

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

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 Wladislaus 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).

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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.² 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 1630.³ 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.⁴ The present volume, however, constitutes the first assembly of a broad selection from Isabella d'Este's correspondence—the most voluminous

2. See Lisa Boutin Vitela, "Dining in the Gonzaga Suburban Palaces: The Use and Reception of Istoriated Maiolica," *Predella* 33 (2013): 103–19; Valerie Taylor, "Art and the Table in Sixteenth-Century Mantua: Feeding the Demand for Innovative Design," in *The Material Renaissance*, ed. Michelle O'Malley and Evelyn S. Welch (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 174–96.

3. On the sale to Charles I, see Alessandro Luzio, *La galleria dei Gonzaga venduta all'Inghilterra nel 1627–1628: Documenti degli archivi di Mantova e Londra raccolti ed illustrati* (Milan: Cogliati, 1913; facsimile reprint Rome: Bardi, 1974).

4. Book-length biographies include, in order of date of publication, Julia Maria Cartwright [Ady], *Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, 1474–1539: A Study of the Renaissance*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1903); Titina Strano, *Isabella d'Este, marchesa di Mantova* (Milan: Ceschina, 1938); Giannetto Bongiovanni, *Isabella d'Este, marchesa di Mantova* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1939); Jan Lauts, *Isabella d'Este: Fürstin der Renaissance, 1474–1539* (Hamburg: M. von Schröder, 1952); Jeanne Boujassy, *Isabella d'Este, grande dame de la Renaissance* (Paris: Fayard, 1960); Edith Patterson Meyer, *First Lady of the Renaissance: A Biography of Isabella d'Este* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970); George Marek, *The Bed and the Throne: The Life of Isabella d'Este* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Massimo Felisatti, *Isabella d'Este: La primadonna del Rinascimento* (Milan: Bompiani, 1982); Daniela Pizzagalli, *La signora del Rinascimento: Vita e splendori di Isabella d'Este alla corte di Mantova* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001). Coming to my attention too late to be considered here is the most recent Lorenzo Boldi and Clark Anthony Lawrence, *Isabella d'Este: A Renaissance Woman* (Rimini: Guaraldi, 2016). All of these are written for a general readership and feature minimal documentation, as is true of the collective portrait, Kate Simon, *A Renaissance Tapestry: The Gonzaga of Mantua* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). A forthcoming biography by Barbara Banks Amendola, *First Lady of the World: A Biography of Isabella d'Este* (seen by this author in preliminary form) features substantial archival documentation. Among the novels, see Maria Bellonci, *Private Renaissance: a Novel*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Morrow, 1989); and Jacqueline Park, *The Secret Book of Grazia de Rossi: a Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997). In a category apart belong the many scholarly studies of Alessandro Luzio and his collaborator Rodolfo Renier. These co-founders of the *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana (GSLI)* planned to write a definitive biography of Isabella d'Este, but that book never materialized. Of particular note are their two longest studies, Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renier, *Mantova e Urbino: Isabella d'Este ed Elisabetta Gonzaga nelle relazioni familiari e nelle vicende politiche* (Turin-Rome: Roux, 1893; reprint Bologna: Forni, 1976); and *La coltura e le relazioni letterarie di Isabella d'Este Gonzaga*, ed. Simone Albonico (Milan: Bonnard, 2005). The first of these presents itself in many ways as a biography.

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

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.

6. Several of the paragraphs below draw on my entries for Isabella d’Este in “Este, Isabella d’” in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1999), 2:295–97; and “Este, Isabella d’,” in *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France, and England*, ed. Diana Robin, Anne R. Larsen, and Carole Levin (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 130–33.

7. Alessandro Luzio, *I precettori di Isabella d’Este: Appunti e documenti; per le nozze Renier-Campostrini* (Ancona: Morelli, 1887). Luzio cites letters from Beltramo 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.⁸

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 marchese 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.⁹ 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.

9. See Paul V. Murphy, *Ruling Peacefully: Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga and Patrician Reform in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

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 amoroze*, and for the accumulation of small and "curious" works of art and nature.¹²

10. See Leonardo Mazzoldi, *Da Ludovico secondo marchese a Francesco secondo duca*, vol. 2 of Mazzoldi, ed., *Mantova: La storia* (Mantua: Istituto Carlo d'Arco, 1961), 293–95. Cited henceforth as Mazzoldi.

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* (Kirksville, 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.¹³ 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

