ISABELLA D’ESTE

Selected Letters

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Introduction

*Isabella d’Este: Princess, Collector, Correspondent*

Selected from nearly sixteen thousand manuscript letters, the writings published here emanated over a period of some fifty years from the chancery of Renaissance Italy’s most prolific female correspondent, Isabella d’Este (1474–1539). Isabella was born into the elite class that ruled Europe through bonds of kinship, marriage, and military service. As the firstborn child of Ercole I d’Este, second duke of Ferrara and Eleonora d’Aragona, princess of Naples, she married Francesco II Gonzaga, fourth marchese of Mantua in 1490. By that marriage she became marchesa of that city-state, co-governing it until after Francesco’s death in 1519 and then operating in the background when their son, Federico II, assumed power.

Meanwhile, Isabella’s brother, Alfonso I, succeeded their father as duke of Ferrara, taking as his first wife Anna Sforza of Milan and as his second, Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander VI. Her sister Beatrice reinforced Ferrara’s alliance with Milan when she married Duke Ludovico Sforza. Another brother, Ippolito, worked the power corridors of the papal court, extending his reach by serving in Hungary as archbishop of Esztergom; he later achieved the rank of cardinal.¹ There were also outliers in the family. While the youngest of the Este ducal offspring, Sigismondo, lived quietly in the shadow of his more powerful siblings, their brother Ferrante spent thirty-four years in prison and died there for plotting to overthrow his brother as duke. Their natural brother Giulio, severely scarred from a gouge in the eye delivered by Ippolito in an act of jealous rage, was given a life sentence for the same treason and was freed only at the age of eighty-one.

Isabella was a figure of renown in her own lifetime and the object of considerable fascination in succeeding centuries. In some ways, indeed, she has become rather too familiar as a “personality” of the Italian Renaissance. Historians of art, theater, music, and fashion have studied her records in detail, charting her prodigious activities as a collector and patron of the arts, a serious amateur musician, and an arbiter of taste. Visitors to the major museums of Paris, Vienna, London, New York, and other world capitals can admire grand canvases from her collection of paintings, peer into glass cases displaying her jewelry, and ponder her visage as rendered by Titian, Leonardo da Vinci, Rubens, and others. Plates

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1. Isabella’s maternal aunt, Beatrice d’Aragona, was also queen of Hungary and Bohemia as the wife of King Mátyás Corvinus from 1476 until his death in 1490 and then as wife to King Vladislaus II of Bohemia. “International” marriages among the Gonzagas included Francesco’s parents (his mother was Margarete von Wittelsbach, of Bavaria) and his sister, Chiara (who was countess of Montpensier).
from her dinner table may be seen in collections around the globe from Vancouver to Melbourne, where they are identifiable by the personal emblems she incorporated into their decoration. Inside the Ducal Palace of Mantua—now a museum—remain the ornate ceilings and the remnants of trompe-l’oeil architecture in her apartments, chambers that have long stood empty of their treasures, most of which were sold to Charles I of England in 1627 or taken in the Habsburg sack of Mantua in 1630. Over the centuries since she lived, many scholars have consulted Isabella d’Este’s papers for information on specific subjects. Many have studied her relations with the historical protagonists of her time; and a notable number of writers have undertaken to narrate all or part of her life in essays, biographies and novels. The present volume, however, constitutes the first assembly of a broad selection from Isabella d’Este’s correspondence—the most voluminous


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documentary record of her “voice” in many spheres—and the first translation into English of such a selection.\(^5\) It is my hope that the range of subject matter here included will both entice new readers to explore the rich landscape of early modern life and bring new material to bear on discussions of the period among experts in the field, perhaps unsettling comfortable notions of Isabella’s character that derive from partial or prejudicial views.

