LADIES, CONCUBINES, AND PSEUDO-WIVES: MISTRESSES IN THE COURTLY CULTURE OF THE EMILIA-ROMAGNA OF RENAISSANCE ITALY

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Ladies, Concubines, and Pseudo-Wives: Mistresses in the Courtly Culture of the

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The fidelity of women was all, but power and money, come from the prince and filtered through courtly pomp, could work the miracle of toleration and the alchemy of repristinated honor.

—Lauro Martines

*Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ladies, Concubines, and Pseudo-Wives: Mistresses in the Courtly Culture of the Emilia-Romagna of Renaissance Italy

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Gender studies have rendered few detailed scholarly analyses of the significance of mistresses in Italian Renaissance city-states. While family historians have concluded that a code of honor and chastity dominated Italian Renaissance society, this work demonstrates that in fact such was not always the case. Families sacrificed the honor and chastity of their daughters to the lusts of their princes in order to gain power and influence. Mistresses also obtained great influence, being celebrated in a very public manner in art and literature, and in some rare cases they wielded political power.

This work examines the lives of mistresses within the Italian province of the Emilia-Romagna, predominantly during the fifteenth century. It examines the mistresses of the Malatesta of Rimini, the Rossi of Parma, and the Este of Ferrara. The lives of such women as Isotta degli’ Atti, Elisabetta Aldobrandini, Bianca Pellegrini, Lippa degli’ Ariosto, Stella del’ Assassino, Giovanna de’ Roberti, Caterina degli’ Albaresani, Camilla della Tavola, Maria Anna di’ Roberti, Isotta degli’ Albaresani, and Laura Eustochia Dianti are also analyzed in varying degrees of detail.

Historical chronicles have proved to be an indispensable source in the writing of this work, revealing much about the lives of these women. The analyses of art and literature celebrating mistresses—whether commemorative medals, frescos, architecture, portraiture, or poetry—are a large part of this work. It also examines the last testaments of princes, which determined the status of their illegitimate children within the succession in comparison to legitimate heirs. These sources reveal that mistresses in fact wielded much influence within the courts of their princes and their status could even affect the ability of their children to inherit. Demographic studies also suggest that the high rate of child mortality in the fifteenth century encouraged a prince to have an abundance of illegitimate children. This permitted mistresses to perform an important service for which they were handsomely compensated.

Overall, this work concludes that honor and chastity were not the overarching rule in Renaissance Italy. While noblewomen could wield great power through their husbands and sons, ruling city-states in their names, mistresses found an alternative path to power. While theirs was not the predominant path, it should not be ignored or forgotten in studies of gender roles and social values within the Italian Renaissance.
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PREFACE

Ever since I became interested in European history—as far back as the eighth grade—I have been fascinated by powerful European women. This interest began with the remarkable six wives of King Henry VIII of England, who had so dominated the last few decades of the English King’s reign.¹ From there I became fascinated by such women as Queen Elizabeth I of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Empress Maud of England, Anne of Brittany, Catherine de’ Medici, Marguerite de Valois, Catherine the Great of Russia, and many others. When I visited Italy in 2003, I discovered that during the Italian Renaissance there were a plethora of remarkable women, such as Isabella and Beatrice d’Este, Lucrezia Borgia, Giulia Farnese, Caterina Sforza, Vittoria Colonna, and numerous others. But after doing some extensive reading on the Italian Renaissance, I developed a keen interest in the more illicitly sexual women (those who were sexually active and in relationships with men outside of wedlock) of that period. These were mistresses who held some degree of influence at their princes’ courts.

The subject of this study is how the mistresses of Italian Renaissance princes wielded power and influence within the courts of various city-states. It examines how they even obtained some measure of influence. Though they were not liberated to the extent that women are today, because they were still limited by the dominant system of patriarchy, they did manage to attain a greater degree of freedom than a majority of the women of their time. The Malatesta lords of Rimini had mistresses who gained wealth and influence through their affairs and in one case a lord of Rimini actually married his longtime mistress years after the death of his wife. One mistress of a Rossi lord of Parma also obtained great wealth and was widely celebrated. The status of the mistresses of the Este of Ferrara helped determined their children’s place in the line of succession. A number of Este mistresses were eventually married by their princely lovers and some of their illegitimate children even inherited over legitimate ones.

Throughout this work I will also briefly examine the double standard that noblewomen were subjected to during the Renaissance. Though men could frequent an abundance of mistresses without any repercussions, Italian Renaissance women of high status took lovers at great risk to their own lives. If they were caught in flagrante delicto with their lovers, their husbands could murder them and their lovers without serious reprisals.

Since few scholars have yet to fully analyze the Italian Renaissance mistresses of princes in great detail, I want to rectify this deficiency in the scholarly discussion through my work. I will reveal the remarkable benefits these women obtained and how they obtained them. Each chapter will focus on such princely courts as the Papal Vicars of Rimini, the Parmense Counts of Berceto, and the Este rulers of Ferrara. My focus will be limited to the northern Italian courts within the modern province of the Emilia-Romagna, focusing mainly on the fifteenth century, though I will occasionally go beyond that timeframe, as well as mentioning princes and mistress from other areas of Italy to create comparisons. Primarily I will concentrate on one specific mistress from each city-state and then examine what she reveals about the Italian Renaissance mistresses of the princes as a whole. But I will not be completely confined to just one mistress per chapter, touching on others as well.

My interest in this subject sprang from a number of history and art history articles that I read while researching the Italian Renaissance. When I discovered Helen S. Ettlinger’s article, “Visibilis et Invisibilis: The Mistress in Italian Renaissance Court Society,” in Renaissance Quarterly, I was inspired to look more into the subject of princely mistresses. Unfortunately, hers is one of the few studies I was able to find that looked at such a wide variety of mistresses. I was able to locate other articles and essays written on either specific mistresses or the mistresses of a specific line of princes. Jane Fair Bestor published an article on the illegitimate offspring of the Este of Ferrara, “Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy: The Estense Succession.” It briefly touches on how the status of their mothers determined their place in the line of inheritance. Timothy McCall’s essay, “Traffic in Mistresses: Sexualized Bodies and Systems of Exchange in the Early Modern Court,” also looks at the mistress of Pier Maria Rossi of Parma and her place in his court in relation to his wife.2

2 Helen S. Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis: The Mistress in Italian Renaissance Court Society,” Renaissance
Researching even more potential sources, I discovered that Ettlinger and McCall are both art historians. This encouraged me to look for writings analyzing artistic depictions of mistresses. I read Janice Shell and Grazioso Sironi’s article, “Cecilia Gallerani: Leonardo’s Lady with an Ermine,” analyzing the portrait of Ludovico Maria Sforza’s mistress. Luke Syson’s essay, “Consorts, Mistresses, and Exemplary Women: The Female Medallic Portrait in Fifteenth-Century Italy,” in part looks at artistic representations of mistresses. I was also able to read Chad Coerver’s essay, “Donna/Dono: Chivalry and Adulterous Exchange in the Quattrocento,” which examines art and literature depicting the mistresses of Pier Maria Rossi of Parma and Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta of Rimini. Works by art and literary historians have been an important source of information for my writing, since they, as well as the writings of historians, provide me with a wealth of information on my subject. By accessing sources by the historians, art historians, and literary historians cited above, by looking for other works they wrote, and by following their footnotes, I was able to find an abundance of secondary and primary sources.3

The primary sources I have utilized in this work are both literary and artistic. Poems written by courtly poets and princes alike have been useful. Renaissance chronicles written by contemporaries and histories written in later times have both proved invaluable in gaining insight into these women’s lives and how they were viewed by others. The last testaments of princes, endowing their mistresses and their offspring with wealth and property, have also been very helpful. I have analyzed frescos, architecture, and portraiture to ascertain the extent to which princely mistresses were openly and visually celebrated. Artistic representations of mistresses also included commemorative medals, since it was during this period that for the first time since the end of the classical era portraits of women began to appear on medals.

Throughout this work I have provided English translations of quotations from primary sources with footnotes containing the passages in their original languages (either Italian or Latin). I have always found it inconvenient when historians do not provide quotations in both English and the original language in their writings, so I did not wish to perpetuate that practice. I have translated most of the quotations in this work from either Latin or Italian into English on my own, but I have usually done so while comparing them to the English quotations in the secondary sources in which I originally found them. If this is not the case, I will indicate it in my footnotes. I also refer to many works of art for which I have been unable to provide images. I will cite in the footnotes, for those who are interested, where such figures can be found.

I have greatly enjoyed writing this work. I feel that I have learned a lot about women’s paths to power during the Italian Renaissance. While many noblewomen attained influence ruling city-states in their husbands’ and sons’ names, others found less conventional means of gaining power. I truly believe that I have accomplished something really worthwhile with this work. I have made fascinating discoveries throughout the research process and happened, in some cases completely by chance, upon many juicy bits of information. All I can hope for now is that others will find the subject matter of this work as enthralling as I do.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In the year 1443, the twenty-six-year-old Papal Vicar of Rimini, Lord Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, was staying in one of his many residences, the Contrada San Tomaso, from which he was preparing to join his ally, Niccolò Piccinino, on a military campaign. But before he could depart forth from the city of Rimini, it was his own heart that was conquered, and by a girl of only ten years. Emerging from the Contrada San Tomaso, Sigismondo spied the daughter of the house across the way, Isotta degli’ Atti. She would have possessed many of the feminine ideals of the Italian Renaissance, with long, flowing fair hair, pale flawless skin, and a figure that was just developing the voluptuous curves of a woman. It was this vision of youthful loveliness which captivated Sigismondo’s heart and never released it. Within two years Isotta had become more of a wife to Sigismondo than his actual spouse, and she had replaced his first official mistress, who had already born him two illegitimate children. Sigismondo publicly celebrated his love for Isotta in numerous poems, written by himself and by his court poets. He also had her immortalized through art, providing her with the means to decorate her own tomb within the Malatesta dynastic church and stamping her image on commemorative medals. A few years after the death of Sigismondo’s wife, Isotta at last attained what few mistresses of the Italian Renaissance could even dream of: he made her his legitimate wife. It was she and her son whom Sigismondo made his heirs to Rimini. It was she, who, upon his death, carried out the duties of a faithful widow. With such a story, how can anyone fail to be captivated by this woman’s accomplishments? Her life seems to be the stuff of fairytales.4

When analyzing Isotta’s story, it becomes essential to ask what her life and the lives of other mistresses can tell us about social norms during the Italian Renaissance. What status

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did the mistress hold in comparison to the legitimate wife in the eyes of courtly society, the church, and the law? And in turn, what status did her illegitimate offspring possess in comparison to their legitimate siblings in the princely court and in the line of succession? These questions do not have simple answers, and such answers often differ depending on the city-state and even the individuals under analysis. In order to answer these questions, this work will look in depth into some of the mistresses of princes in the city-states of the Emilia-Romagna in fifteenth-century Renaissance Italy.

The examination of such women of illicit sexuality places doubt on the initial conclusions of modern family historians who had determined that Italian Renaissance society above all greatly valued the chastity and virtue of its women, seeking to improve their status socially, politically, and economically through important alliances cemented by the marriages of their virgin daughters. But the reality of the situation was not so simple. The Catholic Church officially upheld celibacy as the ideal state, encouraging men and women to take holy vows and enter monasteries and convents. Daughters entering into marital relationships were expected to be virgins before their wedding nights. Wives were supposed to remain faithful only to their husbands, with even pain of death threatening those of the nobility that strayed. Yet not all women were encouraged to maintain their chastity. The courtly culture of the Italian Renaissance encouraged girls of the lower nobility to seek positions as the official mistresses of ruling princes. In many cases their families—fathers, brothers, and even husbands—pressed them (most likely, at least some of the time, with these women’s consent) to enter into illicit relationships which would greatly benefit the family, increasing its wealth and status. Far from shunned, these women were in fact often celebrated. Such women, entering into illicit affairs outside of marriage with princes, played an important role in courtly society.⁵

While the Catholic Church was expected to shun adulterers, canon law in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries actually did very little to punish such an offence among males. It allowed for princes to legitimize their bastard sons and daughters for a price, providing the

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Church with a means to increase its own wealth and influence. Even civic laws did not discourage men from taking mistresses. They allowed legitimized offspring to take precedence in the line of inheritance over non-legitimized bastards, or in some cases (particularly among the Este of Ferrara), over even legitimate sons and daughters.6

The upper class Italian society of the Renaissance was much like that of medieval Japan, from which the geisha girls had developed (ca. 800). It was even more similar to Edo-period Japan (16th century), during which the Japanese pleasure houses were built in abundance. It was during these eras that Japanese men were expected to find love and sexual satisfaction outside of marriage.7 Many men throughout Italy, particularly in the cities of Rome and Venice, were denied the option of marrying. In Rome clerics took vows of celibacy and so marriage was barred to them. Those of the upper classes rarely entered the Catholic Church because they had a religious calling. Instead, they took holy orders and were provided with important and powerful church benefices for their families’ political advantage. Most of those men seemed to feel little desire to maintain their vows of celibacy. They took mistresses and frequented upper-class prostitutes, and many Renaissance popes had illegitimate offspring.8

In the Republic of Venice, the younger sons of the patrician class were forbidden from marrying in order to prevent inheritances from being divided up amongst too many heirs. They took mistresses and even set up households with them. The eldest sons of Venice

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6 Sexual intercourse was supposed to be licit only within marriage. Marriage as a means to salvation for the laity was meant to be monogamous. The church was to condemn adultery and fornication whether committed by the husband or wife. Adultery was seen as a major offence in canon law. Children born outside of wedlock were not to have any legal status. See Bestor, “Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy,” 549-585.


8 Pope Innocent VIII was the first pope to openly recognize his illegitimate offspring, arranging influential marriages for his children and grandchildren during his pontificate. His successor, Alexander VI, the Borgia pope, went even further in his nepotism towards his illegitimate children. Pope Julius II also arranged an influential marriage for his illegitimate daughter, Felice della Rovere, with the patriarch of the powerful Orsini family of Rome, leading to her becoming the matriarch of the family upon her husband’s death and wielding great power within the papal city. See Sarah Bradford, Lucrezia Borgia: Life, Love, and Death in Renaissance Italy (New York: Penguin, 2004); Caroline P. Murphy, The Pope’s Daughter: The Extraordinary Life of Felice della Rovere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
married not for love but in order to form alliances with other patrician families. They too would have had no qualms about taking mistresses.\textsuperscript{9}

The inability of so many men in Rome and Venice to enter into legitimate matrimony, or matrimony based on affection, combined with the accumulation of great wealth and a concentration of courtiers, led to the rise of the courtesan in those two cities. These high class prostitutes, modeled after the ancient Greek \textit{hetairai} (in keeping with the Renaissance’s idealization and emulation of all things from the classical past), combined beauty with intelligence and frequented the dining halls, salons, and bedrooms of some of Rome and Venice’s most powerful and intellectual men.\textsuperscript{10}

Yet it is not the cities of Rome and Venice which are the focus of this paper, but the courts of the city-states of the Emilia-Romagna, ruled by princely houses. Though the Emilia-Romagna as a province did not exist within Italy during the Renaissance, it was still greatly interconnected at that time. Its southern border touches the province of the Marches and what was the Duchy of Urbino. The southernmost area of the region is the Romagna, which runs northwest, following the ancient Roman road of the Via Emilia, from which the current province derives part of its name. The Adriatic Sea makes up its border to the east with the province of Tuscany on its west. To the north the Emilia-Romagna splits into two regions: Ferrara, which continues northwards, ceasing where it comes into contact with the Venetian Republic; and the Emilia, which veers westward, crowning the Republic of Florence. Further to the west, the Emilia becomes Modena, which borders the marquisate of Mantua to the north, the Tyrrhenian Sea to the west, and the territory of Milan to the northwest, marking the cessation of the Emilia-Romagna. This province was littered with an abundance of city-states ruled by Italian Renaissance princes.


The Renaissance prince throughout Italy was a contradiction in and of himself. He was a patron of the arts, overseeing the building of great architectural monuments and their decoration, and patronizing artists and writers. At the same time he was a military leader (condottiere), who led armies onto the field of battle. Also, while he depended on making a brilliant marriage in order to form important alliances, he was expected as well to have mistresses and beget illegitimate offspring. The princes of the city-states of the Emilia-Romagna often followed this norm.

The marriages of the princes of Renaissance Italy, like those of the eldest sons of Venice, were also arranged. They did not marry for love but in order to cement political alliances with other Italian city-states. Because of this, like the eldest sons of Venice, they would have possessed no qualms about taking mistresses. In some cases the Italian Renaissance prince formed a lasting relationship with his mistress, making her appear to be nothing less than a pseudo-wife.

The woman who entered into an illicit relationship with a prince was referred to in primary sources by numerous terms. She was called a “mistress” (amante) or a “concubine” (concubina), and even a meretrice (whore or loose woman). In early modern Europe the terms “mistress” and “concubine” were interchangeable, basically meaning the same thing. They both referred to a woman involved in an extramarital affair with a man who was not her husband. The term madonna in Italian can also be translated as “mistress” in English, but it refers to a respectable lady, not a woman of ill repute; though, in some cases in primary sources, the mistress of a prince was respectfully given the title madonna. While some scholars have chosen to refer to such women as concubines, I will be following the pattern of those scholars who use the term “mistress” instead.

Some of these mistresses, those that were members of the lower nobility, by entering into these illicit relationships, allowed their princes to make further alliances, in addition to those they could gain through marriage. They also provided the prince with additional offspring. The production of such bastards was considered an important sign of the virility

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11 A condottiere was a military general for hire. Italy had been dominated by condottieri for much of the Middle Ages and would continue to be so throughout the Renaissance. Many princes of the great houses of Italy, such as the Gonzaga, Sforza, Este, and Montefeltro, among others, rose to power as condottieri, and some continued to practice the profession, selling their services to the major Italian powers.
the prince was expected to possess by Italian Renaissance society’s standards. They could even play important roles within courtly life and the line of inheritance. In an age when the plague struck Europe on a generational basis and child mortality was high, an abundance of offspring—whether legitimate or illegitimate—was essential to a prince, in order to ensure there would be heirs to follow after him. The Italian Renaissance has been termed by some historians as the “golden age of the bastard.” Illegitimacy in Italy at that time did not create the social stigma it did in the rest of Europe. Illegitimate daughters were married off to form important alliances and illegitimate sons could hold important positions within their fathers’ courts and states. In some cases such illegitimate children, in the absence of legitimate heirs, could inherit their fathers’ principalities, the succession usually being decided based on the status of the mother. In other cases such children even took precedence over legitimate heirs, holding pride of place in the order of inheritance.12

But the life of a mistress was not all glamour and glory. There were certainly downsides to being a mistress during the Italian Renaissance, but if a mistress’ lover was influential and clever enough, there were upsides, too. Many princely mistresses, especially those originating from the lower classes, remained anonymous, their names lost to posterity. Only their illegitimate offspring attest to their existence. But not all of these women were invisible. The mistresses of powerful princes could and sometimes did make names for themselves. A mistress also had practically no legal rights. She could be seduced and then discarded without any chance of making a respectable and profitable marriage. But Italian Renaissance courtly society appears to have dictated that its princes take financial responsibility for their noble mistresses before they cast them aside. These women could be gifted with wealth and property on which they were able to live comfortably if they chose not to marry. If they did choose to marry, their prince would ordinarily provide them with a substantial dowry and find a respectable husband for them.13


The mistresses of princes were celebrated in poetry composed by court poets. Their images were painted in frescos on the walls of their lovers’ castles and stamped onto commemorative medals. They were also influential in furthering their children’s places in the line of inheritance. These women formed a unique subgroup within Italian Renaissance society, along with other lauded women of illicit sexuality who emerged during that period, such as the courtesans of Rome and Venice, as well as sexually scandalous women of the ruling classes, such as Caterina Sforza, Lucrezia Borgia, Giovanna d’Aragona, Isabella Ramola de’ Medici, and others.

Scholarship in English on women who were celebrated for having sex outside of marriage is a relatively recent development. Biographies on famous women of the Italian Renaissance were published in the early twentieth century. Julia Cartwright’s two biographies cover the lives of a pair of famous Italian sisters: Isabella d’Este, Marchioness of Mantua, 1474-1539: A Study of the Renaissance (1903) and Beatrice d’Este, Duchess of Milan, 1475-1497: A Study of the Renaissance (1903). Christopher Hare, in his compilation of mini-biographies of famous Italian Renaissance women, The Most Illustrious Ladies of the Italian Renaissance (1904), touches on a few scandalous women, such as Lucrezia Borgia and Bianca Capello. Maria Bellonci’s biography, The Life and Times of Lucrezia Borgia (1939), is entirely focused on a scandalous Italian Renaissance woman. But women’s studies did not really begin to emerge until the 1970s and work on illicit sexuality in the Italian Renaissance has been an even more recent development. One of the earliest works is Georgina Masson’s Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance, which was published in 1975. In it she writes about the courtesans of Rome and Venice. But nothing more was written on the subject through the 1980s.  

In the 1990s a wealth of articles and essays were at last published, dealing with women who had sex outside of marriage. In Elizabeth S. Cohen’s “‘Courtesans’ and ‘Whores’: Words and Behavior in Roman Streets” (1991), she provides a generalized

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description of the Italian Renaissance courtesans of Rome. Moving beyond the subject of courtesans, Helen S. Ettlinger’s “Visibilis et Invisibilis: The Mistress in Italian Renaissance Court Society” (1994) delves into the subject of princely mistresses. In it she argues that mistresses of northern Italian Renaissance princes wielded some amount of influence, which was unique amongst other women of that time. Ettlinger writes that many of them were openly recognized and honored, independently owned property, and attained a degree of freedom over other women. Jane Fair Bastor’s “Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy: The Estense Succession” (1996) examines the succession practices of the Este rulers of Ferrara and why for nearly a hundred and fifty years illegitimate sons inherited the state. She examines the parts mothers of such illegitimate offspring played through their social status in determining the order of inheritance.15

Also scholars of literary studies and art history began to play a role in such examinations of Italian Renaissance mistresses. Chad Coerver’s “Donna/Dono: Chivalry and Adulterous Exchange in the Quattrocento” (1997) is an artistic and literary analysis of works depicting two fifteenth-century mistresses of princes. He looks at how princely lovers used art and literature, such as that deriving from the Arthurian legend of Lancelot and Guinevere, to celebrate their adulterous affairs as the basis of their military might. Janice Shell and Grazio Sironi’s article “Cecilia Gallerani: Leonardo’s Lady with an Ermine” (1992) examines the debates during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries over the identity of the sitter in Leonardo da Vinci’s Lady with an Ermine. They describe the attempts by art critics to prove the subject of the portrait to be Cecilia Gallerani, the mistress of Ludovico Maria Sforza (regent and then duke of Milan) through comparisons of other supposed portraits of her, attributed to Leonardo and to other artists. In the article they reveal much about Cecilia and her position as Ludovico’s mistress. Also one biography on a woman of illicit sexuality was published: Margaret F. Rosenthal’s The Honest Courtesan: Veronica

Franco, Citizen, and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice (1992). In it she examines the life, sexual exploits, and writings of the Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco.¹⁶

An even greater plethora of writings on the subject of illicit sexuality emerged in the new millennium. In most cases, though, only one chapter in a book touches on the subject. Alexander Cowan’s “Concubinage and Natural Daughters,” from his book Marriage, Manners, and Mobility in Early Modern Venice (2007), examines the types of relationships that existed between “concubines” and their patrician lovers as alternatives to legal marriage. Emlyn Eisenach’s chapter, “Tenere a Sua Posta: Concubinage in Verona,” from her book Husbands, Wives, and Concubines: Marriage, Family, and Social Order in Sixteenth-Century Verona (2004), looks at the practice of concubinage in Veronese culture and argues that it reveals multifaceted relations between people of varying social classes, despite the fact that the century was supposed to be dominated by a growing supremacy of elite men over the lower classes of society as a whole. Diane Owen Hughes’ essay, “Bodies, Disease, and Society,” in the collection Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550 (2004), examines the place of the prostitute in Renaissance society, comparing her alongside another set of “necessary” social outcasts, the Jews.¹⁷

There were also more biographies published on scandalous women of the Italian Renaissance, which make for fascinating reading. Barbara Banks Amendola’s The Mystery of the Duchess of Malfi (2002) is about the life of Giovanna d’Aragona, a Neapolitan princess, who was murdered by her brothers for secretly marrying her steward and giving birth to his children. Sarah Bradford’s Lucrezia Borgia: Life, Love, and Death in Renaissance Italy (2004) depicts the life of the illegitimate daughter of Pope Alexander VI, who herself supposedly carried out affairs with a number of men. Caroline P. Murphy’s Murder of a Medici Princess (2008) describes the life of the Florentine princess Isabella Ramola de’ Medici, who was murdered by her husband for having an affair with his cousin. Elizabeth


Lev’s *The Tigress of Forlì: Renaissance Italy’s Most Courageous and Notorious Countess, Caterina Riario Sforza de’ Medici* (2011) reveals the life of Caterina Sforza, who, after the death of her husband, took two lovers and may have secretly married one or both of them. Another book has also been published by Joyce de Vries on the same remarkable woman, *Caterina Sforza and the Art of Appearances: Gender, Art, and Early Modern Italy* (2010), analyzing her use of image projection. Though Caterina’s life in general and her romances are not the main subject of Vries’ work, she still manages to write about the evidence that alludes to whether or not Caterina married her two lovers.18

Also even more scholars of art and literary studies published articles and chapters on women of illicit sexuality. Timothy McCall’s article “Visual Imagery and Historical Invisibility: Antonia Torelli, Her Husband, and His Mistress in Fifteenth-Century Parma” (2009) examines the status that Pier Maria Rossi’s wife and his mistress attained. In it McCall argues that the elevated position of Rossi’s wife did not suffer due to her husband’s affair and reveals much about his relationship with his mistress. The works of Bestor, previously mentioned above, also entered the sphere of art and literary studies. She published another essay, “Titian’s Portrait of Laura Eustochia: The Decorum of Female Beauty and the Motif of the Black Page” (2003), in which she analyzes the portrait of the mistress, and later-supposed wife, of Duke Alfonso I of Ferrara. She also wrote “Marriage and Succession in the House of Este: A Literary Perspective,” in the collection *Phaethon’s Children: The Este Court and Its Culture in Early Modern Ferrara* (2005), examining what literary texts written at the court of Ferrara reveal about the inheritance practices of the Este.19

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Other essays have focused even more on princely mistresses or courtesans. A majority of works on the subject were published in Allison Levy’s compilation of essays, *Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy: Practice, Performance, Perversion, Punishment* (2010). This collection contains, among other writings, Timothy McCall’s “Traffic in Mistresses: Sexualized Bodies and Systems of Exchange in the Early Modern Court,” Daniella Rossi’s “Controlling Courtesans: Lorenzo Venier’s *Trentuno della Zaffetta* and Venetian Sexual Politics,” Diane Wolfthal’s “The Woman in the Window: Licit and Illicit Sexual Desire in Renaissance Italy,” and Chriscinda Henry’s “‘Whorish Civility’ and Other Tricks of Seduction in Venetian Courtesan Representation.” Also McCall, following Bastor’s example, examines the inheritance practices of the Rossi of Parma in his essay “Pier Maria’s Legacy: (Il)legitimacy, Inheritance, and Rule of Parma’s Rossi Dynasty,” in the collection of essays *Wives, Widows, Mistresses, and Nuns in Early Modern Italy: Making the Invisible Visible through Art and Patronage* (2012).

Early in the historiography of illicit sex in the Italian Renaissance, historians took a decidedly negative view of the status of such women. Gayle Rubin, in her essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975), formulated that women were only passive players in the trafficking of women, in which they had no say and were in no position to obtain benefits. But this work will clearly show that such was not often the case. In Joan Kelly-Gadol’s article, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” (1984), she argues that Renaissance women possessed little substantial freedom or influence. Yet, Kelly-Gadol was analyzing them in comparison with the supposed greater power wielded by earlier women rulers described in literature and based on the tradition of courtly love. Currently scholars now tend to analyze the heroines of courtly love more critically, showing that such adulterous relationships increased only the males’ power, while negating the females’.

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Timothy McCall, in “Traffic in Mistresses,” warns that “scholars attentive to issues of gender should take care not to construct women as passive victims with no room to act within a patriarchal system when evidence suggests otherwise.” After having written this work, and taking into account all its conclusions, I clearly agree with him.21

While there are a few dissenting voices, a majority of these writers agree to one extent or another that women involved in sexually illicit relationships, whether mistress or courtesan, benefited from their extramarital affairs. Elizabeth S. Cohen warns against analyzing the Italian Renaissance courtesan as having been as liberated as women are today. She reminds us that they were still predominantly subject to the will of men. But she still cannot help admitting that for their time they were more liberated than most women. Alexander Cowen, in his writings on Venetian concubines, presents the majority of these women as having lived tragic lives but he also reveals that a few were able to gain some influence within their lovers’ or their own households. Timothy McCall further argues that though the husband might take a mistress, this did not deter the legal wife’s position or the influence she herself might wield.22 While reading this work, one must also remember that the same goes for mistresses as for courtesans. Many of them were thrust into extramarital affairs with princes by their families, some even by their own husbands. They too could not be considered as liberated as modern women, but some of them did hold preeminent positions for their time.

Many of these previously mentioned scholars refer to Italian Renaissance mistresses as being predominantly invisible to the modern eye. Yet they also reveal an abundance of literature and art that clearly celebrated these women in a very public manner. While it is true that the identities many mistresses of low status have been lost to posterity, that they existed is attested to by the existence of their children. Also the names and images of many other mistresses have come down to us in great style. These women were far from invisible in their own world or our current one.


Each chapter in this work will examine mistresses in a specific princely court in the Emilia-Romagna, and will analyze in various degrees their celebration and depictions in the arts and their influence over the succession. Chapter Two will feature the mistresses of the Malatesta Lords of Rimini, focusing primarily on Isotta degli’ Atti, the mistress of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta. Chapter Three will predominantly examine the official mistresses of Count Pier Maria Rossi of Berceto, Bianca Pellegrini, looking at the frescos, medals, and literary works that were created to celebrate her relationship with him. Chapter Four will explore the mistresses of the Este rulers of Ferrara. There were a large number of them from the late thirteenth century through to the mid-sixteenth century, many of whose children were legitimized and inherited their fathers’ state, in some cases even over legitimate heirs. The conclusion will sum up the arguments I have made and discuss the patterns that have emerged from amongst the evidence. It will then go on to show areas of further possible scholarship on the subject of Italian Renaissance mistresses.

Through the examination of art, literature, and lines of succession this work will show that mistresses played essential roles in the princely courts of the Italian Renaissance during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. They could help form alliances, adding to that which the prince obtained through marriage. They also played important roles in determining the order of inheritance. Because of this they were celebrated in the cultures of the courts over which their princes ruled. While many mistresses, mainly of the lower classes, remained anonymous and invisible, others emerged from amongst the noble classes to play important roles. For this they were greatly lauded and well rewarded.
CHAPTER 2

MISTRESSES OF THE MALATESTA LORDS OF RIMINI: THE REMARKABLE ISOTTA DEGLI’ATTI

Though the Malatesta territories, as a papal vicariate, were in practice to be inherited only by legitimate heirs, a long line of illegitimately-begotten-sons rose up to rule over the signoria of Rimini during the fifteenth century. Members of numerous powerful Italian Renaissance families, such as the Montefeltro of Urbino, the Este of Ferrara, and the Aragona of Naples, were born illegitimate and still managed to become rulers of Italian principalities. The Catholic Church actually benefited from this state of affairs by selling papal bulls legitimizing such princes as Federico da Montefeltro, Leonello d’Este, and Borso d’Este, as well as many others.23 While a majority of the mothers of such illegitimate offspring were relatively minor figures, the mistresses of the Malatesta of Rimini stand out, particularly the mistress and then wife of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta (1417-1468), Isotta degli’ Atti. Isotta was immortalized in courtly poetry, some of which was written by Sigismondo himself. She acquired a chapel in the Malatesta dynastic church and her image was stamped on commemorative medals. Even as a mistress, and then later as wife and widow, Isotta wielded a unique political power within the court of Rimini and even inspired the influential mistress who came after her, Elisabetta Aldobrandini.

Sigismondo Pandolfo was born in 1417, the second illegitimate son of Pandolfo III Malatesta (1370-1427), Lord of Fano, Captain General of the Church, and Governor of Brescia between 1404 and 1421 and Bergamo between 1407 and 1420. His father was a famous condottiere, who had carved out a state for himself in Brescia. Pandolfo’s brother was the Lord and Papal Vicar of Rimini, Carlo Malatesta. There were three possible women

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who might have been Sigismondo’s mother. One was Antonia Castellani, another was Allegra de’ Mori, but the most likely was Antonia di Giacomino da Barignano. All of these women were daughters of noble houses of Brescia.24

All three of Sigismondo’s possible mothers would have provided an important means by which Pandolfo could form alliances within the city under his rule. During his life Pandolfo was wed three times but never managed to produce a legitimate heir.25 In fact Sigismondo was not his first illegitimate child, for Pandolfo already had an illegitimate son, Galeotto Roberto (born 1412), before Sigismondo was born. It is unclear though, like Sigismondo, who exactly Galeotto Roberto’s mother was. The first option was Isabella, the wife of another Pandolfo Malatesta, a distant cousin. Another possible candidate was Allegra de’ Mori, also one of Sigismondo’s possible mothers. But the most probable candidate as Galeotto Roberto’s mother was Caterina del Catellano, also a noblewoman of Brescia, who, according to Sigismondo’s court historian, travelled to Rimini to give birth to her child under the supervision of Pandolfo’s sister-in-law, Elizabetta Gonzaga. The circulation of such a story would have legitimized Sigismondo’s older brother in the eyes of posterity, since it was Galeotto Roberto who became Carlo Malatesta’s heir and from whom Sigismondo in turn inherited Rimini. Also Pandolfo may have had two sons with Antonia da Barignano, Sigismondo and Domenico (born 1418), though Domenico’s mother could also have possibly been Caterina del Castellano.26

That Pandolfo’s children could have had multiple possible mothers reveals that he was not faithful to any one mistress, but that was not unusual for princes during the Italian Renaissance. Also, that Caterina del Castellano could have produced both Galeotto Roberto


25 Pandolfo III was first wed to Paola Bianca Malatesta (died 1398), the widow of his ally Sinibaldo Ordelaffi, after receiving a dispensation from the pope, in 1388. His second wife was Antonia da Varano from 1421 or 1422 to 1424. His third bride of a week was Margherita de’ conti di Poppi, a noblewoman of Florence. See Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, 98-99, 105n7, 165, 165n4; Ettlinger, “The Image of a Renaissance Prince,” 22; Bicheno, *Vendetta: High Art and Low Cunning*, 267.

26 Ettlinger, “The Image of a Renaissance Prince,” 22; Ettlinger, “*Visibilis et Invisibilis*,” 777n38.
and Domenico but not Sigismondo, and Allegra de’ Mori could have produced both Galeotto
Roberto and Sigismondo but not Domenico, provides further evidence that Pandolfo was
frequenting more than one mistress at a time. He would not have simply ceased in his affair
with Caterina, in order to produce Sigismondo with another woman, and then taken up with
her again later. Also, he may have grown tired of Allegra before Domenico was conceived or
even earlier. But having multiple mistresses at once was not unusual for princes of the time.
Though, unlike Pandolfo, they usually had an official mistress, who was formally recognized
and provided for by the prince.

