the attention of De studiis’s modern readers; after all, we are talking here about the core discipline of the humanistic curriculum, and the focus of some its most potent ideological claims. The feminist scholarship of the past three decades has tended in general to revise earlier historiographical tendencies to idealize humanistic education for its precociously enlightened advocacy of learning for women, noting the undercurrents of social anxiety that can be detected beneath humanists’ ostensibly celebratory attitude to female learning. Rhetoric has frequently been identified as a prime fault-line in this regard, since the ideals of performative


5See below, p. 52.

eloquence and social and political engagement embodied in the classical ideal of the orator were so difficult to equate with Quattrocento perceptions of women’s proper social role. Within the Aristotelian-scholastic gender orthodoxy of the day, active and “public” virtues such as eloquence were regarded as masculine, while feminine excellence resided in the contrary “domestic” virtues of modesty, silence, and submission. This left the eloquent woman an anomaly, disruptive of social norms in her usurpation of “masculine” virtues, with the result that female learning was only acceptable when it could be safely encoded as “silent.” Bruni’s pronouncements on rhetoric in *De studiis et litteris* have often been taken as indicative of this supposed set of humanistic attitudes to eloquence in women; indeed, they have attained a particular prominence in this regard as one of the very few explicit statements on the subject by a Quattrocento humanist. It is not unusual, for example, to find the passage on rhetoric in *De studiis* cited as the prime or sole evidence that Italian humanists had an “unabated phobia about female speech” or that they considered rhetoric as “the one thing that women should not be taught.”

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8The phrases are, respectively, from Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380–1589* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 166, and Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London and NY: Methuen, 1987), 104, and n. 11. For further discussions of *De studiis* in the context of gender ethics, see King, “Book-Lined Cells,” cited in n. 6 above, p. 77 and Jardine, “Isotta Nogarola,” cited in n. 6 above, p. 232, King noting that Bruni excludes the female student from “the one discipline the knowledge of which would enable a woman to participate publicly in intellectual discourse,” and Jardine that his ban on rhetorical study for women has the effect of excluding them from “public proficiency in advanced studies.”
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Bruni’s name is frequently paired within the scholarship in this area with that of his younger Venetian contemporary Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454), whom we find pronouncing in his *De re uxoria* (1416) on the indecorum of women speaking in public, noting that “a woman’s speech is no less dangerous than the nakedness of her limbs.” Although *De studiis et litteris* does not, in fact, make this kind of explicit connection between verbal “exhibitionism” and unchastity, Bruni is routinely grouped in modern scholarship with Barbaro and other socially conservative conduct theorists who prescribed silence and a rigorously cloistered existence as the necessary basis of feminine social decorum.

Given the importance that Bruni’s proscription of rhetorical study for women has come to assume in current scholarly literature, and the breadth of ideological meaning that has been attached to this gesture, it seems a useful exercise to revisit the passage in its original context and to examine its contentions in detail. The passage occurs around half-way through the treatise, between the two principal sections into which the text is divided, the first outlining the means by which Bruni’s ideal noblewoman-pupil should go about attaining a thorough linguistic and stylistic competence in classical Latin, the second detailing the areas of study in which

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she should concentrate her reading. These two components, linguistic and substantive, together make up her course of studies: Bruni terms them *peritia litterarum* and *scientia rerum* (“skill in letters” and “knowledge of things”). It is at the moment that he begins to move on to his consideration of *scientia rerum* that Bruni gives his view on the appropriateness of rhetorical study for women. The whole passage deserves to be quoted, including the preliminary discussion of disciplinary selection that precedes it:

Having said that genuine learning was a combination of literary skill and factual knowledge, we have set forth our view of what literary skill is. Let us now, therefore, say something about knowledge. Here again I prefer that someone whose intellect shows the greatest promise possess the most ardent desire for learning. Let her despise no branch of learning, hold all the world as her province, and, in a word, burn marvellously with a desire for knowledge and understanding. An ardent and well-motivated person like this needs, I think, to be applauded and spurred on in some directions, while in others she must be reined in and called back. Disciplines there are, which it is not fitting to ignore completely, yet it is by no means glorious completely to master. In geometry and arithmetic, for example, if she should waste a great deal of time worrying about their subtle obscurities, I would seize her and tear her away from them. I would do the same in astrology, and even, perhaps, in the art of rhetoric.

I make this last point with some hesitation, since if any living men have labored in this art, I profess myself to be of their number. But there are many things here to be taken into account, the first of which is the person whom I am addressing. For why should the subtleties of the *status*, the *epicheiremata*, the *krinomena*, and a thousand other rhetorical conundrums consume the powers of a woman, who will never see the forum? The art of delivery, which the Greeks call *hypocrisy* and we *pronunciatio*, and which Demosthenes said was the first, the second, and the third most important acquirement of the orator, so far is that from being the concern of a woman that if she should gesture energetically with her arms as she spoke and shout with violent emphasis, she would probably be thought mad and put under restraint. The contests of the forum, like those of warfare and battle, are the sphere of men. Hers will not be the task of learning to speak for and against witnesses, for and against torture, for and against reputation; she will not practice the commonplaces or think about the sly anticipation of an opponent’s arguments. She will, in a word, leave the rough-and-tumble of the forum entirely to men.

Pp. 102–05 K.

Et quoniam eruditionem legitimam ex peritia litterarum et scientia rerum constare diximus et, quid de litteris nobis placeret, ostendimus,
addatur nunc sane illa pars, quae ad scientiam pertinet. Volo igitur huic ingenio, quod summa mihi omnia de se repromittat, ardentissimam cupiditatem inesse discendi, ita ut nullum genus disciplinae aspernetur, nullum a se alienum existimet, rapiatur incensum mirabili aviditate ad intelligentiam et cognitionem rerum. Huic ergo et ardentia per se et incitato partim stimulos adhibebo et meo insuper clamore adhortabor, partim frenos incutiam ac veluti receptui canam. Sunt enim disciplinarum quaedam, in quibus ut rudem omnino esse non satis decorum, sic etiam ad cacumina illarum evadere nequaquam gloriosum; ut geometria et arithmetica, in quibus, si multum temporis consumere perget et subtilitates omnes obscuritatesque rimari, retraham manu atque divellam. Quod idem faciam in astrologia, idem fortasse et in arte rhetorica.

Invitior de hac postrema dixi, quoniam, si quisquam vivendum illi affectus fuit, me unum ex eo numero esse profiteor. Sed multarum rerum habenda mihi ratio est: in primis, cui scribam, videndum. Quid enim statuum subtilitates et epicherematum curae et illa, quae appellantur crinomena, et mille in ea arte difficultates mulierem conterant, quae fo-rum numquam sit aspectura? Iam vero actio illa artificiosa, quam Graeci hypocrisim, nostri “pronuntiationem” dixere, cui Demosthenes primas et secundas et tertias tribuit ut actori necessaria, ita mulieri nequaquam laboranda, quae, si brachium iactabit loquens aut si clamorem vehe-mortibus aut contra tormentis aut contra rumoribus, nec se communibus locis exercebit, nec interrogationes bicipites neque respondiones veteratorias meditabitur; totam denique fori asperitatem viris relinquet.