A commonplace of historiography casts Isabella d’Este as a female counterpart to the “Renaissance men” for whom Italy is celebrated: polymaths like Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti and Niccolò Machiavelli, whose reputations vaunt their ability to excel as geniuses in numerous spheres.\(^6\) But while the parallel between Isabella and such men is suggestive, it is largely so by contrast, since outlets for her talents were restricted to activities deemed acceptable at the time for elite women. She spent her childhood in the sophisticated court of Ferrara, in regular contact with, musicians, scholars, and courtiers, including prominent humanists like Battista Guarino, who educated her for regency as consort to Francesco Gonzaga. Marriage arrangements were made for Francesco and Isabella in 1480, when the future bride was six and her fiancé was fourteen. In an obvious effort to prepare them for harmonious relations, their families cultivated a friendship between the future spouses by encouraging visits and letter exchanges. Contemporaries described the child Isabella as intelligent and inquisitive, highly verbal, and socially precocious; memorably, she entertained guests with her dancing at the age of seven.\(^7\) Accounts by her teachers recall

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5. It would be inaccurate to discuss Isabella’s correspondence archive as a record of her voice without acknowledging the mediated nature of conventional, generic, mostly dictated letters. For a brief consideration of such mediation, see Deanna Shemek, “‘Ci Ci’ and ‘Pa Pa’: Script, Mimicry, and Mediation in Isabella d’Este’s Letters,” Rinascimento: Rivista dell’istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento series 2, 43 (2005): 75–91.


7. Alessandro Luzio, I precettori di Isabella d’Este: Appunti e documenti; per le nozze Renier-Campostrini (Ancona: Morelli, 1887). Luzio cites letters from Beltramino Cusatro to Federico I Gonzaga and from Guido da Bagno. Cusatro, who conducted the marriage agreement between Isabella and Francesco’s families, reports that after preliminary agreements were reached, Isabella was called to speak with him. “And when I and others put different questions to her, she answered with such intelligence and quickness that it seemed to me miraculous that a little girl of six could make such apt replies. Though I had already been told before that she was especially bright, I would never have imagined her to be so much so and in this way” (11–12). Guido da Bagno, writing a year later, reported, “The most illustrious Madama Isabella danced twice for us with Ambrogio the Jew, who is employed by the most illustrious lord duke of Urbino and is her dancing master; no one else danced with such style and ability, which was so much greater than one would expect at her age” (12n).
an active learner possessed of an excellent memory, a girl who enjoyed horseback riding and card games as well as Latin lessons and chivalric romances.  

On 15 February 1490, Isabella d’Este entered her new home city in triumphal procession, having married Francesco II Gonzaga by proxy four days earlier in Ferrara’s ducal chapel. For the next half-century, she played a substantial role in the culture of the Mantuan state, first as marchesa and then, after Francesco’s death in 1519, as an important auxiliary figure in the court of their son and heir, Federico II Gonzaga. Six of Isabella and Francesco’s children survived infancy. Eleonora married Francesco Maria della Rovere, nephew and heir of the childless Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, thereby succeeding her aunt, Elisabetta Gonzaga, as duchess of Urbino. Federico succeeded his father as marcheshe and was named first duke of Mantua by Habsburg Emperor Charles V in 1530. He married Margherita Paleologa, heir to the marquisate of Monferrato, and ruled Mantua until he died in 1540. Isabella and Francesco’s two other daughters, Ippolita and Livia Osanna, chose to enter convents, in Ippolita’s case preempting plans to place her at the French court in service to the queen. The couple’s bookish second son, Ercole (also known as Aloyse, a northern form of the name Luigi), pursued a career within the Church, where a concerted campaign by his mother led to his appointment as cardinal in 1527. He later served as papal legate to the Council of Trent. Their third son, Ferrante (also known by his Spanish names, Ferrando and Ferdinando) married Isabella di Capua, princess of Molfetta; Ferrante excelled as a commander in Charles V’s imperial army and later governed as viceroy of Sicily. These siblings’ political positions placed them at times not only near the center of historic events for Italy, but also on dramatically conflicting sides of the turmoil that wracked the Italian peninsula over the course of the sixteenth century. During the devastating 1527 Sack of Rome, for example, Ferrante represented Charles V, whose unpaid troops were pillaging the city to the emperor’s helpless dismay. Ercole, meanwhile, served the Holy City’s ineffectual prince, Pope Clement VII. Eleonora Gonzaga was at the time in Urbino hearing Clement’s appeals for support, and Federico II was in Mantua, dodging calls for him to choose between empire and Church. As ferocious soldiers raped, wrecked, and murdered their way through the streets of Rome, Isabella d’Este herself was barricaded inside a palace owned by the powerful Colonna family, where she was offering refuge.