Unfortunately, Pandolfo’s alliances through his numerous Brescian mistresses did not
save him from losing Brescia and Bergamo to the Milanese Visconti. None of the women
Pandolfo had extramarital affairs with can be considered examples of powerful or influential
mistresses. That was most likely because they were not involved with the head of the
Malatesta family, but merely a lesser member. Also, Pandolfo did not value any one mistress
over the others, failing to recognize an official mistress. Instead he lived the life of a
libertine. Because of their low status in their relationships with Pandolfo, like many other
lesser mistresses of the Italian Renaissance, these women did not raise their own children.
Still, at least their names have come down to us, unlike many other lesser mistresses whose
identities have been lost to posterity.

Upon the death of Pandolfo, in 1427, only ten days after his third marriage, all three
of his illegitimate sons were formally adopted by their uncle Carlo and his wife Elizabetta
Gonzaga, who were without offspring. From then on they were raised as the heirs to the
Malatesta patrimony, and they were legitimized by Pope Martin V in 1428. Upon Carlo’s
death, the three boys, who were all still minors, succeeded to Carlo and Pandolfo’s estates,

27 Jones, The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State, 165.
28 It was common at that time for illegitimate children of princes to be raised with their legitimate family
members, often by their fathers’ own wives. Caterina Sforza, the illegitimate daughter of Duke Galeazzo Maria
Sforza of Milan and his mistress, Lucrezia Landriani, was brought up in the care of her father’s wife, Bona of
Savoy. The illegitimate children of Pope Alexander VI—including his daughter Lucrezia Borgia, who was
raised by Alexander’s cousin, Adriana de Milla—were also not raised by their mother, Vannozza Cattanei. The
illegitimately-born Federico da Montefeltro was for a time raised by his uncle, Duke Guidobaldo of Urbino, and
his aunt, Caterina Colonna, until the birth of a legitimate heir. Federico himself had his illegitimate offspring
raised alongside his legitimate children. For Caterina Sforza see Lev, The Tigress of Forlì, 1. For the Borgia
children see Bradford, Lucrezia Borgia, 16. For Federico da Montefeltro see Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,”
776, 776n33.
with Elizabetta Gonzaga acting as their regent, along with a regency council of twelve Riminese advisers. The illegitimately-born Galeotto Roberto, a saintly and pious man, became Lord of Rimini but died in 1432, at the age of twenty-one, from the effects of self-flagellation. Following their brother’s death, Rimini, Fano, and the lands south of the Marecchia River went to Sigismondo, with Cesena, Bertinoro, and the lands to the north going to Domenico, who became known as Malatesta Novello. In this manner Sigismondo, the illegitimate son of a lesser Malatesta, became Lord and Papal Vicar of the signoria of Rimini.  

Sigismondo’s first wife, Ginevra d’Este, while herself legitimate, was the daughter of the illegitimately-born Niccolò III d’Este, Marquis of Ferrara. Ginevra’s mother, Parisina Malatesta, had caused a scandal in 1425 when she was caught having an affair with her husband’s illegitimate son, Ugo Aldobrandino; both of them were executed for their offence. Parisina and many other Italian Renaissance women were put to death when they were discovered cuckolding their powerful husbands. Despite the scandalous reputation of her mother, Sigismondo’s marriage to Ginevra provided him with an advantageous alliance with the Este but she died in 1440 amidst rumors that he had had her murdered. In the following year Sigismondo married Polissena Sforza, who was the natural daughter of Duke Francesco of Milan, cementing another important alliance. While Sigismondo did not appear to be overly fond of either of his wives—his first wife was not able to provide him with any offspring—, both of these marriages secured important alliances, which Sigismondo greatly dependent upon. Claims of murder due to poisoning were not uncommon during the Italian Renaissance when members of the ruling class died prematurely. More often than not they were nothing more than rumors or social slander bandied about in order to sully enemies’ reputations. In fact such deaths can most likely be attributed to food poisoning in a time without refrigeration.  

Pope Pius II, one of Sigismondo’s most ardent opponents, wrote

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scathingly that Sigismondo “had two wives…whom he killed one after another whether with a weapon or with poison”.31

In the early 1440s Sigismondo took as his chief mistress one Vanetta (or Vannella) di Galeotto Toschi. She was the daughter of a noble family of Fano and so would have provided Sigismondo with important ties to a powerful family within one of the cities under his rule. Vanetta gave birth to two of Sigismondo’s children: Roberto (1442-1482), who was born while Sigismondo was in-between wives, and Contessina (1445-1515). In 1450 Sigismondo had Roberto legitimized by Pope Nicholas V. But even a prince’s chief mistress, who, unlike most mistresses, was openly recognized as a form of pseudo-wife, could be displaced at a moment’s notice. And it was Isotta degli’ Atti who replaced Vanetta as Sigismondo’s prima favorita.32

Isotta was born, sometime late in 1432 or early in 1433, to a wealthy wool merchant and his second wife. She was named after her mother, Isotta di Antonio da Meldola, who died giving birth to her. The Atti, apparently, were descended from a noble lineage from Sassoferato, and had migrated to Rimini in the fourteenth century. Isotta’s father, Francesco di Atto degli’ Atti, had become a counselor to Sigismondo by the 1440s and that was most likely how Sigismondo and Isotta initially came into contact. According to the Liber Isottaeus, an epic poem written by Basnio Basini in praise of Isotta, Sigismondo was residing at the time, perhaps in the year 1445, in the Contrada San Tomaso, across from the Atti’s palazzo, preparing to join forces with Niccolò Piccinino. The Liber Isottaeus, as mentioned in the Introduction, describes Isotta as having been only ten-years-old when the twenty-six-year-old Sigismondo first saw her and immediately became enamored of her.33

To a modern audience ten years may seem to have been a shockingly young age for a girl to begin receiving the attentions of a man, but it was still a few years before Isotta and

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32 Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 772, 774; Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 44; Jones, The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State, 204.

Sigismondo initiated their affair. During the Italian Renaissance, young girls could usually begin to be considered ready for marriage and a sexual relationship when they began menstruating, around the age of twelve or thirteen. Girls of the upper classes could be and often were engaged even before they reached the age of menstruation, but their marriages were not normally consummated until after they had begun to bleed and so were capable of procreating. While upper class marriages were intended to cement political alliances between families and so sometimes needed to be carried out as swiftly as possible, their other primary function was to produce offspring, which a girl could not do until she had begun to have her monthly courses.

Much of the evidence suggests that Sigismondo and Isotta’s affair was consummated in 1446. By 1447 Isotta had replaced Vanetta as Sigismondo’s official mistress and had given birth to a son, Giovanni, who did not live long after birth, dying on May 22, 1447. The fact that their child was interred, according to the Cronaca Malatestiana, with “the greatest honor of all the orders and of all the people,” in the church of San Francesco, the traditional resting place of the Malatesta, in Carlo Malatesta’s sarcophagus, reveals that Isotta had taken pride of place in Sigismondo’s heart. That Sigismondo had their illegitimate son laid to rest in the sarcophagus of his uncle, the former Lord of Rimini, seems to allude that if he had not died, the child would have grown up to become Sigismondo’s heir and the next Papal Vicar of Rimini.

Already Sigismondo was showing preferential treatment towards Isotta’s son over Vanetta’s. Vanetta continued to reside in Rimini, though later we find her living in Fano, where she remained close to her family and was allowed by Sigismondo to retain custody of their daughter, Contessina. Some mistresses, like Vanetta and Isotta, were allowed to raise their children instead of having to hand them over to one of their lovers’ female family

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members. But Vanetta was separated from her son, Roberto, who remained in Rimini and continued to correspond with her. Despite Vanetta’s relocation to the city of her origin, she did not fade completely from Riminese politics, but re-entered them, years late, in a triumphant style.\footnote{Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 774, 776n28, 777; Bicheno, Vendetta: High Art and Low Cunning, 168.}

The triangle of women around Sigismondo in 1447, consisting of Vanetta, Isotta, and Polissena, perfectly displayed the mutability of legitimacy and honor during the Italian Renaissance. Both Vanetta and Isotta were legitimately-born and entered into extramarital relationships with the support of their families. Polissena, on the other hand, was born out of wedlock, the illegitimate child of an Italian prince. She was the product of an affair between Francesco Sforza and Giovanna d’Acquapendente. Unlike Vanetta and Isotta, though, she had entered into a conventional marriage.\footnote{Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 774, 783, 783n64.} If the prize was great enough, it seems that noble families were willing to sacrifice the honor and chastity of their daughters with little hesitation. But the situation was very different for noble daughters who sought lovers beneath them in status or for noblemen who reached too high for mistresses. Princes also did not seem to mind taking illegitimate daughters of other princes as legitimate brides in order to cement alliances upon which they greatly relied.

The \textit{Liber Isottaeus} contains two poems in which Isotta and her father are involved in a heated dialogue over whether Isotta should become Sigismondo’s mistress. The young lady is adamant that she cannot resist the power of love but her father warns her against entering into such a relationship, which he labels a crime of immoral desire.\footnote{Basinio Basini, “Liber Isottaeus,” in \textit{Le poesie liriche di Basinio (Isottaeus, Cyrus, carmina varia)}, ed. Ferruccio Ferri (Torrino: G. Chiantore, 1925), 2.3-4.} This display most likely did not reflect the reality of the situation but is instead a literary piece of propaganda, which allowed Isotta and her family to save face. It is highly doubtful that she or her father could have resisted the opportunity for her to enter into a relationship with Sigismondo, since such an affair would have greatly benefited them all. Her father, because he has been seen as warning his daughter against such an illicit action, is presented publicly as irreproachable.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 774, 776n28, 777; Bicheno, Vendetta: High Art and Low Cunning, 168.
\item Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 774, 783, 783n64.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Isotta, on the other hand, has elevated her and Sigismondo’s love, from the status of lust and desire, onto a Petrarchan plain in which chastity can be relinquished honorably.\textsuperscript{39}

Isotta, despite the portrayal of her father as reticent to allow her to enter into such an illicit affair, was in no way ostracized by her family for doing so. In fact her relatives were well rewarded for the loss of her chastity. Francesco maintained his position within Sigismondo’s close council of advisors and was appointed to the position of depositarius (depositary), a very profitable post. According to the Cronaca Malatestiana, on February 12, 1448, Isotta’s brother, Antonio, was knighted by Sigismondo in a splendid ceremony held before the court of Rimini and celebrated within the Castel Sismondo, Sigismondo’s primary residence. Antonio received various rich fabrics of silk and gold, items of silver, weapons, honors, and rights over the villages of Razano, all from Sigismondo. He also received 200 gold ducats from his sister, which she had most likely been provided with by her lover for the occasion.\textsuperscript{40} Francesco died not long after Antonio’s knighting and so for much of Isotta and Sigismondo’s relationship he was unable to protest, if he ever had really protested in the first place. Such was Isotta’s good relations with her family that, upon the death of her brother in 1458, she inherited her family’s palazzo and business.\textsuperscript{41}

Sigismondo was just as generous to his mistress as he was to her family. During the early years of their affair, she continued to reside in her family’s home, since it would have been scandalous for Sigismondo to install her within his wife’s household. Even so, it is evident by the literary and artistic compositions composed celebrating her that Isotta was still a very important member of Sigismondo’s court in Rimini. In 1453 he gifted her with land

\textsuperscript{39} Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 775; Campana, s.v. “Atti, Isotta degli,” 4:548.


and a country residence in the town of Monte Marciano near Senigallia, where she lived for a
time, along with clothing and jewels that were worth five thousand ducats. In 1454
Sigismondo relocated Isotta to the Contrada of Santa Colomba, bringing her nearer to his
own primary residence, where she lived until 1456.42

Most remarkably, Isotta even joined her lover on the field of battle. During the years
1448 to 1450, she accompanied Sigismondo on his campaigns in Lombardy.43 An important
question to ask is how common was it for men to take their mistresses on campaign with
them during times of war? Women were actually an important part of an army. They
performed essential tasks for the soldiers, such as cooking and cleaning for them. Prostitutes,
termed camp followers, were considered a constant, if sometimes criticized part of an army.
Also many wives followed their husbands to war, continuing to perform their wifely duties
and caring for their soldier-husbands on campaigns. During much of human history women
were a permanent and important part of military life.

But how common was it for an Italian Renaissance prince to have his mistress
accompany him to war is also an important question. Isotta, in this case, seems to have been a
rarity. Mistresses, as well as wives, of such upper-class princes were expected to remain
home and see to the birth and care of babies. Reproduction was their primary designation,
which would have become more precarious when they were on the move or on the field of
battle. That Sigismondo brought his sixteen- or seventeen-year-old mistress, a woman in her
prime years of fertility, to war with him seems quite remarkable. Only his extreme affection
for Isotta and his desire not to be separated from her during the early and passionate years of
their relationship seems to account for his bringing her on campaign.

In 1448, only three months after her brother had been knighted, Pope Nicholas V
issued a papal bull allowing Isotta to redecorate the interior of the cappella degli Angeli
(Chapel of the Angels) and build her tomb in the church of San Francesco for five hundred
florins, initiating her involvement as a patroness of the arts in Rimini at the mere age of
sixteen. The bull also allowed for the saying of two masses daily at the chapel’s altar by the

42 Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 45; Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 219;

43 Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 45; Campana, s.v. “Atti, Isotta
church’s Franciscan friars. By 1449, the Florentine artist, Agostino di Duccio, was to be found working on the renovation of Isotta’s chapel, along with other chapels within San Francesco, which became known as the Tempio Malatestiano. Sigismondo’s wife, on the other hand, was gifted no such honors.\textsuperscript{44}

By providing Isotta with a future resting place within the Malatesta family’s dynastic church, Sigismondo may have been attempting to reduce the scandal of his very public relationship with her, providing his mistress with a veneer of respectability. Though the pope’s sanctioning of the redecoration of the chapel was most likely brought about through Sigismondo’s auspices, publicly the undertaking appeared as an act of penance by Isotta, perhaps for having given birth to a child, Giovanni, outside of wedlock, to a man who was already married to another women, making her guilty of adultery. The death of Giovanni might have been viewed as divine retribution for Isotta having sinned with Sigismondo. But by the time work was actually begun on her chapel, two years later, her sin at having given birth to a bastard seems to have been assuaged, since the heraldry within the chapel alludes more to the myth of Isotta’s death than to dead little Giovanni.\textsuperscript{45}

Within the chapel Isotta had her own tomb constructed. The inscriptions chiseled on her sarcophagus reveal the pride of place she held in Sigismondo’s heart. First it was inscribed with the words: “ISOTE ARIMINENSI FORMA ET VIRTUTE ITALIÆ DECORI MCCCCXLVI,” declaring “Isotta of Rimini by her beauty and virtue the honor of Italy,” along with the date 1446 in Roman numerals. This seems to have been a shocking claim for Sigismondo to publicly make about his mistress. But sometime after 1450, following the death of Polissena, the original inscription was covered over by another even more scandalous phrase on a bronze plaque: “D ISOTTÆ ARIMINENSI B M SACRVM, MCCCCL.” The “D” at the beginning of the second inscription can be interpreted as either Domina, meaning “mistress” (as in a respected lady), or Diva, meaning “goddess.” The second interpretation indicated Isotta’s divinity and contributed to accusations of heresy.


\textsuperscript{45} Kokole, “Agostino di Duccio in the Tempio Malatestiano,” 315-316.
against Sigismondo by Pope Pius II, who interpreted the inscription as written “in this manner of pagan custom, ‘Sacred to the deified Isotta’.”

With all the poetry written at Sigismondo’s request and the primary place he ensure for Isotta at the court of Rimini, it is not very farfetched to imagine him worshipping his mistress as a goddess. Basini also gives Isotta the title of Diva throughout the Liber Isottaeus and it was a popular form of praise during the Renaissance for a woman who was the objective of courtly love. DIVA or DIVVS on ancient Roman medals usually referred to the individual as being deceased, so the placement of the “D” before Isotta’s name may also celebrate her fictionalized demise, though this seems unlikely, since Renaissance writers and patrons were most likely unaware of this information until the end of the fifteenth century.

The dates on the two inscriptions, 1446 and 1450, do not correspond either to Isotta’s death or to the date of the tomb’s execution. Instead they are both symbolic of important events. The first date references the year in which Sigismondo and Isotta’s affair was initiated and the second refers to the Holy Year of 1450, in which Sigismondo decided to expand his plans for San Francesco. These two dates, the latter of which was more important to Sigismondo than to his mistress, inscribed alongside praise of the tomb’s occupant further associates her visually with her lover.

The heraldic images decorating the chapel also further that link. The Malatesta coat of arms, consisting of a quartered shield with alternating checkerboard stripes and the emblem $ (a combination of the letters S and I), are displayed on the lateral sides and the top of her sarcophagus. While it might be romantic to imagine that the S and I represent a combination of Sigismondo and Isotta’s first initials, the emblem in fact is simply a combination of the first two letters of Sigismondo’s name, which he began to use before he had commenced his

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affair with Isotta. Even so, this device sought visually to associate Isotta even more with her lover.⁵⁰

The peak of the tomb’s canopy, hovering over the sarcophagus, is supported by the winged heads of two elephants with dragon-like dorsal tails. The sarcophagus itself is held aloft by two elephants, whose necks lean on Malatesta shields supported by their trunks. The figure of the elephant also appears elsewhere in the chapel, on reliefs at the base of the entrance piers. This elephant is in profile, walking under a cloudy sky through which the sun’s rays are shining. The elephant—which could represent chastity, continence, strength, force, magnanimity, regality, fortitude, fame, and immortality—was developing in the early fifteenth century into an emblem of the Malatesta, along with the device \textit{Elephas Indus culices non timet}. The depiction of the Malatesta elephant within Isotta’s chapel links her to her lover’s family, instead of her own, whose coat of arms are displayed nowhere in the chapel. Additionally connecting Isotta to Sigismondo and his family, on the entrance piers there are reliefs illustrating beribboned wreaths framing the personal coat of arms of Sigismondo, the Malatesta rose, and the \$ symbol.⁵¹

The canopy hovering above Isotta’s tomb is also decorated by two banners inscribed with the Latin phrases “Tempus Loquendo” and “Tempus Tacendo” (A Time for Talking, A Time to Cease Talking). Hugh Bicheno hypothesizes that these phrases allude to Isotta becoming a nag. She eventually became fed up with Sigismondo’s philandering and continually harped on him to marry her, evidenced in the only letter remaining that was written by her to her princely lover. Perhaps, though, this “talking” refers to the celebration of Isotta in poetry and that Sigismondo knew when to praise his mistress and when not to. But these phrases are in fact an inverted version of a line from the Book of Ecclesiastes (“tempus tacendi et tempus loquendi” [3.7]). They are to be found inscribed within numerous

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other chapels and cells within San Francesco and so cannot be interpreted as a motto chosen specifically for Isotta’s chapel.  

The piers also contain reliefs of putti carrying cornucopias of fruit and Sigismondo’s coat of arms. There are also cherubic angels singing, dancing, and playing instruments on the chapel’s pilasters. Some of them dance around the figure of the chapel’s patron saint, the Archangel Michael. He is depicted in the niche of the altar between fluted pilasters, which are crowned with garlands and the heads of cherubs. The triangular roof of the altar contains the Malatesta coat of arms held by kneeling naked putti. The Archangel wields a sword in his right hand and scales in his left. Under his feet he is crushing a black devil, which clasps a terrified putto captive in its claws. The symbols of the chorus of angels and the Archangel Michael serve to celebrate Isotta’s fame.

The Archangel Michael and the wreath are also linked to Isotta on some of the commemorative medals which portray her image. Johannes Tinctoris, the leading fifteenth-century musical theorist, in his *Complexus effectuum musices*, written in Italy around 1473-1474, writes in his third *effectus* that heavenly “music increases the joys of the blessed” in paradise, and he makes references to symbolic depictions of angels. The representation of the angelic chorus in Isotta’s chapel most likely signifies that she was meant to be greeted by just such a choir upon her entrance into heaven, just as other famous and holy female figures,

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53 Kokole, “Agostino di Duccio in the Tempio Malatestiano,” 299-300. For images of the Archangel Michael, angels, and putti see Turchini, *Il Tempio malatestiano*, 163 (Archangel Michael); Kokole, “Agostino di Duccio in the Tempio Malatestiano,” plate V, fig. 5 (architectural articulation of Isotta’s chapel), plate IX, fig. 13 (angels playing the triangle and horn), plate XIV, fig. 24 (putto bearing the Malatesta coat of arms), plate XVI, figs. 29, 31 (putti holding aloft a garland framing the $ symbol), plate XVII, fig. 33 (angels playing cymbals), plate XXIII, fig. 47 (angel dancing), plate XXXVI, fig. 69 (putti carrying a garland with the Malatesta rose on the entrance pier), fig. 70 (angels playing a psaltery and lute), fig. 71 (putti holding up a garland with the Malatesta coat of arms), fig. 72 (angels playing tabor and nakers), plate XXXVII, fig. 73 (angels playing the harp and portative organ); F. Arduini et al., eds., *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta e il suo tempo* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1970), 87, no. 46 (musical angel); Hope, “The Early History of the Tempio Malatestiano,” plate 13b (putti holding up a basket of fruit and Malatesta roses); Charles Yriarté, *Un Condottiere au XV Siècle Rimini: Études Sur Les Lettres Et Les Arts a la Cour des Malatesta* (Paris: J. Rothschild, 1882), 213, fig. 102 (angels playing the tambourine and straight cornet with a putto seated holding the Malatesta rose), fig. 103 (angel and putto playing violins); Edward Hutton, *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, Lord of Rimini: A Study of a XV Century Italian Despot* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), 214 (putti playing a curved clarinet and a straight clarinet).

such as the Virgin Mary, were. The *cappella degli Angeli* heralds her fame by announcing that upon her death Isotta, as one of the blessed, would be welcomed into paradise with much celebration and the blessings of heaven, legitimizing her position as Sigismondo’s mistress.\(^{55}\)

The position of the chapel within San Francesco also has significance in indicating the high status Isotta held in her princely lover’s affections. Isotta’s chapel was positioned next to and on the same side of the church as Sigismondo’s chapel, directly across from Ginevra d’Este’s. Only the *cella delle Reliquie* (Cell of the Relics) separates them. Polissena, on the other hand, did not receive her own chapel and, after her death, was interred alongside Sigismondo’s first wife.\(^{56}\) So whereas Isotta, Sigismondo’s mistress, received her own private and sumptuary space in which to reside for all eternity, positioned next to her beloved, Sigismondo’s legitimate wives’ bodies were relegated to share their resting place on the other side of the central isle. This internment arrangement clearly shows in what high regard Isotta was held by Sigismondo and the elevated status she exercised within Rimini, even preceding Sigismondo’s own wives in both life and death.

Though it is unclear to what extent Isotta was educated, with some secondary sources claiming she could not write, the poets of the court described her as being skilled in poetry, history, music, and the arts.\(^{57}\) The *Cronaca Malatestiana*, which was composed while Isotta was Sigismondo’s mistress, refers to her respectfully as “madonna Isotta,” the same title Polissena is labeled with later in the same chronicle as “la magnifica madonna Polisena”.\(^{58}\) That the chronicler does not label Isotta with any of the titles common to mistresses (*concubina* or *amante*) is telling about the level of respect she received within the court of Rimini. In 1445, presumably before their relationship had even been consummated, Sigismondo commissioned his first literary testimony of his love for Isotta: a love song written by the poet Carlo Valturi, providing the first authentic evidence of his affection for the twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl, who would have just been blooming into womanhood.\(^{59}\)

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\(^{56}\) Ettlinger, “*Visibilis et Invisibilis*,” 774-775n22. For a schematic ground-plan of the Tempio Malatestiano see Hope, “The Early History of the Tempio Malatestiano,” 54, fig. 1.

\(^{57}\) Pernis and Adams, *Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta*, 43.

\(^{58}\) Massèra, *Cronache Malatestiane*, 125, 128; Ettlinger, “*Visibilis et Invisibilis*,” 773.

\(^{59}\) Pernis and Adams, *Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta*, 163; Campana, s.v. “Atti, Isotta
In 1446 Sigismondo commissioned the literary work which became the Liber Isottaeus. First he employed Tobia Borghi (also known as del Borgo), the Riminese court poet, to begin work on it. In 1449 Borghi passed away and Sigismondo commissioned more work on the piece from Borghi’s successor at court, Basinio Basini da Parma, a leading Italian poet, who commonly receives credit for the entire epic poem. He completed work on the Liber Isottaeus in 1451. This work consists of thirty elegies organized into three books (ten elegies in a book), which contain a mixture of classical and chivalric elements, along with references to the lives of Isotta and Sigismondo. They were inspired by the Roman poets Virgil and Ovid, the text’s literary form derived from the Ovidian epistulae heriodes (letters of heroines). Thirteen of the elegies are in the form of love letters between Sigismondo and Isotta. Fourteen elegies are fictional missives between Basini and the couple. Two letters, mentioned above, are between Isotta and her father. One missive is from Sigismondo ad Amorem (to love).

The opening elegy of the Liber Isottaeus celebrates Isotta as the inspiration for Sigismondo’s military successes. He declares himself reluctant to take up the traditional Malatesta post as a condottiere but submits to it in order to be worthy of his mistress’ love and to increase her own fame:

In addition, Isotta, it is required in the tradition of my ancestors
That arms would be my disturbing duty,
So I may not seem an unworthy successor to my ancestral realm,
And the Malatesta line, which may rather be a burden to me;
So I, myself, no less willingly take up arms nevertheless,
In order that I may seem by your judgment everywhere famous.
As you are worthy of mine, may I be worthy of your love,
And in part our glory could be yielded to you.

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61 In Latin: “Adde, Isotta, licet maiorum more meorum / Arma ex officio sint agitanda meo, / Successor regni videar ne indignus aviti, / Sitque oneri potius stirps Malatesta mihi; / Non ideo minus ipse sequor tamen arma libenter, / Iuditio ut videar clarus ubique tuo. / Utque meo tu digna, tuo sim dignus amore, / Cedat et in partem
In answer to Sigismondo’s rejection of any other patron to his military glory but herself, Isotta sanctions the sacrifice of her innocence and virtue in exchange for their unending love: “For these years, this body and soul I have devoted to you / To you my eternal faithfulness which always would remain inviolate”.  

Much of the life story of Isotta in the first part of the *Liber Isottaeus* can be confirmed to describe actual events when compared with independent historical sources. It tells how Sigismondo and Isotta meet when she is still very young. The work reveals how greatly Isotta values Sigismondo’s love for her and that she is aware that it is through her lover and his praise for her that she has become famous.

The last four elegies in the *Liber Isottaeus* describe Isotta succumbing to illness, her death, her internment, and Sigismondo’s great grief at the loss of his beloved. These elegies are purely fictional, for in fact Isotta outlived Sigismondo. The poems that Sigismondo wrote himself also display a preoccupation with Isotta’s fictional death. This fixation on and celebration of Isotta’s demise may seem odd and unnaturally morbid, but was in fact quite a common theme during the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Sigismondo wrote a number of poems in his own hand honoring his mistress, the “canzoniero de sonitti.” One poem composed by Sigismondo, *Ad Isottam* (To Isotta), sings his beloved’s praises and claims that her beauty rivals that of even the sun:

O lovely and sweet light, haughty soul!
Gentle creature, O worthy countenance,
O light, clear, angelic, and benign!
In whom alone virtue my mind hopes for.
You are of my salvation strong and first,
Anchor that maintains my feeble timber,
You are of my life the strong support,

*gloria nostra tibi.* Quoted in Basinio Basini, “Liber Isottaeus,” 1.1.27-34; Coerver, “*Donna/Dono,*” 217.


64 Kokole, “Agostino di Duccio in the Tempio Malatestiano,” 308.

Dove pure, fair, and sincere.
Before you the grass and the flowers bow,
Glad to be pressed by your soft foot
And touched by your cerulean mantle.
The sun when he rises in the morning
Is vainglorious and then when he sees you,
He is defeated and pale, he sinks in tears.\textsuperscript{66}

In another poem which he composed, Sigismondo declares himself to be dying for want of Isotta’s love. He pleads with numerous mythological and legendary figures to intercede on his behalf in order to make his beloved love him and so save him from death. He pleads with the Roman gods Mercury, Venus, Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn to “Pray to her who is bruising my heart”.\textsuperscript{67} To the twelve astrological signs he begs “That this Rose born in the spring [Isotta] / Pray I may not fall to death for her, / For my life despairs for her”.\textsuperscript{68} Sigismondo even entreats “O you Tristan and Isolte to whom it was not sufficient / To hold your love in your arms tightly / That it made you prove the bitterness of loving”.\textsuperscript{69} Though his poetry is not on par with that of the great poets of the Italian Renaissance, one still cannot help but be moved by Sigismondo’s clear passion for Isotta.\textsuperscript{70}

Fourteen sonnets are attributed to Sigismondo, which fall into two groupings: those on the life of Isotta (1-5), of which the two above are an example, and those on the death of

\textsuperscript{66} In Italian: “O vagha e dolce luce, anima altera! / Creatura gentile, o viso degno, / O lume, chiaro, angelico, e benegno! / In cui sola virtù mia mente spera. / Tu sei de mia salute alta e prima / Anchora che mentien mio debil legno / Tu sei del viver mio fermo sostegno / Turture pura candida e sincera. / Dinanzi a te l’eretta e i fior s’inchina, / Vaghi d’esser premi dal dolce pede / E commossi del tuo ceruleo manto. / El sol quando se leva lo matina / Se vanegloria et poi quando te vede / Sconficto e smorto se ne va con pianto.” Quoted in Yriarté, Un Condottiere au XV Siècle Rimini, 140; Hutton, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, 89. In translating this poem, I relied more on Yriarté’s version for the Italian, since Hutton seems to have left out a few lines in his Italian quotation and its English translation. Yriarté provides no English translations, so all the English translations from his work are mine.

\textsuperscript{67} Quoted in Yriarté, Un Condottiere au XV Siècle Rimini; Hutton, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta.

\textsuperscript{68} Quoted in Yriarté, Un Condottiere au XV Siècle Rimini; Hutton, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta.

\textsuperscript{69} In Italian: “Pregate quella chei mio cor martella…Che questa Rosa nata in primavera / Pregate che per lei morto non caggi [caschi] / Che la mia vita per lei si dispera. …O tu Tristano Aisotta a cui non valse / Tenere amore nelli bracce Strette / Che ti fe poi provare amare salse…” Quoted in Hutton, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, 209-215; Yriarté, Un Condottiere au XV Siècle Rimini, 389-392.

\textsuperscript{70} Hutton, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, 90-91.
Isotta (6-14). By glorifying her fictional demise in literary works, Isotta was being likened to Petrarch’s Laura and Dante’s Beatrice, who were both dead when their poets wrote praising them. By celebrating her fictional death, Isotta was being defined as a great lady worthy of the adoration of her beloved outside the bounds of marriage, without public censor.71

Isotta was only seventeen or eighteen when she began designing her tomb. Her age may seem a bit immature for beginning to plan her own resting place but this was not an uncommon practice during the Italian Renaissance. With the construction of her tomb and the poetry composed in her honor, Sigismondo was attempting to transform his mistress into an idyllic lady love of poetic fiction, in keeping with “il dolce stil nuovo” (the sweet new style) of courtly love. Similar motifs are also found in another piece written celebrating Isotta, the De amore Iovis in Isottam, as well as in the vernacular love poetry written by Sigismondo himself and the other poems written by Riminese court poets.72

Isotta’s tomb is mentioned in the Liber Isottaeus. After the fictional Isotta falls ill, she confesses to her beloved that she had gone to visit her tomb, which will soon hold her earthly remains. She pleads with him to place lilies and roses upon her sarcophagus:

I came previously to the tomb, that exploit I brought forth by marble,
Let them loftily receive forthwith my body.
There shed tears, there spread pious lilies,
There lay the order of purple roses.73

Her imagined death and internment are described in detail by Basini in the form of a letter written to Sigismondo, who is described as laying siege to the town of Crema. Sigismondo did actually lay siege to that city from February 15 to April 17 in 1449, dating the elegy as having been composed before work on Isotta’s tomb was even begun. But the poet would have been aware that plans were being made by Sigismondo for his mistress to design her tomb in the Malatesta church of San Francesco.74

Isotta’s chapel also plays a part in the last elegy of the *Liber Isottaeus*, in which Sigismondo declares his great grief over Isotta’s demise to Basini. He shows that he is following her wishes by visiting her grave frequently: “I have a marble tomb of sweet devotion, / I often seek the new temple of bright statuary”. As Isotta in literary form has declared her faithfulness to Sigismondo, he in turn is doing the same to her.

The *Liber Isottaeus* was printed numerous times during the fifteenth century. Seventeen editions of it may have been printed in total, most of which were published in that century. This suggests that it was widely distributed at the time as an effort by Sigismondo to spread word of his mistress’ fame throughout the literary world of Renaissance Italy. Sigismondo also commissioned the poet laureate, Porcellio de’ Pandoni, in 1453, to write *De amore Iovis in Isottam*, a collection of twelve elegies in which the Roman god Jupiter is depicted in pursuit of Isotta. The elegies are, like those in the *Liber Isottaeus*, composed in the form of letters, between Sigismondo, Jupiter, Isotta, and other classical deities. The collection describes Jupiter declaring his love for Isotta; her refusal of his advances and declaration of her faithfulness to Sigismondo; and other gods offering up their assistance to Jupiter to approach, and at one point even abduct, Isotta, or to try to persuade him to desist in his pursuit of her. In conclusion it is decided that during her lifetime Isotta will belong solely to Sigismondo, but that upon her death she will join Jupiter in Olympus.

This epic poem clearly glorifies Isotta as Sigismondo’s pseudo-wife, who is faithful in life only to him. Though holy vows did not bind them together, the official mistress of the prince was expected to remain faithful to him, though he was most likely not faithful to her. The poem also glorifies Isotta’s status in death. Upon her demise she will ascend to Olympus itself, becoming deified, and she will sit at the right hand of Jupiter, king of the gods, who is most likely the heavenly manifestation of Sigismondo.

Sigismondo exchanged a series of sonnets with the poet Angelo Galli of Urbino in 1445, while he was absent from Rimini, on military campaign in Lombardy. These poems

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76 Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 75, 75n72.

contain traditions of courtly love, further celebrating Isotta. Sigismondo claims, in his first sonnet to Galli, that his mistress’ beauty far surpasses that of Petrarch’s Laura and Dante’s Beatrice: “…Do not speak of Laura any longer to the people, / And Beatrice will in turn be disregarded…” 78 This very explicit declaration openly declares Isotta to surpass in loveliness those women immortalized in poetry by some of Italy’s greatest poets.

In literary form Isotta is also likened to great ladies of chivalric tradition. Her name itself is the Italian version of Isolte, from the Arthurian romance of Tristan and Isolte. As mentioned above, in one of Sigismondo’s compositions, he pleaded with the tragic pair to assist him in gaining Isotta’s love. Galli, in his first response to Sigismondo, glorifies Isotta and makes a reference to the legend:

But much love and trust in my heart I retain,
That will make my pen divine
To tell you of Isotta, now queen,
Of another beauty in this mortal realm.
Her loveliness and her great intellect,
The fine manners and wise blandishments,
Not the drink which to Tristan was given by Governali… 79

In declaring Isotta a queen, Galli may be referring to the fact that the legendary Isolte was Queen of Cornwall, though he is most likely citing her dominance over Rimini’s court. The character of Governali, mentioned in the bottom line, in the legend was one of the servants who unknowingly gave Tristan and Isolte a love potion to drink while they were on their way for the maiden to marry King Marc of Cornwall, causing the two lovers to become tragically intertwined.