As is clear from this passage, the status of rhetoric in the text is as the last of a series of four disciplines of which Bruni’s ideal female pupil is advised to limit herself to a superficial knowledge, so as not to waste time that could be better deployed elsewhere. These four “dispensable” disciplines—geometry, arithmetic, astrology (or astronomy) and rhetoric—represent the negative counterpart to the four disciplines that make up the core of Bruni’s approved curriculum: moral philosophy, theology, history, and poetry. The grounds for the division are relatively clear: the accepted disciplines are those considered morally and spiritually formative—especially moral philosophy and theology, which are accorded the highest place in Bruni’s curriculum—while those discarded are, at least in the case of the first three, felt to be technical, abstract, and insufficiently “humane.” This leaves rhetoric, however, in an anomalous position, grouped with the technical disciplines of arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, and
severed from the studies of history, poetry, and moral philosophy with which it was generally grouped within humanistic writings. These four disciplines, along with grammar (incorporated by Bruni in his section on *peritia litterarum*) made up the grouping of *studia humanitatis* on which the humanistic curriculum eventually came to be based.\(^{11}\) Bruni underlines the unexpectedness of his relegation of rhetoric by prefacing it with a wry allusion to his own celebrated expertise in the subject: as he puts it with elegant understatement, “if any living men have labored in this art, I profess myself to be of their number.” Why Bruni should have chosen to demote his own chief field of excellence to the status of a subject hardly deserving of attention is one of the principal questions a properly critical scrutiny of *De studiis et litteris* should seek to address.

Of course, at an obvious level, the text provides its own answer to this question, and swiftly: rhetoric is demoted in this instance because the treatise is addressed to a woman, who will have no practical need for such skills. The point is argued with some emphasis and a degree of flamboyance unaccustomed in Bruni’s generally sober-toned treatise. Especially striking in this regard is the cautionary vignette of a gesticulating female orator being mistaken for a madwoman and placed under restraint. This derisory image of a seemingly out-of-control female body intruding itself grotesquely on to the male space of the “forum” has doubtless influenced those critics who pair Bruni with Francesco Barbaro as associating articulacy in women with sexual profligacy. The notion that rhetoric is excluded from *De studiis*’s curriculum solely for reasons of gender decorum has generally been accepted by commentators without question. James Hankins, for example, in his brief discussion of *De studiis* in the anthology, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, notes that Bruni subordinates other subjects in the treatise to theology and moral philosophy, but suggests that, were the curriculum being framed for a man, “rhetoric would have to be added to those two as a third master subject.”\(^{12}\) In this reading of the text, *De studiis* implicitly proffers two complementary, gender-


\(^{12}\) *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*, ed. and trans. Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins, and David Thompson (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987), 238. Hankins expands on the point as follows: “all our studies . . . are directed to those sciences that order our relations with God and with other men; in the case of a male, this includes relations of a larger, political nature.”
differentiated versions of a humanistic curriculum, one inclusive of rhetoric and pitched for male students whose social role requires competence in public modes of discourse and exchange, the other a “private” feminine variant, concentrated exclusively on moral and spiritual self-perfection.

If this seems eminently clear at first sight as a reading of the passage, some further clarification is required regarding the extent and comprehensiveness of Bruni’s exclusion of rhetoric from his “female” humanistic curriculum. The art of rhetoric, as understood in Italian humanism, was a broad one, embracing prose composition, including epistolography, as well as the practice of oratory. However accurate her knowledge of classical Latin grammar and vocabulary, a woman could not aspire to write even so much as a letter without some kind of competence in rhetoric in this sense. That Bruni intended his ban on rhetorical studies for women to extend to written as well as spoken expression seems prima facie implausible, and indeed the most cursory reading of the treatise leaves us in no doubt that this was not the case. On the contrary, a mastery of written eloquence appears very clearly as one of the principal objectives to which the noblewoman’s education is directed. This is especially clear in the section on peritia litterarum, where Bruni defends the depth of engagement with Latin style he demands from his pupil by referring specifically on several occasions to the practical application of this knowledge in writing. Similarly, in the later section on scientia rerum, Bruni stresses the desirability of his pupil studying “the orators,” a term that can mean simply “prose writers,” but here seems to refer more specifically to records, or stylizations, of actual oratory, such as Cicero’s speeches and the declamations attributed to Quintilian:

I will further urge her [= the woman student] not to neglect the orators. Where else is virtue praised with such passion, and vice condemned with such ferocity? It is the orators who will teach us how to praise the good deed and to hate the bad; it is they who will teach us how to soothe, encourage, stimulate, or deter... Then, too, those figures of speech and thought, which like stars or torches illuminate our diction and give it distinction, are the proper tools of the orator which we will borrow from them when we speak or write, and turn to our use as the

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occasion demands. In sum, all the richness, power and polish in our expression, its lifeblood, as it were, we will derive from the orators.

Pp. 108–11 K.

Oratores quoque ut legere non negligat, suadebo. Quis enim aut virtutes extollere ardentius aut vitia fulminare atrocious solet? Ab his et laudare bene facta et detestari facinora addiscemus; ab his consolari, cohortari, impellere, absterrere... Iam vero illa verborum sententiarumque ornamenta, quae tamquam stellae quaedam et faces orationem illuminant et admirabilem reddunt, instrumenta oratorum propria sunt, quae mutuabimur ab illis scribentes loquentesque et in usum nostrum, cum res poscet, vertemus. Denique omnem opulentiam verborum, omnem dicendi vim et quasi ornatum, omnem orationis (ut ita dixerim) vivacitatem et sanguinem ab istis sumemus.

Bruni makes quite clear in this passage that the noblewoman will be drawn to the study of classical oratory at least in part out of a desire to improve her own skills in speech and writing. What is advocated here is not a passive reading of these texts but an active and appropriatory one: she is to read the classical oratores with a view to the use she may wish to make of their “tools” (instrumenta) in her own persuasive discourse, spoken and written. She is quite clearly envisioned here as a potential user of language, and a user of language at a high rhetorical level. One thing she is expressly directed to, in fact, in her reading of the classical orators, is the figures of speech and thought (verborum sententiarumque ornamenta) of which they made such powerful expressive use. This was material that came from the heart of the rhetorical arsenal, falling under the rubric of elocutio, or style.14

It is quite clear, then, if we look at De studiis as a whole, that Bruni does not intend to exclude rhetoric in its entirety from a woman’s studies. This needs to be stressed within an English-language context, since a paraphrase of the text by W. H. Woodward (1897), frequently cited by critics as though it were a straight translation, misleadingly represents Bruni as categorical on this point. Woodward concludes his summary of the passage of rhetoric in De studiis with the phrase “rhetoric in all its forms... lies absolutely outside the province of women.”15 As we have seen, this is far from accurate as a description

14A similar point may be made of Bruni’s discussion of prose rhythm or numerus at pp. 100–02 K, which draws explicitly on Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Cicero’s recently rediscovered Orator: see Kallendorf’s notes at p. 329 for references and John O. Ward, “Cicero and Quintilian,” in Glyn P. Norton, ed., The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Vol. III. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77–80 for context.