8. On Isabella’s memory and her childhood Latin studies, see the letter of her tutor, Jacopo Gallino in Luzio, I precettori, 15. Ferrara fostered two important innovators of heroic adventure poetry in Isabella’s lifetime. Matteo Maria Boiardo’s Orlando innamorato is dedicated to her father, while Ludovico Ariosto’s Orlando furioso is dedicated to her brother, Ippolito. Isabella knew both poets personally and is the subject of tributes in the Furioso’s final edition. The relevant lines appear in Orlando furioso 13.59–60, 41.67 and 42.84. See also Cartwright, Isabella d’Este, 1:293–94.

reportedly, to thousands. She thus escaped unscathed from one of history’s most horrifying imperial invasions.10

Isabella d’Este was keenly interested in politics, government, and social life and had evident gifts for all three, but it is chiefly for her activities as a patron and a collector that history has thus far remembered her. As her correspondence documents, she spent decades building a distinguished collection of artworks, books, and antiquities, devoting careful attention to its every detail. While Isabella’s role as a female patron was not unique, what made her collection truly extraordinary, and garnered for her a lasting place in the history of art, were the scope, richness, and coherence of her acquisitions, together with her meticulous construction of a designated space in which to display them.11 Shortly after marrying, she embarked on a project to decorate her private apartments in Mantua’s Castello di San Giorgio (now part of the Ducal Palace complex). Her quarters included a large reception room (the Camera delle Armi), her bedroom, a chapel, and a bathroom, plus two additional chambers designed to house books, paintings, antiquities, and other luxury collectibles. These two camerini (little rooms) were a studiolo (study) and a room below it that she called the grotta (grotto), with a short staircase running between them. Isabella used these spaces for reading and quiet withdrawal, but she conceived them also for display to selected guests as an expression of her personal culture, taste, and values. They are recorded as one of the most spectacular instances of self-fashioning in the Italian Renaissance. Stephen Campbell observes of these delightfully stimulating rooms:

Isabella’s camerini were emphatically a place devoted to curiosity, to sensual experiences whether visual, tactile, or auditory, and to the reading of “profane” literature. Described by contemporaries as a kind of locus amoenus, they were a place for music-making, for the discussion of cose amorose, and for the accumulation of small and “curious” works of art and nature.12

11. On other women patrons, see a volume whose title explicitly evokes Isabella d’Este: Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins, eds., Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001). See also Sally Hickson, Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua: Matrons, Mystics and Monasteries (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012).
12. Stephen Campbell, The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 61. Campbell offers a compelling, revisionary interpretation of the studiolo and its contents as a project that in large part was devoted to the management of a freely acknowledged and carefully explored eros. The scholarship on these spaces is extensive. Among the most important contributions, see the substantial work of Clifford M. Brown, including, in order of date of publication, “Una testa de Platone antica con la punta dil naso di cera”: Unpublished
Isabella surely had in mind as models for her project the *studioli* she knew about in the palaces of Urbino, Gubbio, and even Ferrara, where each of her parents had at least one such chamber, but no woman before her had elaborated so full a vision of the domestic interior as personal statement, and no patron, male or female, had developed a multi-media collection of such signature coherence. By the time it was completed, seven large narrative paintings (now owned by the Louvre) hung on the walls of the *studiolo*, by Andrea Mantegna, Lorenzo Costa, Pietro Perugino and (after relocation of the apartments in 1519) Antonio Allegri da Correggio. Isabella’s art collection included additional works by Giovanni Bellini, Giancristoforo Romano, Michelangelo, Francesco Francia, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, and others. The last three artists were among those who executed her portrait. Highly wrought intarsia panels as well as the marchesa’s collections of books, ancient and *all’antica* sculptures, cameos, medallions, and other precious finds increased the space’s symbolic density, while frescoes, sculpted doorways, gilded ceilings, and tiles bearing enigmatic emblems and mottoes further ornamented the rooms. All of these carefully planned features contributed to an...
In addition to Arkham House’s Selected Letters volumes, Hippocampus Press, Necronomicon Press, and NightShade Books have printed several collections of Lovecraft’s letters to specific correspondents. NightShade Books has even printed the joint Lovecraft-Wandrei correspondence in Mysteries of Time and Spirit: The Letters of H.P. Lovecraft and Donald Wandrei.