In his poem Galli seems to be expressing that, unlike the Isolte of legend, Isotta does not need a potion to gain love. Instead, her beauty and fine character are what make others adore her. Though she is worshipped by her prince, just as Isolte was loved by Tristan, Isotta

78 In Italian: “Non parlaran de Laura piú le genti, / E Beatrice ne virà a despecto…” Quoted in Aldo Francesco Massèra, “I poeti isottei II,” Giornale storico della letteratura Italiana 92, no. 274/275 (1928): 2. Massèra provided no English translations, so translations from his work alone are entirely mine.

79 In Italian: “Ma tanto amore e fé nel cor retegno, / Che farà questa penna mia indivina / A dir d’Isotta tua, hoggi regina / Del’altrre belle in questo mortal regno. / La sua beltà e ’l suo alto intellecto, / I bei costume e saggi blandimenti, / Non el ber che a Tristan dè Governale…” Quoted in Massèra, “I poeti isottei II,” 3.
has surpassed her namesake. Isotta and Isolte would have been interrelated to an even greater
degree because both of their great loves were considered to be adulterous.

Another extramarital Arthurian couple also finds their way into the exchange of
poetry. In his next sonnet Sigismondo mourns his separation from “the graceful and beautiful
color” of Isotta. Galli, in response, urges Sigismondo to

…the take flight to possess your treasure,
Guinevere and Lancelot in that age,
If there will be with you your lady,
Of your great glory they will never match.

Galli is clearly stating that when Sigismondo and Isotta are together, their love surpasses
even that of the legendary Guinevere and Lancelot. Sigismondo, in closing his next sonnet,
joyfully declares: “But the love which brings me wonder, / My Isotta, she is that which has
my heart consumed”. Sigismondo appears to be truly captivated by his mistress, though
their relationship may not yet have even been consummated.

Another literary work celebrating Isotta, Tracalo da Rimini’s *Canzone de Madonna
Isotta*, dates from sometime between the Fall of 1453 and the end of 1454, but was most
likely written early in 1454. The poem refers to Isotta with respect as a “felice madonna”
(happy lady). Much of the work praises her fame in the afterlife, declaring that “even her
death will be immortal” and she will have “fame amongst the nations”. Tracalo even writes
of the monuments that will keep her name eternal, most likely referring to her chapel.

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80 In Italian: “Mancace el vago vivo e bel colore.” Quoted in Massèra, “I poeti isottei II,” 4; Coerver,

81 In Italian: “…vola a possedere el tuo thesoro / Genevra e Lancilotto in quella etade, / se ce starai cum chi
de te s’indonna, / De voi piu gloriosi mai non fuoro.” Quoted in Massèra, “I poeti isottei II,” 5; Coerver,
“Donna/Dono,” 293n68.

82 In Italian: “Ma l’amore, che me porti a maraviglia, / Isotta mia, è quel ch’el cor m’ha arso.” Quoted in

83 Quoted in Kokole, “Agostino di Duccio in the Tempio Malatestiano,”

84 Quoted in Kokole, “Agostino di Duccio in the Tempio Malatestiano,”

85 In Italian: “E poi la morte ancor sarai immortale…fama in fra le genti….” Quoted in Kokole, “Agostino di
Duccio in the Tempio Malatestiano,” 309. Kokole provided no English translation of this poem, so the English
translation is mine. For the dates that the poem may have been written in see Aldo Francesco Massèra, “I poeti
referencing her fame in the hereafter, Tracalo is clearly contributing to the cult of Isotta’s death.

The fact that the poetry celebrating Isotta was composed in both Italian and Latin reveals much about the transition taking place in the literary field during the Italian Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, high literature in Italy had been predominantly composed in Latin. But with the publication of the works of such Italian writers as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in the vernacular Tuscan dialect, a debate began to arise within literary circles. Some writers preferred Latin, continuing to compose in the ancient script, but others, in the name of civic pride, celebrated their own Italian dialects by composing in their colloquial speech. Throughout the course of the Italian Renaissance, writers in greater numbers turned to composing in the vernacular, eventually praising the Tuscan dialect as the supreme literary language of Italy (and the dialect that eventually became modern Italian), though Latin never died out completely during the Renaissance.

The compositions concerning Isotta were written in the midst of this debate, when the language used could be left up to the writer and/or the patron of the work. Literary pieces written in Latin were meant for the high culture of the upper classes, whereas those written in the vernacular were for the popular culture of the lower but still lettered classes. That works celebrating Isotta were published in both the languages of high culture and popular culture display how her fame was being permeated throughout all the literary classes by the works’ patron, Sigismondo.

Isotta was not just celebrated through the building of her chapel and within literary works. She was also lauded in metal. Sigismondo commissioned Matteo de’ Pasti to strike a number of commemorative medals in honor of Isotta, in addition to those done in honor of himself. The fact that Isotta’s image was cast on medals is remarkable since these would have been only the second instance since ancient times in which medals were struck containing portraits of a woman (the first most likely being of Cecilia Gonzaga in 1447).86 Nine of the twenty medals Sigismondo had commissioned in the late 1440s and the early

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86 Some of Isotta’s medals may have been minted in 1446, predating Cecilia Gonzaga’s medals, since all of the medals were stamped with that date. Yet 1446 could also have been a commemorative reference to the initiation of her affair with Sigismondo and not the date the medals were actually cast. See Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 54.
1450s were dedicated to Isotta. Nearly all of the medals contain two elements: the date 1446 in Roman numerals (MCCCCXLVI), commemorating the year they initiated their affair, and one of two epigraphs, which are attributed to Basini. These two elements also appear within Isotta’s tomb in the cappella degli Angeli. The date 1446 also coincided with the year that Sigismondo consolidated his rule and initiated the building of his new castle and the site of the court of Rimini, Castel Sismondo. By striking 1446 on medals depicting his mistress, he was presenting her as the lady of his heart, who had inspired his martial triumphs.87

One large medal of Isotta, for stylistic reasons believed to be the earliest cast, reveals a veiled portrait. She is portrayed in profile,88 wearing an elaborate, northern European styled veiled headdress. The headdress is fastened with bands and a jewel is perched atop her head. Around her image is an inscription similar to the first one etched on her tomb: “ISOTE ARIMINENSI FORMA ET VIRTUVE ITALIE DECORI” (To Isotta of Rimini, by her beauty and virtue the honor of Italy). On the reverse side of the medal the Malatesta elephant appears, walking in a meadow framed by two rose-bushes. The inscription “OPVS MATHEI DE PASTIS V” (The Work of Mateo de’ Pasti V) arches above the elephant, indicating the author of the medal, and the date “MCCCCXLVI” (1446) inscribed below. Sigismondo also had the heraldic image of the elephant cast on medals depicting himself, further linking the two lovers visually. The elephant on this medal also parallels the heraldry of Isotta’s cappella degli Angeli, where the Malatesta elephant also makes many appearances. These images of elephants would have allied Isotta and Sigismondo in the popular imagination.89

An altered model of this medal was also cast. It portrays the same portrait as on the obverse of the first medal. The reverse still shows the Malatesta elephant walking on a grassy

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88 Profiles dominated portraiture in the fifteenth century, until Leonardo da Vinci revolutionized the genre by making a more frontal view of the face popular in the late fifteenth century.

field and framed by rose bushes but the inscription which originally arched above the elephant has been removed and replaced with a sun shining through a cloudy sky. The date “MCCCCXLVI” still remains beneath the elephant’s feet. The image of the sun with cascading rays could represent both the uncontrollable passion of love raining down and the blessings of heaven. Thus, the addition of the sun peeking through clouds represents heaven blessing both the Malatesta and the irrepressible love of its patriarch for Isotta.\textsuperscript{90}

The same profile of Isotta and the inscription as on the obverse of the first medal are also to be found on a smaller but identical medal, though two letters in the inscription are compacted together for spacing reasons (the “MA” at the end of “FORMA” and the “TE” at the end of “VIRTVE”) and the inscription is less flattering, crowding the smaller space. On the reverse, instead of an elephant, a flying angel is displayed, dressed in wafting robes, emerging from a cloud and holding out a wreath in its hands. The date 1446, along with the artist’s signature, “OPVS MATHEI DE PASTIS V,” circle the form of the angel, just as they also circle the symbol of the elephant on the first large medal. Another small medal is very similar to the one with the angel except that the artist’s signature has been removed and a grassy ground put in its place. Only the date remains curving above the seraphim. The angel may be a reference to the patron saint of Isotta’s chapel, the Archangel Michael. Angels as well as wreaths are also symbols found in Isotta’s chapel. Links to her tomb on her medals were designed to reference her literary fictional demise and disseminate it more widely throughout popular culture.\textsuperscript{91}

On the second large medallic portrait of Isotta, minted by Pasti sometime after 1450, she is once again depicted in profile. Her hair is done up in an elaborate hairstyle of two conical postiches, from which it cascades in curly masses. Again she is wearing bands and a jewel on her head. This medal no longer contains a version of the first inscription chiseled on her tomb but part of the second one instead: “D ISOTTAE ARIMINENSI.” Once again, the “D” could stand for \textit{Domina} or \textit{Diva}, translating the inscription as either “To the Divine Isotta of Rimini” or “To the Lady Isotta of Rimini.” On the reverse of this medal Pasti once

\textsuperscript{90} Hill, \textit{A Corpus of Italian Medals}, 1:40, no. 168, 2:plate 32; Timothy McCall, “Networks of Power: The Art Patronage of Pier Maria Rossi of Parma” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2005), 117.

again portrays the Malatesta elephant walking in a meadow. This time though he leaves off his signature, the rose-bushes, and the sun peeking through the clouds. Instead the elephant is only accompanied by the grassy field and the date, which appears beneath the meadow, making the reverse of this medal look much sparser than its predecessors.\(^{92}\)

Two other smaller medals were discovered in 1932, in one of the walls of the Rocca Malatestiana in the city of Fano. On the obverse one medal illustrates the image of Isotta in veiled profile and on the other the profile of her with the conical postiches. Both are paired with a closed book on the reverse, circled by the word “ELEGIAE” (elegies). On the medal depicting the postiches portrait, once again a later version of her tomb’s inscription, “D ISOTTAE ARIMINENSI,” is etched around her portrait, as on the second large medal but in smaller writing. Unlike the other medals, this medal contains no date. On the medal with the veiled portrait another version of the tomb’s inscription, “D ISOTTAE ARIMINEN,” surrounds Isotta’s image, this time with the date 1446 beneath it. The book on these two small medals most likely represents the *Liber Isottaeus*, since it was written in the form of elegies and which may have been completed and published by the time this medal was cast.\(^ {93}\)

These commemorative medals represent convergences of various celebrations of Isotta. The first small medals combine medallistic celebrations with heavenly ones, employing symbols from her tomb. The other two small medals combine literary and medallistic celebrations of Isotta, referring to the *Liber Isottaeus*.\(^ {94}\) Isotta’s medals also employ symbols that associate her even more with Sigismondo. The most widely disseminated literary work he had commissioned in celebration of his and Isotta’s love is being illustrated. Symbols found in Isotta’s tomb, which was being reconstructed through Sigismondo’s auspices in his own family’s dynastic church, appear on her medals as well. Lastly, the medals themselves were commissioned by Sigismondo, who also had medals commissioned of himself, minted with the same symbol of the Malatesta elephant as also found on some of Isotta’s medals.


\(^{94}\) Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 75.
A third large medal, which was struck anonymously but in the style of Pasti, entirely links Isotta to Sigismondo in the popular imagination. On one side of the medal Sigismondo is shown in profile, surrounded by the inscription “SIGISMVNDVS PANDVLFVS DE MALATESTIS ARIMINI FANI” (Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta of Rimini and Fano). This is the same portrait of Sigismondo as is found on other medals by Pasti cast commemorating him. But on the reverse of this medal the same veiled image of Isotta as found on the first large medal portraying her that was struck by Pasti is once again depicted, surrounded by the earlier inscription. On this medal, Isotta and Sigismondo are two sides of the same coin, displaying openly the romantic bond of devotion between them.95

Isotta’s medals, like the Liber Isottaeus, were widely disseminated in order to spread word of her fame. Timoteo Maffei, in a letter written in 1453 to Sigismondo, reveals that he had come across some of Pasti’s medals struck in gold, silver, and bronze which “were either dispersed in underground locations, or placed within walls, or transmitted to outside nations…”96 Sigismondo had revived the practice of placing commemorative medals within the walls or foundations of architecture—which had been a practice of Francesco da Carrara, under Petrarch’s influence, during the fourteenth century—in order to preserve his fame and that of his mistress for posterity. When Sigismondo rebuilt the fortress of San Giovanni near Senigallia in 1455, he honored Isotta by building a tower named in her honor, the “torrione Isotteo.” Her commemorative medals were placed in a clay pot in the tower’s foundation. Her medals were also discovered in 1934 in an urn in the foundations of the Collegio di Sant’Arcangelo in Fano. Sigismondo may have chosen to place the medals of Isotta in the foundations of the Collegio because it was dedicated to Isotta’s patron saint, the Archangel Michael. While she may not have been the first woman since antiquity to have had her image struck on medals, Isotta is the only female to have had her medals discovered in the foundations of architecture, further revealing the uniqueness of her fame and Sigismondo’s great affection for her.97

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95 Arduini et al., eds., Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, 122; Hill, A Corpus of Italian Medals, 1:41, no. 173, 2:plate 33.
96 In Latin: “…vel in defossis locis dispersae, vel muris intus locatae, vel ad extras nationes transmissae sunt…” Quoted in Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 73, 73n67.
97 Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 45; Luciano, “Medals of Women
A number of portraits of Isotta may also have been painted. A portrait of a lady by the Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca is catalogued as portraying Isotta. She is painted in profile and, as on her first large medal, her hair is veiled in the northern European style. Also, as on the medal, a jewel adorns her forehead. Another portrait of Isotta in bass relief, dating from the eighteenth century, preserves her image for posterity. Isotta’s portrait, by G. M. Mazzuchelli, was supposedly based on a design by the Venetian senator Bernardo Nani, which itself was most likely based on a bust of Isotta executed by Agostino di Duccio for her chapel.98 This portrait also contains similarities to the portraits of Isotta on her commemoratory medals. She is depicted in profile, with the crown of her head stylishly adorned, but with a more eastern-Mediterranean-styled head-wrapping, unlike on her medals where she is portrayed with northern European styles of head-adornments. Also, as on some of her medals, Isotta’s hair flows down past her head-wrappings in torrential waves. In a sonnet composed by the poet Federico Veterano, written in the first person as though by Sigismondo, he celebrates Isotta’s hair as “long, gilded, curly, and blond tresses, / Which appear like rays of the sun and not hair”.99 During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, blond hair was viewed as an ideal and noblewomen, patrician ladies, and even courtesans, often bleached their locks with lemon juice. Isotta, if she had not been born with fair hair, would have most likely done the same and so her hair would have been celebrated as one of her ideal features in her portraiture and poetry.

Another remarkable aspect of the literary and artistic works celebrating her is that Isotta herself may have had a great amount of influence over their commissioning and ultimate forms. Sigismondo was often absent on the battlefield during the period in which the chapel was decorated, the poetry was composed, and the medals were cast. When she was not accompanying her lover on campaign, most likely it was Isotta who played a large part in

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98 Arduini et al., eds., Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, 36; Yriarté, Un Condottiere au XV Siècle Rimini, 151, 153. For images of portraits of Isotta see Yriarté, Un Condottiere au XV Siècle Rimini, 151, fig. 76 (bust of Isotta attributed to Agostino di Duccio), 153, fig. 78 (portrait by Piero della Francesca); Arduini et al., eds., Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, 37, no. 24 (eighteenth-century portrait by G. M. Mazzuchelli).

99 In Italian: “La lunga aurata ricca e bionda treza, / Ch’asembra solar raggi e non capelli…” Quoted in Massèra, “I poeti isottei II,” 7; Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 70.
determining their final forms, playing the part of patroness to poets and artists, and helping to shape her own legend.\textsuperscript{100} 

Despite Sigismondo’s deep protestations of love for Isotta, like most Italian Renaissance princes he was not without his lesser amours. Sigismondo’s adversary, Pope Pius II, scornfully wrote that

so much avarice he [Sigismondo] took into himself, that he did not fear not only to plunder but to steal too; so impatient of lust he was, that he inflicted force on his daughters and his sons-in-law; as a youth he played a bride; and often he had been used as a catamite, often he had emasculated males; no marriages were sacred in his eyes; he defiled sacred virgins [nuns], he violated Jewesses; boys and girls who had not submitted to him, he either murdered or beat violently in cruel ways…”\textsuperscript{101}

Pius is clearly exaggerating the extent of his enemy’s transgressions, for it is highly unlikely that Sigismondo would have committed sodomy, incest, or the violation of children and nuns. Pius also writes of him as having raped a beautiful noblewoman “from Germany making for Rome in a Jubilee year not far off from Verona” and that after having violated her, he “left her behind damaged from her resistance and dripping with blood”.\textsuperscript{102} Pius’ claims would have sullied Sigismondo’s reputation even more for having violated a pilgrim on her way to one of Rome’s most sacred yearlong events. Even so, such stories of rape were commonly a product of a prince’s attempts to present himself as a virile ruler.\textsuperscript{103}

Even after the initiation of his relationship with Isotta, Sigismondo had numerous other illegitimate offspring with women whose names are lost to us. According to the seventeenth-century historian Cesare Clementini, Sigismondo produced a total of thirteen children during his lifetime, though he may have actually produced around fifteen. In 1452 Pope Nicholas V legitimized two of Isotta’s children, Valerio Galeotto and Antonia, and one

\textsuperscript{100} Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 59.

\textsuperscript{101} In Latin: “…avaritiae adeo sese dedit, ut non praedari tantum sed furari quoque non vereretur; libidinis ita impatien fuit, ut filiabus ac generis vim intulerit; adolescens nupsit in feminam, et saepe muliebria passus saepe masculos effeminavit; nulla apud eum sancta fuere matrimonia, virgines sacras incestavit, Iudeas violavit; pueros ac puellas qui ei non consensere, aut neci dedit aut crudelibus modis everberavit…” Quoted in Meserve and Simonetta, eds., \textit{Pius II Commentaries}, 1:326-327.

\textsuperscript{102} In Latin: “Feminam nobilem ex Germania Romam petentem in anno Iubilaeo non procul a Verona, cum esset forma egregia, vi rapuit, ac reluctantem vulneratam et cruore madentem reliquit.” Quoted in Meserve and Simonetta, eds., \textit{Pius II Commentaries}, 1:328-329.

\textsuperscript{103} McCall, “Visual Imagery and Historical Invisibility,” 276.
of Sigismondo’s other illegitimate daughters, Giovanna. In 1451 Giovanna had made a good marriage to Giulio Cesare Varano. The Varani were the long established lords of Camerino, who resided in the Marches just south of the Romagna, and who, along with the Montefeltro, wielded much influence in fifteenth-century Italian politics. Sigismondo also had two other illegitimate sons, Galeotto and Pandolfo (1434-1490), who were married off to daughters of Rodolfo III Varano. These marriages of Sigismondo’s bastards to members of the Varano family would have provided him with important allies to support his rule. Sigismondo’s other illegitimate daughter Lucrezia (1436-1468) was also legitimized by the pope in 1453. It has been theorized that Lucrezia and Pandolfo’s mother might have been Gentile di Giovanni da Bologna, who died in 1439, but this theory is disputed. In 1456 Sigismondo strengthened his alliance with the Este by engaging Lucrezia to Alberto d’Este, the illegitimate half-brother of the Marquis of Ferrara. Sigismondo also may have had other illegitimate daughters by unknown women: Elisabetta (1458-1517) and Umilia (1464-1517).104 Neither Giovanna, Galeotto, Pandolfo, Lucrezia or the two girls just mentioned were the offspring of Isotta or of her predecessor, Vanetta. This abundance of bastards clearly evidences Sigismondo’s virile character, which was an important trait projected by many Italian Renaissance princes. These illegitimate offspring also clearly served as useful pawns in the formation of important alliances.

In one elegy from the Liber Isottaeus Isotta bewails the fact that Sigismondo is being untrue to her, carrying on an affair with a woman by the name of Alba.105 It is Sigismondo’s unfaithfulness which leads to her fictional illness and death. In the elegy Isotta supposedly discovers the existence of her competitor for Sigismondo’s affection when she notices him wearing a garland “woven by the hand of another”.106 The desperate entreaty for her prince to remain faithful to her reveals both the importance of her status as court favorite and the


constant dread of losing Sigismondo’s love and her high position at court, causing her much suffering:

I am not, I confess, a worthy girl for a prince,
I am not worthy of so great a personage.
In quality, nevertheless, I am not inferior to Alba,
And in saying this, I namely venture for even your judgment.
Not in race or in spirit, not of that form or character,
Not of merit indeed am I your second in faithfulness.
Yet now your favor makes her only that first,
All your judgment now pleases that woman. 107

Though the Liber Isottaeus is a work of fiction and Alba may not have actually been a real woman, Isotta still had to live with the constant threat of losing her lover’s affection. The only surviving letter written from Isotta to Sigismondo reveals much about her worries and his infidelity. Isotta dictated the letter to Dorotea Malatesti di Ghiaggiolo 108 and it is dated December 20, 1454, when Sigismondo was on campaign, fighting for the Sienese against the Count of Pitigliano. She pleads with him to marry her and apologizes for the curtness of her previous letter (which has been lost), explaining that she was upset because she had received word that he had been unfaithful to her with the daughter of one Signor G. She refers to his own request in a previous letter (also lost) from him to her, that she should cease writing to him if she cannot stop her badgering. This letter also displays her jealousy towards Aritrea di Galeazzo Malatesta (ca. 1444-1501), the daughter of Sigismondo’s uncle, the Malatesta Lord of Pesaro, and his ward, for whom he showed much affection. Aritrea gave birth to Sigismondo’s illegitimate daughter, Alessandra, in 1462, but the girl did not survive passed the age of six and Aritrea was married off to Andrea Dandolo. 109

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108 That Isotta did not write this letter herself does not necessarily mean she was illiterate. It was common during the Renaissance for high personages to dictate their correspondence to secretaries or servants. See Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 57-58n14.

109 Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 776; Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo
But despite Sigismondo’s obvious infidelity, Isotta still held a preeminent place at his court. This is evidenced by her relationship with his children. Also in her letter to Sigismondo, she regales him with the doings of the children at court: “Our Malatesta is well and received a very well wished for horse. All the other of our sons and daughters are doing well.” But not all of those children were actually hers. Isotta gave him four surviving illegitimate offspring, after the death of Giovanni: Malatesta, who is mentioned above and who died before he reached the age of ten; Sallustio (ca. 1448-1470), who became Sigismondo’s heir; Valerio Galeotto (ca. 1451-1470); and her only surviving daughter, Antonia (1453-1483). It has also been suggested that Sallustio and Valerio were in fact the children of another of Sigismondo’s mistresses, Gentile Ramessini, a Bolognese noblewoman, and that Isotta, upon Malatesta’s death, adopted the two boys as her own. Sigismondo’s enemy, Federico da Montefeltro, initiated the rumor that Sallustio was not Isotta’s son, which would mean that he was not legitimimized by her subsequent marriage to Sigismondo and would have challenged Sallustio’s right to succeed as Papal Vicar of Rimini.

It was not uncommon for the Italian Renaissance prince’s wife, the lady of his court, to raise his children, both legitimate and illegitimate. Polissena may also have been in charge of raising Sigismondo’s bastards but, by the time this letter was written, Polissena had died and it seems that Isotta had taken her place in the care of his offspring. Polissena had given Sigismondo a son, Galeotto Malatesta, but he died not long after birth. That was during the first year of their marriage, before Sigismondo had even met Isotta. Polissena also gave birth to a daughter, Margherita, who survived and who was married to Carlo Fortebraccio, the Count of Montone. It has been suggested that Giovanna was in fact the legitimate daughter of Sigismondo and Polissena, while Margherita was one of Sigismondo’s illegitimate

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daughters.\textsuperscript{112} This legitimate daughter, whether Margherita or Giovanna, for reasons thoroughly discussed in Chapter Four, did not take precedence in the succession over Sigismondo’s illegitimately-born sons.

Polissena died of the plague and was interred next to Ginevra d’Este in June 1449. Once again there were rumors that Sigismondo had had his wife murdered, since his alliance with the Sforza had only just deteriorated, leaving him free to make a third marriage and so form a new alliance; but it was still highly unlikely that he actually murdered his wife. Though Sigismondo had Isotta’s sons, along with some of his other children, legitimized not long after his wife’s death, he did not hurry to marry his mistress. In fact he most likely had been seeking to arrange a new marriage alliance with another powerful Italian family. The letter of 1454 reveals the great strain Sigismondo and Isotta’s relationship was under during this period. Only seven years after Polissena’s death does it appear that Isotta was finally able to persuade Sigismondo to marry her, but only in secret. Though no contemporary documents make mention of such a marriage between them, that it probably took place is evidenced by the fact that Isotta’s signature altered from “\textit{de Attis}” to “\textit{de Malatestis}” on official documents.\textsuperscript{113} Through this marriage Isotta would have secured her position within the court of Rimini. No longer could Sigismondo cast her aside, as he had Vanetta, for a new official mistress. Becoming his wife meant that she would be that until one of them died, since the Catholic Church did not allow divorce.\textsuperscript{114}

Isotta as an Italian Renaissance mistress was an exception to the rule. Very few mistresses eventually married their princely lovers and those who did were not always looked fondly upon by their contemporaries. Within the Emilia-Romagna and other parts of Italy princes did occasionally marry their mistresses, but usually as a means to further legitimize


\textsuperscript{114} While the Catholic Church never granted divorces, it did sometimes allow for annulments. Usually an annulment could be obtained if one member of the couple was incapable of sexually consummating the marriage or, sometimes, if one of them had been forced into the marriage against their will. See Joanne M. Ferraro, \textit{ Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
their offspring and ensure a smooth succession. Duke Bernabò Visconti of Milan, in 1384, after the death of his wife, may have married his mistress, Donnina dei Porri, in an attempt to legitimize their children and make them his heirs. But Bernabò’s ploy failed. His nephew, Giangaleazzo Visconti, had the marriage invalidated when he seized control of Milan, reducing his rivals back to bastardy.115

Yet, in late Renaissance Florence, two generations of its rulers married their mistresses, and not to prevent inheritance issues. In 1570 Grand Duke Cosimo I of Tuscany, after the death of his wife, Eleonora di Toledo, married his mistress, Cammilla Martelli, who was a Florentine commoner. Like Sigismondo, in practice he married her in secret, but the marriage was still widely known of. Cosimo, on the other hand, gave his new wife no political power and she was never considered to be the Grand Duchess of Florence. His imprudent marriage shocked most of the other rulers of Italy and Cosimo’s children and their spouses shunned Cammilla. Upon his death she was immediately forced to enter a convent of the Murate, only to be released for a short time twelve years later for the marriage of her illegitimate daughter by Cosimo, Virginia, to Cesare d’Este, the Duke of Modena. Cosimo’s son, Grand Duke Francesco I, married his Venetian mistress, Bianca Cappello, after the death of his wife, Giovanna Hapsburg. It was widely rumored that they had had Bianca’s husband murdered and Francesco’s wife poisoned. Francesco went one step further than his father and had his new wife declared the Grand Duchess of Florence. Francesco’s marriage to Bianca was very unpopular both within Florence and throughout Italy. Both Francesco and Bianca died within days of each other, supposedly of malaria, and it has been hypothesized that they were in fact poisoned with arsenic.116 A number of Este rulers of Ferrara, who will be discussed in Chapter Four, also married their mistresses.

Still, in the grand scheme of things, few unmarried mistresses of Italian Renaissance princes were eventually wed to them. Instead they were commonly provided with a dowry in cash or land by their princes to make up for their lost chastity and married off to lesser lords. Ludovico Maria Sforza, the Duke of Bari and regent of the dukedom of Milan, married off

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his mistress, Cecilia Gallerani, to a Cremonese count, providing her with a dowry of property and jewels. Other mistresses were able to live quiet single lives, continuing to receive monetary support from their former lovers, as Sigismondo’s former mistress Vanetta did. Agnese Mantegazza was provided with a castle to reside in by her former lover, Giangaleazzo Visconti, the Duke of Milan. Though there is no evidence of cast off mistresses retiring to convents that does not mean that a few of them did not meet such a fate, just that documentation is lacking. This is most likely so because such mistresses remained anonymous and monastic documents do not refer to women’s reasons for taking holy vows. Isotta, on the other hand, was able to escape the more common fates that usually befell princely mistresses and attained even greater glory in the process.

Despite the fact that Sigismondo was never completely faithful to her, Isotta proved to be devoted to him and their children. Pope Pius II could not help but admit that Isotta, because of her constancy, was deserving of Sigismondo’s love and affection. This is remarkable since at the same time Pius accused Sigismondo of heresy, railing against him. The pope also refused to recognize Sigismondo’s marriage to Isotta, continuing to refer to her as the Lord of Rimini’s concubina. Yet he could not help admitting that there was some good in his enemy’s new wife.

During this period, Isotta began to flex her political power, with Sigismondo placing the welfare of his signoria in her hands. Before he departed for the Morea, Greece, to fight the Turks as the Captain General of Venice in July 1464, he formally appointed Isotta and Sallustio to govern the state in his absence. Sigismondo took their other surviving son, Valerio Galeotto, with him to the Morea. Valerio had been created a papal notary by Pope Nicholas V, only a few days after being legitimized, even though he had still been under age; an excellent example of the simony which was rampant during the Italian Renaissance. While both of Isotta’s sons were being given important roles to play—Sallustio ruling with her in his father’s absence and Valerio being given an important papal position before he had even reached his maturity, as well as being taken on campaign with his father—, Vanetta’s son,

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117 Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 780n52; Martines, Power and Imagination, 239; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 166-167.

118 Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 773; Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 45.
Roberto, had turned his back on his father and allied himself with Sigismondo’s enemies: Malatesta Novello of Cesena and Francesco Sforza, the Duke of Milan.119

During Sigismondo’s absence, Isotta was skillfully able to overcome political opposition to her and Sallustio’s rule. A false report reached Rimini in January of 1465 that Sigismondo had perished in the Morea. Roberto attempted to invade Rimini with the support of Cesena, Milan, and Florence, but failed, and Isotta was able to maintain control. During the following month Isotta discovered a traitor among Sigismondo’s group of supporters, Iacopo Anastagi da Borgo San Sepolcro. He had intended to oppose her alliance with Venice and hand Rimini over to Roberto. She ordered the man arrested, questioned, and had him tortured. He was then executed on July 4, by hanging.120

Upon his return to Rimini in March 1466, after failing in his campaign and becoming ill, Sigismondo made out his will on April 23. Afraid of losing Rimini to one of three powers—Venice, the papacy, or Roberto—he took steps to name Isotta and Sallustio his joint-heirs:121 “…His [Sigismondo’s] great and beloved Consort, Mistress Isotta de Malatesta and the great Lord Sallustio of the Malatesta that was his son, are his universal heirs”.122 Sigismondo also left “ten gold ducats” to his daughter Giovanna’s husband and another ten to his unmarried daughter by Isotta, Antonia.123 In the codicil Sigismondo made to his last testament on August 16, 1468, he left two of his other illegitimate children, Lucrezia and Pandolfo, estates in Ragusa. His illegitimately-born children were certainly not expected to survive their father without receiving some inheritance. Following the first drawing out of his

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will, Sigismondo proved to not be as close to death as originally thought and his health improved.\textsuperscript{124}

In declaring his illegitimate son his heir, Sigismondo was not unique among Italian Renaissance princes. Pino III Ordelaffi, the Lord of Forlì, reached the end of his life without producing a legitimate heir. He had been married three times and poisoned two of his wives but produced no legitimate offspring. So he formally recognized his illegitimate son, Sinibaldo, and declared him his heir. His widow, Lucrezia Pico della Mirandola, attempted to maintain control of Forlì upon Pino’s death in 1480 by taking control of the fourteen-year-old Sinibaldo. Unfortunately for her, the boy mysteriously perished as Lucrezia attempted to ward off their enemies. The Spanish King of Naples and Sicily, Alfonso I d’Aragona (“the Magnanimous”), left the kingdom of Naples to his only male offspring, his illegitimately-born son Ferrante I d’Aragona, in 1458. Even one of Sigismondo’s greatest rivals, Federico da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino, had been born illegitimate. Also numerous illegitimate Este sons inherited the city-state of Ferrara, sometimes over legitimate heirs.\textsuperscript{125}

Yet, in declaring his secret-wife and son joint-heirs, Sigismondo was taking a unique step. Women were often made regents of city-states during the Italian Renaissance, ruling in place of sons who were still minors, usually with the assistance of a regency council.\textsuperscript{126} But Sallustio was not a minor and Isotta was not officially recognized as Sigismondo’s wife and consort. Only one other Renaissance mistress had tried to attain a more legitimate means to

\textsuperscript{124} Pernis and Adams, \textit{Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta}, 48; Arduini et al., eds., \textit{Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta}, 35.