Negotiations between Isabella d'Este and Niccolò and Giovanni Bellini," *The Art Bulletin* 51, no. 4 (1969): 372–77; "Lo insaciabile desiderio nostro de cose antique': New Documents for Isabella d'Este's Collection of Antiquities," in *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. Cecil Clough (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), 324–53; "Public Interests and Private Collections: Isabella d'Este's Appartamento della Grotta and its Accessibility to Artists, Scholars and Public Figures," *Sonderdruck* 25, no. 4 (1983): 37–41; *La grotta di Isabella d'Este: Un simbolo di continuità dinastica per i duchi di Mantova* (Mantua: Gianluigi Arcari, 1985); "Tullio Lombardo and Mantua: An Inlaid Marble Pavement for Isabella d'Este's Grotta and a Marble Portal of the Studiolo," *Arte Veneta* 43 (1989): 121–30; "Purché la sia cosa che representi antichità: Isabella d'Este e il mondo greco-romano," *Civiltà mantovana* series 3, 30, no. 14/15 (1995): 71–90, reprinted in Daniele Bini, *Isabella d'Este: La primadonna del Rinascimento, Civiltà mantovana* 112, Supplement (Modena: Il Bulino; Mantua: Artiglio, 2001), 129–53; "Fruste et strache nel fabricare': Isabella d'Este's Apartments in the Corte Vecchia," in *La corte di Mantova nell'età di Andrea Mantegna: 1450–1550: Atti del Convegno, Londra, 6–8 marzo 1992, Mantova, 28 marzo 1992*, ed. Cesare Mozzarelli, Robert Oresko, and Leandro Ventura (Rome: Bulzoni, 1997), 295–335; *Isabella d'Este in the Ducal Palace in Mantua: An Overview of her Rooms in the Castello di San Giorgio and the Corte Vecchia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005). See also Clifford M. Brown and Anna Maria Lorenzoni, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia: Documents for the History of Art and Culture in Renaissance Mantua* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1982); Clifford M. Brown, Anna Maria Lorenzoni, and Sally Hickson, "Per dare qualche splendore a la gloriosa cita di Mantua": *Documents for the Antiquarian Collection of Isabella d'Este* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2002). On Isabella as a collector, see also Rose Marie San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma: Isabella d'Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991): 67–78.

13. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 62. The standard study on Renaissance *studioli* is Wolfgang Liebenwein, *Studiolo: Storia e tipologia di uno spazio culturale*, ed. Claudia Cieri Via, trans. Alessandro Califano (Ferrara: Panini, 2005). In English, see Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

intricate network of significations designed to project an image of Isabella d'Este as a woman of sovereign taste, substantial learning, and solid virtue.¹⁴

Isabella ascribed to herself an “insatiable desire for things ancient” and an “appetite” for beautiful things. Both types of goods were on offer for wealthy and discriminating buyers in sixteenth-century Italy. She shopped assiduously, often through correspondence with trusted agents, for pieces of antique sculpture and for all manner of applied and decorative arts, demanding peerless quality in every purchase and devoting unstinting effort to obtaining precisely what she wanted.¹⁵ She carefully inspected fabrics from France and Venice, gloves from Spain, jewelry, crystal, flowers, belts, beads, and fragrance-filled buttons, never hesitating, despite the complications of early modern transport, to return items that fell below her standards. Her correspondence detailing these purchases reveals Isabella's role as a pioneer of fashion and design. She collaborated in the production of perfumes and toiletries, raising her own flowers and musk-producing animals in part for this purpose. She supervised in detail the design of glassware for her table and worked with consultants on patterns for her clothing and jewelry. The spherical *capigliara* seen on her head in the portraits by Titian and Rubens was a signature element of her wardrobe that was part hat and part wig, made of fabric, jewels, and human hair; it was widely admired and imitated. Motifs from the emblems decorating the walls, floors, and ceilings of the *camerini* were worked into Isabella's jewelry and gowns and were subject to an implicit “copyright,” as evidenced by her written replies to women who sought permission to adopt them. Some of the first fashion dolls known in Europe constitute yet another instance of Isabella's personal branding. Several of these were made for her to comply with requests from the kings of France and Spain for miniature replicas of her attire, so that her styles could be copied for women in those courts.¹⁶ Isabella was also among those Renaissance princes who imitated the ancients by having her image coined in medals bearing her likeness, which she circulated to increase her currency among people she especially favored. The most ornate of these was one encrusted with jewels (now held in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum), but simpler versions have also survived.

The Este court at Ferrara boasted one of the finest libraries in Europe, and Isabella continued her parents' practice of collecting and reading books

14. Campbell, however, cautions against views of the *studiolo* paintings as mere propaganda: “[D]espite what is constantly claimed the paintings are not reducible to monotonous advertisements of the marchesa's chastity and virtuous accomplishments, and even in the instances when such a reading is possible, they are never simply or entirely that.” Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 23.

15. Evelyn Welch, “Shopping with Isabella d'Este,” in *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400–1600* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 245–73, 352–59.

16. Yassana C. Croizat, “Living Dolls: François I Dresses His Women,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 60 (2007): 94–130.

throughout her life.¹⁷ Her letters document many requests for volumes to be bought, borrowed, or copied and offer a portrait of an avid Renaissance reader and book collector. At the time of her death, her library contained one hundred and thirty-three titles, including works of Greek philosophy, Latin classics (works of Cicero, Ovid, Pliny, Plutarch, Seneca, Juvenal, and Horace among them), books of music, chivalric romances, theatrical comedies, religious sermons, saints' lives, biographies, and prophecies.¹⁸ Also present were vernacular writings by Dante, Petrarch, Jacopo Sannazzaro, Lorenzo de' Medici, and Pietro Bembo as well as many minor contemporaries. Still other books passed through her hands without remaining in her personal library but are recorded in her letters. Not surprisingly, Isabella also cultivated literary friends, including Matteo Maria Boiardo, Niccolò da Correggio, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, Mario Equicola, Baldassarre Castiglione, Pietro Bembo, Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, Gian Giorgio Trissino, Bernardo Accolti, Ludovico Ariosto, Paolo Giovio, and Matteo Bandello, several of whom commemorated her in their writings.

