

## Introduction

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### *Ippolita Maria Sforza (1445–1488)*

When Ippolita Sforza, twenty years old, blonde, tall, slim, and famously learned, rode into Naples on 14 September 1465, King Ferrante clearly saw her as a high-value hostage. The daughter of the duke of Milan, Ippolita was already en route to Naples to celebrate her marriage to the king's son and heir when her brother-in-law Jacopo Piccinino was murdered while the king was hosting him at the Castelnuovo<sup>1</sup>—an event that would darken the already grim reputation of her father-in-law. Ippolita would survive Ferrante's vaunted hospitality<sup>2</sup> for twenty-three years to become one of the most influential women of her time. As the wife of the king's son and a member of the royal household, she served the king as his unofficial ambassador to Milan, the primary conduit for the exchange of ideas and information between him and her brother Galeazzo Maria Sforza, who became duke of Milan soon after her arrival in Naples. Ippolita's letters, and the dispatches she received in return from the two rulers and their agents, were a principal means of communication between the two states. Both her father-in-law the king and her brother the duke sought her advice and opinions. Since her supposedly private letters to her father, mother, and brother in Milan were regularly intercepted by the king's secretaries and ambassadors, she voiced her opinions about the royal family in Naples guardedly. Her awareness that her letters would be parsed by her enemies as well as her friends at court must be taken account in our interpretation of them.

Ippolita Sforza's letters and Latin orations are presented for the first time in English translation in this volume.<sup>3</sup> A significant number of Ippolita's autograph

1. Carlo Canetta, "La morte di conte Giacomo Piccinino," *Archivio storico lombardo* ser. 1, vol. 9, fasc. 2 (1881): 252–88; Lucio Cardami, "Diarii di Messer Lucio Cardami," in G. B. Tafuri, *Istoria degli scrittori nati nel regno di Napoli*, 3 (Naples: nella stamperia di Felice-Carlo Mosca, 1760), part 1, 495; Carol Kidwell, *Pontano: Poet and Prime Minister* (London: Duckworth, 1991), 95 and 371n16. Brief profiles of this and other significant figures named in this introduction may be found in the Glossary of Names, below.

2. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, is the most famous source on Ferrante's savagery. Ferrante "was equalled in ferocity by none among the princes of his time... [H]e liked to have his opponents near him, either alive in well-guarded prisons, or dead and embalmed, dressed in the costume which they wore in their lifetime.... His victims...were even seized while guests at the royal table." Trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: Macmillan, 1928), 36–37.

3. Selected Italian letters of Sforza's appear in Ferdinando Gabotto's edition of Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, *Lettere inedite in nome de' reali di Napoli* (Bologna: Romagnoli-dall'Acqua, 1893) and in Bruno

letters survive. She dictated hundreds of others to her two personal secretaries: her childhood teacher and confidant from Milan, the humanist Baldo Martorelli; and after his death, the celebrated poet and head of King Ferrante's literary academy, Giovanni Pontano. Her letters depict her own role in the most momentous events of her time: the frightening days and months following the public assassination of her brother Galeazzo in 1476; her younger brothers' repeated attempts to seize the Milanese throne after the murder; the bloody Pazzi conspiracy in Florence and its repercussions in the peninsula in 1478–1479; the invasion of Italy by a force of Ottoman Turks and their occupation of Otranto in 1480–1481; and her father-in-law King Ferrante's touch-and-go struggle to survive the cholera that threatened his life, his regency, and Ippolita's survival in Naples.<sup>4</sup> On a more visceral level, Ippolita's letters detail her rage and sorrow over her husband's serial sexual liaisons with both men and women, one of whom he moved into the family home in the Castel Capuano in the early 1470s.

Ippolita's last letters, written when she was in her early forties, betray one of the most enigmatic developments in her life. Among the gossips at Ferrante's court, Ippolita's estrangement from her husband Alfonso had long been the subject of speculation. At the same time, from 1483 on, Ippolita's last, emotionally charged letters to Lorenzo de' Medici, her confidant and friend of twenty years, had become suggestive of a relationship that would surely have compromised the duchess's honor had these letters become public.<sup>5</sup>

On 20 August 1488, at age forty-three, without having shown prior signs of any illness, Ippolita collapsed and could not be revived. Her death was attributed to a cerebral abscess.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the circumstances of Ippolita's death while resident in the household of a man reputed for brutality—and who may have arranged the death of Piccinino, her brother-in-law—raises questions.<sup>7</sup> Twenty years before, in 1468, her mother, the Dowager Duchess Bianca Maria Visconti, had died

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Figliuolo's edition of Pontano, *Corrispondenza di Giovanni Pontano segretario dei dinasti aragonesi di Napoli, 2 novembre 1474–20 gennaio 1495* (Battipaglia [Salerno]: Laveglia & Carlone, 2012), henceforth "Figliuolo." See now also the most complete edition of Sforza's letters to date: Ippolita Maria Sforza, *Lettere*, ed. M. Serena Castaldo (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2004), henceforth "Castaldo."

4. On Ferrante's attack of cholera in 1475 see Kidwell, *Pontano*, 114 and 272n55; Gabotto, *Lettere inedite*, nos. 9, 11–19, 21, 22; Figliuolo 13–22 (letters 11–21); and below, Letters 68–73, dated 12, 14, 16, 28, and 29 November 1475.

5. Letters 94–100, Ippolita's last letters to Lorenzo de' Medici, appear below accompanied by our analysis. No responses to these letters are found in Lorenzo's own vast published correspondence: the *Lettere*, edited by Nicolai Rubinstein and F. W. Kent, 16 vols. (Florence: Giunti-Barbèra, 1977–2011).

6. The cause of her death as *apostema nel capo* was offered by Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, the fifteenth-century Bolognese author of famous women's lives: *Gynevera de le clare donne*, ed. Corrado Ricco and Alberto Bacchi della Lega (Bologna: Romagnoli-dall'Acqua, 1888), 351.

7. See above, note 1.

unexpectedly at the same age. At the time, her contemporaries, among them the great Milanese historian of the fifteenth century, Bernardino Corio, had famously accused the duchess's son Galeazzo Sforza of her murder.<sup>8</sup> As yet, no credible charges of foul play have been raised in the case of Ippolita's premature death.

### *The Other Voice*

Ippolita Sforza belongs to the tradition of urban, classically educated Italian women who came of age as intellectuals in the later fifteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Three women, Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, and Laura Cereta, all near contemporaries of Ippolita's, were well known in the Veneto as writers, having circulated in manuscript hundreds of their stylishly written Latin letters that called to mind the prose of Sallust, Cicero, and even Apuleius.<sup>10</sup> All three women studied Latin and Greek with humanist scholars: Nogarola with Martino Rizzoni, a student of the great humanist scholar Guarino Guarini; Fedele with the Hellenist and Servite friar Gasparino Borro; and Cereta with a cloistered nun and Latin scholar. Similarly, Ippolita studied Latin with Baldo Martorelli, a protégé of Vittorino da Feltre, the storied professor of rhetoric at Ferrara who established a humanist school at Mantua. She learned Greek from the émigré Hellenist Constantine Lascaris, who like Martorelli followed Ippolita to Naples where she continued her studies with both professors.