15William Harrison Woodward, Vittorino da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators (1897); reprinted with an introduction by Eugene E. Rice (New York: Teachers College,
of Bruni’s position as it emerges from a holistic reading of the text. If, however, Bruni is not to be regarded as intent on defining “rhetoric in all its forms” as outside women’s province, what, precisely, within the art does he identify as “unfeminine”? One suggestion would be that De studiis condones the study of rhetoric by women for the purposes of writing, but draws the line at oratorical performance. This might be a tempting conclusion, given Bruni’s inclusion of the art of pronunciatio, or delivery, among his examples of rhetorical doctrines to which it would be ridiculous to see a woman devoting her attention. If we return to the passage in which it occurs, however, and consider this set of examples as a whole, it quickly appears that Bruni’s focus is not particularly on rhetoric’s performance dimension, despite the imaginative emphasis he gives to the delivery through his image of the female orator as gesticulating madwoman. Rather, if we review his examples in general, we will see that they relate preponderantly not to a particular rhetorical “medium”—oratory, rather than written rhetoric—but rather, within the general category of rhetorical discourse, to a particular genre and context. Classical rhetorical theory had identified three genera dicendi, the forensic or judicial, deliberative or political, and demonstrative or ceremonial. It is to the first of these, the rhetoric of the law-courts, that Bruni’s examples very specifically relate. Bruni starts his discussion of rhetoric’s irrelevance for women in De studiis, by listing three sample doctrines, whose complexity and technicality he stresses: the doctrines of status, the epicheireme and the krinomenon. Two of these, the first and last, are particular to forensic oratory. Status theory, or stasis theory—Bruni freely mixes Latin and Greek terms here—was the analysis of the different types of issue on which a legal controversy might turn. The krinomenon (iudi-
catio in Latin) was a technical term within the general field of stasis theory, broadly signifying the essential question to be adjudicated in a given case.\(^{18}\) Rather broader in its application, but still traditionally discussed in rhetorical theory within the framework of legal argumentation, was the art of constructing epicheremata, or epicheiremes, a form of syllogistic reasoning modified for rhetorical use.\(^ {19}\) After his discussion of pronunciatio, which we have already discussed, Bruni goes on to speak of the inutility of a woman “learning to speak for or against witnesses . . . torture . . . and reputation.” His reference here is to the forensic skill of handling what were called “inartificial proofs” (probationes inartificialia), in the sense of proofs lying beyond the verbal realm that constituted the art’s proper province, such as (in Quintilian’s account) “preceding court decisions, rumors, evidence extracted through torture, documents, oaths, and witnesses.”\(^ {20}\) The last rhetorical skills Bruni identifies as irrelevant to a woman are what he calls interrogationes bicipites and responsiones veteratorias. These are more difficult to place with regard to classical rhetorical theory, and may refer more to general competences than to codified rhetorical doctrines. Their meaning seems to be something like “double, or two-sided forms of questioning” and “crafty or cunning replies.”\(^ {21}\)

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\(^{19}\)On epicheremata, see Lausberg, Handbook, cited in n. 17 above, p. 170 (no. 371); Rhetorica ad C. Herennium, ed. Calboli, pp. 239–41 (n. 36); also, for more detail Antoine C. Braet, “Hermagoras and the Epicheireme,” Rhetorica 22 (2004): 327–47, esp. pp. 329–40 for an account of the differing treatments of the subject found in Cicero’s De inventione and the Rhetorica ad Herennium, Bruni’s likely sources.


\(^{21}\)These translations of the phrases are mine; cfr. Kallendorf’s more generic translation cited above at p. 52: “she will not . . . think about the sly anticipation of an opponent’s argument.” One specifically forensic sense of interrogatio in rhetoric is the questioning of witnesses (Lausberg, Handbook, p. 163 (no. 354); cfr. Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, who treats interrogation techniques in 5.7.8–37 as part of his discussion of inartificial proofs). Another was the figure of thought now often called the “rhetorical question” (Lausberg, Handbook, pp. 340–41 (no. 767–70)). A responsio might in this case signify a self-supplied response intended to undermine the opponent, such as we find in the mock-dialogue figure of subiectio (Lausberg, Handbook, pp. 341–3 (nos. 771–5)).
If we take the set of competences just detailed as a characterization by synecdoche of a certain understanding of the *ars rhetorica*, it will immediately appear that it is a quite peculiar, and extremely narrow version of the art that we are looking at. *Pronunciatio* aside, most of the doctrines that Bruni alludes to in this passage derive from a single and quite specialized portion of rhetorical theory, that related to legal argumentation and adversarial courtroom oratory. There is no mention here of *elocutio*, nor of the more expansive realms of *inventio*; nothing of *pathos*; nothing of *ethos*; nothing of the union of eloquence and wisdom. We are very far here from the broad and seductive ideal of eloquence defined by Quintilian, capable of ranging over all fields of knowledge and possessed of an irresistible moral force. Rhetoric is portrayed here very narrowly as ancillary to law and geared to no end beyond that of winning a case—and perhaps by no very limpid means, if we take up the implications of Bruni’s allusion to *responsiones veteratorias*. If we came across this characterization of the art in the context of a philosophical indictment of rhetoric in the tradition of Plato, we would have no problem in recognizing it as satirical, and there seems no question that that is also how we should understand it here. Several elements in the passage confirm this suspicion. One is the ethical incongruity, pointed up by Bruni at the outset, of seeing a prominent rhetorical authority attacking rhetoric as an art: an incongruity that inevitably confers an air of paradoxicality on the argument that follows. Beyond this, we may point to the distinctiveness of Bruni’s language and tone here by comparison with those he adopts in the treatise as a whole. Besides his comic vignette of the declaiming female orator being mistaken for a madwoman, we see him earlier threatening the female student over-interested in geometry that he will physically wrest her away from her books (*retraham manu atque divellam*). This kind of graphic physical language is by no means characteristic of the treatise as a whole, nor is the jocular tone with which Bruni here refers to his noble female “pupil,” who is more characteristically addressed in *De studiis* with irreproachable gravity and respect.22 A further point to consider is the position of the passage, poised between Bruni’s two weighty disquisitions on

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22 Mariano David, in what remains the most comprehensive study of the treatise (La prima “institutio” umanistica femminile. De studiis et litteris di Leonardo Bruni Aretino (Turin: L’Impronta, 1935)), is one of the rare critics of this passage to remark on the element of humor in the passage, though the insight is presented in period style (15, “Scorgiamo un sorrisetto del solenne oratore messer Lionardo”). David notes in particular the comic effect obtained through the abstruseness of the doctrines chosen for exemplification and the use of technical Greek terms.
peritia litterarum and scientia rerum: rhetorically and psychologically, the ideal point for a moment of calculated “light relief.”23 Taking all these considerations into account, it seems likely that we should see Bruni’s remarks on rhetoric, in the terminology of the great rhetorical theorist of the generation following his, George of Trebizond (1395–1484), as reflecting not a ductus rectus—a “straight” strategy of argument, where the orator argues simply for what he appears to be arguing for—but rather a ductus oblicus, where he argues for the opposite of what he appears to be arguing for and disguises the reasons for his case.24 Read in this light, Bruni’s advice to his pupil not to waste her time on the ars rhetorica is not to be taken seriously in the general light in which it presents itself; rather, it applies only to the particular, caricatural version of the discipline presented here. Further, this proscription finds its justification not in the gender-based reasons it ostensibly adduces, but rather, ultimately, in the intrinsic meretriciousness of the model of rhetorical study adduced.