Isabella was a skilled musician who was proficient in keyboard as well as stringed instruments.¹⁹ Her substantial correspondence with the master

17. Brian Richardson, "Isabella d'Este and the Social Uses of Books," *La Bibliofilia* 114, no. 3 (2012): 293–325. More comprehensively and for the inventory of her library, see Luzio and Renier, *La coltura*. Campbell and Malacarne also reproduce the inventory of her library; see Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 270–79; and Giancarlo Malacarne, "Collezionismo e querelle librarie: L'inventario dei libri 'lassati' dalla 'quondam' Isabella d'Este," *Civiltà mantovana* 119 (2005): 121–31. On the library of Isabella's parents, see Giulio Bertoni, *La biblioteca estense e la coltura ferrarese ai tempi del Duca Ercole I (1471-1505)* (Turin: Loescher, 1903).

18. The storyteller Matteo Bandello, who spent many days in Isabella's company at her country villa of Porto, remarks of her in the preface to novella 2.21: "She commanded me to take up Livy's *History of Rome* and read to her the story of Tarquin's rape of Lucretia and Lucretia's resulting death, which I did in order to obey her. She, as you know, understands all of the Latin histories." Matteo Bandello, *Tutte le opere di Matteo Bandello*, vol. 1, ed. Francesco Flora, 4th ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 1972), 843.

19. Iain Fenlon, "The Gonzaga and Music," in *Splendours of the Gonzaga: Catalogue; Exhibition, 4 November 1981–31 January 1982, Victoria & Albert Museum*, ed. David Chambers and Jane Martineau (London: the Museum; Cinisello Balsamo [Milan]: Pizzi, 1981), 87–94; Fenlon, "Music and Learning in Isabella d'Este's Studiolo," in *La corte di Mantova nell'età di Andrea Mantegna*, 353–67; Claudio Gallico, "Poesie musicali di Isabella d'Este," *Collectanea historiae musicae* 3 (Florence: Olschki, 1963): 109–19; William F. Prizer, *Courtly Pastimes: The Frottole of Marchetto Cara* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980); Prizer, "Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia, 'Master Instrument-Maker,'" *Early Music History: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Music* 2 (1982): 87–127; Prizer, "Isabella d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia as Patrons of Music: The Frottole at Mantua and Ferrara," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38 (1985): 1–33; Prizer, "Lutenists at the Court of Mantua in the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries," *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 13 (1980): 5–34; Prizer, "Marchetto Cara at Mantua: New Documents on the Life and Duties of a Renaissance Court Musician," *Musica disciplina* 32 (1978): 87–110; Prizer, "Una virtù molto conveniente a madonne: Isabella d'Este as a Musician," *The Journal of Musicology* 17, no. 1 (1999): 10–49; William F. Prizer and Eugene Enrico, "Isabella d'Este: First Lady of the Renaissance," DVD (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Center for Music

instrument maker, Lorenzo da Pavia, documents her purchase of several fine examples of these. She also bought and borrowed instruments from others for her musical pursuits, and she sang for personal recreation and in intimate court gatherings as recorded in her correspondence and that of others.²⁰ At a time when her male contemporaries were mostly patronizing foreign composers, Isabella was among the first sponsors to seek the work of Italian musicians and composers, especially Marchetto Cara and Bartolomeo Tromboncino. The latter was so dear to her that she advocated his pardon for murdering his wife. Ottaviano Petrucci, the first printer of music in Europe, included in his 1504 *First Book of Frottoles* a number of compositions originally produced for Isabella.²¹

When she wasn't singing, Isabella's voice was one of power, but that power was constrained by her female position in a patriarchal society. As a woman, she had to limit her public role to tasks performed in the name of her husband or that fell traditionally to female co-regents, though these were in fact considerable. As Sarah Cockram has argued, moreover, Francesco and Isabella adopted a policy of cooperation and joint decision making that is visible in much of the frequent correspondence between them.²² While Francesco was away on duty as a *condottiere* (hired military officer) in the service of principal European powers, Isabella exercised masterful diplomacy and administrative acumen. She was obliged to defer to her husband's higher authority, but there is ample evidence that Francesco accepted her counsel and trusted her analyses. Her activism, pragmatism, and judgment are evident in arenas ranging from the pursuit of justice to the management of trade and the brokering of marriages. When Francesco was captured and imprisoned by the Venetians (August 1509–July 1510), Isabella became Mantua's official acting regent and fended off foreign contenders for Gonzaga territories, despite internecine power struggles within the court administration. In Francesco's ensuing years of increasing debilitation from syphilis, she appears, on the one hand, to have been marginalized by her husband's advisors, who were often hostile to her. On the other hand, she became an important ambassador for Este, Sforza, and Gonzaga interests and a reliable conduit of intelligence to Francesco at home. The couple's political style was one that may have impressed their contemporary, Machiavelli, if he was watching. As Cockram illustrates, they often embraced a strategy of seeming to be at odds in their allegiances to opposed allies,

and Television, 1999); Donald C. Sanders, *Music at the Gonzaga Court in Mantua* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

20. Brown and Lorenzoni, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia*; Prizer, "Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia."