Meredith Ray and Sarah Ross have seen the birth of a feminist epistolary tradition in Europe in the humanist Latin writings of Nogarola, Fedele, and Cereta.<sup>11</sup> But Ippolita Sforza, whose Latin orations demonstrate her training as

8. For Corio, see Domenico Panebianco, "Documenti sull'ultima malattia di Bianca Maria Sforza e sulla peste del 1468," in *Archivio storico lombardo*, ser. 9, vol. 8 (1969): 367–80.

9. Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr., ed. and trans., *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works by and about the Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy*, 2nd ed. (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992).

10. Isotta Nogarola, *Complete Writings: Letterbook, Dialogue on Adam and Eve, Orations*, ed. and trans. Margaret L. King and Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Cassandra Fedele, *Letters and Orations*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); see esp. Cereta's Apuleian dialogue, at 180–202. For the Latin letters in translation of even earlier humanist women writers such as Maddalena Scrovegni, Cecilia Gonzaga, Battista Montefeltro Malatesta, and Costanza Varano, see also King and Rabil, *Her Immaculate Hand*.

11. Building on King and Rabil's *Her Immaculate Hand* survey of the genesis of the tradition, see now Meredith Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), esp. 22–25; and Sarah Gwyneth Ross, *The Birth of Feminism. Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), esp. 9–10, 144–59.

a classicist, wrote no letters on the rights of women; nor do her epistles champion the contribution of the female voice to philosophical, moral, or theological discourse as do those of her feminist contemporaries. Instead, Ippolita's letters demonstrate her influence in affairs of state as a woman and her ability to move policy at the highest levels of government, undiminished by her sex. Intellect trumps gender in the roles she assumes in her letters as unofficial ambassador, adviser, and informant.<sup>12</sup>

Ippolita Sforza's political action took place consistently: she went right to the issues to be negotiated, even those involving naval strategies when Milan and Naples came perilously close to a war at sea off the coast of Barcelona in 1472. When civil war loomed as it did at the outbreak of cholera in Naples in November 1475 or after the assassination of her brother Galeazzo in Milan in December 1476, her letters vividly portrayed the network of key relationships she had built over the years with men and women who would enable her to save her own and her children's lives.

Stylistically, Ippolita's correspondence operates on two levels. While her letters to family and friends follow Petrarch's dictum that personal correspondence should exemplify "a plain and friendly style of speech,"<sup>13</sup> her epistles to protonotaries, ambassadors, and heads of state display the formal elements of oratory that mark Cassandra Fedele's letter to Lodovico da Schio, the rector of the faculty of liberal arts at the University of Padua, thanking him for inviting her to speak there,<sup>14</sup> and Isotta Nogarola's epistle to the Venetian nobleman Ludovico Foscarini on his arrival as Verona's new governor.<sup>15</sup> Ippolita's letters contain no showpieces on humanist topics designed for manuscript publication such as Cereta's epistolary essay to Pietro Zecchi on women and marriage, or her Petrarchan letter on her ascent of Mt. Isola titled "A Defense of Epicurus."<sup>16</sup> Nor, on the other hand, do Ippolita's letters resemble the vernacular letters of her Florentine contemporary

12. Evelyn Welch comments in "Ippolita Maria Sforza, Duchess of Calabria," in David Abulafia, ed., *The French Descent into Renaissance Italy, 1494–1495: Antecedents and Effects* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1995), 35: "It was only in this last decade of her life that Ippolita's capabilities as a diplomat were finally appreciated by Ferrante and Alfonso."

13. Ronald Witt, "Medieval 'Ars Dictaminis' and the Beginnings of Humanism: A New Construction of the Problem," *Renaissance Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1982): 1–35, at 28–29. Petrarch, following Cicero, rejected for personal letters the *stilus sublimis*, prescribing instead *hoc mediocre domesticum et familiare dicendi genus amice*.

14. Fedele, *Letters and Orations*, 66–67.

15. Nogarola, *Complete Writings*, 128–31.

16. Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 65–72; 115–22.

Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi with their interest in such domestic matters as local gossip, the purchasing of flax, and the finding of a good wet nurse.<sup>17</sup>

Like the great humanist scholar-statesmen of her era, Leonardo Bruni and Francesco Barbaro, Ippolita understood her role to be an active force in politics. Some of her letters are diplomatic dispatches from the field, documenting her activity as emissary, informant, and intermediary between the courts of her natal and marital kin. After her father's death and her brother Galeazzo's accession as duke in 1466, Ippolita's letters to Galeazzo increasingly concern the fraught relations between Milan, Naples, Venice, Florence and the papacy more than ten years after their joining in a mutual defense league.<sup>18</sup> Acting as her brother's agent, she relays to him her observations and opinions of the foreign diplomats and local courtiers at Ferrante's court. At the same time, she counsels him on the conduct of negotiations with Genoa, Naples, Venice and France; and, above all, on the perilous making and unmaking of alliances. Whereas her correspondence from Naples had principally been directed to her father and mother until their deaths in 1466 and 1468, the majority of her letters from 1469 to 1476 address her brother Galeazzo, the reigning duke of Milan, and his turbulent relations with her father-in-law, King Ferrante.

Rebuilding a northern political alliance for herself after Galeazzo's assassination, Ippolita writes to key members of her immediate family: Galeazzo's wife, Bona of Savoy, a sister-in-law of King Louis XI of France; her other brothers Ludovico, Ascanio, and Sforza Maria; and Galeazzo's son and heir to the ducal throne, Gian Galeazzo Sforza. She also addresses a number of letters to Sacramoro da Rimini, the Milanese ambassador to Rome and papal insider, whom she calls her "dear friend." Galeazzo was as notoriously inept in his relations with his own councillors as he was with foreign leaders and their ambassadors.<sup>19</sup> Emotionally and politically situated after her marriage between her natal Milan and her adoptive kingdom in the south, Ippolita was able to speak candidly to her brother and he would listen—or so she thought.

Ippolita's meatiest letters are written to advise her brother, now that she is a titled duchess with an inside line to the king and his courtiers, and on occasion to pull him back from the brink of an international incident. Between 1471 and

17. Alessandra Strozzi, *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. with intro. and notes by Heather Gregory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Strozzi, *Letters to Her Sons, 1447–1470*, ed. and trans. Judith Bryce (Toronto: Iter Academic Press; Tempe, AZ: ACMRS [Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies], 2016).