That Bruni’s discussion of rhetoric in De studiis is intended as satirical becomes clearer if we read this passage in Bruni alongside what may perhaps, loosely, be considered a source for it: Quintilian’s discussion of the place of the arts of geometry, music, and astronomy within the education of an orator in the tenth chapter of Book I of his Institutio oratoria. Although he is more positive than Bruni about the value of studying such subjects, Quintilian very clearly defines them as subsidiary: he acknowledges that many would question the necessity of an orator being schooled in such seemingly irrelevant disciplines, and admits them to his curriculum only as preliminary and preparatory subjects, to be studied in boyhood concurrently with

23For rhetorical recommendations on the subject, see Rhetorica ad Herennium, I, vi, 10, which advises that “if the audience has already been fatigued by listening,” the orator should “open his speech with something that may provoke laughter,” going on to list a full eighteen different species of wit that may be deployed to obtain the desired effect. A number of Ad Herennium’s specific recommendations (perhaps especially that of remarks prater expectationem—overturning expectations) are of relevance to Bruni’s strategy here.

24On the theory of ductus in George of Trebizond, see Lucia Calboli Montefusco, “Ductus and color: the right way to compose a suitable speech,” Rhetorica 21/2 (2003): 123–8; Virginia Cox, “Rhetoric and Humanism in Quattrocento Venice,” Renaissance Quarterly 56/3 (2003): 652–94 (pp. 657–8, 664–5). Although Bruni would not have known George’s account of ductus, written in the 1430s, at the time of the composition of De studiis et litteris, we may assume that he would have known George’s late-antique sources, Fortunatianus and Martianus Capella. In any case, George’s fine-grained division of different species of ductus can be seen as a formalization of rhetorical practice (he finds most of his examples in Cicero’s orations).
grammar. He also implicitly concedes their “dispensable” nature by reminding us that his aim is to prescribe the consummate form of an orator, and that this paragon will be of necessity encyclopedic in his cultural range. What is ironic, of course, here, when we consider the text alongside Bruni’s, is that Quintilian is subordinating these “minor” arts to rhetoric, the discipline, in all its vastness and variety, with which the remaining eleven books of the treatise are concerned. Geometry, music, and astronomy are defined quite precisely as subjects to be studied before a boy passes on to the tutorship of the rhetor; they are propaedeutic to the master science of rhetoric, the portal to eloquence, “the soul-bending queen of all things.” For a reader acquainted with Quintilian, and sharing Bruni’s humanistic commitments, to see the art of rhetoric breezily dismissed as an ancillary discipline along with the likes of geometry and astronomy must have been a gesture so incongruous—especially coming from a noted rhetorician like Bruni—as to invite incredulous laughter as a response.

If it is acknowledged that the section on rhetoric in De studiis is intended as satire, what precisely is its satirical target? One feature of the passage that has already emerged very clearly from our preceding analysis is its focus on the law as a context for rhetorical study: as we have seen, the doctrines whose narrowly technical and hyper-specialized character appears to be the object of Bruni’s satire here are preponderantly forensic in character. The tone of amused contempt Bruni adopts here with regard to “lawyers’ rhetoric” is characteristic of his condescending attitude more generally to law as a profession and a discipline: an ex-student of the law himself in his youth prior to his “conversion” to humanistic studies, he tended in later life to disparage legal study as mercenary and pettifogging, contrasting it unfavourably with the nobility and high-mindedness of the studia humanitatis. Bruni’s most comprehensive and articulated development of this theme occurs in a letter of the early 1430s to the young Ferrarese patrician Niccolò Strozzi (1413–77), son of the condottiere Nanni Strozzi (d. 1428), whose death Bruni had commemorated in a celebrated eulogy. Bruni congratulates Niccolò in the letter for choosing humanistic study over the law, and argues for

25 Quintilian, IO, I, x, 1: “Nunc de ceteris artibus quibus instituendos priusquam rhetori tradantur pueros existimo strictim subiungam…” The definition of eloquent speech (oratio) as “flexanima atque omnium regina rerum” is attributed to the tragedian Marcus Pacuvius. Quintilian quotes the phrase at IO I, xii, 18; cfr. Cicero, De oratore, II, xliiv, 187.
the superiority of a humanistic education over a legal one in terms of utility, dignity, and pleasure, following classical ethical formulae for deliberative rhetoric. Where pleasure is concerned, Bruni contrasts the intellectual delights of literary study with the tedium of a legal education: a point developed further in a passage with autobiographical overtones in his vernacular Vita del Petrarca (1436), where Petrarch’s struggles as a reluctant law student with “the laws and their tedious and vulgar commentaries” (“le leggi et loro tediose e grosse commetionati”) are feelingly contrasted with his delight in his preferred humanistic reading of Cicero, Virgil, Seneca, and Lactantius. Regarding utility, while conceding that a legal training may be “more saleable” (vendibilius), Bruni argues in a Stoically inflected vein that a humanistic literary education has a deeper utilitas, “for these studies [the humanities] all contribute to producing the good man, than which nothing more useful may be imagined, while the study of civil law is in no way conducive to goodness.” Finally, where dignity is concerned—by which is meant social dignity—Bruni casts the law as a profession unworthy of the energies of a man of any standing, arguing that the humanities, by contrast, are of sufficient dignity to be fitting as an education for a prince. His prime example

26 Eugenio Garin, ed., La disputa delle arti nel Quattrocento (Florence: Vallecchi, 1947), 7–8. For the ethical scheme Bruni employs in the letter (utilitas, dignitas, voluptas), see Quintilian, IO, III, viii, 27–29, who allows iucunditas as a subsidiary end of deliberative rhetoric, with the traditional utilitas and honestas; also, on dignitas, De inventione, II, lv, 166. Bruni’s letter reverses the scenario of a noted letter of Petrarch’s (Familiares, XX, 4), which tactfully commiserates with a correspondent who has written to him announcing his intent to pursue a legal career.

27 Opere letterarie e politiche, cited in n. 3 above, p. 554. Petrarch is portrayed in this passage, consistently with his own autobiographical writings, as studying law only under duty to his father, finding it “too base for his intellect” (“troppo bassa materia a suo intelletto”) and contrary to his nature, which was “drawn to higher things” (“a più alte cose tirata”). Bruni’s phrases virtually translate Petrarch’s own description of his desire as a law student to devote his time to “alius . . . nobilis sive nature mee aptius” (Familiares, XX, 4). On Bruni’s attitudes to the law as manifested in this letter, see Cesare Vasoli, “Le discipline e il sistema del potere,” in Andrea Cristiani, ed., Sapere e potere. Discipline, dispute, e professioni nell’Università medievale e moderna. Il caso bolognese a confronto. Vol. II. Verso un nuovo sistema del sapere (Bologna: Istituto per la Storia Bolognese, 1990), 28–9; also, more generally, Frederick Krantz, Florentine Legal Thought (1375–1450) (PhD dissertation: Cornell University, 1971), esp. 143–9.