21. Sanders, *Music at the Gonzaga Court*. I thank Anne MacNeil for informative discussions of Isabella's prominence as a patron of Italian music.

22. Sarah D. P. Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013).

effectively keeping multiple options open and biding their time under uncertain conditions.²³

Some of Isabella's travel was justified officially by religious pledges to visit holy shrines, as with her 1502 and 1523 journeys to Venice and her 1517 visit to Provence. On other occasions her motivations were clearly political, as was true of her 1525–1527 sojourn in Rome to pursue a cardinalship for her son, Ercole. In many cases she performed combined ambassadorial and social functions, for instance in her visits to Milan in 1491 and 1513, and her 1510 trip to Rome and Naples. At still other times, she traveled purely for pleasure and recreation (sometimes incognita). Her summer expeditions to Lake Garda, just north of Mantua, were a regular getaway ritual. Isabella's letters convey her delight in travel and her eagerness to see the world. They further show her to be an able stateswoman with an innate sense of occasion and opportunity, and an attentive travel correspondent. Her descriptions of ceremonies, festivities, and theatrical productions are among the most detailed records of certain events to survive from the period. Among her occasional travel companions were her closest friends—her sister-in-law Elisabetta Gonzaga, the duchess of Urbino; and Emilia Pia da Carpi—both of whom are immortalized in Castiglione's 1528 *Book of the Courtier*.²⁴

Francesco II Gonzaga died in 1519 after years of suffering from the syphilis he had contracted as early as 1496.²⁵ At this time, Isabella transferred her apartments to a less central location of the palace and prepared to yield authority to her son Federico, once he reached his majority. She hardly withdrew from society or political life, however. Over the next twenty years, she continued to travel, making several trips to Venice and spending an extended period in Rome. In 1525, when her brother-in-law, Cardinal Sigismondo Gonzaga died, he left to his nephew Federico a small fiefdom near Imola called Solarolo, which Isabella purchased from her son with the aim of governing it independently. This political experiment was a mixed success, at best. The papacy questioned the legitimacy of Isabella's ownership of Solarolo and made repeated attempts to reclaim it. Choosing to govern largely in absentia, Isabella unwittingly appointed a corrupt administrator who betrayed her trust and undermined her dream of bringing political harmony to the faction-ridden little town. She spent her final years managing her

23. Cockram, *Isabella d'Este*.

24. The most detailed source on the relations among these women remains Luzio and Renier, *Mantova e Urbino*. For an authoritative modern translation of Castiglione's classic work, see *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, ed. Daniel Javitch (New York: Norton, 2002).

25. Molly Bourne notes that Francesco showed early signs of syphilis in the 1495–1496 period of his greatest military successes: *Francesco II Gonzaga: The Soldier-Prince as Patron* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2008) 39. As general sources on this painful and disfiguring condition, see Jon Arrizabalaga, John Henderson, and Roger French, *The Great Pox: The French Disease in Renaissance Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renier, "Contributo alla storia del malfrancesco ne' costumi e nella letteratura italiana," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 5 (1885): 408–32.

affairs, keeping in contact with her growing family, advocating for subjects who sought her protection, seeking out beautiful things to buy, and tending to her own declining health. Isabella d'Este died on 13 February 1539 in Mantua, attended by her son, Federico.

Though a Gonzaga-Nevers line ruled until 1707, the Gonzaga court at Mantua essentially vanished with the death in 1627 of Vincenzo II, the last heir of the original dynasty. To pay off his debts, Vincenzo sold the choicest works from the court's art collection to Charles I of England, and whatever treasures remained were carried off in subsequent years during Mantua's domination by Austria and France. Among the remnants of Isabella's court still remaining in the city she co-ruled, however, are secretarial copies of over sixteen thousand of her letters, together with an even more substantial quantity of incoming correspondence. These documents tell remarkable tales, often with colorful precision, of the daily life and the extraordinary experience of Isabella d'Este and her generation.

The Gonzaga Chancery and Isabella's Archive

Writing in Isabella's time was a bothersome business. Quills required frequent trimming, and even when perfectly shaped to match the direction of the writer's pen strokes, they did not glide smoothly on the page as pens do today. They were uncomfortable to hold and had to be dipped frequently into ink that was easy to smear. Lighting conditions were only ideal in the daytime, near a sunny window; and letters had to be folded to form their own closure, then finished off with the paraphernalia of sealing wax and seals. Personally written letters were charged with special meaning, because they implicitly conveyed not only the sender's corporeal contact but also the physical effort that went into producing them. Nonetheless, like everyone of her class, Isabella avoided this exertion whenever possible and dictated her letters to a secretary. Given that she sent correspondence so regularly, whether in residence at Mantua or traveling, her male secretary was often at her side. As someone who was privy to his employer's personal space as well as the content of her correspondence, the secretary was also often a counselor and a senior, high-security member of the chancery in Italian princely courts, informally organized as these could sometimes be.²⁶ Additional chancery members tended to the production and filing of all important documents.