\textsuperscript{126} Sigismondo’s aunt, Gentile Malatesta, ruled as regent of Faenza for her son, following the death of her husband, Gian Galeazzo Manfredi. Such was her marshal prowess that she was given the nickname Penthesilea, after the ancient queen of the Amazons who was simultaneously loved and killed by the Greek hero Achilles. Gentile supported the Visconti of Milan against her brothers, who were serving as captains in the Florentine army. Only after her forces were defeated did she retire to Faenza and cede power over to her son. Bona of Savoy, ruled as regent of Milan for her son, Gian Galeazzo Sforza, after the death of her husband, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, until she was deposed by her brother-in-law, Ludovico Maria Sforza. Caterina Sforza, Galeazzo Maria’s illegitimate daughter, ruled as Lady of Forlì and Countess of Imola for her son, maintaining her rule long after he had reached his majority. For Gentile Malatesta see Pernis and Adams, \textit{Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta}, 9; Jones, \textit{The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State}, 106, 156, 161. For Bona of Savoy and Caterina Sforza see Lev, \textit{The Tigress of Forlì}.\textsuperscript{125}
power put had failed. The official mistress of Alfonso I of Naples in his later years, Lucrezia (or Lucia) d'Alagno, made an attempt to attain more legitimate power. Alfonso had made her Countess of Caiazzo and her family had greatly benefited from their affair. She sought to bring about the disillusion of Alfonso’s marriage to his barren queen, Maria of Castile, so that he could marry her and make her Queen of Naples, but Lucrezia’s case was rejected by Pope Calixtus III, her uncle through marriage. Though all of Italy was aware that Sigismondo had married his mistress, thus legitimizing their relationship, it is still remarkable that he made her one of his heirs, since their union was not formally recognized, the pope even denying its legitimacy.\textsuperscript{127}

Roberto, also illegitimately-born, did not go without an inheritance. As Sigismondo’s eldest male offspring, he not Sallustio should have inherited Rimini from his father. Though he had been disinherited through his father’s will, he was made the secret heir of his uncle, his father’s rival, Malatesta Novello. When his uncle fell ill in August 1465, Roberto hurried to Cesena, which Sigismondo was eager to retain for the Malatesta against the pope. Upon Malatesta Novello’s death in November, Roberto declared himself Cesena’s lord, but most of the people preferred a return to papal rule, while others, along with the podestà (governor), wanted to give the city over to Venice. Roberto sent appeals to Florence, Venice, Milan, and the pope, but they came to naught. In the end, on December 9, 1465, he allowed the city’s government to be turned over to the papacy. In compensation for his sacrifice, Roberto was taken into Pope Paul II’s service, investing him with the hereditary vicariates of Sarsina, Meldola, Polenta, and other small Malatesta lordships.\textsuperscript{128}

When in 1466 Sigismondo was lured to Rome under false pretenses by Paul II and detained there, he sent a messenger to Isotta, instructing her to seek assistance from Venice. Isotta acted quickly, sending at once a large diamond valued around five or six thousand scudi to Venice to be sold for much needed funds. She was able to convince the Republic’s Council of Ten to provide her with an army for the defense of Rimini. This time Isotta was


\textsuperscript{128} Jones, The Malatesta of Rimini, 242.
solely in charge, since Sallustio was away in Ferrara, but she quickly summoned him to return to Rimini and help her.129

Isotta was rarely left by Sigismondo to rule Rimini in his absence without the assistance of their son. Though it was not uncommon during the Italian Renaissance for wives to govern for absent husbands or for widows to rule as regents over their dead husband’s city-states, they often only did so with the assistance of male councilors. Women were rarely left to rule on their own. In practice Isotta followed this norm, often seeking the support of the Republic of Venice and governing with the support of her son. Yet, the chronicles of the time describe her as vastly overshadowing Sallustio. It is she who appears to have been in control, not her son. Sallustio was merely a figurehead upon whom she could legitimize her rule.130

Two years later, on October 9, 1468, Sigismondo passed away. Four days after his funeral, Isotta, adhering to fifteenth-century Riminese law, ordered all his portable belongings within the Castel Sismondo to be inventoried. The city’s law stipulated that a widow, following the death of her spouse, was required to oversee a thorough inventory of the property and living quarters of her late husband. By following the Riminese law so exactly to the letter, Isotta was displaying in a very public manner how completely she had made the transformation from mistress to respectable wife and then widow.131

Sigismondo may have married Isotta in the first place in order to ensure that his children by her came first in the succession, before his son by Vanetta—who was born before them, while Sigismondo was unmarried, and who had been legitimized.132 There is no evidence though that Sigismondo ever had Sallustio legitimized, though he most likely was, since Isotta’s second son, Malatesta, had been legitimized in 1450 before his death, and her

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129 Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 48.
130 Jones, The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State, 245.
131 Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 48-49.
132 Children born when neither of their parents were married to other people were considered natural children (naturales), holding a status above those bastards born from adulterous relationships. By marrying Isotta, Sigismondo legitimized her children, giving them precedence over Vanetta’s son, who had been born a natural child, since Sigismondo’s first wife, Ginevra d’Este, was deceased and he had not yet wed Polissena Sforza upon Roberto’s birth. For the status of natural offspring over other illegitimate children see Bestor, “Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy,” 549-585; Kuehn, “A Late Medieval Conflict of Laws,” 243-255.
fourth son, Valerio Galeotto, was legitimized in 1452. Sigismondo’s ploy to give Isotta’s sons precedence in the order of inheritance over Roberto ultimately failed. Following Sigismondo’s death, Isotta and Sallustio inherited control of Rimini. Isotta attempted to extend the olive branch to Roberto, suggesting that she and Sallustio share the governing of Rimini with him, but he rejected her offer. The Republic of Venice again lent Isotta their support and provided her with a strong garrison of Venetian soldiers, since she was popular with the people of Rimini, who preferred her rule. The affection of the people of Rimini for Isotta was even praised by Pierantonio Paltroni, who was a supporter of her dead husband’s enemy, Federico da Montefeltro. Paltroni wrote that “she was much loved in the land of Rimini, that most worthy city”. But Isotta was still forced to contend with Roberto.

The political power that Isotta wielded was not unique for the Italian Renaissance. It was not uncommon for wives in Italy and within the Romagna, to rule through their husbands or sons, particularly when either one was absent or when the son was a minor. Sigismondo’s own aunt, Elizabetta Gonzaga, was appointed regent for her nephews, as mentioned above. Later Italian Renaissance ladies, such as Caterina Sforza and Isabella d’Este, ruled entire city-states when their husbands were absent at war or as regents for their minor sons.

Women, though, did not cease to rule through men until the mid-sixteenth century with the reigns of Queens Mary I and Elizabeth I of England, who both inherited the throne in their own right, and not through a husband or son. As seen above, Sigismondo rarely left Isotta to rule Rimini without the support of their son, Sallustio. What is most remarkable, though, is that without publicly declaring Isotta his legitimate wife, Sigismondo was effectively leaving his state in the hands of his mistress and illegitimately-born son.

Isotta still had to deal with her stepson Roberto, though. Giulio Varano also apparently had designs on Malatesta lands through his wife, Giovanna. It was in the hope of obtaining rule over some of the Malatesta lands that he assisted Isotta against Roberto. The pope provided Roberto with an army in order for him to take Rimini from Isotta and Sallustio. On August 30, 1469 Rimini was laid siege to by Roberto, who was supported by

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134 In Italian: “…era assai amata in quella terra de Arimino, che è dignissima città.” Quoted in Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 49.
the forces of Federico da Montefeltro, the Captain General of the League. Isotta and Sallustio were betrayed by men who had all once been loyal to Sigismondo: Raimondo Malatesta, Pietro Genari, Matteo Belmonti, and Matteo Lazzarini. They formed a conspiracy in support of Roberto and on October 20 they helped him to enter Rimini. Federico da Montefeltro left the city under the control of Roberto, Sallustio, and Isotta. While Isotta kept her pervious bargain with Roberto to allow him to rule the signoria with Sallustio, Roberto had the Venetian garrison dismissed, and she soon became disaffected with him, moving out of the Castel Sismondo and into her family’s palazzo. In her absence from the court of Rimini, Sallustio and Valerio Galeotto were murdered in the summer of 1470 under mysterious circumstances, leaving Roberto the sole ruler of Rimini. Both her sons were interred honorably and it was most likely because of the people’s great love for her that Isotta was allowed to continue living quietly in the city. She continued to run her family’s business until her death at age forty-one or forty-two, on July 9, 1474. Little is known about the circumstances of her death and at the time there were rumors that Roberto had had her slowly and methodically poisoned, but such rumors were to be expected. In the end she was interred with much honor in the tomb she had had constructed in San Francesco.\footnote{Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 778n43; Pernis and Adams, Federico da Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta, 49; Jones, The Malatesta of Rimini, 245-247, 245n4.}

Vanetta, the cast off mistress, had managed to take revenge on the woman who had replaced her as Sigismondo’s official mistress. She supported her son Roberto in his takeover of the Rimini state, assisting him in defending the town of Meldola. It was she, not Isotta, who ultimately became the mother of the long reigning Lord and Papal Vicar of Rimini, and she ruled Meldola for her son as his governor. Her daughter, Contessina, who Sigismondo had allowed her to keep and raise, was married to Cristofero da Forli, nephew of cardinal Stefano of Milan. Vanetta was also interred in San Francesco with much honor and ceremony in 1475. Thus her memory was legitimized in that she was laid to rest alongside the other Malatesta lords and their wives.\footnote{Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 780.}

Isotta’s only remaining daughter, Antonia, was married to Ridolfo di Ludovico Gonzaga in 1481. Though she had been born illegitimate, she had been legitimized, and still
proved to be an important bargaining chip for Roberto in forming political alliances, just as Polissena Sforza had been to the Duke of Milan in her marriage to Sigismondo. Unfortunately, Antonia was accused of having her own extramarital affair in December 1483, something the Gonzaga would not stand for in their wives, and she was executed for the offence, just as Ginevra d’Este’s mother had been. Whereas Antonia’s mother could freely enter into an illicit liaison because she had the support of her family, as the legitimate bride of an Italian Renaissance prince, Antonia could not take her own lover, since such an act threatened the stability of the line of inheritance. She was decapitated for her crime.137

Antonia’s fate was not uncommon among Italian noble brides. In the later Middle Ages Giovanni “Sciancato” (The Lame) Malatesta, also known as Gianciotto, had his wife, Francesca da Polenta, and his brother, Paolo “il Bello” (The Fair), murdered for committing adultery ca. 1283/84. The episode was preserved for posterity in one of the most celebrated cantos of Dante’s Divine Comedy, where the lovers are referred to as “anime affannate” (anxious souls).138

In 1395 Captain Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua had his wife, Agnese Visconti, tried for having an affair with one Antonio da Scandiano, and at the age of twenty-five she lost her head. Another Francesco Gonzaga, known as “il Cardinalino” (The Little Cardinal) because he was the illegitimate son of a cardinal, had his wife, Taddea Forlani, imprisoned for committing adultery. The previously mentioned Niccolò Piccinino, after returning from eleven months on military campaign to be presented by his wife with a newborn son, ordered her to be executed for the crime of adultery.139

The aforementioned Pino III Ordelaffi, Lord of Forlì, poisoned his first wife, Barbara Manfredi of Faenza, around 1463, out of jealousy, most likely because he suspected her of being unfaithful. His second wife, Zaffira Manfredi of Imola, was also poisoned in 1473,

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along with her mother, probably because Pino once again suspected his wife of being an adulteress and her mother of facilitating the affair. A local diarist described his third wife, Lucrezia Pico della Mirandola, as being “very cautious about what she ate.” In 1563 the Roman noblewoman, Vittoria Savelli, and her brother-in-law, Troiano Savelli, were brutally murdered by her husband, Giovanni Battista Savelli, when they were discovered in flagrante delicto.140

The tragic fates of these women reveal the double standard that was prevalent throughout the Italian Renaissance. While men of the nobility were expected to take mistresses and often did, wives could be deprived of their very lives for taking lovers. Still, we cannot know for sure how many women did risk their very existence in order to enter into illicit affairs, since the only women we know of for sure who did so are those who were caught. There may have been many other Italian Renaissance noblewomen who were able to keep their amours secret from their contemporaries. Because of this lack of information, it is impossible to say for sure how common it was for women to enter into illicit affairs in comparison to men.

Roberto, who became known as “il Magnifico” (the Magnificent), continued the family tradition of illegitimate sons inheriting the state. He was married in 1457 to Isabetta (or Elisabetta) Montefeltro (died 1521), the daughter of Duke Federico of Urbino. But it was his illegitimate son, Pondolfo IV (1475-1534), by his mistress, Elisabetta (or Isabetta) Aldobrandini da Ravenna, who became his heir and inherited the state upon his death.141

Roberto only had a legitimate daughter, Battista, by his wife, who, as a girl, was barred from the succession. His mistress, as well as giving birth to Pandolfo, also produced two other illegitimate children fathered by Roberto: Giovanna and Carlo. Elisabetta was clearly Roberto’s official and long term mistress. But like Sigismondo with Isotta, Roberto was not completely faithful to her. Roberto had another illegitimate son, Troilo, by the wife of a Riminese nobleman, Adimario degli’ Adimari, who did not seem to have a problem

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141 Bicheno, Vendetta: High Art and Low Cunning, 268.
sharing his wife with his prince. Like his father, Roberto had married for political reasons but continued to carry out illicit affairs during his rule.\textsuperscript{142}

Following Roberto’s death in 1482, Elisabetta, like Isotta, dominate her illegitimate son and ruled through him, assuming a legitimate path to power. Unlike Sallustio, who had reached his majority before his father’s death, Pandolfo IV was only seven years old when his father died. But Roberto’s last testament named a regency council to help his son rule. Unlike Lucrezia Pico della Mirandola, who had tried to rule through her illegitimate stepson, Isabetta da Montefeltro retired to a monastery in Urbino, leaving Elisabetta to raise Roberto’s illegitimate offspring. Following Roberto’s death, Pope Sixtus IV announced the legitimation of Pandolfo and Carlo, investing them with their inheritance, and sent a papal legate to Rimini to officially carry out their legitimization and investiture. In this way Roberto’s illegitimately-born son was able to smoothly succeed to the vicariate with a regency council and his mother to support him.\textsuperscript{143}

But during the regency, Pandolfo was seen to be developing, under Elisabetta’s care, into a sullen and debauched oppressor. Duke Ercole d’Este of Ferrara, worried that Pandolfo was not receiving the proper education due a prince, had sent Bartolomeo Cavalieri to attempt to remove him from his mother’s control, but he failed. After ten years of peaceful rule, the regency council was ripped apart by internal quarrels between its two leaders, Galeotto and Raimondo Malatesta. Elisabetta seems to have favored Raimondo, causing Galeotto and his sons to attack and murder him as he was leaving her house, earning her bitter resentment. Then Galeotto plotted to assassinate Pandolfo and seize power for himself but he was reported and executed. Clearly Elisabetta’s involvement in the politics of Rimini’s regency council was influential enough to create bitterness against herself, those she supported, and her son.\textsuperscript{144}

Following Galeotto’s execution, it appeared for the first time that Pandolfo was the sole ruler of Rimini but it was his mother and her family, the Aldobrandini, who truly held the reins of power. Elisabetta installed her family members in important offices in the

\textsuperscript{142} Jones, \textit{The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State}, 251, 251n3.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 250-251.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 251, 253-254.
government and they wielded great influence. She was even able to have her chief rival, Cavalieri, exiled from the city in 1493, and he gladly returned to Ferrara. Also like Isotta, Elisabetta was wise enough to seek protection from the Republic of Venice. In March of that year, she traveled with Pandolfo and Carlo to Venice and arranged for the Republic to assume guardianship over Rimini for up to two years, providing Pandolfo with a *condotta*, with a yearly stipend of seven thousand ducats in order to maintain a hundred men.\(^\text{145}\) The Venetian writer, Marin Sanudo, provides a favorable description of Elisabetta, who he named as the daughter of “conte Zuam Aldovrandin” (Count Gian Aldobrandini). He calls her a “beautiful lady, young and very wise, that because of his [Pandolfo’s] innocence she ruled the state of Rimini and [she ruled] her son lord Pandolfo”.\(^\text{146}\)

But Elisabetta’s influence over her son eventually began to wane. During the first French invasion of Italy, along with Pandolfo and Carlo, she returned to Venice to once again request the Republic’s guardianship and to renew Pandolfo’s *condotta*. While there, Elisabetta complained to the Venetian government that Pandolfo was conspiring to have her and Carlo killed. She died a year later while visiting her daughter in Tuscany and a rumor quickly spread that Pandolfo had had poisoned her. But, writing to the duke of Ferrara, Pandolfo declared himself to be inconsolable at the loss of his mother, upon whom he had depended for so long. It was after her death that Pandolfo’s hold over Rimini began to disintegrate. Conspiracies were formed against him and revolts broke out. This was the beginning of the end of the Malatesta rule and Pandolfo was the last Malatesta Papal Vicar of Rimini. Though Elisabetta had been far more successful in ruling Rimini through her son than Isotta, her death had also caused rumors of foul play and heralded the end of the Malatesta dominion.\(^\text{147}\)

Isotta and Elisabetta were anomalies amongst Italian Renaissance mistresses. A majority of them remain lost to us, their names never even recorded. Sigismondo was also a


\(^\text{146}\) In Italian: “Questa era di Ravena, sorella dil conte Zuam Aldovrandin, dona bellisima, giovine et molto saputa, la qual con il suo ingenio governava il stato di Rimano et il fiol signor Pandolfo…” Quoted in Federico Stefani, ed., *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto (Mccccxcvi-Mdxxiii)* (Venice: Fratelli Visentini, 1896), 1:752; Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, 255n4. Neither of these works provided English translations of Sanuto’s description, so the English translation is entirely mine.

rarity among Italian Renaissance princes. Few fifteenth-century princes were prepared to share their spotlight so extensively even with their wives, let alone their mistresses, as Sigismondo did with Isotta. Only near the end of the fifteenth century did princes’ wives begin to develop celebrated reputations. Isotta was one of the most successful women of her age to generate such lasting recognition. No other women of other great and noble Italian families, such as the Sforza, Gonzaga, Este, and Montefeltro, were able to attain such economic security, high social status, or posthumous fame during the mid-fifteenth century.¹⁴⁸

Though Isotta and Elisabetta were unique for their time, they and Vanetta reveal much about what a prince’s mistress could hope to gain from an affair. Her family could benefit from an increase in status, wealth, and properties, as could the mistress herself. She could also hope to gain for her illegitimately-born offspring influential marriages and even a share in the inheritance. Mistresses of the nobility could also expect that, with the absence of legitimate heirs, their children could take precedence in the order of succession. Isotta, though, was able to attain even more, becoming a patroness of the arts, celebrated in poetry, interred honorable, memorialized on commemorative medals, eventually married to her prince, and ruled beside her son in her husband’s absence. She was idealized through the celebration of her devotion to Sigismondo in life and she was immortalized through her fictional demise. She is an example of how a woman with enough passion and determination could alter her place in the world and earn great praise in the process.

¹⁴⁸ Luciano, “Medals of Women from the Italian Renaissance Courts,” 77.
CHAPTER 3

MISTRESSES OF THE ROSSI OF PARMA:
BIANCA DE’ PELLEGRINI “THE MARRIED MISTRESS,” PIER MARIA ROSSI, AND HIS CHILDREN—LEGITIMATE, ILLEGITIMATE, AND DISINHERITED

The official mistress of Pier Maria Rossi, Bianca (or Blanchine) de’ Pellegrini, is far more historically visible than his actual legitimate wife. It was Bianca’s image which Pier Maria advertised publically on numerous commemorative medals, in two frescoed chambers, and even subtly in a panegyric poem. Though she did not attain a height of fame equal to that of Isotta degli’ Atti, Bianca benefited from her relationship with Pier Maria and was greatly celebrated by him in various public mediums. It was Bianca, as an already married princely mistress, who, more than Isotta, represents the type of woman who became the mistress of an Italian Renaissance prince.

Pier Maria Rossi (1413-1482), Count of Berceto, was descended from the Rossi line of condottieri, who had traditionally served the Visconti dukes of Milan. In the fifteenth century, through military acquisitions and his support of Francesco Sforza as Duke of Milan from 1447 to 1450, Pier Maria managed to become the preeminent landholder in the area around Parma, controlling up to one fifth of the Parmense. He was dubbed “father of the homeland and the protector of the Parmense freedom.” Rossi celebrated his military gains and his mistress simultaneously, associating one with the other.

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Pier Maria, like Sigismondo, was already married when he became involved with his most well-known mistress. At the age of fifteen, in 1428, Pier Maria was wed to Antonia Torelli of Guastalla, who was the legitimate daughter of Count Guido of Montechiarugolo, another important landowner in the area around Parma. This marriage strengthened the Rossi alliance with the Visconti and increased their political power around Parma. The marriage of Antonia’s brother, Cristoforo, to a lady of the Este court increased Pier Maria’s influence, providing him with important ties to the ruling family of Ferrara. Though his marriage to Antonia was very important politically, it would not have prevented Pier Maria from entering into illicit relationships—just as with other Italian Renaissance princes.\(^{151}\)

Bianca, unlike Isotta, is an example of a mistress who was already married before she became involved with her prince. In Pier Maria’s will of January 15, 1464 Bianca is described as “filia donina Andree de Peregrinis de Cumis” (the daughter of Andrea de’ Pellegrini of Como). The Pellegrini family had originated in Lucca but relocated to Como. They then became a family of minor consequence at the Visconti court of Milan. Pier Maria’s final testament also describes Bianca as the wife of Melchiorre d’Arluno of Milan. Bianca’s marriage to Melchiorre would have benefited the Pellegrini family in cementing their status within Milan. He was an advisor to the Duke and so held an important position at the Milanese court. It is Melchiorre who is specified as the father of Bianca’s two children in Pier Maria’s last testament, though there is much ambiguity over the paternity of Bianca’s offspring. Pier Maria was an ally to Duke Filippo Maria Visconti and was employed as a condottiere during the wars between Milan and the Venice-Florence alliance from 1431 to 1444. It was most likely during that time that Pier Maria and Bianca first came into contact at the ducal court and initiated their affair.\(^ {152}\)

In both Pier Maria’s will of 1464 and its codicil of 1467, Bianca is described as “the consort of the respectable and generous nobleman Melchiorre d’Arluno, noble and citizen of


This flattering description of Melchiorre reveals that Bianca’s husband and her lover were most likely on friendly terms and that her husband in fact sanctioned her affair with the Count of Berceto, if not having urged her to enter into it himself. Carrying on affairs with married women was not an unusual occurrence for Italian Renaissance princes, and many husbands, instead of punishing their wives for or attempting to suppress such affairs, in fact facilitated them. Federico Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua, built the Palazzo del Te for his married mistress, Isabella Boschetti. Galeazzo Maria Sforza’s illegitimate daughter, Caterina Sforza, was the product of an affair with the wife, Lucrezia Landriani, of his “companion in pleasure.” Galeazzo Maria purchased his last official mistress, Lucia Marliani, from her husband and mother-in-law for 8,000 ducats, as well as other benefits, on the understanding that she would frequent only the duke’s bed and not her husband’s. In return for her fidelity to Galeazzo Maria, she received the honorable titles of Countess of Melzo and Gorgonzola. Pier Maria in fact acted as a witness to one of the grants Galeazzo Maria made to Lucia Marliani, solidifying his relationship with the Duke of Milan. Similar arrangements were made by other Italian Renaissance princes for their married mistresses, most often benefiting their husbands.154

The Italian scholar Pier Paolo Mendogni claims that Bianca deserted her family in order to pursue her affair with the Parmense lord, but the evidence does not support such a claim. Pier Maria appeared to also greatly value the connection his affair with Bianca created with her marital and natal families. Both the Pellegrini and Arluno are mentioned in his wills. When in 1476 Luchino d’Arluno was suffering from legal difficulties in Mantua, Pier Maria wrote to Ludovico Gonzaga in defense of “honorevole mio amico” (my honorable friend). According to Emilio Motta, Pier Maria’s illegitimate son by another mistress, Beltrando, was married to Melchiorre’s daughter Polissena in the late 1490s. But the only marriage generally


discussed by scholars on Beltrando’s life is that to Pietra Malaspina in 1448. This evidence alludes that Bianca’s husband would have been more than eager for her to take up with the influential Parmense lord, for his family benefited just as much as hers.\footnote{Pier Paolo Mendogni, “La camera d’oro e gli altri affreschi,” in Il castello di Torrechiara: storia, architettura, e dipinti, ed. Gianni Capelli and Pier Paolo Mendogni (Parma: Public Promo Service, 1994), 118; Pier Paolo Mendogni, Torrechiara: il castello e la badia benedettina (Parma: Public Promo Service, 2002), 30; Emilio Motta, “L’università dei pittori milanese nel 1481 con altri documenti d’arte del quattrocento,” Archivio storico lombardo 22 (1895): 420n4; McCall, “Visual Imagery and Historical Invisibility,” 274; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 160.}

Though Bianca had two children, Ottaviano and Francesca, they were not recognized as having been fathered by Pier Maria. Instead it has been claimed that they were the offspring of her legitimate husband. If her children had been Pier Maria’s, it seems he would have had no qualms about recognizing them as his own. He readily acknowledged two of his bastards by other mistresses, Beltrando and Ugolino. So why would he have hesitated to recognize Bianca’s children as his bastards if they were actually his?\footnote{McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 39.}

The mothers of Beltrando and Ugolino are anonymous and they may not have been married at the time of their affairs with Pier Maria, making him more likely to recognize their sons as his bastards. Gianni Capelli has suggested that while Ottaviano and Francesca are mentioned in Pier Maria’s will as the children of Bianca and Melchiorre, the suspicion that they were in fact Pier Maria’s children is justified. Evelyn Welch describes them as being Bianca’s children by Pier Maria but that they were recorded as Melchiorre’s offspring since Bianca was his official consort. Helen S. Ettlinger writes that while the two children were mentioned in Pier Maria’s will of 1463, she finds it “interesting” that they were given the surname of Bianca’s husband, hinting that she also considers them to have been Pier Maria’s offspring. Still, Giuseppa Z. Zanichelli appears justified in writing that Ottaviano and Francesca, while clearly Bianca’s children, may not have actually been Pier Maria’s. In the end all we can do is conjecture over the actual paternity of Bianca’s children.\footnote{McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 39; Gianni Capelli, “Vicende storiche e architettoniche,” in Il castello di Torrechiara: storia, architettura, e dipinti, ed. Gianni Capelli and Pier Paolo Mendogni (Parma: Public Promo Service, 1994), 40; Welch, “Painting the 15th-Century Palace,” 90; Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 779n48; Giuseppa Z. Zanichelli, I conti e il minio: codici miniati dei Rossi, 1325-1482 (Parma: Università di Parma, Istiuto di Storia dell’Arte, 1996), 67.}
While less is known about Bianca’s private life than Isotta’s, evidence of her relationship with Pier Maria still abounds in numerous artistic forms. Like Isotta, Bianca’s image was printed on commemorative medals by her princely lover. She was most blatantly appears in two fresco cycles, in which her affair with Pier Maria was very publicly memorialized. Bianca was also celebrated in poetry, though more subtly than Isotta. These multimedia campaigns were meant to advertise Bianca de’ Pellegrini to a wide audience as Pier Maria’s lady love, the patroness of his military conquests, and a link in both their families’ fealty to the rulers of Milan.\footnote{McCall, “Networks of Power,” 122.}

The earliest images of Bianca are in the form of commemorative medals dating from the mid-1450s. Four of the five medals struck by the Emilian artist Gianfrancesco Enzola of Parma for Pier Maria either alluded to or blatantly depicted Bianca. These medals portray her as playing a central role in the propaganda that promoted Pier Maria’s military and architectural programs. The imagery on these medals was also to be found in the fortresses Pier Maria was renovating at around the same time.\footnote{McCall, “Visual Imagery and Historical Invisibility,” 273; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 113; Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 214. For images of commemorative medals referencing and depicting Bianca see Hill, A Corpus of Italian Medals, 2:plate 45, no. 280 (1455 medal), no. 282 (obverse of the 1457 medal), plate 47, no. 297 (medal depicting Bianca as wandering pilgrim), no. 296 (medal depicting both Pier Maria and Bianca).}

On the first medal, dating to 1455, Pier Maria is portrayed in profile with the inscription “PETRVS MARIA DE RVBEIS B CETI COMES AC TVRISCIARE FONDATOR,” translated as “Pier Maria of Rossi, Count of Berceto and founder of Torrechiara.” Framing his face is inscribed the date 1455 in Roman numerals. The image of one of his fortresses, either Roccabianca or Torrechiara, is depicted on the reverse, surrounded by the inscription “IO FRANCISCI PARMENSIS OPUS,” indicating the author of the piece. A bird is perched atop the center of the castle, a moat of ducks surrounds it, and a radiant sun presides over the scene. Pilgrim’s staffs (bordoni) are positioned on either side of the castle and are hung with the traditional pilgrim’s wallet (borsetta). Rays burst forth from the sun above the castle, cascading downward, showering over the scene below. Much of the imagery on the reverse of this medal in fact alludes to Pier Maria’s mistress.\footnote{Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 214; Woods-Marsden, “Pictorial Legitimation,” 553; Haughey, “The Frescoes of the Camera di Griselda,” 4, 58; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 114, 138; Capelli, “Vicende storiche e
Bianca’s last name Pellegrini means pilgrim (pellegrina) and the staff with a hanging wallet was a symbol clearly associated with pilgrims. Plays on family names and artistic iconography went hand in hand in Renaissance Italy. Surnames were supposed to be meaningful, interpreted, alluded to, and punned on in art. The pilgrim staff thus connects Bianca with Pier Maria’s fortress, as well as with himself. The pilgrim was a symbol with many layers of meaning which become evident in the numerous ways Bianca is referred to and depicted as a pilgrim throughout Pier Maria’s artistic commissions. The pilgrim itself had great meaning for the Rossi family, a number of its members, many of whom were close to Pier Maria, having undertaken important pilgrimages. The illustrations of Bianca as a pilgrim, on commemorative medals and in frescos, are meant to have erotic, chivalric, religious, and historical connotations, referring both to her affair with Pier Maria and to the Rossi family history.

The image of a tower on the medal, while referring to perhaps Roccabianca or Torrechiara—two fortresses which were both integral in the celebration of Bianca—, may also refer to the Pellegrini emblem of a tower, linking Bianca to Pier Maria’s portrait bust on the obverse of other medals. While many scholars have theorized over what type of bird is perched atop the castle, most seem to believe it is an eagle (aquilotto). But Timothy McCall postulates that it is in fact a peregrine falcon (falco pellegrino), another emblem associated with Bianca’s surname and her depiction as a pilgrim. Ducks were considered the

architettoniche,” 31; Hill, A Corpus of Italian Medals, 1:70, no. 280, 2:plate 45.


162 Pier Maria’s ancestor, Donnino Rossi, in the late fourteenth century was a member of Parma’s Consorzio di San Giacomo di Galizia, which was committed to funding pilgrimages to Santiago di Compostella, Spain. Pier Maria’s father, Pietro Rossi, went on two pilgrimages: one to Jerusalem with Niccolò III d’Este in 1413 and another to Compostella around 1420. Pier Maria’s illegitimate brother, Rolando Rossi, was also a crusader. See McCall, “Networks of Power,” 137, 142-143.


favored prey of the peregrine falcon in medieval avian tradition and are portrayed in the moat
surrounding the fortress. Ducks were also an emblem of the Sforza, referring to the loyalty of
the Pellegrini and Rossi families to the rulers of Milan over whose emblem the peregrine
falcon is keeping watch.165

The subtle allusions to Pier Maria’s mistress soon become more blatant on the other
medals that were struck. On the second medal, dated to 1457, Bianca’s portrait in profile is
shown on the obverse, her hair done up under a veil. Her image is surrounded by the
inscription “DIVAE BLANCHINAE CVMANAE SIMVLACRVM MCCCCLVII,”
translated as “the figure of the divine Bianca of Como,” with the date the medal was struck in
Roman numerals. Here, as on Isotta’s medals, Bianca is being celebrated as worthy of
divinity. But unlike Isotta’s medals, on Bianca’s there is no need to interpret a “D” as either
Diva or Domina, for the word for “goddess” is inscribed in full. Beneath her portrait is a
symbol that some scholars have interpreted as a flaming cloud or torse (a twisted wreath
which was worn on helmets), symbols that help to identify her in the Camera di Griselda
fresco cycle in the fortress of Roccabianca. The reverse of the medal contains the same image
of the fortress as found on the previous medal. Once again the pilgrim’s staffs and wallets are
positioned beside the castle and the peregrine falcon is perched atop it. All of this imagery
eludes even further to Bianca. That the same reverse is found on medals depicting portraits of
both Pier Maria and Bianca would have helped to link them even more in the popular
imagination and commemorate their relationship.166

A third medal, perhaps also dating from 1457, uses both blatant and subtle symbolism
to celebrate Bianca. On the obverse of the medal a slightly different portrait bust of Bianca
from the previous medal is illustrated. Her hair is done up in a coif and it is apparent that she
is wearing a rich dress. Once again beneath her profile is the flaming cloud or torse. The
inscription surrounding Bianca’s image reads “D BLANCHINE R SIMVLACRVM,” most
likely an abbreviated version of the inscription on the previous medal. Once again the “D” in
this inscription is referring to the divine status of Pier Maria’s mistress, which is so explicitly

165 McCall, “Networks of Power,” 122-123, 125.
166 Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 214; Haughey, “The Frescoes of the Camera di Griselda,” 58; McCall,
declared on the previous medal. George Hill theorizes that the “R” stands for “Rubeae,” the Latin for Rossi, but this would mean that Bianca had taken Pier Maria’s name and that would have been highly unlikely since she was a married woman.

On the reverse of the medal Bianca is depicted in full as a wandering pilgrim, with a dog scurrying before her. She carries the symbols of the pilgrim: the staff with a wallet over her right shoulder and what is perhaps a purse held in her left hand. Above her is a sun showering down rays and beneath her is the flaming cloud or torse. She is framed by two fortresses in the background, which most likely represent castles belonging to Pier Maria. The inscription, “LIZADRA ET PELLEGRINA SOPRA TVTO” (beautiful pilgrim above all), encircles the travelling pilgrim. The words *sopra tuto* (above all) refer to Bianca as ranking above all other women in beauty. The adjective *lizadra* (*leggiadra*) can be translated as “beautiful, charming, and graceful.” The word *pellegrina*, if also taken as an adjective, instead of as the noun meaning “pilgrim,” was commonly translated in courtly poetry as “elegant, rare, and refined.” So an alternative translation of the medal’s inscription could be “beautiful and elegant above all.”

A fourth, undated medal contains both the image of Bianca’s portrait from the previous medal on one side and Pier Maria’s portrait from the first medal, fully linking the two lovers, just as did the medal with portraits of both Sigismondo and Isotta. The identities of the two subjects are confirmed by the inscriptions surrounding them. The image of Pier Maria is once again encircled by the inscription from the 1455 medal. Bianca’s portrait is bordered by the inscription “DIVE BLANCHINE R SIMVLACRVM CB.” The meanings of the initials are still unknown but Hill once again theorizes that the “R” stands for “Rubeae” (Rossi) and the “CB” for “Comitissae Berceti,” translated as “Countess of Berceto.” Still, Hill’s theories are highly unlikely since Bianca never took Pier Maria’s surname and she was never the Countess of Berceto.

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These medals both subtly and not so subtly heralded the connection between Pier Maria and Bianca far and wide. They depict Bianca as the patroness of Pier Maria’s and the Rossi family’s military conquests, through the images of the Rossi fortresses. Also, they allude to the loyalty of the Rossi and the Pellegrini to the Sforza rulers of Milan, through Milanese imagery. Like the medals of Isotta, Pier Maria would have widely circulated these medals, celebrating his mistress in a very public manner. The symbols on the medals help to identify the couple as the subjects of two fresco cycles within Pier Maria’s fortresses of Torrechiara and Roccabianca.

At the same time that Pier Maria was commissioning commemorative medals from Enzola, he was also renovating his twenty-seven castles and fortifications during the 1450s. In the two castles of Torrechiara and Roccabianca he had internal decorations painted which celebrate his affair with Bianca, disseminating her image in a very public manner. Within these fortresses he depicted his mistress in multivalent mediums which can be interpreted on numerous levels.170

In Pier Maria’s castle of Torrechiara, within the northeast tower, the two lovers were painted in frescos performing rituals of courtly love. This chamber is known as the Camera Peregrina Aurea (Golden Room of the Pilgrim), the name it was given in the fifteenth century, or as the Camera d’Oro (Room of Gold), as it is more popularly referred to.171 Pier Maria most likely commissioned the Cremonese artist Benedetto Bembo to decorate the Camera d’Oro after he had completed Torrechiara’s construction in 1460. The chamber is overflowing with multiple-medias celebrating Pier Maria and his mistress.172

The room’s walls are lined with a three meter high panel of gilded, red and blue terracotta tiles, depicting four alternating heraldic designs.173 One motif portrays two

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172 Most scholars support Benedetto Bembo as the artist responsible for the Camera d’Oro’s fresco cycle but a few have suggested that the artist may have actually been Benedetto’s brother, Bonifacio Bembo. Still the attribution of the frescos to Benedetto Bembo has not yet been seriously questioned. See Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 201, 291n23.
173 For images of the tile motifs see Franco Furoncoli, “Le pietre del cuore,” in Il castello di Torrechiara: storia, architettura, e dipinti, ed. Gianni Capelli and Pier Paolo Mendogni (Parma: Public Promo Service,
entwined hearts circled with three crowns and inscribed with the phrase “DIGNE ET IN ETERNVM,” translated as “nobly and eternally.” The heart was already a device employed by the Rossi. It was particularly associated with Pier Maria’s father, Pietro Rossi, celebrating the defeat of his traditional enemy, Ottobuono Terzi, whose heart was supposedly interred triumphantly in Pietro’s own tomb. Pier Maria altered the emblem’s form, adding a second heart and the phrase above, using the Rossi symbol to declare his love for Bianca and bind her to the military and political triumph of his family. The two hearts represent Pier Maria and Bianca’s love bound together “nobly and eternally.”