28 Garin, La disputa delle arti, cited in n. 26 above, p. 8: “Nam studia quidem ista ad faciendum virum bonum tota contundent, quo nil utilius excogitari potest; ius autem civile ad faciendum virum bonum nil pertinet.”

29 Garin, La disputa delle arti, p. 8: “Iam vero magnis et praeclaris viris non satis decora est haec in litibus et controversiis mercenaria versatio. Itaque qui nobilitate aut divitiis praecellunt militiae dignitate gaudent, doctoratum vero sibi ad dedecus potius
here is Philip of Macedon, who called on Aristotle to tutor Alexander in philosophy and eloquence, where he would clearly have scorned to have his son taught the law.

In addition to this general disdain for the law as a discipline, we also find Bruni on occasion expressing a more particular, territorial indignation towards lawyers who dare to venture on to the terrain of the *studia humanitatis*. Revealing documents here are two letters Bruni wrote in 1436–37 to Francesco Pizolpasso (c. 1370–1443), Archbishop of Milan, in the thick of his polemic with the Spanish jurist and bishop Alonso de Cartagena (1384/86–1456), who had criticized Bruni’s translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* as less accurate in some respects than the medieval version by Robert Grosseteste. Bruni ironically praises Alonso in his first letter for the extraordinary intellectual range that allows him, a *professor juris*, to opine on philosophy, noting that prodigies of that type are unknown in Italy: “Italians who study the law are largely ignorant of all else, and if they stray into other fields and set themselves up as philosophers, poets, orators, or historians, they are regarded as ridiculous.” Later in the same letter, more tersely, Bruni warns lawyers to remain in their own “camps” (*castra*) and not attempt to invade others’, while in his follow-up letter to Pizolpasso, composed after the receipt of a response from Cartagena, now lost, he states categorically that law and philosophy

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et ignominiam reputarent” (“For it is considered unfitting for great and distinguished men to concern themselves with court-cases and legal wranglings for monetary gain. Those who excel by virtue of nobility or wealth glory in military honors, but would consider the attainment of a doctorate in law as indecorous and ignominious”). Bruni may here be accommodating to the perceived values of his Ferrarese correspondent: on the social prestige of the law as a career in Florence, see Lauro Martines, *Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 71.


31 (“Nostri quidem Itali, qui juris studium profrinentur, nihil fere aliud sciant, quam ipsum ius, et si in ceteris vagnetur studiis ac philosophis et poetis et oratoribus et historicis imperti operam velint, ridiculi habentur.”) Letter of 15 October 1436 to Francesco Pizolpasso, in González Rolán et al., *Humanismo y teoría*, p. 274. In his second letter to Pizolpasso, of 1437, never sent, Bruni admits that his focus on Italian jurists here was intended to spare Alonso’s feelings (*Humanismo y teoría*, p. 298).
are “separate” studies and that a lawyer who intervenes in the field of philosophy risks appearing as absurd, as would a philosopher who ventured into the terrain of the law. In the Cartagena polemic, Bruni is understandably concerned principally with philosophy as a potential domain of lawyerly trespass, but his mention of oratory in the passage first quoted suggests that he regarded eloquence, too, as lying outside the lawyer’s domain. This is made more explicit in a passage of the second letter to Pizolpasso, where Bruni objects to Cartagena’s attribution of “style and eloquence” (stylus et eloquentia) to “those jurists who have composed summae and other such works,” noting haughtily that his standards in this regard appear to be a little higher than his opponent’s. Specifically, he dismisses Dino del Mugello (d. 1298) and Cino da Pistoia (1270–1336)—presumably cited as examples by his antagonist—as estimable for their legal knowledge, but the rankest amateurs in “those other arts and disciplines that make men learned and eloquent” (ceteras disciplinas et artes, quae doctum et eloquentem faciunt hominem), whose surface they have no more than scratched (vix primis ... labiis degustomus).34

Bruni’s decisive positioning of eloquence outside the “camp” of the lawyers in this letter is interesting and potentially provocative, given the long tradition within Italy that coupled rhetoric, in a subsidiary role, to the study of law. The principal center for the formal study of Latin rhetoric in Italy from the late thirteenth century was the University of Bologna, where courses on the art were offered to students as a supplement to their legal studies. Bolognese rhetorical teaching was based on the study of the pseudo-Ciceronian Rhetorica ad Herennium, a text with a significant forensic bias, and whose first two books comprise a comprehensive discussion of legal argumentation, including an extensive treatment of stasis theory.

32 Humanismo y teoría, cited in n. 30 above, pp. 274, 300.
33 Humanismo y teoría, cited in n. 30 above, p. 290 (“ego autem perfectius quiddam et maius et eruditus in praestanti homini requiro”).
34 Humanismo y teoría, cited in n. 30 above, p. 290.
This doctrine appears to have been regarded as having a continuing utility to lawyers in analyzing cases, even if forensic oratory as practiced in Cicero’s Rome was no longer a part of the modern legal process. We find the view enshrined in Petrarch’s famous anecdote about his father saving Cicero’s *Rhetoric* from the flames to which he was consigning his student son’s other distracting literary reading on the grounds that it could serve as a “prop” (*adminiculum*) to him in the legal studies he was attempting to constrain his son to pursue. The nexus between law and pre-humanistic rhetorical study is illustrated within a Florentine context by the existence of two rhetorical compendia drawn up by prominent Florentine lawyers and diplomats based on *Ad Herennium* and on Cicero’s similarly forensically-biased juvenile *De inventione*: one by Bruni’s near-contemporary Lorenzo Ridolfi (c. 1362–1443), in the Biblioteca Nazionale of Florence, and the other by an earlier figure, Luigi Gianfigliazzi (d. c. 1375), now in the Vatican. The surviving manuscript of the Gianfigliazzi compendium was copied in 1417, confirming the continuing currency of this tradition down to the time that Bruni was writing.

Given this background, it seems quite plausible that what we are seeing in the passage on rhetoric in *De studiis* is a piece of humanistic polemic against the philistinism of contemporary lawyers, who reduce the lofty art of rhetoric to an ignominious *adminiculum* to the—in Bruni’s eyes—baser science of the law. To read it in this way, we do not have to believe literally that Florentine lawyers spent their spare moments thrashing out the finer points of the doctrine of *krinomenon*, but simply that their approach to rhetoric was inimical to Bruni—along with, perhaps, their pretence to expertise in the subject at all. Implicit in the positive recommendations of *De

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38 Ward, *Ciceronian Rhetoric*, p. 66. See also, on this work’s fifteenth-century currency, Witt, *Footsteps*, p. 364 n. 73.


studiis et litteris is a very different, broad and "noble" Quintilianesque conception of rhetoric: rhetoric as eloquence, as a holistic composite of mastery of language and wide-ranging knowledge of "things" (peritia litterarum and scientia rerum). Viewed from the perspective of this ideal, the notion of an ars rhetorica reduced to a grinding of dry technical rules seems offensively narrow, as does an ars rhetorica conscripted to the mercenary end of getting an edge over one's opponent in court.