26. Though the title's original connotations have faded today, the secretary was, by definition, the custodian of secrets. Isabella's secretary for many years was the Mantuan Benedetto Capilupi, who descended from a long line of Gonzaga secretaries. After his death, Capilupi was succeeded in 1519 by Isabella's humanist tutor, Mario Equicola, who was then followed by Antonio Tridapali when Equicola passed into service of Federico II Gonzaga. On Capilupi, see Daniela Ferrari, "La cancelleria gonzaghesca tra Cinque e Seicento: Carriere e strategie parentali al servizio dei duchi," in *Gonzaga: La celeste galleria; L'esercizio del collezionismo*, ed. Raffaella Morselli (Milan: Skira, 2002), 301. On Equicola, see Stephen Kolsky, *Mario Equicola: The Real Courtier* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1991); Alessandra

Since correspondence sent from one person to another belongs to the recipient, letter archives often contain only incoming mail. Unless they were copied prior to sending, the letters of a single writer remain dispersed and can only be editorially reassembled if retrieved, which is often an impossible task. Isabella wrote to scores of addressees, many of whom were ill equipped to archive their papers. The vast majority of her correspondence would now be lost forever, had it not been transcribed by chancery secretaries before being entrusted to a courier. Gonzaga secretaries sometimes drafted or took down verbally dictated letters in a shorthand version, called the *minute* (minutes). The *minute* could then be expanded in two subsequent transcriptions: one for filing in the *copialelettere* (bound copybooks), which served as administrative points of reference; and another for sending, the *originale* (fair copy).²⁷ In the present volume these letters are designated as originals. Given the magnitude of Isabella's correspondence, for efficiency I have used the copybooks as the main source for this edition. I have selectively (though not systematically) compared those texts to secretarial drafts and to the fair copies addressed to other members of the court which, given their recipients, are also held in the Gonzaga Archive. Such comparison reveals that few significant revisions were made between one phase of production and the next, but a substantial number of letters went uncopied, as attested by the existence of fair copies not represented in the copybooks. Isabella also wrote some letters herself. These are identified in the archive as *autografi* and in this edition as autographs.²⁸ The choice to rely primarily on the copybooks as the source for this edition made it possible for me to make maximal use of my time in the archive as a foreign visitor to carry out the project, but it came at the cost of a certain one-sidedness. Readers who wish to pursue questions raised by letters published here may now follow their trails of origination and replies as well as read letters that were not copied into the copybooks by consulting online images of Isabella's correspondence through IDEA: Isabella d'Este Archive.

Villa, *Istruire e rappresentare Isabella d'Este: Il "Libro de natura de amore" di Mario Equicola* (Lucca: Fazzi, 2006). On the emergence of the secretary as a professional figure, see Douglas Biow, *Doctors, Ambassadors, Secretaries: Humanism and Professions in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). On the organization of the Gonzaga chancery, see Isabella Lazzarini, "Peculiaris magistratus: La cancelleria gonzaghesca nel Quattrocento," *Ricerche storiche* 24, no. 2 (1994): 337–49.

27. In some instances, additional copies were also created, for example when they were needed for sharing with other readers. Occasionally the copybook indicates that multiple recipients should receive the same letter, in which case the copybook version served as a template record, for example of a birth or death announcement. All sent copies are designated as *originali*.

28. The number of incoming pieces of correspondence addressed to Isabella is currently estimated at about 28,000. Though it would have been ideal to read and comment on replies to the letters included in this edition, constraints of time and the dimensions of the archive prohibited me from undertaking that project. The notes to this edition refer readers to published sources discussing some of these fuller exchanges.

Renaissance Epistolarity

There are critical ways in which Isabella's letters differ from several other types with which they should not be confused. Though her teachers were humanists, she did not write humanist letters, strictly speaking. The letter was a banner genre for Petrarch, Coluccio Salutati, and other fourteenth-century pioneers of that cultural movement, and by the 1520s, epistolary writing had become central to humanist pedagogy.²⁹ In 1345, when Petrarch made his jaw-dropping discovery of a copied book of Cicero's letters in the cathedral library of Verona, he resolved to make a collection of his own, adopting the Roman's intimate and informal epistolary voice and mobilizing the letter as a vehicle for the spread of humanist ideas. Petrarch's twenty-four books of familiar letters (the *Rerum familiarum libri*), together with the eighteen books of his letters in old age (the *Rerum senilium libri*), launched humanist epistolarity as a mode of introspective, proto-essayistic writing.³⁰ This practice flourished among humanists for centuries, but the Gonzagas' letters served other purposes. Though they bear many marks of humanist thinking—for example by casting epistolary correspondence as virtual conversation between friends—Isabella's letters never engage in extended reflection on mortality, friendship, or other humanist themes, nor do they serve as a medium for self-scrutiny or the dissemination of ideas. Hers are letters of personal and state business, the correspondence of a woman who understood herself to be always, to some degree, speaking in an official role, and potentially under surveillance. Isabella's letters offer no gazes deep into her soul, but they do afford some glimpses. Though they contain few intimate confessions, they feature numerous moments of unguarded candor in her real-life dealings with others.

Humanist letters emulating personal conversation were oriented toward an oral model (a fiction of speaking directly with another), but so was the medieval

29. The two premier spokesmen for humanist education in the sixteenth century, Desiderius Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives, each published highly successful printed guides to epistolary composition: see Shemek, "Letter Writing and Epistolary Culture," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Renaissance and Reformation*, <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0194.xml>>.