A second motif displays what appears to be the initials PMB interlaced together and bound by a scroll containing the words “NUNC ET SEMPER” (now and always), most likely referring to Pier Maria’s relationship with his mistress, as well as his rule over his subjects. Chad Coerver has interpreted the initials as standing for Pier Maria of Berceto, but other scholars have theorized that the “B” may actually stand for Bianca. On the other hand scholars have also claimed that the device does not actually contain three initials at all but just the letter “M” with a fluttering ribbon running across it. The “M” may stand for Pier Maria’s name or for the Virgin Mary, referring to the Count of Berceto’s devotion to the Queen of Heaven to whom the castle was dedicated. Whether or not this motif refers to Bianca, there are still an abundance of references to her throughout the rest of the chamber.

The third design on the tiles reveals a shield containing the image of a fortress—the same one which was chiseled on the first two medals mentioned above—which is flanked by pilgrim staffs, each hanging with the traditional wallet, and with a bird perched atop it. The

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The pilgrim staff, wallet, and falcon likely all refer to Bianca, once again through her last name, since they all were associated with pilgrims. These images are also references to Bianca since they are all found on the reverse of the 1457 medal, which contains her portrait on the obverse, and the fortress was an emblem of her family. Also, that this image of the fortress is found within Torrechiara may hint that it is that castle which is portrayed on the medals, and not Roccabianca. Lastly, the final motif on the tiles is another shield stamped with the image of a rampant lion, which was the personal coat-of-arms of the Rossi family.176

These motifs combine images that allude to both Pier Maria and Bianca, further linking them. They also depict emblems of both the Rossi and Pellegrini families, revealing the alliance Pier Maria and Bianca’s affair had created between these two families. They also continue to celebrate Bianca as the patroness of Pier Maria’s and the Rossi family’s military victories. If the initials of the second motif in fact are interpreted as the “M” of the Virgin Mary, this may allude to a heavenly blessing of Pier Maria and Bianca’s relationship, since it is included amongst other images that clearly allude to their relationship. All this becomes even more apparent in the frescos above the tiles.

In the four frescos on the vaults of the ceiling, a female pilgrim travels through a landscape illustrating scenes of country life. The figure, through comparisons with the medals of 1455 and 1457, has been identified as Bianca. As on the reverse of the 1457 medal, she wears the apparel common to pilgrims: a staff, a wallet, and also a wide-brimmed hat (petaso), either tied about her neck and resting on her back or hung on her staff. Her cloak (mantello) is decorated with a scallop shell and two crossed keys, the symbols of Saints James and Roch, the patron saints of pilgrimage.177

Bianca is not dressed like a common pilgrim but instead wears sumptuous gowns in order to display her beauty and Pier Maria’s wealth. Such extravagant dress alludes to the economic benefits Bianca received from her lover. Pinned to Bianca’s scarf is a motif similar to the one containing the phrase “Nunc et Semper” on the tiles below. This motif, as well as

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permeating the *Camera d’Oro*, was also to be found throughout Torrechiara and Roccabianca. The pilgrim Bianca is not traveling to worship at religious sites but instead at fourteen representations of castles and villages that were ruled over by her beloved. Each fief’s name is clearly inscribed beside it and they are arranged in accurate geographic order. That Bianca is travelling to worship at Pier Maria’s castles declares her as the patroness of his martial prowess, for it was through such military skill that he was able to attain many of the depicted castles.178

The similarities in iconography between the frescos on the ceiling of the *Camera d’Oro* and the reverse of the third medal also help to identify Bianca as the subject of the frescos in the *Camera d’Oro*. On both the medal and in the fresco cycles Bianca is shown as a wandering pilgrim, carrying the pilgrim’s symbols. In both mediums Bianca is also portrayed with a sun above her, showering down rays. She is framed by two fortresses in the background on the medal and she is similarly portrayed in the fresco cycle in the *Camera d’Oro* as a pilgrim wandering through a landscape littered with Pier Maria’s castles. The inscription, “LIZADRA ET PELLEGRINA SOPRA TVTO” (beautiful pilgrim above all), which encircles the travelling pilgrim on the third medal may simultaneously refer to Bianca’s position on the ceiling of the *Camera d’Oro*, as well as to her beauty as ranking above that of all other women. Unfortunately, since this medal’s date is unconfirmed, it is unknown whether or not it was cast before or after the chamber was decorated, making proving this presumption impossible.179

The frescos throughout the chamber abound with illustrations of Pier Maria’s territories captured through his military conquests. While such representations most likely seek to celebrate Pier Maria’s military prowess, that Bianca is also included in the frescos eludes to her as the patroness of her lover’s military successes, just as Isotta was depicted in poetry as the patroness of Sigismondo’s martial might. In this fresco cycle military and adulterous topography are fused in order to bind the expansion of the Rossi lands with the aristocratic practice of adultery.180

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To a modern audience it may seem scandalous that a prince would portray his mistress as the religious figure of a pilgrim but the symbol of the pilgrim in Renaissance iconography had erotic, chivalric, and religious connotations. The link between chivalry and religion was strong, in that crusades were considered to be armed pilgrimages. This interpretation was apparent in chivalric literature and philosophy. Saints were called Knights of Grace by Dominican preachers. The crusading saint, Francis of Assisi, referred to his followers as Knights of the Round Table. Pilgrimages, as well as having religious importance, also seemed to have facilitated chances for lovers to meet, with chivalrous and amorous associations. The Romance of the Rose is filled with erotic peregrine imagery. Niccolò III d’Este, whom Pier Maria’s father had accompanied, had numerous affairs while on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.181

The adulterous female pilgrim was a popular character in courtly literature in the later Middle Ages. In Giovanni Boccaccio’s Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta (1343-1345), the heroin disguises herself as a pilgrim in order to follow after her lover, Panfilo. The early fifteenth-century author of Les quinze joyes de mariage depicts a jealous husband who suspects that his wife is going on religious pilgrimages in order to commit adultery. Bianca in the frescos is playing the part of the pilgrim damsel in distress, a character that was also popular as the basis for jousts in the fifteenth century. Bianca’s pilgrimage of adulterous love through Pier Maria’s territories appears to be spiritually sanctioned with divine approval. The letters “YHS,” San Bernardino’s monogram of Christ, are inscribed within the sun at the vault’s apex. Simultaneously, Bianca’s body transmutes from representing moral indiscretion to the incarnation of and inspiration for virtue. So while Bianca is meant to appear to be worshiping at each of her beloved’s castles upon the chamber’s ceiling, she also appears to be going on pilgrimage in order to continue her affair with Pier Maria, searching him out at each of his residences. Such an illustration of a mistress would not have been seen as shocking to Pier Maria and Bianca’s contemporaries but an acceptable means of celebrating an illicit relationship.182

181 McCall, “Networks of Power,” 140-142.
182 Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 204; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 117. To see an image of San Bernardino’s monogram of Christ at the apex of the vaults of the Camera d’Oro see Furoncoli, “Le pietre del cuore,” 162.
Bianca and Pier Maria are both portrayed as idealized, larger than life figures in the four frescoed scenes painted on the lunettes of the Camera d'Oro. Each scene takes place within different pavilions, which display a combination of classical and Gothic styles. Putti do battle and play music around the pavilions and eight more of Pier Maria’s castles are represented in the backgrounds. This fresco cycle can be interpreted in a number of ways. On one level it depicts the chivalric ideals of the day. On another level it reveals common visual allegories of courtly love. It also serves as a historical portrayal of Pier Maria and Bianca’s relationship.183

The first fresco in the cycle, on the east lunette, “Cupid Striking the Lovers,” shows the initiation of the couple’s love. Bianca and Pier Maria are standing within a splendidly decorated and columned portico of classical design. In the background on the left is the fortress of Basilicanova and on the right is Torrechiara itself. The lovers within the pavilion are sumptuously attired and stand in profile, facing one another. A blind-folded, adolescent Amore (Cupid) is perched atop a column between them. He has already let loose his arrows upon the lovers, bursts of flame marking where his projectiles have struck them each in the breast. The hand gestures of the two lovers allude to their emotional states. Pier Maria, gazing at his beloved, points to the arrow embedded within his chest, revealing that he has been struck and consumed by love. One of Bianca’s hands is raised in defense, as though to ward off Cupid’s arrow, but her failure to deflect it causes her gaze to mirror that of Pier Maria’s. Cupid’s surprise attack excuses their illicit love as beyond Pier Maria and Bianca’s control. Though she has attempted to resist, just as Isotta’s father warns her to do in the Liber Isottaeus, the God of Love has declared that she must submit. Pier Maria and Bianca’s love is the will of the gods and beyond the couple’s ability to resist.184

On the south lunette, in “Presentation of the Sword,” the two lovers are located within a chapel-like structure decorated with gold statuettes of warriors and knights. On the left is the fortress of Neviano de’ Rossi and on the right is San Vitale Baganza. Pier Maria is


wearing a full set of armor, kneeling before Bianca, who is dressed in rich brocade and is accepting a sword from her beloved. This stance was a common representation of the medieval chivalric practice of initiation into knighthood. Just as a sword would be presented to a vassal, this ceremony could be reversed to convey respect or friendship towards a superior. This act of fealty in the Camera d’Oro represents Pier Maria as offering his amorous services to his lady, who has become his superior. Both the presentation of a sword from a vassal to a superior and vice versa were common in Arthurian literature, with ladies such as Guinevere and Isolte receiving a sword from their chosen knight errant, declaring them to be the inspiration for the knights’ military exploits. The presentation of the sword and Pier Maria’s armor suggest a chivalric preparation for battle. The giving over of the sword from Pier Maria to Bianca can also represent the practice of giving over one’s heart, which was a custom of courtly love.185

The west lunette, “Crowning with a Garland,” displays the reciprocal action which traditionally followed the presentation of the sword: the crowning of the knight with a garland by his lady. The scene is depicted within a loggia before a pavilion. The castle of Segalara is on the left of the pavilion and the fortress of Noceto is to the right. Pier Maria is now once again dressed in the courtly attire he originally wore in the first lunette. He is also holding a staff, perhaps a reference to Bianca the pilgrim. Bianca places a chaplet of laurel leaves on Pier Maria’s head. This presentation of a garland has numerous interpretations. It represents Bianca as formally accepting Pier Maria’s amorous services and shows that she returns his love. It can also represent military victory, celebrating Pier Maria’s acquisitions of the fortresses and his defense of the land. His compliance to this crowning also symbolizes his acceptance of the difficulties his illicit affair with Bianca will pose. The inscription of the words “in eternum” (in eternity) crossing a radiant heart and an angel in the tympanum of the pavilion further reinforce the third interpretation, suggesting that the lovers are helpless before the force of their eternal love.186

186 Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 207; Haughey, “The Frescoes of the Camera di Griselda,” 60-61; McCall,
In the south and west lunettes Pier Maria is alluding to Bianca as the patroness of his military successes. The presentation of Pier Maria’s sword to Bianca makes her the patroness of his military ventures. Romance literature combined the act of crowning with the knight’s capacity for valor. Crowning in the romance economy also served to bind the woman to the man. The man’s acts of valor were an exchangeable asset in return for sexual rights to the lady. The woman’s social value, and in turn her honor, was defined by just such an association with a valorous knight. Pier Maria is transferring his military might to Bianca through the practice of amorous vassalage.187

The final image on the north lunette, “Lovers Triumphant,” denotes the prestige shared by Pier Maria and Bianca. They are depicted facing the viewer, each inside one of two Gothic niches, separated by a doorway to the countryside in the background. This configuration is very similar to an illumination in the fourteenth-century Lombard manuscript *Tristan*, portraying Tristan and Isolte’s tomb. The structure memorializes the loyalty of Tristan, the knight, to Isolte, his queen, and her to him. In the background, to the right of Pier Maria, is revealed his castle of San Secondo. To the left of Bianca, also in the background, is Roccabianca, the castle which was supposedly named after her. Pier Maria was overseeing the renovation of both of these fortresses at the same time as he was renovating Torrechiara, making it only fitting that they should be depicted in the scene representing the triumph of his love for Bianca.188

In this final image Pier Maria is once more dressed in full armor, resting his sword on his right shoulder while gazing over at his lady, while she in turn stares back at him. Bianca is now dressed in a pure white gown, which she will wear upon her pilgrimage painted above, and holds a white cloth in her left hand. The color white, which was a play on Bianca’s given name (Bianca means “white”), was a symbol of purity and chastity, qualities which were prized in pilgrims and mistresses. She gazes back at Pier Maria as she points

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187 Coerver, “*Donna/Dono*,” 205-210, 213.
188 Coerver, “*Donna/Dono*,” 210-211, 292n43; Haughey, “The Frescoes of the *Camera di Griselda*,” 60; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 115. For an image of “Lovers Triumphant” on the north lunette see Greci, Madruzza, and Mulazzani, eds., Corti del rinascimento, 142, fig. 156.
strait up with her right hand to the crown floating above her head. This crown marks her as the queen of Pier Maria’s heart. The crown also alludes to the Rossi insignia on the tiles below the lunettes, hinting at the promise of a perpetual relationship. The white cloth suggests Pier Maria’s favor towards his lady love and the virtue of Bianca. In chivalric tradition a knight wore a white cloth until he had completed an honorable task. His lady would then remove it from his person, keeping it as a token. These symbols suggest that Pier Maria and Bianca had been wed, if not in reality than spiritually. Bianca in this fresco has now been completely transformed from an adulteress to a queen deserving of the warrior Pier Maria’s love.189

The numerous suns depicted within the frescos of the Camera d’Oro and on the medals referring to and portraying Bianca—like those engraved above the Malatesta elephant on a medal of Isotta and the pilasters of her tomb—served to legitimize Bianca and Pier Maria’s relationship. A sun appears at the pinnacle of the ceiling’s vault and is inscribed with San Bernardino’s monogram of Christ. Four suns illuminate Bianca the pilgrim’s journey with gold, gilded sparks raining down from them upon the landscape through which she travels. A similar sun is also painted in the scene of the “Lovers Triumphant,” further adding to the attributes Bianca has attained in this fresco: the white pilgrimage dress and the crown. The crown and sun appear together throughout the chamber with the motto “DIGNE ET IN ETERNVM.” This emblem was also depicted on the façades of many of Pier Maria’s castles, openly publicizing his love for Bianca.190

The sun sought to convey both an erotic and spiritual form of Bianca and Pier Maria’s affections. The rays of the suns may represent the fire of the lovers’ passion cascading down upon them, a theme which was greatly favored by both Dante and Petrarch. They may also represent the blessings of heaven being rained down, legitimizing the couple’s affair. Also the sun located at the pinnacle of the ceiling may elude to the relationships both Pier Maria’s and Bianca’s families had with the Visconti and Sforza dynasties, who were their overlords. This sun is in fact very similar to an insignia employed by the Visconti and Sforza: the razza.

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This symbol, positioned in a key location within the chamber, can be interpreted as expressing divine wisdom, as well as loyalty to the Visconti and Sforza rulers of Milan. San Bernardino’s monogram may also have been meant to express piety, in that Pier Maria was the patron of a Bernardine church built near the fortress of Roccabianca. In all, these suns expressed love, loyalty, and piety, linking Bianca and Pier Maria’s affair with religious and political devotion.191

The representations of cherubs and putti throughout the frescos serve much the same purpose as they do in Isotta’s cappella degli Angeli. By the mid-fifteenth century they had become common features in Italian tombs and chapels. In the Camera d’Oro the heads of cherubs are depicted with wings and frame the lunettes, carrying garlands. Like the suns in the vaults, each head is emitting solar sparks. Cherubs carrying garlands served as a celebration of both nature and of heaven. Charles Dempsey has dubbed such representations as “a concept of life extending from heaven to earth,” connecting the earthly sphere with the heavenly one.192

The putti in the foreground of each of the lunettes’ frescos, framing the lovers, are shown in musical or martial poses. Eight of them are making music with a variety of instruments. Two putti, located to the left of “Cupid Striking the Lovers,” blow into a pair of horns. On the right of “Presentation of the Sword,” one putto strums a lute and another plays a dulcimer. In “Crowning with a Garland,” to the left of the lovers, one putto bows a viol while a monkey toys with his genitals and another putto plays a psaltery with plectrum. To the right of the lovers, two more putti are playing an organ. In “Lovers Triumphant,” two putti to the left of the main scene strum a pair of harps. The rest of the putti in the lunettes are depicted in martial poses, battling with various types of birds. The putti on the right on the east lunette are wrestling a peacock. On the south lunette, to the left, putti are battling a swan. Putti to the right of the pavilion on the north lunette are wrestling a stork.193

193 Campbell, “Pier Maria Rossi’s Treasure,” 72; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 317, 320. For images of putti in the Camera d’Oro see Furoncoli, “Le pietre del cuore,” 164 (putti playing harps in “Lovers Triumphant” on the north lunette and putti wrestling a peacock in “Cupid Striking the Lovers” on the east lunette), 166-167 (putti playing an organ in “Crowning with a Garland” on the west lunette).
These putti represent both the erotic and warlike potential of the scenes they frame. They are *spiritelli d’amore* (spirits of love), relatives of Cupid, who has struck the lovers in the first scene and is the source of their love. The martial putti allude to Bianca and Pier Maria’s love as the inspiration for his martial triumphs. The music-making putti, when combined with the cherub-heads above, represent the celestial choir legitimizing the lovers’ affair through the blessings of heaven, much as the cherubs of Isotta’s chapel were meant to legitimized her and Sigismondo’s relationship as heaven blessed.

The pictorial admission of Bianca’s adulterous status within the frescos of the *Camera d’Oro* served to remove her symbolically from the Renaissance patriarchal system in which virginal women were, in theory if not in reality, exchanged by their male relatives. In fact the idealized Bianca, being inserted into the sexual economy of courtly love, renounced the aristocratic system of female exchange by male guardians. The extent of the ideal woman’s passivity and chastity was meant to reflect the ethical integrity and strength of the male guardian and the ruling elite as a whole. The ideal Bianca, in giving herself to Pier Maria, has transformed herself from a product in a coercive system into a luxury commodity and is consumed by her beloved instead of acquired through commerce. Ideally through the performances depicted in the lunettes, Bianca and Pier Maria have obtained a degree of individual dominion in regard to the state’s avaricious logic. They have been placed beyond the aristocratic sphere of exchange which would commonly have defined their social status. Bianca’s visual pilgrimage through Pier Maria’s lands represents the creation of her new social status as the Count of Berceto’s *prima favorita* and the patroness of his skill as a warrior.

Yet the reality of the situation was far different than how it was meant to be portrayed in the *Camera d’Oro*’s frescos. While it might be romantic to imagine Bianca as a woman who has broken from the confines of a patriarchal society, following her heart instead, she had in reality far from escaped the male-controlled system of exchange. She had originally taken the conventional path and was given by her father in marriage to a Milanese courtier. Though the initiation of her affair with Pier Maria may seem far less conventional, she was

194 Campbell, “Pier Maria Rossi’s Treasure,” 72-73.
still most likely encouraged by her husband and male members of her family to enter into the relationship, which would be beneficial to them, as well as to her. Had she attempted to make such a move on her own and without patriarchal approval, her husband could have denounced her as an adulteress, and he and her family could have deprived her of financial and social support. She might also, like the noblewomen mentioned in the previous chapter, have been murdered by a vengeful husband for bringing shame upon his honor by committing adultery.196

For a prince and a noble lady to enter into an affair without the sanction of the woman’s family could have meant trouble for the prince as well as the lady. One of the three assassins of Duke Galeazzo Maria of Milan, Carlo Visconti, was motivated in part by the duke’s forced seduction of his sister. Pietro Rasiglia revenged himself on the prince of Foligno for having an affair with his wife by throwing her off one of the towers of his castle and assassinating two of the prince’s brothers, leading to the outbreak of more violence.197 Also, had Pier Maria chosen, he could have put Bianca aside when their affair cooled, though he would most likely have ensured that she was well supported, with grants of land. Still, her affair could have failed to have a happily ever after, with her lover growing tired of her in the end. As a woman who was already married, Bianca would have found herself being placed once again under the control of her husband. Bianca in reality was still very much subject to the patriarchal system of exchange, just a less common but still acceptable sphere of that system.

As well as Torrechiara, Pier Maria’s renovation of the fortress of Roccabianca further added to the celebrations his mistress. According to Pier Maria’s posthumous biographer, Jacopo Caviceo, Roccabianca was named after a Milanese woman with whom Pier Maria was “very much in love.”198 Just as Sigismondo named one of the towers of one of his castles, the torrione Isotteo, after his mistress, Pier Maria had most likely named an entire fortress, Roccabianca, in his mistress’ honor; though its name can also be translated literally

as “white rock,” referring to its whitewashed façade. The names of castles could be multivalent and meaningful. The name Roccabianca could have been meant to express both the pure white exterior of Pier Maria’s latest military construction and at the same time the “purity” of his widely advertised mistress. Naming this fortress after his lady love was a very public and symbolic act, which was perhaps propagated even more through the depiction of Roccabianca on the medals referring to and portraying Bianca.199

The castle of Roccabianca had originally belonged to the Pallavicini family, another influential dynastic house within the Parmense. The fortress had been presented to Pier Maria’s father, Pietro Rossi, in 1425 by Duke Filippo Maria Visconti after it was ruined by a fire. Pier Maria began rebuilding the fortress around 1450 and it was completed by 1463. Inside the fortress Pier Maria commissioned another cycle of frescos celebrating his relationship with Bianca. The frescos were detached from Roccabianca in 1898, were rediscovered in 1940 in the Galleria Sabauda in Turin, and were relocated to the Castello Sforzesco in Milan where they currently reside. They include a ceiling decorated with astrological signs and walls covered with a mural cycle displaying the “Tale of Griselda.” Both the ceiling and walls are painted in chiaroscuro a terretta (light-dark green) or terra verde (green earth) with small details in reddish-brown.200

The fresco cycle in the Camera di Griselda was originally positioned in the southwest tower of Roccabianca, on the first-floor, in a square planned room, which was most likely used as a bedchamber. The frescos decorated all four walls and the vaulted ceiling, which was painted with eighty-seven celestial and astrological figures. There are a total of forty-one panels in all. Scholars have been unable to reach a consensus over who the artist of the frescos was or even the artistic school to which they belong.201

The figures in the frescos can be identified as representing Pier Maria and Bianca in a number of ways. First, their figures are very similar to the idealized images of Pier Maria and

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Bianca struck on the commemorative medals and painted on the frescos in the Camera d'Oro. Secondly, if examined carefully, certain images displayed on the ceiling of the Camera di Griselda hint at their identities.202

The astrological figures on the ceiling of the chamber begin to confirm that the characters depicted on the walls below are meant to represent Pier Maria and Bianca. The figures on the ceiling form an unconventional map of the heavens. It has been hypothesized that the constellations’ arrangement corresponds to the astrological configuration of heavenly bodies on a day of great import to Pier Maria or to both him and Bianca. But there are oddities within the celestial makeup of the ceiling that do not fit in with that theory but instead seem to refer to Bianca and Pier Maria.203

A cloudlike image, the label of which was most likely destroyed even before the frescos were transferred from their original location, can be associated with Bianca. It has been interpreted as representing stylized flames. Beneath the portrait of Bianca on two of her commemorative medals is the device that has been described by scholars as “flames”, “a kind of flaming torse,” and a “radiant torse.” The torse on the third medal is more diffused and cloudlike, helping to identify the symbol on the ceiling as related to clouds with the flames representing either thunder or lightening. It might even represent the sun breaking through clouds. Despite the repetition of the symbol on the vault of the Camera di Griselda and the commemorative medals containing Bianca’s portraits, there is no way to know for sure what the image represents and how it relates to Bianca’s personal or familial iconography. It has also been hypothesized that the cloudlike image signifies the “force of love,” representing rain clouds that hurl down Cupid’s arrows, just as the suns do on the fresco cycle of the Camera d’Oro and on one of Bianca’s medals. Such an interpretation would support the image of Pier Maria and Bianca’s love for each other as being beyond their control and the will of the gods.204

Also, the symbol is very similar to a personal device used by Gian Galeazzo Visconti. It might have been an earlier form or a simpler variation of what became the more familiar Visconti-Sforza flaming turtledove perched on a cloud with the motto “A bon droyt.” The simpler cloudlike image is even found among other Visconti symbols on the decorative boarders of the Visconti Hours. It is also located on a sculpted heraldic capital on the southwest side of the Rocchetta of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan. Massimiliano Sforza included just such an image as one of his personal emblems. Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Francesco Maria Sforza, and Cardinal Ascanio Sforza also all used an altered form of the cloudlike symbol with a rainbow. The Pellegrini, with their close proximity to the ruling house of Milan, may have adopted this symbol to express their loyalty to the Milanese ducal family. The inclusion of this symbol on the ceiling of the Camera di Griselda may have served to express Bianca’s and Pier Maria’s families’ allegiance to the dukes of Milan, though the exact meaning still remains uncertain.205

The image of two constellations of Leo on the celestial vault may also help to identify Pier Maria and Bianca as the subjects of the fresco cycle below. While the first lion can be interpreted astrologically, the second would seem redundant. This second lion is overlaid with a sun (Sol), an image previously referenced to Bianca and Pier Maria. The rampant lion was a heraldic symbol of the Rossi family. Though the sun can be interpreted as representing the its astrological dominance over the zodiac sign of Leo, it also could allude back to images painted in the Camera d'Oro and imprinted on the commemorative medals. Images of the sun abound throughout the Camera d'Oro’s fresco cycle, with the stucco sun over the apex of the ceiling’s vault and the five other suns showering their rays across the Rossi lands. The four medals cast by Enzola, which so visually bound Pier Maria with Bianca, also contain suns, apparently playing a role in the family arms of the Pellegrini.206

Directly above the Leo/Sol is a crowned heart bursting forth with fiery rays. This image is very reminiscent of the motif of the two intertwined hearts surrounded by three crowns with the phrase “DIGNE ET IN ETERNVM,” repeated numerous times on the tiles

of the Camera d’Oro. Also the image of the corona meridionalis (marchional crown) on the Camera di Griselda’s ceiling, located directly above the first scene of the Griselda cycle, on the northeast quadrant of the vault, links Pier Maria and Bianca even more to the figures below. This crown could also be connected to the motif of the three crowns encircling two intertwined hearts in the Camera d’Oro. It can additionally be associated with the crown floating above Bianca’s head in the fresco of “Lover’s Triumphant.” Also, the depiction of the lars as a two storied fortress on the Camera di Griselda’s ceiling may allude to the Pellegrini emblem of the tower, which may also have been represented on many of the commemorative medals alluding to and portraying Bianca. All these links seem to support the hypothesis that the subtle manipulation of the astrology on the ceiling of the Camera di Griselda was meant to accommodate the iconography of Pier Maria and Bianca in order to recall their personal content in the Griselda fresco cycle.207

The story of Griselda can be found in the works of Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarca (or Petrarch). Boccaccio included it as a novella within his masterpiece, Decameron.208 Petrarch, after reading his contemporary’s version, rewrote it in Latin in a letter to Boccaccio, titled “De insigni obedientia et fide uxoria”209. Along with Dante, these men are considered the three greatest literary figures of the Italian Renaissance. Though the works of these three Florentines were published in the fourteenth century, by the fifteenth they had increased in popularity throughout Italy and helped to promote the Tuscan dialect as the premier literary language of Italy.210

Though the references to Bianca in the fresco cycle of Roccabianca are not as explicit as those in Torrechiara, they still celebrate Pier Maria and Bianca’s relationship with chivalric conventions and ideals of courtly love which would have been easily apparent to


209 Sadlon, “The Story of Griselda.”

their contemporaries. The story of Griselda is about the Marquis of Saluzzo, Gualtieri, who marries beneath his class, taking a beautiful peasant woman, Griselda, as his wife. In order to prove to himself and his subjects that he has made a good choice in marrying Griselda, he tests the limits of his wife’s virtue, putting her through many heartbreaking trials, such as taking her children away from her and letting her believe he has had them killed, rejecting her and sending her back to her father, and then having Griselda herself make the preparations for his new marriage to a much younger woman. Griselda accepts all these trials with great virtue, remaining ever faithful to her cruel husband and doing everything he asks of her without complaint, despite her own distress. Gualtieri’s new perspective bride turns out to actually be his and Griselda’s daughter. Before the marriage can take place, he reveals the truth to Griselda and announces that he will in fact have no other woman as his wife but her. He reuniters her with their son and daughter and they all live together as a happy family from that time on.

Though this tale may seem very cruel to modern readers and highly unusual for a bedchamber, the theme of virtue overcoming all odds was in fact common in Medieval and Renaissance literature. Chivalric romances often depicted characters being tested in order to reveal their inner values. Nor was the story of Griselda originally conceived of by Boccaccio. It had previously existed in oral and written traditions and was very popular during the early Renaissance. The story was most often painted on cassoni (wedding chests) as a theme representing good marriage. Another fresco cycle of the Griselda story was supposedly painted in Pavia around the end of the fourteenth century but was destroyed.

The fresco cycle on the walls of the Camera di Griselda consists of twenty-four scenes on two levels, moving in a clockwise direction and originating on the upper level. There are six scenes on the east and north walls. The west wall only has four scenes because

211 Haughey, “The Frescoes of the Camera di Griselda,” 5, 64.
of its window. On the south wall, which has a window alcove, there are five scenes on the actual wall and three within the window recess.\textsuperscript{214}

Pier Maria as Gualtieri is portrayed in the frescos enjoying the hunt, a typical image projecting courtly pleasures. It is while he is hunting that Gualtieri’s courtiers persuade him to take a wife. These frescos clearly display a dilemma faced by all noblemen, having to decide between the pleasures and freedom symbolized by the hunt and the responsibility of making a good marriage that would bring both the ruler and his people honor. In this case Gualtieri takes a beautiful peasant girl as his bride, choosing carnal pleasure over his own honor as a responsible ruler. Pier Maria in entering into a relationship with Bianca was satisfying his own erotic passions, though he continued to maintain his honor through his marriage to Antonia Torelli. To prove that Gualtieri has not chosen poorly though, he puts his wife’s virtue to the test. In the end she reveals to everyone her inner nobility, earning a joyous reunion with her husband and children.\textsuperscript{215}

Depicting Bianca as Griselda in the fresco cycle would have helped Pier Maria justify his relationship with her. Like Griselda, Bianca’s status was lower than Pier Maria’s, though she was still of the nobility and not a peasant like Griselda. Also her relationship with Pier Maria was not considered the norm (though not so very unusual), being that it was illicit, and it was also considered unusual for a nobleman to marry a peasant woman. Through the fresco cycle Pier Maria was justifying his illicit relationship with Bianca. Bianca, like Griselda, the frescos claim, is possessed of an inner nobility and virtue that is not reflective of her lower class and her involvement in an adulterous affair, making her worthy of Pier Maria’s love.

The combination of the frescos on the walls and the ceiling would have conveyed to a humanist audience an association between the divine realm and earthly life. The trials of Griselda can be interpreted as a battle of heavenly virtue over earthly passion. The conclusion of the story conveys the moral that the pursuit of virtue leads to heavenly paradise where virtue and passion become reconciled with one another. In this way Pier Maria’s relationship with Bianca ceases to be merely a carnal affair but a love blessed by heaven.\textsuperscript{216}

\textsuperscript{214} Haughey, “The Frescoes of the \textit{Camera di Griselda},” 15.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 64-65.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 66.
That Bianca’s identity is only hinted at within the two fresco cycles in the Camera d'Oro and the Camera di Griselda was not uncommon. In the tradition of courtly love the lady’s name was to remain a secret and the humanistic conventions of courtly love emphasized the beloved as a spiritual figure. In this way Bianca was only “named” cryptically and never openly. The beloved was meant to be depicted in frescos in an idealized manner, leaving little evidence of her true identity.\(^{217}\)

Roccabianca’s fresco cycle, along with that of Torrechiara’s, legitimates and celebrates Pier Maria and Bianca’s affair. They combine numerous forms of love—divine, courtly, and carnal. They reflect a celebration of both the Rossi and Pellegrini families, as well as the two families’ loyalty to their Milanese overlords. The multivalent layers of these fresco cycles, though they seem at times difficult for modern viewers to grasp, would have been easily apparent to Pier Maria and Bianca’s contemporaries.

Pier Maria’s celebration of his mistress was also displayed through literature, as well as metallurgy and fresco. Written in 1463, perhaps in celebration of the completion of the Camera d’Oro, Gerardo Rustici of Piacenza presented Pier Maria with a panegyric poem on New Year’s Day of 1464, titled Cantilena Pro Potenti D. Petro Maria Rubeo Berceti Comite Magnifico et Noceti Domino.\(^{218}\) It lauds Pier Maria, his allies, his wife, his offspring, and the newly renovated castle of Torrechiara. The title and the epilogue of the poem are written in Latin while the rest of it is composed in the vernacular Italian, evidence of the transition which was taking place at that time from the preferred use of Latin to Italian within the literary sphere. A majority of the poem celebrates Pier Maria’s licit relationships with his wife and their children. It is during Rustici’s flattering description of Pier Maria’s newly renovated fortress, Torrechiara, that he makes references to Bianca.\(^{219}\)

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\(^{217}\) Haughey, “The Frescoes of the Camera di Griselda,” 68.


In Rustici’s description of the frescos of the Camera d’Oro, he refers to Bianca as a pilgrim (“le quatre pelegrine poste altecto”\textsuperscript{220}), playing on her surname, and a damisela (damsel). In describing the images on the Camera d’Oro’s west lunette, he makes specific mention of the depiction of his patron, “To who is familiar the damsel / Who with him now talks / Now turns to place the crown upon him”,\textsuperscript{221} referring to the scene of Bianca placing the laurel chaplet on Pier Maria’s head. Rustici also expresses the importance of the frescos to his patron while describing the images on the chamber’s ceiling:

I do not know what one would say
Of the four pilgrims placed above.
After one regards her appearance
With her staff and scrip,
I believe that no one
Could imagine the cost. \textsuperscript{222}

Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti has conjectured that, like Sigismondo to Isotta, Pier Maria most likely himself composed poetry in praise of Bianca. He would also have made use of the multiple meanings that can be gleaned from her given name, Bianca, and her surname, Pellegrini. Unfortunately none of these poems have survived.\textsuperscript{223}

Despite the visual illustrations of his love for Bianca, also like Sigismondo to Isotta, Pier Maria was not faithful to her. Of course he was already married when they met and he was expected to produce legitimate heirs, which he did in abundance. His wife Antonia gave birth to six sons and two daughters. But there is evidence of him having affairs with other women besides Bianca.\textsuperscript{224}

\textsuperscript{220} Quoted in Rustici, “Cantilena.”

\textsuperscript{221} In Italian: “A cui e familiare la damisela, / Chi seco or favela, / Or verde par gli pona la corona.” Quoted in Rustici, “Cantilena,” 64; Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 214, 293n51.