If it is accepted that the passage on rhetoric in Bruni's De studiis et litteris should be read as satirical, what implications will it have for the gender issues that were the starting-point of this essay? One very obvious one is that, if this reading is accepted, there are no longer grounds for considering that Bruni genuinely intended to exclude women from the study of rhetoric in any broad and meaningful sense.39 Instead, his aim seems to be rather to satirize what he considered bankrupt and meretricious models of rhetorical teaching, while advocating instead a broader humanistic alternative, privileging the direct study and imitation of classical texts.40 An implication of this would be that, rather than a special curriculum customized for a female addressee through the omission of rhetoric—a kind of "humanism lite" for the ladies—De studiis should be seen as proposing a course of studies of equal appropriateness to both sexes. This finds external confirmation in Bruni's letter to Niccolò Strozzi, discussed above, which refers Strozzi without qualification to De studiis for an account of the humanistic studies he should pursue.41

39The same conclusion is reached in two recent discussions of this passage of De studiis et litteris that anticipate my arguments here to some extent, though without entering in any detail into the rhetorical context or proposing a satirical reading: Stevenson, Women Latin Poets, cited in n. 13 above, pp. 154–5, and Allen, Concept of Woman, vol. 2, cited in n. 1 above, pp. 698–9.

40Suggestive in connection with Bruni's procedure in De studiis is Augustine's contention in De doctrina Christiana that talented pupils learn eloquence better through reading and listening to the eloquent than through studying rhetorical precepts ("quoniam si acutum et fervens est ingenium, facilius adhaeret eloquentia legentibus et auditentibus eloquentes, quam eloquentiae praecepta sectantibus"; De doctrina Christiana, IV, 3, 4, in Richard Leo Enos, Roger Thompson, et al., eds., The Rhetoric of St Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina Christiana and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 40–41. It should be noted, however, that, outside a satirical context, in the dedication to his collection of translations of Greek oratory of 1422, Bruni argues for a more balanced practice, incorporating both theoretical study and the study and imitation of models (Leonardo Bruni Aretino Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften mit einer chronologie seiner werke und briefe, ed. Hans Baron (Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner, 1928), 129).

41Garin, La disputa delle arti, cited in n. 26 above, p. 8.
A further implication of the new reading of *De studiis* being proposed here also deserves underlining. Just as it becomes clear in this reading that Bruni is not seriously proscribing rhetorical study for women, so too he does not seem to be seriously proposing that women have no place in the public sphere. Bruni states three times in the passage quite explicitly that women have no place in the *forum*, one occasion specifying that women are removed from the “contentions and contests of the forum” (*fori contentiones atque certamina*), and on another that she should leave the “asperity of the forum” (*fori asperitatem*) to men.42 If we assume that Bruni is here speaking of rhetoric in general, understood in a Ciceronian sense as an art of civic discourse, it evidently makes sense to interpret the word “forum” in its broad sense as indicative of the whole public sphere.43 Given that Bruni’s exemplification here, however, is near-exclusively drawn from the specific rhetorical field of forensic oratory, there seem grounds here for taking “forum” instead in its narrower sense of the “courtroom”: a setting in which it might be said quite uncontentiously in Bruni’s culture that women were out of place.44 This interpretation of the passage makes better sense contextually than the construction conventionally placed on it, when it is considered that Bruni was addressing his treatise to a woman related by birth and by marriage to two of the most powerful dynasties of central Italy and raised from childhood with the knowledge that, if circumstances demanded, she might have to play a part in government. The reason why women of Battista’s standing received a strong Latin education was, in fact, precisely in view of such contingencies, and Battista would herself prove her worth in this regard at numerous points over the course of her married life.45 To suggest to such a woman that she

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42See above, p. 52–53. The third mention of the *forum* occurs towards Bruni’s beginning of the discussion of rhetoric, where he states that a woman “will never see the forum” (“*numquam forum sit aspectura*”).

43See, as an example of this, Jones, *The Currency of Eros*, cited in n. 7 above, p. 21, who regards Bruni, with Francesco Barbaro, as “encouraging women to study but insisting that those studies be used only in private, familial contexts.”

44It is telling in this regard that the portion of rhetorical teaching most closely related to politics, that regarding the topics of deliberative oratory, does not feature in Bruni’s exemplification of the irrelevance of rhetoric to women.

had no place in the public realm generally would have been a strange faux pas for a man of the urbanity of Bruni. To paint her, by contrast, as remote from the professional world of the law-courts was hardly an insult to a woman of this status, as it would not have been to a man.

These considerations must prompt a quite serious revision of the traditional understanding of Battista da Montefeltro’s role within De studiis as addressee. Most readings of the text take Bruni’s unusual choice of a woman as addressee as a given and then exert themselves to explain the various concessions and accommodations that this required him to make to his program. A more productive approach might, however, rather be to ask why Bruni—not a figure one thinks of as notably pro-feminist in his other writings—should have chosen a woman as addressee and ideal reader of such an important manifesto of humanistic cultural ideals. One reason must be simply the novelty represented by the figure of the secular female intellectual: a novelty that equipped her well to serve as a figurehead for the novel intellectual program Bruni is outlining here. Another is the particular variant of novelty that the secular “learned lady” represented, as the reincarnation of a prestigious classical type: a point Bruni underlines in his prefatory remarks to De studiis, where he invokes Cornelia, Aspasia, and Sappho as classical prototypes for the modern cultivated woman. Beyond this, by virtue of her sex and rank, Battista was well positioned to embody a “liberal,” disinterested, and aristocratic humanistic model of culture, of the type that Bruni sketches out in his letter to Strozzi, where he contrasts it with the mercenary or “saleable” (vendibilis) culture of the law.

decade of the century when she was in her early thirties, and Clough describes her as effectively the ruler of Pesaro in the years before her husband, Galeazzo Malatesta (1385–1452), considered by most historians an inadequate ruler, ceded his vicariates to Francesco Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro in 1445.

46 For a nuanced discussion of Bruni’s attitudes to women in his writings in general, see Allen, Concept of Woman, vol. 2, cited in n. 1 above, pp. 683–703, esp. 700–02 for his adherence in certain works to traditional Aristotelian notions of gender difference.

47 On the emergence of the secular female intellectual in Italy in this period, see Virginia Cox, Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400–1650 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2–3, 17. Battista da Montefeltro was of the second generation of such women, following figures such as Maddalena Scrovegni (1356–1429) and Angela Nogarola (d. c. 1436), both active by the 1380s.

48 P. 92 K. Aspasia’s presence on the list is of particular interest in the present context, given that her fame was predominantly as a rhetorician. On the role attributed to female erudites in Italian humanism as emblems of the revival of classical culture, see Cox, Women’s Writing, 28–30.
very “gratuitousness” of classical learning for women gave their learning a particular discursive value for male humanists, serving to distance their preferred educational model from any base associations with the “vendible.” This was perhaps something of particular interest to a “new man” like Bruni, who had profited so significantly in social and financial terms from his own humanistic skills. 49 Finally, as a woman, and a famously devout one, Battista served eloquently to deflect the accusation that classical erudition was morally corrupting for the Christian reader: an issue that remains very much alive within the treatise and which Bruni devotes a considerable amount energy to addressing. 50 If classical literature could be recommended with impunity to a woman like Battista, a paragon of piety and moral probity, it became difficult to conceive of it as representing any serious danger for men. 51

A further point deserves to be made regarding Bruni’s choice of Battista as addressee for his treatise: its role in positioning the educational ideal he is proposing in relation to political power. Other humanists, like Pierpaolo Vergerio in his De ingenuis moribus (c. 1402–03) and Enea Silvio Piccolomini in his De liberorum educatione (1450), would choose scions of princely dynasties as the nominal addressees of their educational treatises, clearly staking out the value of the studia humanitatis for prospective or actual rulers. 52 Bruni’s strategy


50See especially pp. 114–21 K.