30. Petrarch famously went so far as to address letters to persons long dead, including Cicero, Seneca, Virgil, and Quintilian. Machiavelli, nearly two centuries later, described in his most famous letter to Francesco Vettori his practice of putting questions to the ancients who, "in their humanity," replied to him through their books. Francesco Petrarca, *Letters on Familiar Matters: Rerum familiarum libri*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, 3 vols. (New York: Italica, 2005); *Letters of Old Age: Rerum senilium libri*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, 2 vols. (New York: Italica, 2005); John M. Najemy, "Renaissance Epistolarity," in *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513–1515* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 18–57. On Petrarch's strategic adoption of the letter, see Nancy S. Struever, "Petrarchan Ethics: Inventing a Practice," in *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3–34.

letter writing the humanists rejected. The *ars dictaminis* (arts of dictation) constituted a set of formulaic epistolary practices drawn from ancient rhetorical models that were taught to letter writers throughout late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The *ars dictaminis* looked to the oral practice not of private conversation but of public oratory, recommending that letters be composed in five parts that were considered necessary in a good speech: *salutatio* (greeting), *exordium* (an often-proverbial opening), *narratio* (the subject matter of the letter's business), *petitio* (the request, if one was to be made), and *conclusio* (closure). While this type of letter writing had many uses in the world of commerce, it also served loftier purposes, for example in "public" addresses couched as letters. Celebrated medieval Italian examples of these include Dante's epistle to Cangrande della Scala, in which he discusses interpretive keys to his *Divine Comedy*, and the letters of Catherine of Siena, many of which are political or religious treatises.³¹ Dante's epistle is formal and learned; Catherine's letters are formulaic and relatively unschooled. They share a relation to generically structured formal speech that is detectable also in the correspondence of the Gonzaga princes and, indeed, in personal and business correspondence today. Isabella's letters might best be seen as a blend of the personalized, sometimes intimate humanist style with medieval generic efficiency.

Though the Gonzagas preserved their correspondence, it was neither written nor conserved for sharing with the public. Readers familiar with Renaissance literature know that as the nascent printing industry took hold, marketing strategies for new types of books also developed, and media promoters, known as *poligrafi*, burst onto the Italian publishing scene with new kinds of books, like anthologies of lyric poems.³² One such novelty appeared for the first time in 1538, when Pietro Aretino published the first of six volumes of his "personal letters." Aretino's chatty, self-serving invention launched a phenomenon that would thrive, mostly in Italy, for well over a century. Italians proved to be keenly interested in reading each other's mail; like public relations strategists *avant la lettre*, they also grasped the opportunistic value of offering up their own correspondence for public consumption. Far from being simple media for sharing their actual correspondence, their letter books were carefully edited, authorized self-portraits that could launch, aggrandize, or vindicate the reputations of their writers, even as they pandered to a public taste for access to the private and authentic details of

31. On the latter, see Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

32. Monica Bianco and Elena Strada, eds., *I più vaghi e i più soavi fiori: Studi sulle antologie di lirica del Cinquecento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001); Louise George Clubb and William G. Clubb, "Building a Lyric Canon: Gabriel Giolito and the Rival Anthologists, 1545–1590," *Italica* 68, no. 3 (1991): 332–44; Amedeo Quondam, *Petrarchismo mediato: Per una critica della forma "antologia"* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974).

“celebrity” lives. Marking the mass-media modernity of this phenomenon, Francesco Erspamer quips that if (for the ancients) letters were dialogues with absent friends, Aretino’s letter books were like a talk show with absent interviewers.³³ Virtually all of Isabella’s correspondence predates this phenomenon, but in any case heads of state like the Gonzagas did not publish their correspondence, even at the height of the letter book’s popularity; they had no need to engage in the social climbing and self-justification that motivated the commercialized letter book. On the contrary, they took pains to prevent unauthorized reading of their letters, sometimes even encrypting them in cipher.³⁴ The reasons they saved their letters were to share them with their descendants and to use them in the present as administrative records.

More relevant points of reference for the conservation of Gonzaga correspondence were bureaucratic reforms that had been transforming European political and military institutions since the twelfth century. Armando Petrucci points to the emergence of the notary, the secretary, and the resident ambassador as key professional figures in early modern Europe whose jobs revolved around the production, circulation, and preservation of documentary records, including letters, within increasingly complex institutions. These institutional changes coincided with the aggressive expansion of long-distance commerce. As banking systems developed and trade networks went global, merchants relied on written communications for their livelihood. For purely practical reasons, vernacular literacy was rising among both men and women, who used letters to manage family and business affairs. Moreover, all of these practices fostered and benefited from technological advances that made letter writing cheaper and faster. Water-powered paper mills—a technology learned from the Spanish that appeared in Italy as early as the mid-thirteenth century—were supplying far cheaper writing surfaces than the animal-skin parchments previously in use.³⁵ Postal networks evolved to answer the need for faster delivery. Cipher systems became more complex and numerous to protect this circulating data. And in order to handle the increased volume of correspondence, professional chancellors and secretaries invented cursive (“running”) writing.³⁶

33. Francesco Erspamer, “Introduzione” in Pietro Aretino, *Lettere, 1: Libro primo* (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo / Ugo Guanda, 1995), x–xi. More generally, see Amedeo Quondam, ed., *Le “carte messaggere”: Retorica e modelli di comunicazione epistolare, per un indice dei libri di lettere del Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981).