18. Based on the Peace of Lodi signed between Venice, Milan, and Florence in 1454, Naples and the papacy joining in the resulting Italian League in 1455.

19. Gregory Lubkin, *A Renaissance Court: Milan under Galeazzo Maria Sforza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), esp. 232–46; Vincent Ilardi, "Towards the *Tragedia d'Italia*: Ferrante and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Friendly Enemies and Hostile Allies," in *Abulafia*, 91–122.

1475, her letters to her brother are full of foreboding, reflecting, among other things, an ever-widening rift in the once-amicable relations between Galeazzo and her father-in-law Ferrante that threatened the peace of the peninsula. During these years, while Ippolita expresses her esteem for the ambassadors her brother dispatches to Naples, she soon makes equally clear her worry over his recall of men who, to her mind, had been his exemplary servants. In letter after letter, she advises Galeazzo to exercise caution. It is as if her epistolary narrative is heading inexorably for a disaster—a disaster that does come with the murder of the duke by his own courtiers on 26 December 1476.

Unlike her younger contemporaries Laura Cereta and Cassandra Fedele, Ippolita Sforza did not circulate her letters publicly.<sup>20</sup> Despite her fame as a highly educated woman involved in both policy-making and the arts, her Italian letters have remained for the most part unknown. The intellectual and political legacy of the themes voiced in her letters, however, which constitute an extraordinary public record of her ideas about governance, war, marriage, motherhood, family, and her own role in statecraft, can be seen in the generations of women writers who came after her. Ippolita's letters can be seen as prototypes both for the self-fashioning of the influential women epistolographers who would follow her and for the fictional female characters portrayed in dialogues, plays, and essays in early modern European literature.

The increasing volume and circulation of women's writings in the sixteenth century indicate that representations of the female voice became a matter of great interest.<sup>21</sup> The intense curiosity of the reading public about the nature of gender was now manifested in works by female authors from the fifteenth century on. In fact, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a proliferation of works that featured a new voice in Italian literature: that of the female author. The principal commercial presses in sixteenth-century Venice now published letter collections, dialogues, treatises, poetry books, and novels not only by women but by men impersonating women. In 1548, Ortensio Lando produced a bestseller, as Meredith Ray has shown, by publishing an anthology of 181 letters, most of them fictional, written by Lando himself, to be sold as the works of women.<sup>22</sup>

20. The letters of Cereta and Fedele that circulated in manuscript were collected and published in the seventeenth century by Giacomo Filippo Tomasini: *Clarissimae feminae Cassandrae Fidelis venetae epistolae et orationes posthumae* (Padua: Prostat apud Franceiscum Bolzettam, 1636); *Laurae Ceretae brixienis feminae clarissimae epistolae* (Padua: Types Sebastiani Sardi, 1640).

21. Diana Robin, *Publishing Women: The Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

22. Ray, *Writing Gender*; 45–52; Ortensio Lando, *Lettere di molte valorose donne, nelle quali chiaramente appare non esser ne di eloquentia ne di dottrina alli huomini inferiori* (Venice: appresso Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari[is], 1548).

While neither Ippolita Sforza's letters nor her life story were known by subsequent generations of women, her works live on as prototypes for the problems depicted in the autobiographical letters that early modern women would publish, either in printed volumes or in the manuscripts they circulated of their works. Their letters furnished testimony of their attitudes on education, motherhood, state governance, religion, medicine and the art of healing, war, and marriage—the most political of all institutions in early modern Europe. Ippolita's letters can be seen, then, as a matrix for the letters, dialogues, and treatises of Laura Cereta, Vittoria Colonna, Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Mary Beale, Anna Maria van Schurman, and the many other women writers who came after her.

If Ippolita Sforza's letters model what it was to “write like a woman,” Moderata Fonte's dialogue *The Worth of Women* (1600) was simply an expansion of the epistolary female voice to seven voices, all female, in dialogue with one another. The subjects of Fonte's dialogue were those that Ippolita had aired in her letters, among them, marriage. Ippolita's earliest letters from Naples portray her deeply ambivalent feelings about her marriage. While she boasts early in the marriage of a conversation she had with her husband about a book on state governance, in the next breath she describes being locked in her chambers by her own lady's maid, which supposedly ensures the duchess's safety but also prevents her from spying on her husband. Such letters, though they remained unpublished and unknown, are nonetheless prototypes for the anti-marriage speeches of Fonte's fictional characters Leonora and Corinna in *The Worth of Women*.<sup>23</sup>

Ippolita's frequent letters to her mother also suggest a template for what Ross, in her analysis of Fonte's *The Worth of Women* has called the “feminization” of humanist *amicitia* (friendship), a term which in Cicero's dialogue of the same name portrayed the idealized friendship between men who were intellectual equals.<sup>24</sup> In Fonte's dialogue, as in Ippolita's letters to her mother, the conversation ranges across numerous subjects from politics to travel, representing a prototype of humanist friendships between women. But Ippolita also extended her Ciceronian idea of *amicitia* to her long-term relationship with Lorenzo de' Medici. Addressing him as “my dear brother,” she wrote that the two friends “shared all things in common” (Letter 95: 7 April 1483). In this adaptation of *amicitia*, Ippolita anticipated the seventeenth-century Englishwoman Mary Beale's appropriation of Cicero's idealization of friendship as the basis for equality in between the sexes.<sup>25</sup>

23. See the discussion in Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 65–72; and Moderata Fonte (Modesta Pozzo), *The Worth of Women: Wherein is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 48–49, 54–55, 113–14, 257–58.

24. Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, 276–87.

25. Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, 299–304.

Ippolita's engagement in the politics of the Neapolitan and Milanese courts and her letters to leading statesmen of the time anticipate the transnational community of male and female intellectuals that Carol Pal has so vividly described in her study of the circle of friends of the seventeenth-century Utrecht-born scholar Anna Maria van Schurman that extended from the Netherlands to England, Ireland, Germany and France.<sup>26</sup> Schurman created an epistolary network that "cut across barriers of religion, nation, class, intellectual allegiance, and family formation."<sup>27</sup> It included Katherine Jones, Lady Ranelagh, the French scholars Marie de Gournay and Marie du Moulin, and the Palatine Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. Similarly, the seventeenth-century Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti, writing from the confines of the cloister, used her letters to build an international network of supporters.<sup>28</sup> The letters she published show her use of the epistolary form for self-promotion, social critique and public debate.<sup>29</sup> Collection of letters had come a long way since the fifteenth century when the letters of women were circulated for the most part privately.

