

ISABELLA D'ESTE

# Selected Letters



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Iter Press  
Toronto, Ontario

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies  
Tempe, Arizona

2017

Iter Press

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Printed in Canada.

A generous subvention from the Lila Acheson Wallace — Reader's Digest Publications Subsidy at Villa I Tatti enabled the book's publication.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Isabella d'Este, consort of Francesco II Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, 1474-1539 Author. | Shemek, Deanna, editor, translator.

Title: Isabella d'Este : selected letters / edited and translated by Deanna Shemek

Other titles: Correspondence. English.

Description: Tempe, Arizona : Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017. | Series: Medieval and Renaissance texts and studies ; 516

Identifiers: LCCN 2016053857 (print) | LCCN 2017005260 (ebook) | ISBN 9780866985727 (paperback) | ISBN 9780866987332 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Isabella d'Este, consort of Francesco II Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, 1474-1539—Correspondence. | Mantua (Italy)—Kings and rulers—Correspondence. | Nobility—Italy—Correspondence. | Mantua (Italy)—History—Sources. | Italy—History—1492-1559—Sources. | Renaissance—Italy—Sources.

Classification: LCC DG540.8.I7 A413 2017 (print) | LCC DG540.8.I7 (ebook) | DDC 945/.28106092 [B] —dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016053857>

Cover illustration:

"File: Tizian 056.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed 20 May 2015, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Isabella\\_d%27Este#/media/File:Tizian\\_056.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Isabella_d%27Este#/media/File:Tizian_056.jpg).

Wikimedia Commons image source: *10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei: von der Antike bis zum Beginn der Moderne*. DVD-ROM. ISBN 9783936122206. Berlin: Yorck Project, Gesellschaft für Bildarchivierung. Distributed by Directmedia Publishing GmbH. c2002.

Portrait details: Tizian (Tiziano Vecellio) (c.1488-1576), *Isabella d'Este (1474-1539), Margravine of Mantua*. Oil on canvas (1534-1536), 102 x 64 cm. Inv. Gemäldegalerie, 83. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

Cover design:

Maureen Morin, Information Technology Services, University of Toronto Libraries.

Typesetting and production:

Iter Press.

## *Introduction*

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### *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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 Istoriatto 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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 Luzzio, *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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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

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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).