34. For brief discussion of the Gonzagas’ use of cipher systems, see Romano Sarzi, “Le (ziffre) dei Gonzaga,” *La Reggia* 6, no. 2 (May 1998): 5; 6, no. 3 (September 1998): 4.

35. For a concise chronology of paper production, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_paper>.

36. Armando Petrucci, *Scrivere lettere: Una storia plurimillennaria* (Bari: Laterza, 2008), 49–110; 204–14.

Themes and Content

The letters translated here constitute a substantial selection, but they represent only a fraction of the number that might have made it into print. In choosing what to include, I have sought, first of all, to present as many sides of Isabella d'Este's correspondence as possible, so that readers may access a fuller, perhaps more nuanced picture of her activities than the one that results from the heavy historical emphasis on her persona as a collector and patron. Counterbalancing the letters about her shopping and commissions here are many that address politics, marriage, maternity, war, diplomacy, justice, friendship, health, food, travel, animals, and a wide range of other topics that evoke everyday life in a working Renaissance court. This variety will allow Isabella's correspondence to function as a gateway to understanding much about the sixteenth century that lies beyond any individual's significance. I hope it will also enable readers to begin to gauge for themselves the validity of starkly contrasting portraits of Isabella d'Este that circulate in the biographies and scholarship.

Isabella's historical legacy circulates in two general, competing versions. One version was first propagated by her admiring contemporaries and then, more comprehensively, by the historian archivist, Alessandro Luzio. Beginning in 1883, over the course of three decades Luzio wrote more than forty articles examining sixteenth-century culture and politics through the prism of Isabella d'Este's letters. Combing through the marchesa's voluminous correspondence with persons throughout Italy and beyond, Luzio and his sometime collaborator, Rodolfo Renier discovered a brilliant and faultless Renaissance princess, a paragon of womanhood who was married, regrettably, to a man who was her intellectual, moral, and cultural inferior, but one whom she managed to love and serve. Their Isabella is educated and sophisticated, devoted, energetic, generous, brave, wise, creative, and serenely chaste. This is the Isabella who appealed to the great, Edwardian-era art historian Julia Cartwright, whose two-volume biography draws heavily on Luzio and Renier's publications and paints a highly admiring picture of its subject. A long strain of writing on Isabella, particularly of the sort directed to a general readership, carries on this uncritical tradition.

Another Isabella, however, appears like an evil twin in a range of writings that also extends back to the Renaissance.³⁷ Exhibiting varying degrees of dislike

37. Negative views of Isabella as presumptuous for her involvement in political matters appear in some of the correspondence of the period, especially among certain reporters from the papal court. See Carolyn James, "Machiavelli in Skirts': Isabella d'Este and Politics," in *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400-1800*, ed. Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 57-75. An early slander in print came from Pietro Aretino, who published in 1534 a satirical "Forecast" on the coming winter, which he predicted would be so cold that everyone would be copulating to keep warm and, "even the monstrous marchesa of Mantua who has teeth of ebony and eyebrows of ivory and is immorally ugly and even more immorally painted with makeup, will give

for the marchesa and what are deemed her amateurish, feminine intrusions on the serious business of art, a veritable pantheon of authoritative modern art historians has pronounced against Isabella d'Este. For Roberto Longhi, she was "odious" for distracting Mantegna and Leonardo from more significant projects than hers. Kenneth Clark dismissed her as a "dictatorial bluestocking." Subtly condescending, Andrew Martindale saw Isabella's collecting of bronzes, medals, and gems as evidence of a "typically feminine" love for *objets d'art*, while J. M. Fletcher, in similar vein, attributed her interests to "a highly developed sense of interior decoration," adding, as if to distinguish her from the majority of wealthy patrons, that Isabella was "exceptionally difficult" and "unpredictable." Charles Hope pronounced Isabella's taste for mythological paintings and allegories "banal" and "pretentious." The revered Italian cultural historian, Carlo Dionisotti, however, outdid these relatively mild misogynists, in a book review on another subject, where he paused to comment on recent critical interest in the marchesa of Mantua:

[T]he studies we have on Isabella d'Este, it must be said, are as poor in critical discernment as they are rich in loving erudition. How curious that modern scholars have become so enthused by a woman who, as far as we know, was not beautiful and was so frigid and virginal that, with no ill will, we can say she got the husband and son she deserved.³⁸

Dionisotti wrote in the 1950s, in open polemic with Luzio and a whole school of celebratory Italian historiography, but his resentment of the marchesa's avoidance of her syphilitic husband (whom she had already borne eight children) and his apparent hostility to female ambition echo more broadly in twentieth-century criticism as clichés in their own right. Even thirty years later, in an important valorization of Mannerist painting, Giovanni Romano returned to these preoccupations when he portrayed Isabella d'Este as a woman who, trapped in a reputation for spotless virtue, renounced all bodily passions and took refuge in the fables of antiquity that were painted on the walls of her *studiolo*.³⁹

birth in her old age, without benefit of conjugal relations." See Alessandro Luzio, *Un pronostico satirico di Pietro Aretino* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1900), 9.

38. Carlo Dionisotti, review of *Un illustre nunzio pontificio del Rinascimento: Baldassar Castiglione*, by Vittorio Cian, *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 129 (1952): 53.