Ippolita's letters on the invasion of Otranto by Ottoman Turks could also have served as prototypes for the moving dispatches on the wars and city sieges men and women published in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Laura Cereta's letter to the Brescian magistrate Luigi Dandolo describing the bloody siege of Rovereto and Calliano by the German army in 1487 is a case in point.<sup>30</sup> Cereta had recalled the horror of the scene:

It has saddened and disgusted Christian hearts (I believe) that they had left so many innocent people homeless, slaughtered so many soldiers, destroyed so many city walls, laid waste so many fields, and lighted the blazing fires of a bloody war. For the war had already

26. Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

27. Pal, *Republic of Women*, 2.

28. See for example Lynn Lara Westwater, "A Rediscovered Friendship in the Republic of Letters: The Unpublished Correspondence of Arcangela Tarabotti and Ismaël Boulliau," *Renaissance Quarterly* 65, no.1 (2012): 67–134.

29. Arcangela Tarabotti, *Lettere familiari e di complimento* (Venice: Appresso li Guerigli, 1650), now in modern Italian and English editions by Meredith K. Ray and Lynn Lara Westwater: respectively, *Lettere familiari e di complimento* (Turin: Rosenberg and Sellier, 2005); and, translated by Ray and Westwater, *Letters Familiar and Formal* (Toronto: Iter Academic Press; Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012). See also Ray, *Writing Gender*, 196–99; and Arcangela Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. and trans. Letizia Panizza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 19–28.

30. Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 160–64; see also Cereta's antiwar letter to Francesco Fontana, 153–58. Both letters suggest Bruni's writings on war: see C. C. Bayley, *War and Society in Renaissance Florence: The De militia of Leonardo Bruni* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).

caused a great many courageous men to come together, and the result has been carnage on both sides and many men have lost their lives. Corpses now lie piled high in carts and are being hauled away on all sides. Was there not time for sorrow and pity—a time when bloodshed might have touched and softened men's minds?<sup>31</sup>

The legacy of Ippolita's political counsel to her brother was far-reaching. Half a century after the duchess' death, the poet Vittoria Colonna seemed almost to be imitating Ippolita's daily words of advice in her letters to her brother on how he should practice diplomacy with the pope and his other adversaries. Colonna wrote daily letters to her brother Ascanio in his armed conflict with Pope Paul III during the Salt War of 1541 that closely resemble Ippolita's letters counseling her brother Galeazzo on how to deal with her father-in-law, King Ferrante, and his ministers.<sup>32</sup> Colonna not only followed closely the events leading up to her brother Ascanio's war with the pope, but she acted as though she were her brother's ambassador to the Vatican, corresponding with members of the papal court. She wrote letters to the chief officer in charge of the field commissary in the pope's army, and even corresponded with Emperor Charles V, in the hope that he would intervene. Like Ippolita, Colonna counseled her brother Ascanio on each of the diplomatic moves that would bring to a close the pope's war against him, on the tone he should take in addressing the pope, and on the points he ought to propose to effect a compromise.

### *Biography*

On 18 April 1445, Ippolita Sforza was born in Pesaro, long a Sforza enclave on the Adriatic coast. Her parents were Bianca Maria Visconti, the only legitimate child of Duke Filippo Maria Visconti of Milan,<sup>33</sup> and Francesco Sforza, the commander-in-chief of Visconti's army and perhaps the greatest condottiere (mercenary general) of his day.

Ippolita was two years old when, after two centuries of Visconti rule, the citizens of Milan revolted. On the death of her grandfather Duke Filippo Maria Visconti on 13 August 1447, an elite group of Milanese noblemen, jurists, and

31. Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 161.

32. On Colonna's diplomacy, see Vittoria Colonna, *Carteggio*, ed. Ermanno Ferrero and Giuseppe Müller with a supplement by Domenico Tordi, 2nd ed. (Turin: E. Loescher, 1892), 214–27; and Robin, "The Salt War Letters of Vittoria Colonna," in *Publishing Women*, 78–101.

33. Bianca Maria Visconti was the legitimized daughter of the duke and his mistress Agnese del Maino.

ducal councilors assembled to declare the duchy a republic.<sup>34</sup> Elections were held and within five weeks, the new captains of the republic ordered the dismantling of the Visconti palaces and the burning of the city records. Milan's client cities revolted, refusing to pay taxes to Milan in return for its protection. The republic then hired Visconti's former condottiere, Francesco Sforza, to bring them back into the fold.

But in October 1448, Sforza defected from the republic himself, signing an agreement with the Venetians: they were to help him subjugate Milan and bring its client towns under their jurisdiction. By early 1449, civil war had broken out in Milan and most of the nobility had gone over to Sforza, abandoning the republic. Sforza now lay plans to take Milan not for Venice but himself. On 1 February 1449, he cordoned off access to the city, effectively stopping the flow of all foodstuffs into Milan. By fall and throughout the winter, famine held the city in its grip. The living fed on dogs, cats, and vermin; and the dead lay in the streets where they fell.

On 20 February 1450, Sforza entered the city unarmed. The Milanese surrendered to him, and on 26 March 1450, he was invested as duke of Milan. A year after the war's end, Sforza presided over the worst recorded plague in Milan's history. In 1451, thirty thousand citizens died in the epidemic. Ippolita was then six years old.

By 1450, Francesco Sforza had moved his wife and children from Pesaro to the ducal residence in Pavia. That year he appointed Baldo Martorelli as the teacher of his son Galeazzo and daughter Ippolita, then ages six and five.<sup>35</sup> In

34. On the Ambrosian revolution of 1447–1451, the primary sources are Giovanni Simonetta, *Rerum gestarum Francisci Sfortiae Mediolanensium ducis commentarii*, ed. Giovanni Soranzo, in *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, second series, 21.2 (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1932); Pier Candido Decembrio, *Annotatio rerum gestarum in vita Francisci Sfortiae IV Mediolanensium ducis*, in Decembrio, *Opuscula historica*, ed. Attilio Butti, Felice Fossati, and Giuseppe Petraglione, in *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, second series, 20.1 (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1925), #1; and Decembrio, *Vita Philippi Mariae III Ligurum ducis*, in *Opuscula historica*, #2. For the most comprehensive modern account of rise and fall of the republic, see Francesco Cognasso, "La Repubblica di San Ambrogio," in *Storia di Milano*, vol. 6: *Il ducato visconteo e la repubblica ambrosiana, 1392–1450* (Milan: Fondazione Treccani degli Alfieri, 1955), 387–448. See also Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 140–48. For fuller bibliography, see Diana Robin, *Filelfo in Milan: Writings 1451–1477* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 85–104.

35. Monica Ferrari, *Per non manchare in tuto del debito mio: L'educazione dei bambini Sforza nel Quattrocento* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2000); Dario Cingolani, *Baldo Martorello da Serra de' Conti: Un umanista al servizio degli Sforza: Biografia con edizione delle lettere e della grammatica latina dal ms. trivulziano 786*. [Serra de' Conti]: Biblioteca Comunale, 1983; also Sandra Bernato, "Martorelli, Baldo," *DBI* 71 (2008):358–59 <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/baldo-martorelli\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/baldo-martorelli_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)>.