51It has sometimes been suggested that Bruni’s emphasis on patristic literature in De studiis may be seen as an accommodation to the sex of his addressee; see, for example, Kallendorf, “Introduction” to Humanist Educational Treatises, cited in n. 3 above, p. xi. See, however, Paolo Viti, “Leonardo Bruni e le polemiche antihu-


52Texts and translations of both treatises are available in Kallendorf, Humanist Educational Treatises, cited in n. 3 above. For discussion of Vergerio’s treatise, see John M. McManamon, Pier Paolo Vergerio: The Humanist as Orator (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), 89–103. The addressees are, respectively, Ubertino da Carrara (1390–1407) of Padua, son of the ruler of that city, Francesco Novello da Carrara; and Ladislaus Postumus (1440–57), duke of Austria and king of Hungary and Bohemia.
is more oblique: rather than a ruler or prospective ruler, he addresses
his treatise to a figure close to political power but not formally
invested with it, and positioned to influence events not directly but
through the moral and intellectual suasion she may come to exert
on her spouse. This indirect relationship to power allows Battista
to function effectively as an idealized prototype for the humanist
intellectual, whose relation to the exercise of power is similarly
rhetorical and oblique. Interesting in this regard is a passage in the
treatise, ostensibly illustrating the political relevance of literature,
which cites examples from Homer showing moments when a ruler
or hero is swayed by the prudent advice of a counselor. Bruni’s
examples from the Iliad are both inaccurate as textual citations. One,
from Book 6, has Hector restraining Aeneas when he is rashly urging
his troops on to battle, urging the value of caution and prudence.53
The other, from Book 2, has the goddess Iris descending to reproach
Agamemnon for sleeping when “so great a responsibility is his and
the safety of his people has been committed to his care.”54 Both are
suggestive if we consider them as insinuating a sense of how learning
might inflect the exercise of power—the second, perhaps, especially,
given the coincidence of the sex of the “counsellor” in question and
that of the addressee of the text.

When we consider the complexity of Battista’s role as addressee
and cultural prototype in De studiis, it becomes all the more apparent
that it is a literalist misunderstanding of the treatise to see it as ex-
cluding her from the study of rhetoric in a broad sense on the grounds
of her sex. Her role is, on the contrary, quintessentially rhetorical, in
that it is seen as issuing in politically beneficial moral suasion, and
her education is rhetorical in that it equips her ethically and ver-
bally to give this suasion the maximum force. Though a sui generis
modernized version, Battista may be seen as an update of the Quin-
tilianesque orator: a vir bonus dicendi peritus inflected to the feminine
and adapted to the modern Christian world. She also symbolically
marks the transition of the ideal locus of rhetorical counsel from the
republican public sphere, emphatically gendered as masculine, to
the quieter and more ambiguously gendered sphere of the court and
the circles of the prince. The device of using a feminine figure in

53Kallendorf (p. 329, n. 18) identifies the passage in Homer as Iliad, 6.77ff., noting
that Bruni appears to have substituted Hector for Helenus.
54P. 113 K; for the Latin, see p. 112. Kallendorf (p. 329, n. 19), following Hans
Baron in his 1928 edition, cited in n. 40 above, p. 15n., identifies the Homeric passage
as Iliad, 2.23–35, noting that Bruni’s “Iris” may reflect a corruption in his manuscript
for oneiros (“dream”).

this way to emblematize cultural ideals largely in practical terms invested in males is far from unique to Bruni’s treatise. As Stephen Kolsky has noted, we see something of the same dynamic pertaining in the figure of the late-antique Christian poet Proba (c. 322–c. 370 CE) in Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* (c. 1360–61), where she represents a model of moralized Christian engagement with classical learning presented as equally of relevance to women and men. Later, in the 1440s, in implicit polemic with Bruni, we find the Venetian humanist Lauro Quirini (1420–1480/81) using the Veronese *erudita* Isotta Nogarola (1418–66) as figurehead for a Venetian model of humanism that differs quite sharply from Bruni’s “Florentine” ideal in its more technical, philosophical orientation, reflecting the centrality of Paduan Aristotelianism within the Venetian intellectual culture of the time. If we read women in humanistic texts such as these solely as “women,” we risk losing a great deal of their significance. The female intellectual in all these cases is being conscripted to perform complex tasks within the formation of intellectual identities that have little directly or immediately to do with women, even though women might certainly benefit from the resulting enabling discourses. A parallel can usefully drawn with the kind of cultural work Jennifer Summit sees being performed in late-medieval and early-modern England by the figure of the “woman writer,” with whom the “learned lady” of humanism obviously overlaps.

One advantage of rethinking the literalist reading of Bruni as advocating women’s exclusion from rhetorical studies is that it allows us to revisit with fresh eyes the question of what fifteenth-century women’s relation to rhetoric and the rhetorical tradition actually was. As was noted towards the beginning of this study, *De studiis et litteris* is one of Quattrocento humanism’s rare explicit general pronouncements on this subject, and has tended for that reason to punch above

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57 *Summit, Lost Property*, cited in n. 8 above, esp. 16–18.
its weight within the scholarship in this area. With Bruni out of the way as an authority, it is striking how difficult it becomes to find supporting evidence for the thesis that fifteenth-century Italian humanists regarded rhetoric as lying outside a woman’s proper field of study—certainly, if we limit our field of evidence to those humanists who showed themselves sympathetic to women’s education in general. On the contrary, especially if we keep within the world of the courts, Italian humanism appears to have been notably supportive of women’s cultivation of eloquence, and notably unbound by the Aristotelian-scholastic ethical prescriptions that mandated silence as the feminine speech norm. Of course, an important caveat is necessary here. In speaking of Italian humanists’ supportiveness of women’s cultivation of rhetoric, we are not speaking of a general revision of perceptions of gendered speech decorum, but rather a local nuancing of attitude, affecting only that minuscule group of elite women that was accorded a humanistic education and conscripted to play the complex role as cultural signifier adumbrated in the case of Battista da Montefeltro above. These women were not merely permitted to be eloquent; rather, eloquence was practically demanded from them, within a culture in which the prime means of displaying erudition was through the performance of rhetorical competence, written or spoken.