\textsuperscript{222} In Italian: “E non so quel mi dica / Di le quatre pelegrine poste altecto. / Chi doppo se risguarda quil aspecto / Con il bordone e sue borsete brune, / E credo niune / Potirereb imachinar quil chi costo.” Quoted in Rustici, “Cantilena,” 65; Coerver, “Donna/Dono,” 214, 293n52; Woods-Marsden, “Pictorial Legitimation,” 555.


\textsuperscript{224} Haughey, “The Frescoes of the Camera di Griselda,” 12.
There are numerous myths and legends describing Pier Maria as involved in illicit affairs. Bianca has been confused with a French lady, a Spanish princess, and another mistress named Chiara. Later sources have suggested that the fortress Torrechiara was named for the latter woman. The earliest of such sources, Francesco Stella’s *Geneologia de’ Rossi parmigiani, marchesi di San Secondo*, dates to the seventeenth century and insists that Pier Maria built Torrechiara for his beloved Chiara. In the eighteenth century it was also said that Pier Maria had raped the daughter of a king or emperor. This legend may have arisen by an accidental fusion of Pier Maria with that of Giulio Rossi, his great-grandson, who, trying to force Maddalena Sanseverino, a Neapolitan noblewoman, to marry him so he could assume control over her lands, raped her. But more likely this story is a product of the effectiveness of Pier Maria’s propaganda promoting himself as a virile ruler.225

There was no shortage of illegitimate offspring within the Rossi family, many of whom were given strategic roles to play. In the fourteenth century, numerous illegitimate sons of the Rossi family and been relied on for political and military support and even served as podestà for their absent legitimate brothers. Pietro Rossi’s illegitimate brother, Leonardo, helped fight in his dynasty’s feud against Ottobuono Terzi. Pier Maria’s illegitimate cousin, Marsilio (or Basilio), the son of his uncle Giacomo the Bishop, served as abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Santa Maria della Neve near Torrechiara and supported his cousin. Marsilio also may have illegitimately fathered Ugolino Rossi, who became a politically powerful canon of the Cathedral of Parma.226

Pier Maria depended greatly on the support of his illegitimate brother, Rolando, throughout his career. Rolando joined the Order of the Knights of Saint John and was well-known for fighting against the Turks on the island of Rhodes. Upon his return from crusade he fought against Rossi enemies many times and was an important political player in Parma. Rolando had his own illegitimate son, Giannantonio,227 fight beside him during the riots in

227 The abundance of illegitimate sons by members of the Rossi family who were clergy is not surprising. Numerous Italian Renaissance families had members, legitimate and illegitimate, who took holy vows—often without a true calling—but still produced illegitimate offspring without social repercussions. Giovanni Battista Cybo (future Pope Innocent VIII) had an illegitimate son and daughter, who made advantageous marriages when their father became pope. While he was a cardinal, Rodrigo Borgia (future Pope Alexander VI), fathered
Parma in early 1477, following the assassination of the Rossi ally, Galeazzo Maria Sforza. Upon his death in 1481 at Noceto, Rolando was interred with much magnificence beside his father, Pietro, at Sant’Antonio Abate. He was most likely given such an honor in return for his years of loyal service to his legitimate brother.\(^{228}\)

Pier Maria himself had an abundance of children of various degrees of legitimacy which later caused feuding within the dynasty over Pier Maria’s lands. While, unlike Sigismondo, he did leave behind him legitimate sons, he also left illegitimate sons and a disinherited son. This complicated situation, which was also to be found amongst the Este offspring of Ferrara, could commonly lead to dynastic feuding. While a prince depended on producing an abundance of children, both legitimate and illegitimate, in order to ensure there would be heirs to inherit, such an abundance of children could also cause more chaos than smooth successions. Some scholars have even exaggerated the situation, claiming that Pier Maria in fact denounced all of his legitimate heirs to the benefit of Bianca’s own offspring, but such was not actually the case.\(^{229}\)

Pier Maria had two illegitimate sons, Beltrando and Ugolino, born eighteen years apart, who were not Bianca’s offspring. Since the identities of their mothers are unknown—though Letizia Arcangeli has theorized that Beltrando’s mother could have been one “Simona d’infirma condizione” (Simona of an infirm condition)—it can be assumed that their families were far less noble than Bianca’s; they may even have been peasant women. Pier Maria may also have had an illegitimate daughter, Elisabetta, who resided in Milan. Her existence is evidenced when in 1479 she and her father came to some sort of agreement over her avoiding certain unnamed individuals. Pier Maria, it has recently been discovered, produced an additional illegitimate child, Cesare Maria Rossi, when he was in his late sixties. Cesare was born in November 1480 to an anonymous woman, after Bianca had passed away. In all, Pier

\(^{228}\) McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 35; McCall, “Networks of Power,” 143, 182.

Maria had at least eight sons, legitimate and illegitimate, and two were even disinherited, which caused dynastic feuding amongst a later generation of Rossi.\textsuperscript{230}

In the case of Pier Maria, the legitimacy of some of his offspring did not ensure that they would inherit. Documents of the mid-1460s describe the crimes that two of his legitimate sons, Giovanni and Giacomo, committed and the legal proceedings Pier Maria carried out against them in order to have his sons disinherited. The testimonies of Giovanni and Giacomo reveal their fervent desire to commit patricide. After his sons were legally disinherited through the law, Pier Maria then went on to take the next logical step, changing his will and leaving them bereft of an inheritance.\textsuperscript{231}

When given by his father the Sforza \textit{condotta},\textsuperscript{232} Giacomo had within only a few years come close to destroying the Sforza-Rossi alliance. He had abandoned his forces in 1460 after the defeat at San Flaviano and he complained openly about his commander, Alessandro Sforza, while threatening Francesco Sforza. Pier Maria pleaded with the Duke of Milan to merely revoke Giacomo’s \textit{condotta}, instead of punishing him physically, and Francesco granted his request. Pier Maria had Giacomo imprisoned in Parma’s episcopal palace. When Giovanni and others attempted to free Giacomo by force, Pier Maria then had him transferred to the more impregnable \textit{cittadella}.\textsuperscript{233}

Upon his release, Giacomo went on to threaten the Sforza-Rossi alliance again. He arranged the assassination of another Sforza \textit{condottiere} and close friend of Francesco Sforza, Pierpaolo Cattabriga, with his brother Giovanni’s and Ginevra Terzi’s support. Ginevra was Pierpaolo’s wife and had been involved in an illicit affair with Giacomo. After Giacomo and Giovanni fled, their father attempted to discover the whereabouts of his “\textit{indignissimi figlioli}” (most unworthy sons). When Pier Maria failed to locate them, he was called before the Duke of Milan to account for his sons’ “\textit{nefando, atroce et scelerato}” (nefarious, atrocious, and wicked) crimes.\textsuperscript{234}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{230} McCall, “Visual Imagery and Historical Invisibility,” 275-276; McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 36, 39, 51n56, 52n66.
  \item \textsuperscript{231} McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 36-37.
  \item \textsuperscript{232} A military contract to serve the Sforza as a \textit{condottiere}.
  \item \textsuperscript{233} McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 37.
  \item \textsuperscript{234} McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 37.
\end{itemize}
Giacomo’s choice of Ginevra Terzi as his mistress was not random. She was in fact the granddaughter of Ottobuono Terzi, who had been the archenemy of Pier Maria’s father. Ottobuono’s head had been chopped off and was then presented to Pietro Rossi, who put it on display at Felino castle. Ottobuono’s heart, according to legend, was buried in Pietro’s chapel in Sant’Antonio Abate in Parma. Giacomo’s choice of a mistress from the ranks of the Rossi’s ancient enemies served further to alienate father and son. It was not only unacceptable that Giacomo had taken a mistress whose family was the traditional enemy of the Rossi. He had also sullied the honor of a woman of the upper nobility. While princes could take mistresses from the classes beneath them, even from amongst the lower nobility, without social repercussions, for a prince to enter into an affair with a married woman of the upper nobility meant a great scandal and was highly frowned upon. Society also expected that a prince obtain the permission of the lady’s family before initiating an affair. With the murder of his mistress’ husband, Giacomo had disgraced himself in his father’s and society’s eyes. Giacomo and Giovanni, adding further insult to injury, allied with other Rossi enemies, the San Vitale and Este, against the Rossi and Sforza. Pier Maria had every reason to disinherit Giacomo and Giovanni for their disloyal actions. He did not do so just to please his mistress as a few scholars have intimated.235

Giacomo was eventually pardoned and allowed to return to Parma in 1467. He made peace with Antonio Cattabriga, Pierpaolo’s brother, and received a new condotta from the Sforza. In the early 1480s Giacomo fought in support of his father. Giovanni, though, was never reconciled with Pier Maria and his other brothers. In 1478 Pier Maria ordered Giovanni imprisoned after he failed to heed the warning advising him not to come any closer to Parma than Piacenza. Following Pier Maria’s death in 1482, Giovanni attempted to take Felino castle from his brother Guido but failed and was imprisoned for a brief time. He was repudiated by his Rossi relatives and stripped of his wife, Angela Scotti’s, dowry, reducing him to poverty. He tried on numerous occasions to gain back the good graces of the Sforza, defending his late father as “humano et pio” (humane and pious) and not “di natura di tigri o di serpenti” (by nature like a tiger or serpent). That Pier Maria reinvested Giacomo with his inheritance shows that he was in no way opposed to welcoming his errant sons back with

open arms if they were suitably penitent. Bianca in no way seems to have tried to prevent such an action.\textsuperscript{236}

The case of Pier Maria and his sons reveals that being disinherited could exact an even greater stigma than illegitimacy. Pier Maria referred to Giovanni, after he had been disinherited, as a “\textit{bastardo}” in a letter to Ludovico Gonzaga, negating him of any legitimacy in his father’s eyes.\textsuperscript{237} Disinheritance was a form of illegitimacy, so being born legitimate did not ensure inheritance or perpetual legitimacy, whereas illegitimate children could be made legitimate and so gain a greater inheritance. No matter a child’s status at birth, there was the potential for mobility up or down. A mistress could always hope to benefit if her children were raised in status by her princely lover.

Two of Pier Maria’s illegitimate sons, Beltrando and Ugolino, fared far better than his disinherited sons and Bianca’s children. They played important roles in ecclesiastical networks and political conflicts for the benefit of the Rossi. Beltrando, the elder of the two, was legitimized by imperial, instead of papal, authority. In Pier Maria’s final codicil to his will, added on May 1, 1480, Beltrando was given Berceto and other southern castles which had once been promised to his deceased legitimate half-brother, Bernardo. The following day his legitimation was confirmed by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. During the Rossi’s war against Ludovico Maria Sforza from 1480 to 1482, Beltrando received ever increasing political authority. The mountainous south was particularly vulnerable to attack during those years and Pier Maria required a competent and trustworthy supporter there. He chose to depend on the support of his illegitimate son. Beltrando appears to have been particularly clever in that he was quick to make peace with Ludovico Maria Sforza upon Pier Maria’s death in September 1482. By making peace Beltrando was the most successful of the Rossi brothers of his generation in maintaining his Rossi territories.\textsuperscript{238}

He proved not just to be skilled in secular politics but in ecclesiastical affairs as well. He continued his father’s efforts to consolidate the resources and benefices of many ecclesiastical institutions into Berceto’s parish (\textit{pieve}) church of San Moderanno. Berceto is

\textsuperscript{236} McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 38.

\textsuperscript{237} McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 38.

\textsuperscript{238} McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 40-41, 52n75.
strategically located along the Via Francigena at the Cisa pass, which was a much traveled route through the Apennines. By consolidating this area in the southern Rossi territories, Pier Maria and Beltrando hoped to strengthen Rossi control over passage through the Apennines and the southern territories. San Moderanno was the site of a fervent cult frequented by pilgrims. Pier Maria had begun to rebuild and outfit the Romanesque church and Beltrando ordered the transfer of relics and the building of a new altar in order to continue his father’s work. Beltrando commissioned a walnut armadio (closet) and a bell to be forged by Jacopo da Reggio in 1497. He also most likely bought the Muranese glass chalice which was discovered in 1971 in a tomb close to the main altar. It was interred with two bodies, one of which may be Beltrando, himself. The decoration of San Moderanno’s capitals with the Rossi lions and inscriptions visually proclaim the patronage of both Pier Maria and Beltrando. The bell Beltrando commissioned was depicted with the imago pietatis (image of piety), an iconography that was dear to Pier Maria, visually joining even more father and legitimatized son.239

The younger illegitimate son, Ugolino, was primed towards a minor ecclesiastical career from birth, but upon his legitimate half-brother Bernardo’s death, he became the primary religious player in the family. While it was not uncommon for an illegitimate son to take holy vows, the role of the family’s chief clerical figure was commonly assigned to a younger legitimate son. It has often been claimed that Pier Maria had the Badia of Santa Maria della Neve constructed near Torrechiara in order to provide Ugolino with a benefice, but he actually had grander designs in mind for his illegitimate son. Ugolino was nominated abbot of San Giovanni Evangelista, Parma’s most important monastery. As abbot, Ugolino viciously defended his family. He had the nose of a Correggio partisan sliced off during the riots in Parma following Galeazzo Maria Sforza’s assassination. He fled Parma, after escaping from his monastery’s burning campanile, along with his illegitimate uncle, Rolando, and other Rossi adherents. Though he was never able to return to Parma, he remained San Giovanni’s abbot in absentia, receiving a large pension for another six years. He also eventually governed San Zeno in Verona and Santo Spirito in Ravenna. He clearly marked

239 McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 41-42.
his presence as a member of the Rossi family by having the Rossi emblems of the heart, medlar, and lion chiseled on the portico of Santo Spirito.240

Pier Maria’s legitimate sons, those which were not disinherited, also fared very well, like their illegitimate half-brothers, and their inheritance did not suffer in order to benefit Bianca’s children. Beltrando was born in the mid-1430s and was geared towards a religious life. Though at first he had rebelled against the vocation that his father chose for him, he eventually accepted a religious career and the benefits it would bring to the Rossi family. He received numerous benefices while still in his teens, earned a degree in canon law, and was elected bishop of Cremona in 1458. He consecrated the Duchess of Milan, Bianca Maria Visconti’s, votive church of San Sigismondo, helping to strengthen the Visconti-Sforza alliance, as well as the bonds between the Sforza and Rossi. Bernardo was clearly being groomed to become a cardinal and he advanced quickly under the auspices of Pope Paul II. It was Bernardo’s premature death in 1467 that robbed him of the chance to ascend to the College of Cardinals and inherit a large part of the Rossi estate, not Pier Maria’s neglect or his fictional predilection for Bianca’s offspring.241

Modern scholars, having claimed that Pier Maria’s legitimate children were disinherited or neglected to the benefit of Bianca’s offspring, equated those actions with Pier Maria’s preference for Bianca over his own wife, whom he supposedly neglected. Ferdinando Bernini, writing in the early twentieth century, wrote that Pier Maria favored Bianca’s children over his own legitimate progeny. More recently Syson claimed that Pier Maria disinherited “his children by his wife in favour of his mistress and her offspring.” Evelyn Welch insisted that Pier Maria “disinherited his legitimate sons…in favour [sic] of Bianchina and her children.”242 But the reality of the situation was far different. As seen above Pier Maria’s illegitimate sons not by Bianca had benefited greatly by their father, and his legitimate son, Bernardo’s, career had been far from lacking in success due to his father’s

240 McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 40.
auspices. Also, Pier Maria’s youngest legitimate son, Guido, was also not neglected by his father.

Guido was wed to Ambrogina Borromeo of Milan, and was promised in Pier Maria’s first will to inherit a large part of his father’s territories. Guido’s beauty was celebrated by Rustici as likened to that of the legendary Ganymede and Narcissus:243

But more I cannot keep silent about the noble Guido,
I am pleased, I am very grateful, with his benign laughter,
Who seems like Narcissus,

... Oh from golden eagle, raptor to Ganimede....244

He served as a condottiere under both Francesco and Galeazzo Maria Sforza. When Pier Maria rebelled against Ludovico Maria Sforza in the 1480s, Guido stood faithfully by him. They were both declared to be rebels in Milan and were painted in effigy being hanged side by side by the foot. He went into exile in Venice and served as a general, rescuing the Venetian army in 1487 from a total rout at Rovereto. Upon his death in 1490 he was given a magnificent state funeral.245

Whether legitimate, disinherited, or illegitimate, many of Pier Maria’s sons laid claim to his estate. In the third generation, there was much feuding over Pier Maria’s legacy. One of his grandsons, Troilo Rossi, who was descended from Giovanni, his disinherited son, fought over Pier Maria’s lands against Bernardo and Filippo Maria Rossi, who were descended from Guido, his legitimate son. In that generation the variety in the legitimate status of Pier Maria’s offspring produced negative effects but such was in no way Bianca’s fault.246

Some scholars have hypothesized that, like Isotta and Sigismondo, Pier Maria and Bianca were secretly married after Antonia Torelli’s death in 1468. But such an event would have been impossible, considering that Melchiorre outlived both his wife and her lover. The

243 McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 40.
244 In Italian: “Ma più non posso tacer quil nobil guid / Lieto, gratioso, con il benigno riso, / Chi par narciso, / … / O da quila aquila rapto a ganime...” Quoted in Rustici, “Cantilena,” 63.
245 McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 40.
246 McCall, “Pier Maria’s Legacy,” 34, 42.
date of Bianca’s death is unknown but she had most likely passed away by May 1479, as had her son and daughter. Pier Maria died in September 1482. In a register of Milan’s deceased centenarians, Melchiorre’s name does not appear until 1486, disproving the claim that Bianca had in the end married her prince.247

Though two of Pier Maria’s legitimate sons had been disinherited, not all of his estate was to go to his illegitimate offspring or to Bianca and her children. Instead much of it was willed to his other legitimate sons, who had remained loyal to their father. Bernardo was to receive Roccaprebalza, Corniana, Castrignano, Beduzzo, Pugnetolo, Roccaferrara, and Bosco di Corniglio. Pier Maria left joint control of San Secondo, Corona, Neviano dei Rossi, San Andrea oltre Taro, and Roccalanzona to Bernardo and Guido jointly. Guido was also left Felino, Seglara, Noceto, Neviano, Carona, Sant’Andrea, Roccalanzon, Cardone, and Berceto. Pier Maria’s legitimate daughters, Leonara and Donella, were also left dowries, so that they could marry. Clearly Pier Maria’s legitimate and un-disinherited children’s inheritances did not suffer due to his relationship with Bianca.248

In his will Pier Maria did make concessions for some of his illegitimate offspring, promising Beltrando and Ugolino allowances of 100 gold ducats in his will of 1464. Also, he willed Bianca and her son Ottaviano much of the properties he had obtained as a condottiere. He left them the Rossi possessions in Milan, Cremona, and Parma; the castles of Torrechiara, Basilicanova, and Rivalta; and the villages of Arzenoldo and Fontanelle di Pizzo. He also left a large dowry of 1,500 gold ducats to Bianca’s daughter. But the dowry was not to be paid to her directly by Pier Maria. Instead it was to come from her brother’s inheritance, which also funded the annual masses to be said at Torrechiara for the souls of both Pier Maria and Bianca. In 1467, in an attempt to prevent his wife and disinherited sons from challenging his bequests to Bianca, Pier Maria gave his mistress outright control of Roccabianca and its surrounding territory.249

While these benefices were generous, they were not unusual. Pier Maria was simply following the pattern of gift giving and the economy of favors for mistresses that were common and even expected in the courtly societies of Renaissance Italy. Unlike Sigismondo’s will, which was an attempt to leave Isotta in control of his state, Pier Maria’s last testament was more inclined towards granting Bianca the rights and gifts which were commonly expected to be left to a mistress and her family.250

Bianca was also more the norm than Isotta in that she had little overall political power. It was Antonia Torelli, not Bianca, who ruled in Pier Maria’s absence, as Italian Renaissance consorts were expected to do. Her marriage to Pier Maria was essential in maintaining his influence over the region. If he had rejected, ignored, or mistreated Antonia, her family would have retaliated in her defense, as well as depriving Pier Maria of their support. While Pier Maria did benefit from his relationship with the Pellegrini family, through their connections to the court of Milan, he would have risked the political stability of his own influence within the Parmense if he had alienated Antonia and her family.251

Even while Pier Maria celebrated Bianca Pellegrini in metallurgy, fresco, and literature, his wife remained the greater force within Parma. Bianca’s family, both natal and marital, most likely benefited from her affair but Pier Maria depended far too much on the support of Antonia’s family to risk offending them by mistreating his legitimate wife. Despite the fact that he planned to leave Bianca and her son generous properties and estates upon his death, it was Antonia’s legitimate sons, those who weren’t disinherited, who would have received the greater inheritance from their father through his last testament. Bianca, more than Isotta, represents the princely mistress of the Italian Renaissance, whose children a prince could choose whether or not to recognize; who would be left some wealth and estates as recompense for her lost chastity; and who could be celebrated in art and literature without exercising any political power.

CHAPTER 4

MISTRESSES OF THE ESTE OF FERRARA: WOMEN OF VARIOUS STANDINGS AND THEIR CHILDREN’S PLACE IN THE LINE OF SUCCESSION

The Este of Ferrara were unique amongst the noble families of not just Italy, but of all of Europe, in that for almost a hundred and fifty years, from 1352 to 1471, illegitimate sons inherited the state, sometimes even over legitimate heirs. While many of the Este married in order to form important alliances, others failed to wed at all or married the women they had been carrying on illicit affairs with in order to legitimize their offspring. It was not until near the end of the fifteenth century that they began to favor legitimate heirs over illegitimate ones, but even then, like most Italian Renaissance princes, they continued to carry on illicit affairs and illegitimate branches of the family still made claims to the state. While many Este rulers took mistresses of noble status, they also had illegitimate offspring with women whose names are lost to us, most likely because they were commoners and/or participated in only brief, casual affairs with their princes. More than anything else it seems to have been the rank of the illegitimate children’s mothers that helped define their place in the Este succession.

While each of the previous chapters has focused mainly on one specific mistress, only briefly mentioning other mistresses, the abundance of illicit affairs carried out by the many Este princes of Ferrara makes it difficult to focus on just one woman. Instead this chapter will reveal what is known about each of them. Also, while the previous chapters mostly analyzed the works of art and literature which reveal so much about princely mistresses, this chapter will focus more on analyzing the place of their children in the Este line of inheritance, but does not completely reject what can be learned from literary, artistic, and

historical sources. Lastly, this chapter will begin at the end of the thirteenth century, delving into the sexual activities of the medieval Este rulers and then proceed up through the Italian Renaissance and into the sixteenth century. The argument supported here requires an examination of the Este that begins within the late medieval period.

In the second half of the thirteenth century, many Italian communes, in opposition to Roman civil law, had begun to pass statutes allowing illegitimate children to inherit, explaining how in the absence of legitimate sons, illegitimate Este were able to inherit. Infant mortality was high and though men married and produced legitimate children, there was no guarantee that any or all of them would survive to adulthood. The increase of famine during what historians have termed “the Little Ice Age” and the outbreak of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century led to a greater reliance on such statutes. The plague continued to strike Europe once a generation through the following century, making the survival of children even more precarious and ensuring that illegitimates could be converted into heirs in the absence of legitimate offspring. But many canonists quickly set about condemning such statutes as encouraging men to sin. Bartolo da Sassoferrato, Baldo degli Ubaldi, and Antonio Roselli (1386-1466) argued that illegitimate children had the right to inherit just enough to provide them with support. They rejected these statues, though they did concede that illegitimates could be legitimized by the *princeps* (prince) alone, referring to the Holy Roman Emperor. Roselli recognized that it was the privilege of the *princeps* to legitimize bastard children on a case-by-case basis and so provide them with a place in the line of succession. Thus, according to these canonists, a man could legitimize his bastards through sanctioning by his overlord, whether the pope or the Holy Roman Emperor.\(^{253}\)

The ever increasing rate of child mortality explains why the Este system of inheritance described below was able to function within a structure that had become more fluid due to the continuous outbreaks of plague and famine. This high mortality rate also explains why it became increasingly more acceptable for princes to take mistresses, ensuring that they would have a plethora of heirs, even if all their legitimate sons died or their wife failed to produce any. Viewed in this light, the women who gave birth to bastards were performing for their princes an important service for which they were compensated. It was

\(^{253}\) Kuehn, “A Late Medieval Conflict of Laws,” 251-254.
not until the sixteenth century with the outbreak of the sexually transmitted disease syphilis and the Counter-Reformation’s attempts to more clearly define marriage and inheritance that the moral code within Italy became more rigid and there were fewer chances for mistresses and bastards to move upward socially.

In his will of 1292, Obizzo II d’Este (ca. 1247-1293), the first formally elected Marquis of Ferrara and Modena, wrote that should any of his descendants fail to produce legitimate male heirs, the surviving or eldest legitimate daughter should inherit. But due to preconceptions based on gender, the Este rulers who came after him chose to prefer illegitimate sons over legitimate daughters. Men eligible to succeed through women—whether the husbands or sons of daughters—were viewed as a threat, increasing the number of contenders for the throne and creating more competition for inheritances. Also, since such men were descended from foreign houses, they were viewed as less likely to continue and respect the traditional practices of the house if they inherited. The daughter was also viewed as being more loyal to the foreign house of her husband or son, while a bastard, though illegitimate, was much more a member of the familia of the marquisate. Though the father of the house usually determined the status of illegitimate sons, deciding whether to recognize them or legitimize them, the mother also had some influence. In legal theory a noblewoman who participated in illicit sex was to be stripped of her rank and so had none to pass on to her children. In reality though, her station did make a difference and if her lover was influential and powerful enough, she did not suffered from a lack of status as punishment for her extramarital activities, as evidenced by the previously examined mistresses in this work. While children of women of lowly status were commonly barred from the succession, the standing of noblewomen helped determine the place of their children in the order of inheritance.254

What is most remarkable about the statement in Obizzo II’s will, barring illegitimate sons from succeeding, is that he himself was the illegitimately-born son of Rinaldo d’Este by an unknown woman, supposedly a Sicilian washerwoman. Rinaldo had died while an

imperial hostage in Naples to the Emperor Frederick II, leaving only his illegitimate son as heir to Ferrara. In the absence of any legitimate heirs or illegitimate sons born of women of a higher status, Obizzo’s grandfather, Azzo VII (died 1264), had no choice but to legitimize him in 1252, and Obizzo became Marquis of Ferrara following his grandfather’s death, Lord of Modena in 1288, and Lord of Reggio in 1290.255

On closer inspection, though, Obizzo’s own self-loathing can clarify why he attempted to prevent illegitimates from succeeding to the throne of Ferrara after him. In the late thirteenth century, the Parmense historian Salimbene de Adam, who was a Franciscan friar, wrote that Obizzo’s jesters made him feel ashamed that he had been born a bastard of a common mother, and he was so humiliated by his illegitimate status that he had his mother drowned.256 In the early fourteenth century, the Paduan chronicler, Da Nono, reported that it was secretly rumored Obizzo was in fact the product of an incestuous liaison between his grandfather Azzo VII and his sister Constantia.257 Salimbene also recorded a similar story of incest, adding that Obizzo had known his own sisters and sisters-in-law carnally.258 Yet such stories are highly unlikely to have been true.259 Still, Obizzo himself did have a number of illegitimate sons. It was rumored by Salimbene that he had avidly seduced both the daughters


257 Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,”

258 In Latin: “Aliqui dixerunt istum Opiçonem filium fuisse Açonis marchionis Hestensis…erat domine Beatricis…temporis…nos…Quod si…fuit sibi pater…illi…Hestensi. Et tamen prefuit…Notandum presertim…Malaspina…Constantia tribus vicibus maritata. … Item diffamatus fuit quod proprias sorores cognoverit nec non et sororem uxoris.” Adam, Cronica.

259 Just as with rumors of lords murdering their wives, stories of incest were not uncommon in Renaissance Italy as a means to slander an enemy’s reputation. Pope Alexander VI was rumored to have had an incestuous relationship with his daughter, Lucrezia Borgia, who was also rumored to have had another incestuous affair with her brother, Cesare. Yet not all such rumors were false. Apparently the Lord of Perugia, Gian Paolo Baglioni, publically received ambassadors while he was lying in bed with his sister. See Bradford, Lucrezia Borgia, 18.
and wives of Ferrarese nobles and non-nobles. But Obizzo appointed his three legitimate sons by his first wife, Iacobina de’ Fieschi,—Azzo, Aldobrandino, and Francesco—as co-heirs in his will, practicing the traditional Este form of fraternal succession.

It was Azzo VIII (died 1308), though, who dominated the marquisate and patrimony after Obizzo’s death, becoming Marquis of Ferrara and Lord of Modena and Reggio. Since his younger brothers were still minors upon their father’s death, Azzo probably took advantage of their young age in order to seize control. Upon Azzo’s second marriage to the daughter of King Charles II of Anjou, Beatrice, in 1305, he agreed to institute primogeniture, where only the eldest son could inherit. The marriage contract stated that

Likewise it was agreed that the first son born from the said lord marquis and the lady Beatrice would succeed the said marquis by then to the marquisate and the principal dominion, excluding other sons following what is written by law and by the tradition of the house of the said marquis, also it is said thus that if the first son born dies, the next eldest should succeed and so on in the succession, however if all the males die, the first born daughter would succeed to the said marquis.

Once again it was being stipulated that upon the extinction of the male legitimate line, a legitimate daughter could inherit over illegitimate sons.

Yet Azzo died without a legitimate heir, male or female, so he had designated his legitimately-born grandson, Folco, by his eldest illegitimate son, Fresco, to succeed him.

Azzo made it conditional that Fresco would receive none of the inheritance, stipulating that

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260 In Latin: “Item dictum fuit de eo quod filias et uxorres tam nobilium quam ignobilium de Feraria constupraret.” Adam, Cronica.


262 Da Nono claimed that when Obizzo was on his deathbed, he planned to alter the succession, dividing his lands between his three sons. Azzo would rule Ferrara, Aldobrandino would rule Modena, and Francesco would rule Reggio. But according to Da Nono before Obizzo could make his will, Azzo strangled him so that he could inherit all three territories. It became widely believed that Azzo had in fact strangled his father and many versions of this story were circulated. See Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 46n8.

263 In Latin: “Item concordatum est quod primogenitus nasciturus ex dictis domino marchione et domina Beatrice succedat marchioni iam dicto in marchionatu et principali dominio, exclusis aliis secundum quod est de jure scripto et de consuetudine domus dicti marchionis, etiam dicitur ita quod primogenito deficiente succedat post eum sequens maior et sic deinceps deficientibus autem masculis succedat marchioni praefato filia primogenita.” Quoted in Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 47, 47n9.
only legitimately-born heirs could inherit, while excluding their illegitimate predecessors. Azzo had even attempted to strengthen his grandson’s claim to the throne by christening him with a name traditionally born by past Este lords—a practice that his descendants also made use of. But even so, following Azzo’s death, Fresco quickly seized control away from his son, producing a false document of election and declaring himself Marquis of Ferrara. He had most likely moved with the assistance of his illegitimate uncles, whom Azzo had generously provided for in his will; evidence of the important political roles illegitimate sons could play in support of their family members. But Obizzo II’s other two legitimate sons were not sitting idly by, and they quickly rose up to oppose Fresco’s rule. It was Aldobrandino II’s sons, Rinaldo II (ca. 1289-1335), Obizzo III (1293-1352), and Niccolò I (died 1344), who eventually took back the marquisate of Ferrara, ruling jointly with Francesco’s son, Bertoldo (died 1343). In 1336 Obizzo and Niccolò reconquered Modena, which had been lost during the struggle with Fresco, along with Reggio.264

Rinaldo II, Marquis of Ferrara and Lord of Modena, had only one legitimate child with his wife Lucrezia Barbiano: a daughter named Beatrice. Despite the stipulations by his predecessors that legitimate females could inherit in the absence of legitimate male heirs, Rinaldo’s daughter was barred from the succession, leaving him with no legitimate heirs. He did have four illegitimate children by his official mistress, Orsolina Macaruffi: three sons and one daughter. Two of his illegitimate sons took holy vows, effectively removing them from the succession. Aldobrandino (1325-1381) became Bishop of Adria, Modena, and Ferrara, and Obizzo was made vicar of Ferrara. Azzo (ca. 1332-1371), though not forced to enter the church, was barred from inheriting the marquisate of Ferrara, serving instead as podestà of Modena. Rinaldo and Orsolina’s illegitimate daughter, Giocoma, was married off to Zambrosino Beccadelli, but Rinaldo’s legitimate daughter made a far more prestigious marriage to Giacomo of Savoy, the Prince of Piedmont. By having most of his illegitimate sons enter the church, Rinaldo clearly had no intention of allowing them to inherit upon his death. Instead he continued the practice of fraternal succession and sole leadership of Ferrara

went to his next brother, Obizzo III (died 1352). This is perhaps because Rinaldo’s mistress, Orsolina, was not of a high enough status to make her children contenders for the marquisate of Ferrara. Even so, their father saw that they were well provided for with careers in the church and in politics.\(^{265}\)

Obizzo III, Marquis of Ferrara, Rovigo, and Modena, was the last of the three sons of Aldobrandino to survive and had to deal with the conundrum of who would inherit the marquisate following his death. Obizzo, like his predecessors, had produced no legitimate male heirs. In order to ensure that Ferrara would continue to be ruled by the Este, he married his official mistress, Lippa degli’ Ariosto of Bologna. But instead of marrying her immediately after the death of his legitimate wife, he waited until Lippa was on her deathbed in order to legitimize their eleven children and provide their sons with a place in the line of inheritance.\(^{266}\)

Obizzo had first come into contact with Lippa in the city of Bologna, when he was in exile from Ferrara, and they had become romantically involved. Upon his return from exile, she followed him to Ferrara and became his official mistress. Ludovico Ariosto, in his masterpiece _Orlando Furioso_, published in Venice in 1565, listing celebrated wives, refers to her as “la bella Lippa da Bologna” (the beautiful Lippa of Bologna), including her amongst other illustrious consorts and personages.\(^{267}\) She was well-known for her beauty and the historian Lodovico Antonio Muratori, writing in 1740, referred to her cognomen as “la Bella” (the Beautiful).\(^{268}\) Despite her illicit relations with the Marquis of Ferrara, her image was cleansed and continued to be so long after her death.\(^{269}\)

Lippa did not scandalously flee from her family’s clutches in order to leave Bologna and travel after her lover to Ferrara. Instead, like Isotta and Bianca, she had her family’s support in entering into and continuing an affair with her prince. Her two brothers, Bonifacio


\(^{266}\) Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 782, 786; Bestor, “Marriage and Succession in the House of Este,” 54.

\(^{267}\) Lodovico Ariosto, _Orlando Furioso_ (Venice: Vicenzo Valgrisi, 1565), 13.73.