1454, Martorelli composed a Latin grammar text, his *Grammatica latina*,<sup>36</sup> for both children. At age eight, Ippolita wrote her first vernacular letter, addressed to her father (Letter 1: 13 July 1453). She signed the letter *manu propria* (written in my own hand), indicating nonetheless Martorelli's influence, since he would cosign many of her letters "Baldus M." Martorelli, who arrived in Milan in 1449, had received his own classical education from Vittorino da Feltre, who ran the celebrated palace school, the Casa Giosa, in Mantua at the court of Ludovico Gonzaga and his wife Barbara of Brandenburg.

Many noble families in fifteenth-century Italy conducted their correspondence with one another in Latin. Official documents and correspondence exchanged between courts were often in Latin; and so the sons and daughters of elite families were trained not only to write eloquently in Latin but to ornament their prose with passages from Virgil, Plautus, Ovid, and other authors in the Roman canon.<sup>37</sup> Ippolita's vernacular letters everywhere manifest her schooling in Latin eloquence. Her three extant Latin orations delivered publicly in 1455, 1459, and 1465 further demonstrate her education in the elements of classical rhetoric.<sup>38</sup> With the exception of one elegy in Latin that Ippolita wrote mourning her father's death in 1466, no poetry has been attributed to her:

Est socer ille meus Siculum rex gloria regum  
 Est meus hic coniunx alter spes Latii  
 Nil socer ipse magis nec coniunx deligit eque  
 Fratribus Ipolite nil genitrice magis  
 Hiis igitur sevim phar est lenire dolorem  
 Hiis propria sunt magno vota ferenda deo.<sup>39</sup>

Ippolita also acquired a teacher of Greek in the refugee scholar Constantine Lascaris, who had in 1458 received the prestigious chair of Greek in Milan.<sup>40</sup> He wrote a Greek grammar for her use, the *Erotemeta*, dedicating the work to her; it

36. Conserved in the Biblioteca Trivulziana in Milan, MS 786.

37. See, for example, Ippolita's *Wedding Oration for Tristano Sforza and Beatrice d'Este (1455)*, given below.

38. Ippolita's three extant orations in the original Latin and our English translations are given below.

39. Jane Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets. Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 172–73. Stevenson's translation reads: "My father-in-law is king and glory of the kingdom of Sicily,/ My husband is another hope for Latium,/ But neither my father-in-law himself, or my husband, please me more/ Than Ippolita's brothers, or her mother./ Therefore for these, there is a light to relieve severe grief./ For these are proper prayers to be uttered to almighty God." We have not been able to find any other citation of these verses.

40. On Lascaris and Ippolita Sforza see John Monfasani, "Lascaris, Constantine," in Paul F. Grendler, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1999), 3.381–82. See also Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets*, 172, and Castaldo, "Introduction," lxxv, on her relationship with Lascaris.

would be the first book published in Greek in Italy.<sup>41</sup> In 1465, he followed Ippolita and her nuptial train to Naples, obtaining that same year an appointment at the university of Naples. Galeazzo, meanwhile, left Martorelli to study with Guinforte Barzizza, the son of Gasparino Barzizza, the eminent professor of moral philosophy and rhetoric at the university of Pavia.

Even after he was made duke in 1450, Francesco Sforza found himself constantly at war. A respite from the battlefield came in April 1454, when Sforza concluded the Peace of Lodi with Venice and Florence, the papacy and Naples joining the resulting Italian League the following year. The agreement with King Alfonso I of Naples stipulated a double marriage alliance with Milan: the king's grandson Alfonso was to marry Ippolita Sforza, then ten years old, while his granddaughter Eleonora d'Aragona was to be betrothed to Sforza Maria Sforza.<sup>42</sup>

Ten years later, in May 1465, Ippolita's marriage to Alfonso was celebrated in Milan, with his brother Federico serving as his proxy. In June, Ippolita and her train of attendants left for Naples, stopping on the way in Florence, where they were the guests of the sixteen-year-old Lorenzo de' Medici who had represented his family at Ippolita's wedding in Milan.<sup>43</sup> Ippolita and her party were lavishly entertained at the houses of the merchant elite in Florence as well by Lorenzo and the Medici. In August, as the group continued on their journey to Naples, Francesco Sforza halted Ippolita's cortege for three weeks after hearing that that his son-in-law Jacopo Piccinino had been murdered at Ferrante's castle in Naples where he had been a guest.

Once assured that his daughter would be not only safe from harm but graciously received in Naples, the duke allowed Ippolita and her attendants to continue their journey. They arrived in Naples on 14 September. On 10 October 1465, the nuptial ceremonies were celebrated in Naples and the festivities went on for days. On 27 December, Ippolita officially received the title duchess of Calabria. In her letters to her mother, Ippolita described the games she and Alfonso played and the books they read together. But already in mid-January, three months into the marriage, Ippolita had Alfonso followed when she learned that he was slipping away to visit former lovers, among whom were young men as well as women.<sup>44</sup> Angry and distraught, she complained bitterly to her mother, in spite of the fact that extramarital affairs were the rule among fifteenth-century noblemen. In any case, she had seen it all before with her own father and his

41. Monfasani, "Lascaris, Constantine."

42. See Carlo Canetta, "Le sponsalie di casa Sforza con casa d'Aragona," *Archivio storico lombardo* ser. 1, vol. 9, fasc. 1 (1882): 136–44, for the betrothal agreements.

43. Judith Bryce, "Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence," *Renaissance Quarterly* 4, no.1 (2001): 1074–1107.

44. Regarding the diplomats' correspondence on Ippolita's having Alfonso tailed see Welch, "Ippolita Maria Sforza," 128–29.

mistresses.<sup>45</sup> In March 1466, less than two months after her discovery of Alfonso's affairs, Ippolita received news of the death of her father, the man she saw as her protector, confidant, and mentor rather than the distant figure he had been for much of her life since, as the consummate military man, Francesco was almost constantly in the field with his troops, moving from one outpost to another.