39. For full references and further discussion of these and other sources, see Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 1–4; San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma"; Villa, *Istruire e rappresentare Isabella d'Este*, 9–15. For review of many of Isabella's "fanatics," see the introduction to Luzio and Renier, *La coltura*, by Giovanni Agosti, "Ai fanatici della marchesa," vii–xxxvii.

Recent scholarship has systematically confronted the flaws in this fraught legacy. Rose Marie de San Juan was the first to point to the art-historical tendency to focus on Isabella's personality rather than on her collecting practices in context. Stephen Campbell's extensive study offers learned and dramatic new readings of the paintings in Isabella's *studiolo*, in key both with San Juan's feminist critique and with a wealth of philological and theoretical reflection on Renaissance thought. A definitive monograph by Molly Bourne has laid to rest the caricature of Francesco Gonzaga as a boorish warrior and explored his impressive patronage of art, architecture, and music, thus opening up more informed discussion of the relations between Isabella's and Francesco's cultural programs. Sarah Cockram, in a book on power sharing between Isabella and Francesco, makes a convincing argument for their collaborative political style. A series of studies by Carolyn James offers new critical readings of Isabella's correspondence not only with her consort but also with her mother and her daughters. And a monograph by Alessandra Villa examines the relationship between Isabella and her tutor-turned-secretary, Mario Equicola, addressing also this divided legacy of Isabella d'Este criticism.⁴⁰

Given the historical failure to conserve most non-literary writings from the period, it is difficult to measure how exceptional was Isabella's output as a female correspondent. What we can say is that, to date, we know of no other woman of her century, anywhere, who left an organized epistolary legacy of similar dimensions. The marvel of Isabella's correspondence lies both in its quantity and in its range of tone and subject matter: commerce, politics, travel, art, food, fashion, shopping, gardens, animals, music, theater, family life, health, justice, friendship, and other topics alternate, often in the same letter, throughout her epistolary corpus.

40. San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma"; Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*; Molly Bourne, "Renaissance Husbands and Wives as Patrons of Art: The *camerini* of Isabella d'Este and Francesco II Gonzaga," in Reiss and Wilkins, *Beyond Isabella*, 93–123; Bourne, *Francesco II Gonzaga*; Cockram, *Isabella d'Este*; Carolyn James, "An Insatiable Appetite for News: Isabella d'Este and a Bolognese Correspondent," in *Rituals, Images, and Words: Varieties of Cultural Expression in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. F. W. Kent and Charles Zika (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 375–88; James, "Machiavelli in Skirts"; James, "The Travels of Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua," *Studies in Travel Writing* 13, no. 2 (2009): 99–109; James, "Florence and Ferrara: Dynastic Marriage and Politics," in *The Medici: Citizens and Masters*, ed. Robert Black and John Law (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Villa I Tatti Series, 2015, 365–78); James, "What's Love Got to Do With It? Dynastic Politics and Motherhood in the Letters of Eleonora of Aragon and her Daughters," *Women's History Review* (2015): DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2015.1015327; James, "Women and Diplomacy in Renaissance Italy," in *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics Since 1500*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 13–29; Villa, *Istruire e rappresentare Isabella d'Este*. The work of Stephen Kolsky stands apart from these revisionary studies. In his view, Isabella's active role in politics suggested that she wanted to be a man: Kolsky, "Images of Isabella d'Este," *Italian Studies* 39 (1984): 47–62; most valuable is Kolsky, *Mario Equicola*.

Organization and Technical Criteria

The letters are arranged chronologically and provided with descriptive headers. Salutations, though they can provide crucial information for identifying addressees, have been considered prohibitively lengthy for this edition.⁴¹ A brief introduction to each decade of Isabella's life together with footnotes to the individual letters provide minimal historical, biographical, and geographical coordinates to facilitate reading. Square brackets indicate material I have inserted for clarification. Curved brackets signal missing words where the manuscript was illegible or damaged.

In all cases I have published complete letters and, unless otherwise stated, have relied on my own transcriptions. Given space limitations in a book that is already long, I have not cited every previous published transcription, paraphrase, or translation but have made a good-faith effort to reference some of these.

This project resulted from many hours in an archive, where I often pondered the technology of letter writing in the Renaissance and the massive effort early moderns made to produce, deliver, and preserve the very correspondence I held in my hands. I also worked for lengthy periods from remote locations in the United States, Italy, France, and Hungary, profiting from the technology of the photocopy machine, the laptop computer, and the enlargeable PDF. I am pleased to report that today, readers who wish to view or study the manuscripts of Isabella d'Este's correspondence may do so through yet another transformative technology, by visiting the online IDEA: Isabella d'Este Archive, where they may also offer corrections or pose questions to a community of contributing scholars.

41. An otherwise obscure figure may be recognized as an artisan if he is addressed as "maestro," while a person who shares the same name with another may be distinguished from her homonym by a salutation such as "dearest sister" or "beloved cousin," and a greeting including the words "most reverend" confirms the clerical status of the addressee. But salutations in Isabella's correspondence can occupy several lines, once the abbreviations are expanded. In the interest of concision, and knowing that online images of these letters are now available, I have used the salutations and other historical evidence to identify Isabella's addressees but have not included here the lengthy salutations themselves.