\(^{268}\) Lodovico Antonio Muratori, _Delle antichità Estensi continuazione, o sia parte seconda_ (Modena: Stamperia Ducale, 1740), 118.

and Francesco, relocated to the court of Ferrara with her, along with their cousin, Niccolò. Her two brothers ascended to great heights within the court of Ferrara, benefiting from their sister’s relationship with Obizzo, and they became counselors to Obizzo’s successors, their nephews. Francesco became a sometime captain of Modena and received a large inheritance of land. Bonifacio received an inherited estate as well, though a slightly smaller one. Niccolò served as podestà of Modena and Reggio several times and Giudice dei Savi (Judge of the Elders, one of Ferrara’s most important councils) from 1418 to 1421, while receiving a smaller inheritance of land than those of his cousins. The Ariosti became a great and influential noble family in Ferrara and were highly involved in the city’s politics. Niccolò’s branch of the family produced the much lauded Renaissance poet Ludovico Ariosto, who celebrated Lippa in his masterpiece.270

Like Sigismondo and Pier Maria, Obizzo was also not faithful to his official mistress, since he had at least one other child, Giovanni (1324-1388/89), by an anonymous woman. Giovanni later served as governor of Frignano. Obizzo, also like Sigismondo and Pier Maria, had a legitimate wife, Giacomina (or Giacoma) Pepuli. Both Lippa and Giacomina would have provided Obizzo with important ties to the city of Bologna, since Giacomina was the daughter of a lord of Bologna and Lippa was a member of one of its noble families.271 Four of his and Lippa’s sons and three of their daughters were born when Giacomina was still alive. Another three sons and one daughter were born after her death in 1341.272

In order to strengthen his illegitimate sons’ claims to Ferrara, Obizzo gave them names traditionally born by previous Este rulers. But the existence of other legitimate descendants from the dynastic lines of Obizzo’s relatives threatened his own illegitimate sons’ claims to the marquisate. There was the legitimate son, Rinaldo, of Obizzo’s youngest brother Niccolò I, and the legitimate son, Francesco, of his cousin Bertoldo. Obizzo sought

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272 Rinaldo, Aldobrandino, Niccolò, Azzo, Alda, Beatrice, and Alisia were born before Giacomina’s death and Falco, Ugo, Costanza, and Alberto were born after. See Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 50-51, 51n13. For portraits of Obizzo III, Lippa, and their sons see Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 446, fig. 3.
papal recognition in order to legitimize his and Lippa’s offspring and give them priority in the order of inheritance over the legitimately-born members of his family.273

Muratori, writing during the reign of Duke Francesco III of Modena, listed Obizzo and Lippa’s many children:

There was born the Marquis Aldrovandino [Aldobrandino] with the other earlier mentioned brothers Niccolò, Folco, Ugo, and Alberto out of the marriage of Lippa de gli Ariosti Bolognese, …, who in addition to these also gave birth to Rinaldo, and Azzo who predeceased Obizzo their father, and Alda, Beatrice, Alisia, and Costanza. 274

Because Obizzo and Lippa’s children were born before their marriage and either before or after Obizzo’s legitimate wife’s death, they held different illegitimate statuses in the eyes of the church and law. The seven children born before Giacomina’s death were viewed as the product of an adulterous union and so were considered spurii, born of coitus that was damned in the eyes of both divine and moral law. Such children fell into two categories: vulgo quaesiti (born of unknown fathers) and ex damnato coitu (born of incest or adultery). Obizzo’s children by Lippa fell into the latter category. Within civil law they were not even considered to be sons or daughters of the familia. They were barred from inheriting or holding offices unless they were legitimized by princely decree, which would have been denied them if legitimate children had also existed.275

While the children born following Giacomina’s death were also viewed as illegitimate, their station was superior to that of their elder siblings. The children born during Obizzo’s marriage were considered bastards, while those born after were considered naturales (natural children): the offspring of a man and woman who both had the option of marrying one another and so were not committing adultery. Though in the eyes of the law naturales had limited inheritance rights, jurists did usually acknowledge their right to bear

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the family name and coat of arms. Also, through the marriage of their parents, they could be legitimimized and allowed to attain rights of inheritance equal to those of legitimate children. Yet jurists did recognize both spurii and naturales as members of the house by virtue of shared blood and so they were viewed as entitled to some form of alimentary support. In reality what mattered amongst the upper classes was not the degree of illegitimacy but paternal recognition.276

In the 1340s, Obizzo, in the absence of any legitimately-born heirs, was eager to have all his children by Lippa recognized as equally legitimate in order to prevent dynastic feuding upon his death. A few years after Giacomina’s demise Obizzo requested that Pope Clement VI legitimize his spurii. He maintained that he wanted to marry Lippa but he feared that in doing so he would elevate the status of his naturales over that of the spurii and create feuding within the family over the inheritance. Clement agreed to legitimize the spurii, as well as the naturales, if Obizzo married Lippa first. Even so, Obizzo continued to delay his marriage to his mistress. He only married her over a year later as she lay dying in 1347; six months after their last child had been born. Following Lippa’s death, Obizzo was able to prove that his marriage to her was valid in the bishop’s court and all of his children received equal legitimation from Clement VI. In 1351 Obizzo sought a renewal of the papal vicariate of Ferrara and effectively lobbied Clement to include all his legitimized sons. The pope also agreed that upon Obizzo’s death, his eldest son would inherit the vicariate, and after the death of his eldest son, the next eldest would inherit, and so on and so forth, continuing the traditional practice of fraternal succession. In 1354 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV took Obizzo’s legitimized sons under his official protection and granted them the right to jointly inherit Modena and Rovigo. The decrees by the pope and emperor allowed Obizzo to bar legitimate members of the family—such as Niccolò I’s son, Rinaldo, and Bertoldo’s son, Francesco—from the line of succession.277

It can only be conjectured whether or not Obizzo truly desired to make Lippa his wife because he loved her. He had kept her as his official mistress for many years and she bore him an abundance of offspring. Though Obizzo claimed that he did want to wed Lippa, he put off marrying her until she was on her deathbed. But he probably did so for important dynastic reasons. That Lippa was still capable of bearing children—since their last child was born six months before her death—is what most likely prevented him from making an honest woman of her. If he had married Lippa and then they had had children after the marriage was official, those offspring, as legitimate products of a legal union, would have taken precedence in the order of inheritance over their illegitimately-born children, even though the *naturales* also would have been legitimized by their parents’ marriage. This could have caused rivalries amongst their offspring, which Obizzo wished to prevent. While he may have truly been fond of Lippa, for political reasons he chose to put off marrying her for as long as possible. Still, when he did marry her, it was at a very public ceremony, replete with a dowry from the dying bride.²⁷⁸

The *Cronica vetus*, a primary source used by court officials for the history of Ferrara and the Este in the fourteenth century, recorded under the date November 27, 1347:

> The noble lady Lippa degli’ Ariosti of Bologna died, wife of the magnificent and illustrious lord, lord Marquis Obizzo, etc., whom he married at the end of her life at the admonition of the lord Pope Clement VI, from which lady the lord Marquis had procreated eleven children, namely seven boys and four girls etc., and she was honorably buried in the place of the Brothers Minor [Franciscans] of Ferrara, as was fitting etc.” ²⁷⁹

Through her death Lippa became more respectable than she had been in life. She had at last become the wife of her longtime lover and her children were legitimized. Also, as mentioned in the *Cronica vetus* above, she was interred honorably in the Franciscan monastery of

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²⁷⁹ In Latin: “Obiit nobilis domina Lippa de Ariostis de Bononia, uxor magnifici et illustrius domini domini marchionis Obiçoni, etc., quam desponsavit ad ultimum mortis de conscientia domini pape Clementis sexti, de qua domina dominus Marchio genuerat XI filios, videlicet septem masculos et IIII feminas etc., et sepulta fuit ad locum fratrum Minorum de Ferraria honorifice, sicut decebat etc.” I could not find an English translation of this work, so the translation is entirely mine. Giulio Bertoni and Emilio Paolo Vicini, eds, *Chronicon Estense* vol. 15, part 3, of *Rerum italicarum scriptores: raccolta degli storici Italiana dal cinquecento al millecinquecento*, (Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1908), fol. 119r.
Ferrara. From then on, in the many chronicles mentioning her which were written after her death, she was more commonly referred to as Obizzo's wife than as his mistress.

Upon their legitimization, Obizzo III and Lippa’s children were then able to enter the political sphere. After having been legitimized, their daughters made advantageous matches, just as legitimate daughters of noble houses were expected to. Beatrice (1332-1387) married the German prince Waldemar I of Anhalt-Zerbst in 1365. In 1352 Alda (1333-1381) was married to Lodovico II Gonzaga, the Lord of Mantua. Alisia, who had made a decent marriage to Rainaldo Bonaccolsi before being legitimimized, made an even more illustrious match following her first husband’s death, marrying the Lord of Ravenna, Guido III Novello di Polenta, in 1349. Constanza (1343-1391) married the Lord of Rimini, Malatesta IV Ungaro Malatesta, in 1363. Through his legitimatized daughters with Lippa, Obizzo was able to form important alliances with the ruling dynasties of Italy and beyond.²⁸⁰

Obizzo and Lippa’s sons were also able to take their places in the Este line of inheritance. Their first son, Rinaldo (1334-1348), died before his father, only two years after being legitimimized. Aldobrandino III (1335-1361), their next eldest son, was married by his father to Beatrice da Camino, the niece of Obizzo’s ally, Mastino della Scala, in 1351 when he was fourteen.²⁸¹ Aldobrandino succeeded as Marquis of Ferrara and Lord of Rovigo and Modena in 1352, and ruled for nine years. He was succeeded by his brother, Niccolò II (1338-1388), in 1361, bypassing Aldobrandino’s legitimate infant son, Obizzo IV (1356-1388). Niccolò married the sister of Lord Cansignorio of Verona, Verde della Scala, but she failed to provide him with a male heir, instead giving birth to a daughter, Tadea. Obizzo and Lippa’s sons Azzo (1340-1349), Falco (1342-1356/8), and Ugo (1344-1370) all died before their predecessors in the order of succession and so were unable to inherit the marquisate. Niccolò had arranged a marriage for Ugo with Costanza Malatesta but he died childless.


²⁸¹ Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 52; “Welfen 9,” Genealogy.eu last modified Oct. 9th 2003. This was Beatrice’s second marriage. She had previously been married to Count Neri da Pisa in June 1346, so she may have been older than her second husband. Her more mature age may have actually been seen as an asset in assisting Aldobrandino in securing his lordship over Ferrara, since she would have been able to provide valuable council to her much younger husband. See Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 52n14.
Niccolò also arranged a marriage for his youngest brother, Alberto I (1347-1393), in 1375 to Giovanna de’ Marzano, the daughter of the late Count of Squilacio. The marriage was never officially consummated though and was dissolved by Pope Urban VI in 1382. Alberto succeeded as Marquis of Ferrara and Lord of Modena and Reggio in 1388. Alberto had to contend with his eldest brother’s son, Obizzo IV, who had inherited his father’s share of the patrimony and rebelled against his uncle. Alberto had Obizzo and his mother, Beatrice da Camino, beheaded, repossessing the entire estate. But he did spare Obizzo’s young illegitimate son, Gerardo, most likely because he did not see the boy as a threat, since he had not been legitimized and was still a minor.  

The marriages of Obizzo’s children show in what high esteem other Italian lords held marriages with members of the Este family. Eager to make alliances through marriage by marrying Este daughters or marrying their daughters to the Este, they did not seem to be overly concerned over whether such marriage partners were legitimate or illegitimate. That Obizzo had taken his children’s mother in matrimony and that he had had them legitimized certainly made other Italian lords even more willing to except them as brides and grooms. Though the Italian moral code declared that illegitimate children were permanently stained by the sins of their parents, the reality of the situation did not conform to such decrees.

Alberto, after becoming Marquis of Ferrara, already in his mid-forties and in need of an heir, married Giovanna de’ Roberti (died ca. 1390). She was a daughter of the powerful Roberti family, who had been instrumental in assisting earlier Este in regaining control of Reggio. But Giovanna was the daughter of a mere knight, Cabrino de’ Roberti, and many considered her an unworthy match for Alberto, suggesting that, ignoring his responsibility to make a politically beneficial match, he instead married her for love. At least one chronicler has suggested that Giovanna was previously Alberto’s mistress, and if so there would have been no other reason for him to marry her but love, since she had not provided him with any illegitimate offspring who would have been legitimized by their marriage. But Alberto may also have been eager to attain the Roberti’s support against the opposition of Obizzo IV.

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marriage contract exists but in his two wills Alberto left Giovanna ten thousand ducats, which he reported having received from her or from another in her name after the consummation of their marriage.\textsuperscript{284}

In 1393 Alberto married another of his mistresses, Isotta degli’ Albaresani, in the last year of her life.\textsuperscript{285} The historian Giovan Battista Pigna, writing in 1572, during the reign of Alfonso II d’Este, described the importance of the event:

\begin{quote}
...he [Alberto] married Isotta Albaresana, a young woman of a noble house and of honorable quality, and which he sealed with much care: so that by this means, in addition to the discharge of his conscience, he ensured the succession of Nicolo his son, which was made during the age of his minority.\textsuperscript{286}
\end{quote}

Though Isotta was a Ferrarese lady, she was not of the high nobility, but Pigna still writes of her in a respectful manner, and insists that she was held to be of good character, even though she was carrying on an illicit affair with the Marquis of Ferrara. Alberto was only able to marry her after the death of Giovanna de’ Roberti, who, like so many other Este wives, had provided Alberto with no legitimate heirs. In the absence of such heirs, it was imperative that Alberto have his and Isotta’s son, Niccolò III (1383-1441), legitimized. When Alberto died that same year, his illegitimately-born son, who was still a minor, inherited the marquisate of Ferrara, Modena, and Reggio.\textsuperscript{287}

Isotta’s family greatly benefited from her illicit affair. Following her death many of the Albaresani were granted favors by Niccolò III and later marquises of Ferrara, and a number of them frequented the Este court. They are also openly mentioned in many documents as relatives of the Este marquises. Clearly the Este felt no shame in openly


\textsuperscript{285} Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 782; “Welfen 9,” Genealogy.eu, last modified Oct. 9\textsuperscript{th} 2003.

\textsuperscript{286} In Italian: “…sposò Isotta Albaresana, giovane di Casa nobile & di honorate qualità, & ch’egli s’havea tenuta molto cara: accioche di questo modo, oltre allo scarico della conscienza, facesse che la successione di Nicolo suo figliuolo, ch’era constituuito in età puerile, fosse leggitima.” All the English translations of Pigna are entirely mine. Giovan Battista Pigna, Historia de principi di Este, (Vinegia: Vincenzo Valgrisi, 1572), 5.327.

\textsuperscript{287} Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 782; Gardner, Dukes and Poets in Ferrara, 26; Noyes, The Story of Ferrara, 64; Bestor, “Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy,” 568; “Welfen 9,” Genealogy.eu, last modified Oct. 9\textsuperscript{th} 2003.
flaunting their connection to the Albaresani by blood, their bond having been legitimized by Alberto’s marriage to Isotta.288

Niccolò III became the fifth illegitimate Este to inherit, becoming Marquis of Ferrara and Lord of Modena and Reggio when he was only ten years old in 1393. During his reign, he had a mistress from the Roberti family (the family of his father’s first wife) and another from the Albaresani family (his own mother’s family). His first marriage, to Gigliola da Carrara (ca. 1382-1416), was an unhappy and childless one, and, like other Italian Renaissance princes, he did not hesitate to carry on with a number of women. But Niccolò seems to have taken this practice to an extreme. It is estimated that he had over thirty illegitimate offspring. Such was his love of women and his abundance of bastards that he literally was considered “Pater Patriae” (Father of his Country).289 A popular rhyme was composed claiming: “Here and there along the Po; / all are children of Niccolò.”290 He had both his illegitimate and legitimate children raised at his court, making no distinctions between them.

Despite the overabundance of bastards, Niccolò only had his offspring by his favorite mistress, Stella del’ Assassino (died 1419), legitimized and made heirs to Ferrara. The Assassino family had, according to a fifteenth-century chronicle, emigrated from Siena to Ferrara in 1330, via Assisi from whence they derived their name. They originally were a branch of the noble Tolomei family of Siena, but they changed their named to Assassino when they settled in Ferrara. Several members of the family frequented the court of Ferrara during the fifteenth century. All the Ferrarese chroniclers refer to Stella’s father as one Giovanni, but the Tolomei records in Siena give his name as Antonio. Stella gave birth to the ill-fated Ugo Aldobrandino (1405-1425), to Leonello (1407-1450), and to Borso (1413-

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290 In Italian: “Di qua, di là, sul Pò; / Tutti figli di Niccolò.” Quoted in Gundersheimer, Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism, 76. The English translation is Gundersheimer’s.
1471). It was Stella’s second son who Niccolò eventually designated as his heir, overlooking his legitimate sons by his third marriage, Ercole and Sigismondo.291

From the beginning Niccolò’s sons by Stella were treated as though they were his legitimate offspring. Ugo Aldobrandino’s birth was celebrated with the same pomp and ceremony that would have followed the birth of a legitimately-born heir to the state. At his christening Baldassare Cossa (the Cardinal Legate of Bologna and future Pope John XXIII) and the Lords of Rimini and Mantua stood sponsors by their procurators and ambassadors, along with Niccolò de’ Boiardi, the Bishop of Modena. The guilds of Ferrara hosted horseraces and tournaments in celebration of the birth and the Bishop of Ferrara, Pietro de’ Boiardi, along with the clergy carried out a solemn procession through the city. Clearly the people of Ferrara and beyond had grown accustomed to the succession of illegitimate Este and considered Niccolò’s bastard from birth to be his legitimate heir, especially since his wife had yet to provide him with any legitimate children.292

Stella was not regarded as merely Niccolò’s mistress but as a lady to be treated with great respect. Despite the fact that Niccolò was openly carrying on affairs with a number of other women during their relationship, Stella was accorded the honor and respect due to the prince’s prima favorita. He gifted her with a palazzo on the Via Carmelino. In 1402 she also received from Niccolò two hundred and ninety-two campi at Saguedo and Barbuglio for her and her heirs. She was also very popular in Ferrara due to her beauty and kindness. She was referred to by Iacopo de’ Delaito, Niccolò’s chancellor, in his Annales Estenses as “the magnificent Lady Stella dell’ Assassino” (coll. 1035, 1036). A Latin poem was composed in hexameters by Galeotto Marzio da Narni in honor of Stella and dedicated to Giovanni del’ Assassino. After the death of Gigliola in 1516, Stella most likely expected Niccolò to marry her, as his father and grandfather had married their mistresses, and so make her Marquise of Ferrara, but she was sorely disappointed. Enea Silvio Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II) wrote that she was a virtuous and wise woman, who was taken by Niccolò by force and with the


292 Gardner, Dukes and Poets in Ferrara, 33; Gundersheimer, Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism, 77.
promise of marriage. Instead of marrying his much loved mistress, Niccolò took a second wife in April 1418, the before mentioned and ill-fated Parisina Malatesta. Most likely the political situation had demanded that Niccolò marry and form an alliance with the Malatesta, preventing him from marrying his mistress. Stella died in July of the following year, saving her from witnessing the execution of her eldest son and her prince’s second wife. Even though Niccolò had not married her, Stella was interred with full honors in the church of San Francesco, just as Lippa had been.

Niccolò III also had an affair with one Caterina degli’ Albaresani, who was the daughter of a doctor, Taddeo degli’ Albaresani. She was also perhaps his cousin, causing some to call their relationship incestuous. One of their illegitimate sons, Meliaduse, was born only a year after Stella’s first son, in 1406. The lesser status of Meliaduse’s mother, along with the suspicion that her and Niccolò’s mothers were both supposedly descended from the Albaresani family, may explain why Meliaduse was excluded from the succession by his father, even after Ugo was executed. Meliaduse was legitimized by the Emperor Sigismund during his visit to Ferrara in 1433, but he was then forced by his father to enter the church and was made Abbot of Pomposa, barring him from the succession. He had three illegitimate sons of his own, who became part of Pope Pius II’s entourage in 1459. Caterina, since she was not her princely lover’s official mistress and was a commoner, was clearly not of a high enough status for her son to be allowed to take a preeminent place in the Este order of inheritance. Also her relationship with Niccolò was most likely a brief one, since she only bore him one child, whereas Stella had given him four children.

Two of Niccolò’s other illegitimate sons, Alberto (1415-1502) and Gurone Maria (died 1484), were the children of a woman of an even lesser status: Niccolò’s maid, Camilla della Tavola (sometimes referred to as Filippa). Camilla’s children were prevented from being knighted by the Emperor Sigismund, along with Meliaduse, and neither were they

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293 Meserve, *Pius II Commentaries*; Gray, *The Commentaries of Pius II*;


295 Ettlinger, “*Visibilis et Invisibilis*,” 782, 783n60, 786-787; Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara*, 33; Bestor, “*Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy*,” 570; Bestor, “*Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House*,” 63, 72.
legitimized by the emperor as Leonello and Meliaduse were. The lowly station of Alberto and Gurone’s mother most likely explains their less than preferential treatment.  

As with Caterina, Niccolò’s relationship with Camilla was most likely a brief one. It would have lasted only a few short years. Just long enough for her to produce two boys. But once he had tired of her, Niccolò saw to it that his maid was well provided for. Camilla received lands in the Bolognese and Ferrarese, which served as her dowry when Niccolò married her off to a Bolognese citizen living in Ferrara, Giacomo Benedecto. Camilla’s legitimate daughter by her husband, Alberto and Gurone’s half-sister, made a good marriage to Bonvicino de La Carte, whom Borso made a precinct general. Alberto became extremely influential within the Este courts of his half-brothers, and he and Camilla were granted various spiritual favors by Pope Paul II in a papal brief dated April 26, 1471. Alberto became one of Borso’s most trusted advisors and Gurone was made Abbot of Nonatola and a protonotary.

Meliaduse’s mother was in fact of a higher rank than Camilla, which does not explain his exclusion from the knighting ceremony held by the Emperor Sigismund, since another illegitimate son, Falco, whose mother is unknown and was most likely a commoner, was included in the knighting ceremony, along with Leonello, Borso, Ercole, and Sigismondo. But Falco was not legitimized by the emperor and, because of the lesser status of his mother, whose name has been lost, he most likely was not seen as a possible threat to his half-siblings within the line of succession. Niccolò’s son by another unknown woman, Baldassare, became a painter and a medalist. Meliaduse and Gurone—since neither of them had a true religious calling—both went on to produce illegitimate offspring, many of whom also had illegitimate children of their own, as did Alberto.

While Niccolò clearly saw to the welfare of his illegitimate offspring, providing them with a means of support, he obviously preferred some over others. His preferences for some


297 Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 779, 779n45, 787; Gardner, Dukes and Poets in Ferrara, 33n1; Dean, Land and Power, 60n164.

had much to do with the status of their mothers. He had begun early on to earmark the children of his first official mistress to take precedence in the line of inheritance. He attempted to negate the threat his other illegitimate sons—whose mothers were of a lesser status than Stella but who might have still become rivals in the succession—posed by having them take holy orders. Those who were of the lowest status, such as Falco and Baldassare, because they were most likely the products of very casual affairs with common women, were not in any way viewed as a threat. While it might appear unusual that Niccolò eventually gave his eldest surviving son by Stella preeminence in the order of inheritance over his own legitimate sons, he began to do so before his legitimate sons had been born. By the time Ercole and Sigismondo came into being, it had become difficult for Niccolò to alter his illegitimate sons’ primary positions in the succession.

In 1428 or early 1429 Niccolò arranged a brilliant marriage for Leonello, his then eldest illegitimate son by Stella. Leonello was married to Margarita (died 1439), the daughter of Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, the ruler of Mantua. In return for Margarita’s dowry, Niccolò agreed to secure Leonello’s legitimation from the pope and further contracted that Leonello would remain his heir, even if he went on to have legitimate sons. The terms of the contract also indicated that Leonello was the product of a morganatic marriage and so he could legally succeed to the lordship. But this was probably untrue since, if Niccolò had been secretly married to Stella, he would have been practicing bigamy when he married Parisina a year before Stella’s death. Through this agreement Niccolò would later give his illegitimate son preeminence in the line of inheritance over his own legitimate progeny. On June 13, 1429 Leonello was legitimimized by Pope Martin V and he was again legitimimized by the Emperor Sigismund on September 17, 1433.299

The marriages of Niccolò’s illegitimate daughters also show that matches made for them could be determined by the status of their mothers. Stella’s daughter, Isotta, was at first betrothed to the heir to the duchy of Urbino, Oddantonio Montefeltro, but after he was assassinated, she was married to Count Stephano Frangipani of Segna. Both of these matches were impressive for an illegitimate daughter, but because she was the child of Niccolò’s

official mistress she was viewed as an acceptable potential bride by other Italian lords. Stella’s successor as Niccolò’s official mistress was Maria Anna di’ Roberti (died 1483). Though she may have given him four children, they never took precedence over his offspring by Stella. Still, because she also held the status of official mistress, Maria Anna’s three daughters were all married off to members of the Italian nobility. Her daughter Bianca Maria (1440-1506) was married to Galeotto Pico, the Lord of Mirandola, in 1468. The other two daughters may have been Maria Anna’s but they may also have been another Roberti woman’s offspring by Niccolò. Beatrice (1427-before 1497)—who was widely admired and so well-known for her skill at the dance that she was dubbed “the Queen of Feasts”—married Lord Niccolò of Coreggio in 1448. After her first husband’s death, she was then wed to the illegitimately-born Tristano Sforza. Camilla, also in 1448, married Lord Rodolfo Varano of Camerino. Niccolò’s daughter Orsina, whose mother was the wife of a farrier, Messer Antonio Rampino, became the third wife of a gentleman of the bedchamber, Andrea Gualengo, in 1469. Orsina’s mother was clearly of a status lower than those of many of his other daughter’s mothers, since her marriage was far less prestigious but still impressive for the illegitimate daughter of a farrier’s wife. Niccolò had two daughters both named Margherite by unknown mothers, one of whom was married to Sigismondo Pandolfo’s older brother, Galeotto Roberto Malatesta, in 1429, and who entered a convent upon her husband’s death. Clearly Margherite’s mother must have been of a noble status in order for her to have been able to make such a brilliant match.300

Niccolò’s daughters married into the powerful ruling houses of Mirandola, Coreggio, Camerino, Monferrato, and Malatesta. That these Italian lords married his daughters without complaint over their illegitimate status, attests that their mothers were most likely held in some regard, particularly Stella and Maria Anna, who were more like pseudo-wives than mistresses. These marriages would have provided Niccolò with important allies throughout Northern Italy. Also the lords of Italy, anxious to form alliances with the powerful Este family, would have gratefully accepted any Este daughters, legitimate or illegitimate, that the Este lord offered to them in marriage, at least within reason. If the daughter of a mistress of a

common status had been offered to them, they most likely would have turned down the match.

Maria Anna outlived Niccolò by forty years, so she must have been very young when their affair commenced, just as Isotta had been when she began her affair with Sigismondo. Upon her death in 1483 she was interred by her illegitimate son Rinaldo with much honor. Rinaldo had been made Abbot of Pomposa but he renounced the post in order to give it to his sons in 1469. Instead he became Lord of Ostellato and in 1472 he married Lucretia, the daughter of Marquis Guglielmo IV of Monferrato. Maria Anna had, like many other princely mistresses, benefited from her relationship with the ruler of Ferrara, as did her children by him. Though she clearly did not surpass the influence that Stella and her children had wielded, she was publically recognized as Niccolò’s official mistress and she and her children benefited from the status of her relationship.301

After the execution of Ugo Aldobrandino and Parisina in 1425, Niccolò III was still without legitimate male heirs. Parisina had given him a son, Alberto Carlo, who only lived a few weeks, and twin daughters, Ginevra (the first wife of Sigismondo) and Lucia. It was his decision to marry a third time, this time late in life, to a daughter of the House of Saluzzo, Ricciarda, which threw off the balance of power amongst his children. This third marriage, which was consummated on January 15, 1431, produced two legitimate sons. Ercole (1431-1505) was born nine months after his parents’ wedding and Sigismondo (1433-1507) came two years later. The arrival of these two boys on the scene created conflict between Niccolò’s legitimate and illegitimate offspring. Though Niccolò ceded broad powers to Leonello in 1434, making him practically co-ruler of Ferrara, he held off declaring Leonello his official heir until he was on his death bed in 1441, in order to prevent as much conflict as possible from erupting between his offspring.302

Niccolò, following his predecessors’ examples, provided those sons he intended to legitimize and succeed him with names that had traditionally been given to Este rulers. That

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he had given his first born son, Ugo Aldobrandino, a combination of two traditional Este names, may indicate that he was already planning on legitimizing Stella’s children and making them his heirs. Niccolò did not christen Ercole and Sigismondo with traditional ancestral names because by the time of their birth he did not intend for them to inherit. Instead, Ercole received a name of classical origins and Sigismondo was named after his illustrious godfather, the Emperor Sigismund, who had visited Ferrara during his christening. On the other hand, Leonello’s legitimate son, who was born seven years after Ercole, was named after his grandfather, projecting Niccolò’s intention to implement primogeniture. His less favored bastards, such as Meliaduse and Gurone, instead of traditional names, received names from French chivalric literature, perhaps reflecting the romantic liaisons which had produced them.303

In his first will, promulgated before a crowd of witness on October 18, 1435, Niccolò left Ferrara to Leonello and ten thousand ducats to Borso. He left Modena and Reggio to Ercole but stipulated that Leonello should rule over them until Ercole reached the age of twenty-five. Only then could Ercole take control of his inheritance and only if he had loyally obeyed his older brother, otherwise he was to be deprived of his legacy. Niccolò did not make any mention of his other children, legitimate or illegitimate, except to leave them in Leonello’s charge.304

But on the day of his death, December 26, 1441, Niccolò had his previous will nullified and a new testament drawn up. He dictated that “the illustrious lord Leonello… he [Niccolò] institutes and wishes to be his universal heir and his true, undoubted and only successor…”305 He left only ten thousand ducats each to Ercole and Sigismondo, ordering them to be content with their lot. He insisted that upon Leonello’s death, primogeniture

305 In Latin: “…Illustrem dominum Leonellum natum ipsius domi testatoris precipuam et dilectissimum et maiorem… instituit et esset voluit sibi heredem universalem ac suum verum, indubitatum et unicum successor….” Quoted in Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 76, 76-77n46.
should be adhered to because it was “useful and necessary.” Only if Leonello’s line failed
was Ercole to succeed. But Niccolò’s wishes were ignored.³⁰⁶

After succeeding to the throne, becoming Marquis of Ferrara, Modena, and Reggio,
Leonello took as his second wife Maria d’Aragona, the illegitimate daughter of King Alfonso
I of Naples by an African woman, in 1444. Though he had an illegitimate son, Francesco
(born before 1430), by an unknown woman, he sent the boy away to Burgundy, most likely
to please his new wife. He also sent his legitimately-born brothers, Ercole and Sigismondo,
into exile at the court of Naples in 1445, where they both remained for seventeen years.
Leonello greatly depended upon the support of Borso and their other illegitimate brothers
during his nine year reign. In the end, ignoring his father’s wishes, Leonello made Borso his
heir, once again bypassing Ercole, as well as his own legitimate son by Margarita Gonzaga,
also named Niccolò, who was still a minor (only twelve years old upon his father’s death), in
the line of succession. Borso succeeded his brother in 1450, becoming Duke of Modena in
1452 and Duke of Ferrara in 1471.³⁰⁷

Pope Pius II wrote expressing how much he marveled at the Este succession:

It is an extraordinary thing about that family that within our fathers’ memory
no one legitimate son has come through to rule; that the sons of concubines have
been to a greater extent fortunate than the sons of their wives; a circumstance
contrary not only to Christianity but to the statutes of almost all nations.

Niccolò, in our time begotten outside of marriage, was a prince of his family
[and] a man of great capacity but eagerly followed pleasure; the common people
would have thought [him] happy, if he had not found out about the adultery of his
wife and son and struck them both with a sword. Deserving the vengeance of
God, that he who had frequently defiled the marriages of others, should endure to
find the son corrupting his own bedchamber! There were several sons from this
man, not only from marriage but also from adultery. The legitimates were
excluded by the judgments of the father; Leonello he decided was [his] successor,
[born] from a concubine of a Sienese family; [Leonello] who married the daughter
of King Alfonso (and herself illegitimate), when earlier he had married another
dughter from the house of Gonzaga. Leonello was succeeded by Borso, [his]
brother born from the same mother. [Leonello’s] son was passed over, either

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³⁰⁷ Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 783; Bestor, “Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional
State in Italy,” 571-572; Bestor, “Kinship and Marriage in the Politics of an Italian Ruling House,” 86-90, 94;
because he would have been legitimate or because he would have been the age of a minor. 

Pius clearly reveals how unusual the succession of illegitimates was to the rest of Europe, while it was clearly quite common in Ferrara. Pius, in failing to mark down Stella’s name, merely referring to her as “concubina,” clearly shows his aversion towards such women. He had treated Isotta much the same in his correspondence, refusing to refer to her as anything other than a concubine, even after Sigismondo had married her.

It may seem shocking that both Niccolò and Leonello bypassed their legitimate heirs in the order of succession. Yet Niccolò had begun cultivating Leonello as his heir before Ercole and Sigismondo’s births and had made it part of Leonello’s marriage contract that he would succeed Niccolò. Also, upon Niccolò’s death, Ercole and Sigismondo were both still minors. While Niccolò had succeeded when he was still a minor, such a state of affairs was usually to be avoided. The institution of regencies for minor sons was seen as threatening to the stability of the state. Such would have become evident by the succession of Falco after the death of Azzo VIII. His rights were usurped by his father, the illegitimate Fresco, and the chaotic situation which followed resulted in the loss of Este territories which were eventually won back at a great cost. So Niccolò had been reticent to allow his very young legitimate sons to inherit, as was Leonello in allowing his own legitimate minor son to inherit the patrimony, which Pius states above.