Ippolita's literary activity had begun almost as soon as she settled into the couple's home at the Castel Capuano, a short walk from the King Ferrante's residence at the Castelnuovo. Thanks to the fame of her Latin orations, the duchess was well known to the poets and the men of letters at court even before her arrival in their city. The Neapolitan literati saluted her as their own in encomia and other works in her honor. Reflective of the cultural dynamism of the Neapolitan court, her letters also suggest the nature of her relations with the court poets and architects of the realm, one of whom she commissioned to design a *studio*, or study, for her own use, where she could write, read, and display the art works and family portraits she collected, and meet privately with her friends, clients, and secretaries.<sup>46</sup> In this respect she behaved no differently from men in her position. Her older brother, as noted below, had a private study built for himself in the Sforza castle in Milan where he displayed his hunting trophies.<sup>47</sup>

The writers in King Ferrante's literary academy, named the Accademia Pontaniana after its president Giovanni Pontano, counted on the duchess's patronage. Ippolita had already become something of a cult figure among the Italian poets as early as 1459. That year, at age fourteen, she had delivered a Latin oration at the Gonzaga court in Mantua before the international congress that Pope Pius II called to mount a crusade against the Ottoman Turks who had seized the Byzantine capital of Constantinople on 29 May 1453. Ippolita also received works dedicated to her by many members of the Academy: among them Lorenzo Valla, Flavio Biondo, Antonio Cornazzano, Francesco Galeota, Benedetto Gareth, Antonio Beccadelli (Panormita), Masuccio Saliterno, and, of course, Pontano himself, who would become her personal secretary in 1475, after the death of Baldo Martorelli. Ippolita was also praised by the Neapolitan chronicle writers Loise de Rosa and Giovanni Antonio Bonini; and she was memorialized in the sonnets of Bernardo Bellincioni and the Latin epigrams of Porcelio Pandoni and Antonio Beccadelli. The Florentine poet and playwright Luigi Pulci dedicated to her his *Novella dello sciocco senese* to her (The Story of a Sienese Fool). Other Neapolitan poets who celebrated her in their encomiastic works were Egidio Canisio, Paolo Parisi, and Gabriele Altilio, the teacher and later personal secretary of Ippolita's son Ferrandino.

45. See for example Ippolita's Letters 30 (13 January 1467) and 33 (19 May 1467).

46. Letter 24: 6 January 1466. See Judith Bryce, "Fa finire uno bello studio et dice volere studiare": Ippolita and her Books," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance* 62, no. 1 (2002), 55–69.

47. See below at p. 16 and pp. 62–63.

Ippolita Sforza died on 20 August 1488 at the age of forty-three, suddenly and without signs of a prior illness. The Paduan humanist Ludovico Odasio read her funeral oration at the requiem mass held for her in the cathedral in Naples. Giovanni Pontano stood beside her bier at the end and sang a Latin elegy.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Biographical Tradition*

As Pamela Benson has shown, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the ages in which literary portraits of noblewomen became models of femininity to be imitated.<sup>49</sup> But rather than the stylized lives of famous women of classical antiquity presented in Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (Famous Women, 1362),<sup>50</sup> the new collective biographies of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries idealized women of the noble courts who were often portrayed as remarkable for their educational accomplishments as well as their beauty. In 1547, Giuseppe Betussi's revised edition of Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* added forty-nine new biographies of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century women. The modern biographies introduced a major change in the biographical tradition, revealing that the public now saw learned women, as Sarah Ross has argued, "as participants in the family business of education, who brought honor both to their natal families and to the larger civic family of their native cities."<sup>51</sup>

For early modern biographers, Ippolita Sforza was one such woman. Her life and accomplishments were described at length in the collected biographies of Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera, de le clare donne* (Gynevera, of famous women, 1490); Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo's *De plurimis claris selectisque mulieribus opus* (A work on the most famous and select women, 1497); Betussi's supplement to Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*, titled *Donne famose ... ai giorni nostri* (Famous women in our time, 1545); Paolo Morrigia's *La nobiltà di Milano* (The Milanese nobility, 1595); Francesco Agostino della Chiesa's *Teatro delle donne letterate* (A theater of literary women, 1620); and Niccola Ratti's *Della famiglia Sforza* (The Sforza family, 1794/5), among many other such works, all of which praised their models as much for their education and intellectual

48. The full Latin text of the elegy (Castaldo, 91) with our English translation appears below at pp. 38–39.

49. Pamela J. Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

50. Benson, *The Invention*, 9, calls Boccaccio's *De mulieribus* "the foundation text of Renaissance pro-feminism." The date of the *De mulieribus* is Virginia Brown's; see her edition and translation of Boccaccio's work, *Famous Women* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

51. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Libro di M. Gio. Boccaccio delle donne illustri*, ed. and trans. Giuseppe Betussi (Venice: Pietro de Nicolini da Sabbio, 1547); Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, 96–101.

accomplishments as for conventional female characteristics. Arienti discusses such traditional feminine qualities of Ippolita as her physical beauty and her piety; he also notes in some detail her facility at in demonstrating her learning and sophistication in conversation. Although he describes such physical characteristics as Ippolita's blond hair, lovely eyes, her aquiline nose, and her height [*Fu bella, bianca, bionda, ebbe occhi venusti, naso un poco aquilino... Fu più presto grande che mediocre*],<sup>52</sup> he especially prizes her oratorical gifts and her ability to talk about history, political theory, and statecraft, as well as about hunting, weaponry and arms, agriculture, and the roles of men and women.<sup>53</sup> What Arienti and her other Renaissance biographers do not allude to are her Italian prose style, her skill at persuasion, and her mastery of a variety of tones and colors in the prose she uses in her letters depending on the occasion and her correspondent's situation. Her early modern biographers appear not to have known her letters. In any case, not one of them cites her letters in their portraits of the duchess.

### *Synopsis of the Letters (1453–1486)*

The letters are grouped into nine chapters by chronology and theme.

#### *1. Travels in Lombardy: Letters 1–22 (1453–1465)*

Despite the turbulence of the first seven years of her life, Ippolita Sforza's first extant letter, dated 13 July 1453 and written in her own hand, betrays no sense of insecurity. Sent from the Visconti castle in Pavia to her father Francesco Sforza, her letter was dated the year that Constantinople, the city Italians regarded as the "New Rome," fell to the forces of the Ottoman Turks. In July, three years after the civil war in Milan, the duchy remained at war with Venice over the control of Brescia, Bergamo, and Crema. War continued to inflame all of northern Italy until the Peace of Lodi was signed by Venice, Milan, and Florence on 9 April 1454. On 2 March 1455, the treaty of the Italian (or Italic) League that followed in consequence, agreed to by all five regional states—Milan, Naples, Venice, Florence, and the papacy—was proclaimed.

In her earliest letters addressed to her father, who was throughout her childhood the most important figure in her family, Ippolita portrayed her life as a school for hunting and rural hospitality. On a week-long journey to Varese,

52. "Sapea parlare de hystorie, de le condictione di stati et di regni, et come quilli se doveano acquistare et mantenere"; "Sapea disputare de le cose urbane, de le arme, de' cavalli, de cani, sparvieri, falchoni, de la agricultura, de li exercitii de le donne e de varie virtù degl'homini, che era una felicità ad audire." Arienti, *Gynevera*, 339.

53. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 345.

she met the Sforza's neighbors in the smaller towns, villages, and ancestral castles that lay northwest of Milan. She hunted for quails and partridges with dogs and a hawk she learned to train. She traveled to the ducal hunting lodges with her mother, her brothers Galeazzo and Filippo, and her half-sister Drusiana,<sup>54</sup> and the family servants. One of her letters describes a visit to her mother's castle at Cremona, the city her father Filippo Maria Visconti had given Bianca as part of her dowry. In another letter, Ippolita depicted her journey to the neighboring castle of the Gonzaga, the lords of Mantua, whose daughter Dorotea, betrothed to Galeazzo, was her age.

In Letters 2–5, written during a three-week stay at the family hunting lodge at Castro Leone (Castelleone, Castiglione), Ippolita, now thirteen, boasted to her father about her skill at catching partridges and quails with the hawk and hounds she trained. We also see how much a sign of disapproval from her father could wound her. In Letter 5, addressed to her father, she made no attempt to hide from him the hurt she felt when she learned from her mother that he had joked about her efforts at birdhunting. These letters also make clear that successful hawking, falconry, and hunting were integral to the Sforza children's education and were markers of their progress. Ippolita's older brother Galeazzo decorated a study in the Sforza castle in Milan with green velvet embossed with the ducal insignia, to put on display his numerous hawks, falcons, and other hunting animals.<sup>55</sup>

A second group of letters Ippolita sent to her father (Letters 6–10) spans the period from November 1458<sup>56</sup> to September 1459. The letters of November and December 1458 describe Ippolita's three-week stay at her mother's castle in Cremona. There the Sforza entourage, headed by the Duchess Bianca Maria, included Ippolita, her brothers Galeazzo and Filippo, and her half-sister Drusiana. Despite being surrounded by her brothers and sister and their neighbors, the ruling family from Mantua, the Marchesa Barbara of Brandenburg and her daughter Dorotea, Ippolita longed to see her father and spend time with him. Letters 9 and 10, both from September 1459, delineate scenes away from home, one remembered and the other imagined. The first of these describes the autumn sightseeing excursion on which she took her two grandmothers (Bianca Maria's mother Agnese del Maino and Francesco Sforza's mother Lucia Terzani da Marsciano<sup>57</sup>), which

54. Filippo Maria Sforza is Ippolita's younger brother; Drusiana is a half-sister of Ippolita, a daughter of Francesco Sforza by his mistress Giovana d'Acquapendente.

55. On his hunting animals see Francesco Malaguzzi Valeri, *La corte di Lodovico di Moro*, 4 vols. in 3 (Milan: U. Hoepli, 1913–1923), vol. 1, part 2, 714–49. Galeazzo spent 3,000 ducats one year for his falconers and falcons alone.

56. Castaldo, 6n1, believes that Letter 6 is erroneously dated 15 December 1458; the correct date should be November 15.

57. Lucia was the longtime mistress of Francesco's father, Giacomuzzo (Muzio) Attendolo Sforza, Count of Cotignola.

included tours of the Visconti castle at Pavia and the Certosa, the monastery the Visconti had founded as a family mausoleum in 1396. The second depicts what she imagined to have been a great occasion: her father's meeting in Rome with the newly-crowned pope, Pius II, at the papal court, and at the same time their neighbors from Mantua, the Marchese Ludovico and Marchesa Barbara of Brandenburg, who were there with their daughter Dorotea. Neither letter mentions the international congress the pope had summoned to Mantua in 1459, where church leaders and rulers from numerous European cities gathered to mount a crusade against the Ottoman Turks, conquerors of Constantinople. At that congress, Ippolita delivered a Latin oration stating her father's commitment to such a crusade, provided the other great city states agreed to join the expedition.<sup>58</sup>

In January 1462, Francesco Sforza was struck down by the return of the hydrophobia and gout that had tormented him the preceding summer, this time in a more virulent form.<sup>59</sup> It appeared that he would not live much longer. During his illness, Bianca Maria handled all high-level communications with the allies, assuring the pope and King Ferrante in Naples that the duke of Milan would stand by them. At the same time, the new king of France Louis XI sought to enlist the duke in an alliance against Naples, which he proposed to ratify with a marriage between the son of the pretender to the Neapolitan throne, Jean d'Anjou, and Ippolita Sforza. Even as rumors of Francesco's imminent death spread throughout Italy, by February 1462 the duke had rallied. He refused Louis XI's proposal of a marriage alliance and moved to secure not only his own kingdom but that of his ally King Ferrante.

A group of eight letters from Ippolita written between early May and mid-June 1462 (Letters 11–19) bear no hint of the turmoil she must have seen roiling around her in the preceding months. Addressing her letters from this point on no longer only to her father, who was now much weakened by his illness, but to both parents, she describes the pleasures and hospitality she enjoyed on a trip north to Bolate, Carone, Cislago, Tradate, Varese, and Castiglione Olana, before finally arriving back in Milan. Spending generally no more than a night in each town, she and her party kept such a breathtaking pace and covered so many towns and villages that she returned to Milan after a one week on the road feeling, she wrote, as if she had been traveling for many years (Letter 17: 11 May 1462). She and her party rose at dawn. They frequently rode for eight or more hours, often not stopping for the night until late in the evening. On one such late arrival in a village, a crowd of men and women who were dancing to the music of flutes and drums

58. See below Ippolita's *Oration for Pope Pius II (1459)*.

59. Antonio Menniti Ippolito, "Sforza, Francesco," in DBI, 50 (1998):11 <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-i-sforza-duca-di-milano\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-i-sforza-duca-di-milano_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)>. The hydrophobia (edema) Sforza suffered from appears to have been an extreme swelling and pooling of fluid in the lungs, legs, and around the heart.

welcomed Ippolita and her party. They were then regaled with “a multitude and variety of dishes” served at their host’s castle (Letter 14: 7 May 1462).

During the journey, Ippolita often stopped at a village to hear mass, often participating in a local religious festival. Wherever the group stopped, she and her friends were showered with gifts of game and cheeses, among other things. The purpose of her trip to the northern towns in the duchy of Milan was not only to meet old family friends, hunt, enjoy nature, and see the sights. It was also understood that Ippolita, as the duke’s eldest daughter, had been dispatched by her parents to play her role as their emissary: thus she was expected to strengthen the bonds of sociability, mutual exchange, and kinship in the duchy.

Letter 19 (30 September 1463), written two years before her departure to Naples by the now eighteen-year-old Ippolita after an unsuccessful day of hunting at Melegnano, betrays no sense of the pressures that the duke and duchess were now facing. In May 1463, King Louis XI had officially ceded the governance of Genoa and Savoy to Francesco Sforza, obligations the duke was in no position to take on. In August of the same year, the duke’s longtime allies Pope Pius II and Cosimo de’ Medici died, leaving Florence in the hands of Cosimo’s invalid son Piero de’ Medici, while in Rome Paolo Barbo, a Venetian hostile to Milan, came to the papal throne as Pope Paul II.