This point may be easily demonstrated by a survey of the surviving evidence. Where written rhetoric is concerned, we may point to the letters of women like Isotta Nogarola, Costanza Varano Sforza (1426–47), and Cassandra Fedele (?1465–1558), all quite widely circulated and admired in their lifetime.58 Where oratory is concerned—quite surprisingly, given the pervasiveness in this period of the social-ethical conventions mandating a modest taciturnity for women—a respectable number of cases also exist from this period of women speaking in public to the enthusiastic applause of their contemporaries. The first attested instance is none other than Battista da Montefeltro, the dedicatee of Bruni’s De studiis et litteris, who spoke in 1433 before the Emperor Sigismund at Urbino, pleading the case for

Leonardo Bruni on Women and Rhetoric

her imprisoned son-in-law and her husband, recently deposed as lord of Pesaro. Also famed for their public oratory were Battista’s granddaughter Costanza Varano, and Costanza’s daughter Battista Sforza da Montefeltro (1446–72): a remarkable intellectual dynasty of women whose tradition of eloquence found numerous celebrants among the humanists of their time. The extent to which female oratory was socially accepted as a phenomenon is well demonstrated by cases in which male humanists appear to have commissioned speeches from women for public delivery: an oration by Nogarola in praise of St Jerome of the early 1450s seems to have been commissioned by Ermolao Barbaro the Elder (1410–71), then bishop of her home town of Verona, while a speech by Fedele of the 1490s in praise of literature (De laudibus literarum) was composed at the request of Giorgio Valla (1447–c. 1500), reader in rhetoric at the School of San Marco. Among writings of male humanists celebratory of female eloquence, we may cite the numerous paratexts that accompanied printed editions of Cassandra Fedele’s oration Pro Bertucio Lamberto (1487); numerous funeral orations, including Giannantonio Campano’s for Battista Sforza, with its glowing account of Pius II’s

59 For a translation of the speech, see Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr, eds., Her Immaculate Hand. Selected Works by and about the Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983), 35–8. For discussion, see Bernardino Feliciangeli, “Notizie sulla vita e sugli scritti di Costanza Varano-Sforza (1426–1447),” Giornale storico della letteratura italiana 23 (1894): 1–75 (p. 6); Clough, “Daughters and Wives,” cited in n. 1 above, p. 45; Allen, Concept of Woman, vol. 2, cited in n. 1 above, pp. 704–06 (though note, in this discussion, the erroneous date of 1431 given for Galeazzo Malatesta’s death at 704). An earlier speech sometimes attributed to Battista, delivered before Pope Martin V in 1418, is probably a phantom (Feliciangeli, “Notizie,” 15n.).

60 For studies of these women and their political and intellectual activity, see Clough, “Daughters and Wives,” cited in n. 1 above; Patrignani, “Le donne,” cited in n. 45 above; and, on Battista Sforza, Marinella Mazzanti Bonvini, Battista Sforza Montefeltro: Una principessa nel Rinascimento italiano (Urbino: Quattrocenti, 1993). Though less famed for her erudition, Battista da Montefeltro’s daughter and Costanza Varano’s mother Elisabetta Malatesta Varano also had a reputation for eloquence; see n. 62 below. The tradition continued into the sixteenth century with Battista Sforza’s famous granddaughter Vittoria Colonna (c. 1490–1547).

61 For Nogarola’s speech, see Opera, cited in n. 56 above, 2, 276–89, Complete Writings, cited in n. 56 above, pp. 167–74. On the context, see pp. 161–3; Abel, De Isotae Nogarolae Vita, in Nogarola, Opera, 1, lxvi-xviii. For Fedele’s oration, see Giacomo Filippo Tomasini, ed., Clarissimae feminae Cassandræ Fidelis venetae epistolae et orationes (Padua: Franciscus Bolzetta, 1636), 201–07; Robin, ed., Cassandra Fedele, cited in n. 58 above, pp. 159–62. Valla’s involvement is alluded to in the opening words of the speech.
admiration of her eloquence; Guiniforte Barzizza’s 1442 set-piece letter congratulating Costanza Varano on a speech and imaginatively reconstructing the scene of its delivery, and several of the biographies in Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti’s *Gynevera, de le clare donne* (c. 1489–90). Where rhetorical study among women is concerned, of particular interest is Martino Filetico’s *locundissimae disputationes* (1462–63), which portrays Battista Sforza in erudite conversation with the author, who had been employed as her tutor. An extended conversation in the second book concerns precisely Battista’s delight in the study of rhetoric, which she describes as her “leader” and “goddess,” and defends warmly against Filetico’s manufactured Platonic moral criticisms, clearly intended to provoke precisely such a response.

Given this copious evidence to the contrary, it becomes unsustainable to maintain the position we find so often stated without nuance in scholarly discussion, that Italian fifteenth-century humanists regarded the study and practice of rhetoric by women as indeco-

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63 The discussion is at Martino Filetico, *locundissimae disputationes*, ed. Guido Arbizzoni (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1992), 192–201. See especially p. 192 on Battista’s own devotion to rhetoric (“hanc ego tanquam ducem omni cura, omni studio persequer et tamquam deam quandam observo, veneror, adoro”; “this I put my every care and study into following as my leader; this I worship, venerate, and adore as my goddess”), and 193 on her debt to it (“Dat enim haec mihi certam viam rationeque capessendi ingenii cultum, ut non modo docte sed erudite possim et perpolite atque eleganter dicere”; “This art confers on me a way and method of cultivating my mind, such that I come to speak not merely correctly but with learning and refinement and elegance”).
rous and to be discouraged. Some certainly did: Francesco Barbaro in *De re uxoria* quite categorically dissuades women from seeking “the praise attaching to declamation, or the applause and acclaim deriving from public harangues.” To generalize from this, however, is simply misleading. Barbaro’s view was presumably not shared even by his nephew, Ermolao, commissioner of Isotta Nogarola’s 1453 oration on St Jerome, let alone by the humanists of the 1480s and 90s who vied to celebrate the oratory of Cassandra Fedele. Where rhetorical study is concerned, it seems even more untenable to posit a generalized humanist hostility than in the case of oratorical practice. Bruni’s *De studiis* is isolated as a humanistic educational text advocating a classical education for women that excludes the study of rhetoric, and Bruni’s position, as we have seen, is not what it seems. Quirini’s letter to Isotta Nogarola, cited earlier, takes rhetoric as given, while congratulating Nogarola in her ambition to pursue more difficult and demanding studies. Filetico’s *Iocundissimae disputationes* shows rhetoric as pivotal to the classical studies of Battista Sforza. To argue that humanists recognized a value in female eloquence is not, of course, to suggest that they regarded women as their full intellectual equals, still less that they envisaged a socially equal role for women. Feminist scholarship has been correct in calling attention to the many and insidious ways in which women’s “otherness” was registered and reinforced within apparently celebratory discourses. It is incorrect, however, to say that this exclusionary tendency extended to a banishment of women from the humanistic culture of eloquence. To see fifteenth-century learned women as systematically “silenced” is as inaccurate as to see them as full citizens of the *respublica litterarum*. The truth lies somewhere in between.

64Barbaro, *De re uxoria*, cited in n. 9 above, E2r: “Nec enim declamatorii ludi laus, nec concionis plausus et adulatio, sed eloquens et morata et gravis taciturnitas ab eis [i.e. mulieribus] desideratur.” “for what is required in women is not the praise that derives from declamation, not the applause and adulation that arise from public speaking, but rather an eloquent and mannerly and dignified taciturnity.”