Just as Leonello had depended on Borso’s support, Borso depended on the support of one of his illegitimate half-brothers, Camilla della Tavola’s son, Alberto. Though Alberto was a violent and undisciplined individual, there is much evidence that he held a position as

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foremost amongst the members of the Este family in Borso’s court. Borso arranged Alberto’s marriage to Lucrezia Malatesta, one of Sigismondo Pandolfo’s illegitimate daughters on February 6, 1456. Apparently, though, the marriage did not last long and in 1486 Lucrezia died in Ravenna. Such was Camilla’s son’s influence at court and his control over many of Borso’s major castles and cities that he was highly influential in determining the succession after Borso’s death. Though he did quietly make a bid for the throne, when he could not garner enough support from foreign powers, he decided to support his legitimate brother Ercole instead.309

Borso was a rarity amongst his predecessors, for he seemed to have had little interest in the opposite sex. He never married or produced legitimate children. Also, he never had any illicit affairs that are known of or produced illegitimate offspring. Borso chose as his heir Ercole, who had become a great condottiere, and he allowed Ercole and Sigismondo to return from Naples in 1462. Once again Leonello’s legitimate son, Niccolò, had been passed over, though this time by a legitimate claimant to the throne. But Borso refused to make an official will and treated Ercole and Niccolò equally in the eyes of the court. Upon Borso’s death, Ercole seized control of Ferrara for himself and unsuccessfully plotted to have Niccolò poisoned in Mantua, where he had fled.310

Duke Ercole I was determined and successful in at last instituting primogeniture as the official Este form of heritance. Even so, the Este, like a majority of other Renaissance princes, continued to keep mistresses who gave birth to bastards. Despite producing an abundance of legitimate children with his wife, the Neapolitan princess Eleonora d’Aragona, Ercole also had two illegitimate offspring. He had a daughter, Lucrezia, with his mistress, Lodovica Condolmieri. Lucrezia was betrothed at the age of six or seven to Annibale Bentivoglio, the ruler of Bologna, and they were married in 1487. Lodovica must have been of a noble status in order for her daughter to have made such a prestigious match. Ercole also had an illegitimate son, Giulio (1478-1561), by one of his wife’s Neapolitan ladies-in-waiting, Isabella Arduino. Both of Ercole’s illegitimate offspring benefited from having been

born of women of the lesser nobility and so were brought up at the Este court under Eleonora’s supervision, raising them alongside his legitimate children.\footnote{Ettlinger, “Visibilis et Invisibilis,” 787; Bellonci, The Life and Times of Lucrezia Borgia, 206; “Welfen 10,” Genealogy.eu, last modified Nov. 28th 2003.}

Ercole’s son and heir, Alfonso I (1476-1534) was married twice, to Anna Sforza (1473-1497) and then to Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519), but he, like so many of his ancestors, lived a libertine lifestyle, frequenting the prostitutes of Ferrara. He had a preference for easy women who could be bedded with little preliminary effort. At the age of twenty-one, so one story goes, Alfonso strode out naked onto the streets of Ferrara in full daylight with a sword in his hand. He may have done so in order to win a bet or just as an act of bravado. In fact, Alfonso, as well as his brothers Ferrante and Sigismondo, all suffered from the sexually transmitted scourge of that time: syphilis.\footnote{Gardner, Dukes and Poets in Ferrara, 342; Bellonci, The Life and Times of Lucrezia Borgia, 206; “Welfen 10,” Genealogy.eu, last modified Nov. 28th 2003.}

Years after the death of his second wife, in 1526 Alfonso I took the daughter of a Ferrarese artisan, Laura, as his official mistress. Bestor theorizes that Alfonso must have granted her use of the name Eustochia during the initiation of their relationship. Later historians, trying to construct a more respectable family origin for Laura, gave her the surname Dianti but she never used this name during Alfonso’s or her own lifetime. Laura was well provided for by her princely lover. He built her a fine residence at the end of the Via Alberto Lollio, which was dubbed the “little palace.” Though there is documentary evidence that numerous portraits of Laura were commissioned by Alfonso, few of them survive, and the identities of their sitters are questionable. It has been suggested that Titian’s portrait of Laura with an Ethiopian page boy (Portrait of Laura de’ Dianti [ca. 1523]) in fact depicts the duke’s previous wife, Lucrezia. It has also been theorized that another portrait done by Titian, which is now located in the Louvre, showing a young woman at her toilet attended by a man holding two mirrors (Woman with a Mirror), actually portrays both Laura and Alfonso together, but the execution of the work (ca. 1514) may have long predated the initiation of their relationship. Upon her death Laura was honorably interred in the church of the nuns of St. Augustine on June 28, 1573, accompanied by her lover’s legitimate
Alfonso and Laura had two illegitimate sons: Alfonsino (1530-1547), the Marquis of Castelnuovo, who only lived to be seventeen; and Alfonso (1527-1587), the Marquis of Montecchio, who made two good marriages into powerful Italian families with Giulia della Rovere and Violante Signa. Duke Alfonso I, like Sigismondo with Isotta, supposedly secretly married Laura. Two illustrious Ferrarese writers, Tomaso and Agostino Mosti, both claimed to have been present at the union. Laura and Alfonso’s marriage would have legitimized their offspring but Alfonso waited until the last year of his life to make an honest woman of his mistress. Instead of having their children transformed into “iusti et veri filii” (lawful and true offspring) by marrying Laura earlier in their relationship, Alfonso instead had Cardinal Innocenzo Cybo legitimize them by decree on April 17, 1532. This act though had no weight in respect to the Este succession to the duchy of Ferrara. Even after they were legitimized by their parents’ marriage, Alfonso’s illegitimately-born sons still suffered from legal deficiencies in relation to the Este inheritance. Most jurists viewed illegitimately-born offspring who were legitimized by marriage as legitimate only by a fiction of law prior to that point. While in Roman and canon law they were considered legitimate in relation to legitimacy requirements, the situation was blurred in respect to rules of inheritance and feudal contracts. In his will Alfonso continued to uphold the line of succession through primogeniture but stipulated that if all three of his legitimately-born sons’ (Ercole II, Ippolito II, and Francesco) legitimately-born descendants should become extinct, his illegitimately-born sons’ descendants should succeed to the dukedom of Ferrara.

Alfonso’s brother, Ercole’s third son, Ippolito I (1479-1520), entered the church and became Cardinal d’Este. Despite his vow of celibacy, he had illegitimate offspring, like many sons of powerful noble families who were forced into careers in the church. His son, also

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named Ippolito, was legitimized in 1551. His daughter, Elisabetta, made a politically advantageous marriage with Giberto Pio, the Lord of Sassuolo. The fact that his children were the illegitimately-born offspring of a cleric did little to hinder them in the long run, which was not unusual during the Italian Renaissance.315

The wives of the Este princes, like many noble wives, suffered under a double standard. While their husbands could philander to their hearts’ content, the Este wives had the threat of death hanging over them if they dared to take lovers. Niccolò III’s lack of hesitation in executing his eldest son and his second wife attests to this fact. Of course, Parisina and Ugo Aldobrandino’s crime was doubly taboo in that they were considered to be committing incest along with adultery.

Alfonso I’s second wife, Lucrezia Borgia, came to him possessing an already scandalous reputation. She had been twice married: once divorced and once widowed. It was rumored that during the annulment proceedings ending her first marriage, Lucrezia had been involved in an illicit affair. Though she had been sheltered away in a convent by her father, Pope Alexander VI, she had still managed to carry out an extramarital affair with her father’s servant, Pedro Calderon (also known as Perotto), and had born him a bastard child. It had been Perotto, not Lucrezia, who suffered for entering into such a relationship with the pope’s daughter. His dead body was discovered floating in the Tiber River and it was rumored he had been murdered by Lucrezia’s brother, Cesare. It had taken much persuasion from both the pope and the King of France to convince Ercole I to marry his son and heir to Lucrezia. Legend has it that Ercole was so determined to convince Lucrezia of the severity of what would happen to her if she was unfaithful to Alfonso that, upon her arrival in Ferrara, Ercole, giving her a tour of her new home, blatantly pointed out to her the spot where Parisina and Ugo Aldobrandino had been executed.316

Even so, it was whispered that Lucrezia did perhaps carry on romances with other men when she was married to Alfonso. She and the poet Pietro Bembo wrote numerous love letters to each other, though there is no proof they were ever able to consummate their

flirtation. Bembo, overcome by the risks involved in such an affair, eventually abandoned Ferrara for Venice. Lucrezia was also rumored to have had an affair with her brother-in-law, Francesco Gonzaga, the Marquis of Mantua, Isabella d’Este’s husband. Just as with Bembo, they exchanged numerous love letters. Though Lucrezia was never caught in the act and executed, the Ferrarese courtier and poet, Ercole Strozzi, was murdered, it was implied, by the order of Alfonso I for facilitating Lucrezia’s affair with Francesco. In the end Lucrezia died of complications in childbirth.  

It has been speculated that Alfonso II’s first wife, Lucrezia de’ Medici, was poisoned by her husband. This led to gossip that she had been unfaithful to him. But these speculations did not prevent Alfonso II from making two more important political marriages, both of which proved to be childless. Modern diagnostics in fact has revealed that Lucrezia may have actually died of tuberculosis. This is once again an example of how common such accusations of wife-murder were during the Italian Renaissance and how they were more often a form of slander rather than the truth.

Despite Ercole I’s institution of primogeniture into the Este succession, his decree failed to prevent members of the Este’s illegitimate lines from attempting to usurp the dukedom for themselves. In 1476 Leonello’s legitimate son Niccolò tried to topple Ercole from power. He failed and Ercole had him beheaded privately in the cortile (courtyard) of the Castello. After Ercole’s death and the succession of Alfonso I, his sons began plotting against each other and rivalries sprang up between them. In 1506 Ercole’s illegitimate son, Giulio, and his legitimate son, Ferrante, plotted the overthrow of Alfonso I and their other legitimate brother, Cardinal Ippolito, who seemed to them to have an unnatural influence over the duke.  

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318 Murphy, *Murder of a Medici Princess*, 87-88.  
320 Also the rift between Ippolito and Giulio was said to have been partially caused by their rivalry over the affections of Lucrezia’s cousin and lady-in-waiting, Angela Borgia. Giulio was the one who managed to seduce Angela into his bed and she supposedly bore him an illegitimate child. It was Ippolito’s anger at being reject by Angela for his illegitimate brother that supposedly caused him to have his men attack Giulio and attempt to pluck out his eyes. Giulio survived the assault but the fact that Alfonso allowed Ippolito to escape any punishment for his crime against Giulio enflamed the feuding between the brothers. See Bellonci, *The Life and
sentenced to be executed. While the brothers’ fellow conspirators were beheaded, they themselves were saved at the last minute from the block, since Alfonso I transmuted their sentence. Instead they were condemned to perpetual imprisonment. Ferrante died in prison after forty-three years, while Giulio was at last liberated from his confinement after fifty-three years by Alfonso II (1559-1597). Clearly, despite the institution of primogeniture and the exclusion of illegitimates from the line of inheritance, the history of illegitimate heirs inheriting the Este patrimony still served to inspire other illegitimates to make bids for the throne of Ferrara.

During the late 1530s and 1540s, Laura Eustochia sought to publicize her marriage to Alfonso in numerous ways. Four years after Alfonso’s death, in the summer of 1538 Laura began to use the Este cognomen as a way of advertising her marriage to the late duke. Laura signed her name as Laura Eustochia Estense and is referred to as such in many acts. Due to an internal crisis taking place within the Este house at that time, Laura hoped to strengthen her sons’ place in the Este succession. Ercole II’s wife, Renée of France, was a Protestant sympathizer. In 1541 the repression of Protestantism in Italy increased and Laura most likely hoped that Renée and her children would be discredited due to their Protestant leanings, leaving the way open for her own sons to inherit. She employed the humanist Pietro Aretino, through his letter to her, dated October 1542, in order to promote her marital status to the late Alfonso and her children’s place in the succession.

Aretino’s letter was meant to give Laura his condolences on the death of her father but it does not follow the conventions of the genre of condolence letters, which should have praised her father’s virtues and the benefits which he had conferred upon Laura. Instead, the letter turns this form around and extols the benefits Laura conferred on her father through her affair with Alfonso. He addresses the letter “a la Signora Laura Estense” (To the Lady Laura Estense), using her married name. Aretino claims to be revealing her marriage to

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Times of Lucrezia Borgia, 293-294; Bradford, Lucrezia Borgia, 245.


322 Bestor, “Marriage and Succession,” 73, 75-76.

323 Bestor, “Marriage and Succession,” 76.

324 Pietro Aretino, Il terzo libro delle lettere di M. Pietro Aretino (Parigi: Matteo, 1609), fol. 12r.
Alfonso to the world for the first time, exposing “the ignorance of all in the present century”.  

He praises Laura as “being one of [the century’s] most notable wonders, merit[ing] that it bow down to you, as you are bowed down to by me”.  

Aretino lauds Laura as having provided more for her father than he ever did for her. While he clothed her, she, through her affair with Alfonso, provided him with many honors and gave him the joy of becoming the father-in-law of a prince. Aretino describes Alfonso’s graciousness in stooping to marrying Laura, who was of such low origins (*istato ignoto*):  

The general opinion of the most famous people authenticates that only the greatness of the soul of the catholic Duke Alfonso was sufficient to perform a duty of such immeasurable goodness, which made him condescend to marry the inviolable Lady Laura…  

Aretino refers to “the excellence of the quality of the inviolable Lady Laura” and declares it to have been her destiny to marry Alfonso.  

Aretino was an excellent choice for Laura to have made to announce her prestige as Alfonso’s widow publically. He was feared and sought after by the princes of Italy, and he had shaped himself into a creator of public opinion. In 1537 he had published a collection of his letters—the first person, he claimed, to do so in the vernacular—, which proved to be a highly successful undertaking. He included his letter to Laura in his third book in this collection, published in 1546 and dedicated to Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici. Through this letter and her blatant use of the Este name, Laura hoped to influence the possibility of her illegitimate line of descendants one day inheriting the dukedom of Ferrara.  

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326 In Italian: “…la ignoraza di tutto il presente secolo; …essere una delle sue più notabili maraviglie, meritate ch’egli v’inchini, come sete inclinata da me…” Quoted in Bestor, “Marriage and Succession,” 76, 76n85.  
327 Bestor, “Marriage and Succession,” 76.  
328 Ibid., 76.  
329 In Italian: “In tanto il grido delle più chiare genti fà fede, come solo la grandezza dell’ animo del catholico Duca Alfonso era bastante ad eseguire uno ufficio di si smisurata bontade, che lo facesse condescendere a torre in mogliera la inviolabile Signora Laurà: & che dalla eccellenza della qualità dalla inviolabile Signora Laura infuora niuna era sufficiente ad ottenere un’ dono di si santo pregio; che la destinasse a conseguire in marito il catholico Duca Alfonso.” Quoted in Bestor, “Marriage and Succession,” 77, 77n86.  
330 Bestor, “Marriage and Succession,” 77.
After the Este’s legitimate line died out, members of illegitimate lines did attempted to lay claim to Ferrara. In February of 1539, Pope Paul III had ratified Ercole II’s election to the dukedom of Ferrara but stipulated that legitimacy by birth become a requirement for succession to the duchy of Ferrara. In 1598, after the death of Alfonso II without heirs, Ferrara reverted back to the papacy. Modena, which had been granted to the Este by the Holy Roman Empire, went to Alfonso II’s heir, Cesare (1552-1628), who was descended from an illegitimate line. He was the grandson of Alfonso I, through his illegitimate son, Alfonso, by Laura. In the early 1640s Francesco I (1610-1658), Cesare’s grandson, appealed to the papacy to restore Ferrara to his family.331

Francesco insisted that his great-grandfather had been legitimized by the subsequent marriage of his parents. Thus he claimed to be a descendant of a legitimate line of the Este dynasty. But the papacy rejected his claims. The papal lawyers asserted that as Alfonso I’s wife, Laura would have been housed in the castle or ducal palace, not her “little palace.” That she was painted in her surviving portrait by Titian in a decidedly lascivious manner, denoting a lascivious woman, she could not have been the Duchess of Ferrara, who would never have been painted in such a scandalous manner. Also the church claimed that her portrait was never hung amongst the other portraits of the princes and princesses of the Este family as tradition dictated. Lastly, she was not buried in the traditional resting place of the Este and their wives, the church of the nuns of Corpus Christi. Francesco insisted in his appeal that Alfonso I had had Laura painted in a less lascivious manner in other lost portraits and many historians had affirmed that Laura was Alfonso’s third wife.332 The compilation of the trial records, the Ristretto,333 explains that

It certainly prevails that Fra Leandro [Alberti], il Giovio [Paolo Giovio], and the other historians mentioned above have placed her name among the other duchesses because time consumes portraits, and writers perpetuate names.”334

332 Bestor, “Titian’s Portrait of Laura Eustochia,” 628-629; Bestor, “Marriage and Succession,” 75.
333 The full title is Ristretto delle regioni che la Serenissima Casa d’Este ha colla Camera Apostolica compilatto con occasione di replicare alla Risposta di Roma. See Bestor, “Titian’s Portrait of Laura Eustochia,” 628n1.
334 In Italian: “Prevale certo che Fra Leandro, il Giovio, e gli altri storici sopra citati habbiano posto il nome
Ludovico Domenichi, most likely having read Aretino’s letter to Laura, recorded her marriage to Alfonso in the fifth book of his work, *La nobilità delle donne*[^335], which was published in Venice in 1549 and in 1551 was reprinted in a corrected edition. Giorgio Vasari, who was a friend and correspondent of Aretino’s, mentioned the marriage in his chapter on Titian in his second edition of *The Lives of the Artists*, published in 1568[^336]. As mentioned in the excerpt above, the Dominican friar, Fra Leandro Alberti, affirmed Laura’s married status in his work, *Descrittione di tutta Italia*, published in 1550[^337]. Marco Guazzo, most likely inspired by Alberti, also mentioned Laura’s marriage in his *Cronaca*, which was published in Venice in 1553[^338]. Because Paolo Giovio was patronized by both Aretino and Cardinal Ippolito II, he mentioned the marriage in ambiguous terms in his *Liber de vita et rebus gestis Alphonsi Atestini*, published in 1551, allowing the readers to come to their own conclusions on whether Laura and Alfonso were married or not[^339]. Through these historians, Laura’s marriage to Alfonso had become “common knowledge” (*publica vox et fama*) by the cessation of the sixteenth century. But Alfonso I’s successors, Ercole II and Alfonso II, had refused to recognize Laura as his legitimate wife, due to her common origins. In the end, while her descendants inherited Modena, they were not able to prove their line’s legitimate status and so were unable to gain back the dukedom of Ferrara from the papacy[^340].

In many situations, the overabundance of illegitimate offspring by the Este lords wrought havoc, creating atmospheres ripe with conspiracies and plotting. But Obizzo III, Alberto I, and Niccolò III had hoped to ensure smooth successions by taking mistresses and producing bastards. Though some of them took such a practice to excess, in many cases they seemed to have been warranted in doing so, since their legitimate brides often were incapable

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[^335]: Lodovico Domenichi, *La nobilità delle donne* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito, 1549)
[^338]: Marco Guazzo, *Cronaca* (Venice: Francesco Bidoni, 1553), fol. 345r.
of producing heirs. Their illegitimate daughters provided the Este lords with a means of securing alliances throughout Italy and beyond, while their illegitimately-born sons were able to inherit the state in the absence of legitimately-born heirs. The acceptance of the Este system of succession throughout Italy—its princes marrying illegitimate Este daughters and allowing their own daughters to marry illegitimate Este sons—reveals the existence of a more fluid moral code, which was not based solely on honor and chastity, but instead on political expediency.

The mistresses of the Este of Ferrara provide a variety of examples of what women could expect out of illicit affairs with princes. Lippa degli’ Ariosto, Giovanna de’ Roberti, Isotta degli’ Albaresani, and Laura Eustochia Dianti, like Isotta degli’ Atti, are examples of that rarity among Italian Renaissance women: mistresses who were eventually married to their princely lovers. The Este also had mistresses who were held at various levels of esteem. Some of them are anonymous, most likely because they were not noblewomen but commoners, such as the mother of the first Lord of Ferrara, Obizzo II, as well as the mothers of Niccolò III’s bastard sons Falco and Baldassare. Some of the illegitimate Este may have also been the products of brief, casual liaisons, further explaining why their mothers’ names are lost to us. While these children did receive a means of support from their pater familias, they were not seen as contenders in the line of succession. Another mistress, Stella del’ Assassino, expected to be made her lover’s legitimate wife but was robbed by political expediency of the opportunity. Though the children of women like Stella were raised by their fathers to great heights, the offspring of women of a lesser status, such as Orsolina Macaruffi, Caterina degli’ Albaresani, Camilla della Tavola, Maria Anna di’ Roberti, and Lodovica Condolmieri, while they did attain a station above that of the everyday common woman, their children were lesser contenders in the line of inheritance. What is most remarkable is that Niccolò III placed his eldest illegitimate son by his prima favorita before his legitimate offspring. Even after the legitimate line of the Este had died out, the illegitimate line, which had sprung forth from such women, continued to rule the Duchy of Modena and make claims to Ferrara.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF ITALY’S ILLUSTRIOUS MISTRESSES

While family historians have sought to prove that the Italian Renaissance ideal of the chaste woman dominated society, this work has clearly revealed that the reality was not so clear cut. Families sacrificed the chastity of their daughters, sisters, and even their wives, in the pursuit of power and influence. Neither was the woman who captured the heart of an Italian Renaissance prince condemned and looked down on by society at large. Instead she was celebrated by her princely lover in art, on commemorative medals, and in literature. Her family, her children, and she herself were all well provided for by the prince, as courtly society dictated. These women, in participating in illicit affairs with princes outside of marriage, performed an important role in Italian Renaissance court culture.

The women who gave birth to the illegitimate offspring of princes were providing an essential service in a time when infant and child mortality was high and legitimate heirs did not always survive to adulthood. In return these women were provided for and even celebrated by their princes. Isotta degli’ Atti served as a muse for artists and writers in the court of Rimini long before Sigismondo married her. Bianca de’ Pellegrini’s relationship with Pier Maria was commemorated in numerous fresco cycles and on commemorative medals, utilizing imagery that contained various levels of interpretation. The status of Este mistresses determined their children’s place in the succession, and in rare cases even allowed them to inherit over legitimate heirs. All of these women were compensated in one way or another by their princes, making up for the loss of their chastity and honor, while at the same time providing them with a place in the patriarchal system of exchange which was predominant in Renaissance Italian culture.

One pattern that emerges within the study of the mistresses of the Emilia-Romagna, which may explain the eagerness of women’s families to not so subtly push them into the paths of princes, is that a large number of them were relative newcomers to the cities in which they were residing. Isotta’s family had relocated from Sassoferrato to Rimini in the
fourteenth century. Elisabetta Aldobrandini’s family was originally from Ravenna. Bianca’s family had recently moved from Lucca to Como, making them new residents of the Milanese court when she met Pier Maria Rossi. Obizzo III d’Este became involved with his mistress, Lippa degli’ Ariosto, in her city of origin, Bologna, and only when he returned to Ferrara did she and members of her family relocate there. The family of Stella del’ Assassino, before she had met Niccolò III d’Este, had also recently emigrated from Siena to Ferrara via Assisi, changing their name from Tolomei to Assassino.341

It seems that, being new to their respective areas, the families of these women were more willing to sacrifice the honor of their female family members in order to cement and improve their statuses within the cities in which they were residing. The Atti gained influence in Rimini at Isotta’s expense, with her father being given a profitable position and her brother being knighted. The Aldobrandini attained powerful positions within the government of Rimini through Elisabetta’s influence over her illegitimate son. The Pellegrini and the Arluno, Bianca’s natal and marital families, also obtained some benefits from their relationship with the Count of Berceto. Lippa’s family retained its political influence in the city of Ferrara long after she had died. The family of Isotta degli’ Albaresani, also greatly profited when her son came to power, their connection by blood to the Este being openly flaunted. While the more entrenched families of the Emilia-Romagna would have felt a lesser need to sacrifice the chastity and honorable reputations of their daughters in return for princely benefaction, the newly established would not have hesitated to do just that. Their reluctance would have been even further diminished if there was the potential for the illegitimate descendants of their female family members to make claims to the city-states themselves. Such children could advance their mothers’ families’ positions of influence even more within princely governments.

Yet the more established families of these city-states of the Emilia-Romagna did in some instances also offer up their daughters to princes. Alberto I and Niccolò III d’Este both took mistresses from amongst the Roberti family of Reggio. Alberto actually did so in order to secure his position of power within his city-state, while at the same time elevating the

status of his mistress’s family when he married her.³⁴² It seems that both new and established families enthusiastically gave their daughters over to the lusts of princes if they stood to benefit enough from the arrangement.

A pattern of gift giving and an economy of favors for mistresses and their families were common and even expected in the courtly societies of Renaissance Italy. While in order to form alliances Italian noblemen married off their daughters by providing them with dowries, they could also find themselves the recipients of wealth and increased status if they were willing to sacrifice the chastity of their daughters’ to princes. With the abundance of families who did so, it soon becomes evident that this system of illicit affairs was not necessarily atypical, but that it existed as just another aspect of the patriarchal system of exchange which dominated Renaissance Italy. It was just a facet that did not hold as fast to chastity and honor as the rest of the system did. Even so, a mistress was expected to remain faithful to her princely lover, producing only his illegitimate offspring, even if she was married to another man at the time. Both means of exchanging daughters, whether in marriage with dowries in return for alliances or outside of marriage in return for wealth and privilege, were both different sides of the same coin.

In order to reveal just how less than atypical this system of illicit affairs really was, there is still an abundance of research yet to be done on illicitly sexual relationships outside of the confines of marriage during the Italian Renaissance. Princely mistresses were clearly not to be found only in the Emilia-Romagna. Numerous Italian Renaissance rulers across the peninsula openly kept mistresses, leaving room for the possibility of further scholarship on illicit affairs. Just as in the Emilia-Romagna, princes throughout Italy exuded virile reputations, of which mistresses and bastards were an important part.

The Visconti and then the Sforza dukes of Renaissance Milan had a wealth of mistresses. Luchino Visconti (1292-1349) is described as having had many spurii and mistresses. Bernabò Visconti (1323-1385) had three official mistresses during his reign. Giovannola Montebretto gave him a bastard daughter, Bernarda. Bernabò imprisoned Bernarda when she was caught having an illicit affair, allowing her to starve to death: further evidence of the double standard under which Italian Renaissance women suffered. But when

Giovannola had a very public affair with Bernabò’s condottiere, Pandolfo II Malatesta, she got off scot-free. This is surprising since society dictated that Bernabò would have been well within his rights to do to his mistress as he had done to their daughter, since illicit mistresses were expected to remain faithful to their princely lovers, even if they were married. Instead it was Pandolfo who suffered, losing his commission and being forced to flee Milan in a hurry. Giovannola was a rare exception to the rule.343

Bernabò’s second official mistress, Donnina dei Porri, produced three illegitimate daughters. As mentioned in Chapter Two, he may have married Donnina in order to legitimate their offspring, but his nephew, Giangaleazzo, had it invalidated in order to prevent opposition to his rule. Bernabò also had a relationship with Catherine da Cremona whose children are unknown. It has also been theorized that Bernabò had around twelve other bastards by anonymous women. Giangaleazzo Visconti’s (1351-1402) illegitimate son by his mistress, Agnese Mantegazzo, was able to attain the status of Lord of Pisa from 1403-1405, more evidence that illegitimate children could attain impressive statuses. The Visconti certainly projected virile reputations with their abundance of mistresses and illegitimate children, as did their Sforza successors.344

The Sforza were able to make their claim to the dukedom of Milan through Francesco Sforza’s (1401-1468) marriage to Bianca Maria Visconti (1425-1467), the illegitimate daughter of Duke Filippo Maria Visconti (1392-1447) by his mistress, Agnese del Maino. Francesco himself was the illegitimate son of Muzio (Giacomo) Attendolo Sforza (1369-1424) by his mistress, Lucia Terzani da Marsciano. Francesco produced around seventeen illegitimate offspring of his own with numerous mistresses. Giovanna da Acquapendente gave him three illegitimate children: Polissena I (1427-1428), Polissena II (1428-1449)—the second wife of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta—, and Sforza Secundus (1435-1492). Though his second official mistress, Druisiana (1437-1474), gave him no illegitimate offspring, she benefited from their affair when Francesco arranged for her to marry Iacopo

Piccinino. Francesco had a daughter, Isotta, with an unknown woman in 1428. He also shared a mistress with his good friend Morelli de Parma. It seems that some men were just as willing to share their mistresses as they were their wives with their princes. Francesco’s shared mistress gave birth to Tristano Sforza, the husband of the also illegitimately-born Beatrice d’Este. He also had an illegitimate son, Polidoro, and two daughters by an unnamed “lady of the court.” He produced another illegitimate daughter, Bianca Maria, in 1445 with Perpetua Crivella de Varitio. Another of his recognized mistresses, Hippolita, gave birth to a son, Giulio, who, like Cesare d’Este in Ferrara, made claims to Milan that were never recognized. In 1448 Francesco had Tristano, Sforza Secundus, and Polidoro legitimized.345

Francesco’s brother, Alessandro Sforza (1408-1473), was also an illegitimate son of Muzio Attendolo and Lucia Terzani. Despite his illegitimate status, he became the count of the Romagnan city of Pesaro. Alessandro also had an unknown mistress, who gave birth to a daughter, Ginevra (died 1507). Alessandro was able to secure an important alliance with the city of Bologna, marrying Ginevra off to two of its rulers: first to Sante I Bentivoglio and then to Giovanni II Bentivoglio.346

Francesco’s eldest legitimate son, Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1469-1494), had four children with his friend’s wife, Lucrezia Landriani. He had two children by Lucia Marliani, the wife of a Milanese courtier, who, as mentioned in Chapter Three, was purchased by the duke from her husband and mother. Galeazzo Maria also had a number of other children with unknown women. His brother, Ludovico Maria Sforza (1452-1508), the regent and then Duke of Milan, had three official mistresses. The first was Bernardina de’ Corradis, who died giving birth to his illegitimate daughter, Bianca. As was common, Bianca was raised by Ludovico’s wife, Beatrice d’Este. His second mistress was Cecilia Gallerani, who benefited greatly from the affair, as did her family. She gave birth to Ludovico’s illegitimate son, Cesare, and was married off to the Count of Carminati not long after Ludovico was married. His third mistress was Lucrezia Crivelli, who also gave him another son, Giovanni Paolo.

Clearly these Northern Italian Renaissance princes had no shortage of mistresses or bastards and more studies on their illicit sexuality would be both fascinating and informative.\textsuperscript{347}

The Renaissance kings of Naples in Southern Italy also had an abundance of mistresses. The Aragonese conqueror of the Kingdom of Naples, Alfonso I, had three illegitimate children. Maria was married off to Leonello d’Este, and Eleonora to Raimondo Orsini and then to Marino Marzano. His illegitimate son, Ferrante I, inherited Naples from him, since Alfonso’s legitimate wife was barren. Ferrante himself had a large number of noble mistresses and illegitimate children. One mistress, Diana Guardati, died giving him a son, Enrico. Ferrante was so fond of Enrico that when he died while still a young man, it was rumored that Ferrante’s legitimate heir, Alfonso, felt so threatened by Enrico that he had had him poisoned. Ferrante had an illegitimate daughter, Maria, by Marchesella Spitzata, and two sons, Cesare and Alfonso, by Priscisella Piscinelli. He had a son and daughter by his mistress Giovanella Caracciolo and three illegitimate daughters by Illaria Raviniana. Ferrante’s heir, Alfonso II, also had two illegitimate children by his official mistress, Trussella Gazzella: Sancia and Alfonso, both of whom married Borgias. Though Alfonso I was actually Spanish by birth, his descendants were born and raised in Italy, but they did continue to nurture close ties with their Iberian origins. Even so, in many ways, particularly in their abundance of mistresses and bastards, they were very much Italian princes.\textsuperscript{348}

More detailed studies focusing on the courtesans of Rome would also make for interesting reading. As evident also in this work, the Italian Renaissance clerics of princely houses seemed to have had little incentive to keep their vows of celibacy. Even the Renaissance popes, who were both spiritual leaders and secular princes of the Papal States, had illegitimate children by mistresses. These offspring were referred to as “nieces” and “nephews” and were often raised by the popes’ siblings, until the reign of Innocent VIII, the first pope who openly referred to his two illegitimate offspring, Franceschetto and Teodorina, by a Neapolitan noblewoman, as his own children. He supposedly also had another sixteen (most likely less) illegitimate offspring who he continued to refer to as “nieces” and

\textsuperscript{347} Ettlinger, “\textit{Visibilis et Invisibilis},” 779, 790; Shell and Sironi, “Cecilia Gallerani,” 56-58; “Sforza Family,” Genealogy.eu, last modified March 13\textsuperscript{th} 2003.

\textsuperscript{348} Amendola, \textit{The Mystery of the Duchess of Malfi}, 2, 4, 10, 212-213.
“nephews.” His successor, Alexander VI, also had an abundance of illegitimate children by various women who he openly recognized. His favorite offspring were those by the Roman courtesan Vannozza Cattanei: Juan, Cesare, Lucrezia, and Jofrè. Though most popes had their children when they were still bishops or cardinals, Alexander continued to keep a married mistress, Giulia Farnese, during the beginning of his pontificate, who may have given him a daughter, Laura. Pope Julius II also had an illegitimate daughter, Felice, when he was a cardinal, and she became the matriarch of the powerful Roman Orsini family. The Medici Pope, Clement VII, was the illegitimate son of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s brother, Giuliano. He had an illegitimate son of his own, Alessandro, by his Moorish mistress, Simunetta.349

The patricians of Italy’s republics also kept mistresses, who, in some cases, benefited from their relationships. A poor girl who became the mistress of an Italian patrician male could expect, like a princely mistress after her lover had tired of her, to be provided with a dowry and a decent marriage, something she could never have hoped for before. In Venice some unmarried women found themselves mistresses of their own households and their illegitimately-born daughters could even be legitimized in order to marry into the Venetian patrician class. Some Veronese mistresses, like those of the Emilia-Romagna, also profited from their affairs, as did their families, in some cases maneuvering upward socially.350

Powerful patricians could act just as princes of city-states did in relation to mistresses. Lorenzo de’ Medici, the de facto ruler of the Republic of Florence, openly composed love poetry to Lucrezia Donati, a patrician daughter of Florence. He also wore her device publicly into jousts, despite the fact that he was married. When he was forty, according to Francesco Guicciardini, Lorenzo fell passionately in love with the wife of Donato Benci, Bartolommea dei Nasi. He supposedly frequented her bed at her country villa, returning to Florence just before dawn each day, and his wife never openly complained about their relationship. Just as


with Italian princes, powerful patricians could take mistresses with little fear of public censor for themselves or their mistresses.\footnote{Christopher Hibbert, \textit{The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall} (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 146-147.}

Yet in patrician societies, which were made up of oligarchies, honor and chastity were still predominant in their marital system of exchange. Oligarchic families claimed to originate from respectable, legitimate dynastic lines, which demanded that a strict code of honor be adhered to when arranging marriages between their families. Marriages of oligarchs outside the sphere of the ruling families were frowned on, seen as diluting their dominance over the wealth and power of their republics, and preventing them from marrying their mistresses. Also, as mentioned in the Introduction, they tended to favor inheritance through primogeniture, with families’ entire estates going to eldest sons. This provided the families of younger sons, through their couplings with concubines, with almost no claims to family inheritances.

The princes of the Emilia-Romagna, on the other hand, tended to be descended from less than legitimate lines, which as \textit{condottieri} originally seized control of city-states through martial prowess. Only after instituting their rule over city-states did they usually receive the sanction of the pope or emperor, confirming them as overlords. Also princes’ tendencies to practice more fluid forms of inheritance allowed them to leave wealth and lands to both legitimate and illegitimate offspring. That these princes were descended from less than politically legitimate dynasties allowed them to openly flaunt their illicit relationships with mistresses, breeding other little-illegitimate-princes, who in some cases could lay claim to city-states themselves. While when it came to the daughters and wives of these princes the exchange system of honor and chastity, which also dominated the oligarchic republics of Italy, was supreme, the princes themselves were able hypocritically to institute their own less than honorable system, which was essential to their self-images as virile rulers.

While historians have written prolifically about the mistresses of Northern European Renaissance kings, they have rarely compared them to their Italian predecessors. As the Renaissance spread north into other areas of Europe, the legacy of the mistresses of Italy becomes more apparent. Powerful and influential mistresses began to make appearances in
the courts of France and England. As with the princely mistresses of the Emilia-Romagna, they were also celebrated in the arts and wielded great influence.

Though the official mistresses of the princes of the Emilia-Romagna were certainly not one of a kind, they played an important role in the Renaissance courts which they frequented. They were patronesses to artists and writers. They served as muses for which their princes commissioned works in their honor, celebrating them in a very public manner. Their illegitimate offspring played important roles in cementing marriage alliances and could even find themselves included in the line of succession. The fact that these women were involved in sexually illicit relationships—which was not the supposed ideal of their age—seemed to hinder them very little from participating in an impressive style in the glorious princely courts of the Italian Renaissance and they firmly left their mark on history.
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