Written only a few months before Ippolita was to travel to the court of Naples where she would become the wife of Alfonso, duke of Calabria, son and heir of Ferrante, king of Naples, Ippolita’s letters of February and March 1465 reveal not only her sorrow at leaving home but her frustration at not being able to express what she feels. “God knows with how much sorrow your Lordship wrote his last letter, in which it seemed to me I saw with my own eyes the great pain it gave your Lordship,” she wrote her father (Letter 21: 12 February 1465). These last letters Ippolita wrote to her father before her departure suggest a sense of familial intimacy and emotional dependence, shared not only between the duke and duchess for whom this period was fraught with anxiety, but also by Ippolita and her parents. In February, Bianca suffered for several days from the excruciating pain of abdominal “blockage” (*serramento*), for which she is given medication (*pilole*) to relieve the pain.<sup>60</sup> When Ippolita tells her father that her mother has become ill and is suffering, we learn for the first time of Francesco Sforza’s great concern for his wife.

## 2. *Marriage and Betrayal: Letters 23–28 (1465–1466)*

In June 1465, Ippolita left Milan to embark on the long journey to the kingdom of Naples where she would marry Duke Alfonso of Calabria. She had traveled no

60. This incident may have been a harbinger of the illness she would die of three years later.

further than Siena when the news of the apparent murder of Jacopo Piccinino, husband of Ippolita's sister Drusiana, put the wedding plans on hold. Piccinino, who led the armies of both King Ferrante and Duke Francesco Sforza, had been brought to Naples on the promise that the king would name him viceroy of the Abruzzi, and was lavishly entertained when he arrived on 4 June 1465. But on 24 June he was taken away in chains, and on 12 July, it was reported that he had died in the palace. Exactly where he or how he died is not known, though poison was suspected. Fearing that Ippolita herself might be held hostage at the Neapolitan court or worse, Sforza halted his daughter's cortege in Siena for three weeks until he could be assured of her safety.<sup>61</sup>

Ippolita arrived at last in Naples on 14 September 1465, to celebrate her marriage on 10 October. Between 6 January and 3 February 1466, now officially the duchess of Calabria, she dispatched a series of letters to her mother and father in Milan describing both the pleasures and the humiliations she experienced at the Castel Capuano. Her father-in-law King Ferrante, she reported, showed his interest in her well-being, though principally by letter.

Within the first year of the marriage, Ippolita commissioned her own servant Donato, whom she had brought with her from Milan, to follow Alfonso. When the duke accused her of not showing him respect,<sup>62</sup> she countered that she expected to be treated by her husband "not as a servant but a companion"<sup>63</sup>—her response reported to Bianca Maria by Pietro da Landriano, a Milanese nobleman Ippolita's mother had sent to Naples to observe her daughter's situation. In another letter Ippolita complained that Alfonso had commanded Ippolita's own maidservant to lock her into her apartments when he left—presumably so she would not be able to spy on the duke herself (Letter 24: 6 January 1466). Ippolita's anger about her husband's infidelities caused a scandal at court and embarrassed her parents. The resident ambassador Antonio da Trezzo described the incident to Bianca Maria, and da Landriano was sent back to Naples with the message that Alfonso's disrespectful treatment of Ippolita, if continued, would damage the alliance between the two cities.<sup>64</sup>

In the same letter, Ippolita took care to remind her mother and father that she was still the gifted Latin scholar, writer and avid reader who had come to

61. Despite this show of disapproval, some scholars suggest that Francesco Sforza collaborated in Ferrante's murder of Piccinino. See, for example, Menniti Ippolito, "Francesco Sforza," 11; and Alan Ryder, "Ferdinando I d'Aragona, re di Napoli," *DBI* 46 (1996):179 <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ferdinando-i-d-aragona-re-di-napoli\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ferdinando-i-d-aragona-re-di-napoli_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)>.

62. Welch, "Ippolita Maria Sforza," 128–29.

63. See below Letter 30: 13 January 1467. For the quoted comment see also ASMi, SPE, Napoli, 216, Pietro da Landriano to Bianca Maria Sforza, 10 Jan. 1467, in Welch, "Ippolita Maria Sforza," 129.

64. Welch, "Ippolita Maria Sforza," 128–29.

Naples with her own library of classical texts.<sup>65</sup> She proudly told them that she had ordered a study be built for her own use as a room of her own where she could read and write without being disturbed. In this letter, Ippolita's self-presentation as an independent, working scholar resists the humiliation inflicted on her by her husband. So too does her plan to display the power of the Sforza clan to her Neapolitan family by mounting a gallery of portraits [*tavoletti retratti*] of her parents and her siblings in her study to warn and rebuke anyone in the kingdom of Naples who might attempt in any way to diminish her honor. As a postscript to this letter, Ippolita reminds her mother of her sexual needs as a young bride, asking Bianca Maria to send her some of the sweet-smelling unguent the duchess regularly used. Alfonso may have strayed, but Ippolita by no means has given up to hope of winning back his love (Letter 24: 6 January 1466).

Only months after her arrival in Naples, Ippolita began to play the role of an intermediary between the two courts. Her father's longtime general and kinsman Roberto di Sanseverino had approached her for a favor, she wrote her parents on 13 January 1466 (Letter 26). Sanseverino's chancellor had requested an annual salary of six thousand ducats from King Ferrante and an equal amount from Francesco Sforza so that he could maintain his troops either in Lombardy or the kingdom of Naples, as needed. She had interceded with her father on Sanseverino's behalf, she wrote, on the basis of "the very great love" that her father's general had always shown her. In a subsequent letter (Letter 28: 3 February 1466), Ippolita regaled her father and mother with the details of sumptuous four-day visit to Caiazzo where Sanseverino took her and her husband on three all-day hunts in the mountains and entertained them with food, wines, and other pleasures at his beautiful country estate.

The early period of her letters from Naples ends with two signal events: the earthquake of January 1466 and her father's death two months later, on 8 March. Her letter of 15 January (Letter 27) describes the earthquake that struck the city and, in particular, the Castel Capuano, terrifying her and her servants in the early hours of the morning while her husband had been away hunting. Fortunately nobody in her household was hurt and the house was undamaged. Though no letter in this collection marks the passing of her father, Ippolita asked her mother in Letter 31 of 12 February 1467, eleven months after his death, whether she should still be wearing mourning.

65. Tammara de Marinis, *La biblioteca napoletana dei re d'Aragona*, 4 vols. (Milan U. Hoepli, 1947–1952), 1:97–116.