

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Daughter, Mother, Widow: The Making of the Identities of Isabella d'Aragona

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Abstract

This article examines performances of identity (as daughter, mother and widow) by Isabella d'Aragona (1470–1524) in three of her letters. Isabella's construction of self, drew on her status as a dynast of the House of Aragon and aimed at securing her future and promote the interests of her children. The analysis of the language of letters, their context and their outcomes will contribute to the understanding of the use of letter-writing as an effective rhetorical device, thus demonstrating that the epistolary genre was used by women to engage their male recipients in a persuasive negotiation.

Isabella d'Aragona was an early modern dynast whose life was entwined with the early onset of the Valois-Habsburg conflict in sixteenth-century Italy. She was born into the House of Aragon of Naples, became Duchess of Milan by marriage and later ruled in her own right as Duchess of Bari. Isabella was born in 1470 to Alfonso, Duke of Calabria, and Ippolita Maria Sforza. Her parent's marriage was the keystone in an alliance between Naples and Milan, orchestrated by Isabella's grandfather Ferrante, King of Naples (r. 1458–1494). Educated by her mother, Isabella was betrothed to her cousin Gian Galeazzo Sforza and married him in 1489. From the outset, Isabella's marriage was overshadowed by Gian Galeazzo's powerful uncle, Ludovico *Il Moro* Sforza, who, after Gian Galeazzo's early death in 1494, claimed the dukedom of Milan for himself.

Throughout her life, Isabella acted to preserve her status as a member of the House of Aragon and further the interests of her children. These actions are documented in her letters, in which she constructed targeted identities at different stages of her life – identities that sought to achieve particular effects in her male readers. Her epistolary practices served as tools articulating affective persuasion by provoking certain behaviours of her correspondents though use of emotive language and tropes fashioned by gender roles not only expected of her but also expected of them. In this article, I aim to analyse Isabella's making of her relational identities through the means of her letters. I examine how she effectively drew in her male addressees to respond to her needs by enabling them to perform identities she persuaded them to adopt. The three letters selected for analysis here represent key moments in Isabella's life that demanded a particular identity presentation.

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The first letter, tentatively dated as 1493, is by Isabella as a daughter seeking help from her father so that her husband may exercise rule and she may receive her rightful place as a dynast, daughter, mother and wife. The second, from 1501, is addressed to Ferdinand II, King of Spain, and was written by Isabella as a widow seeking investiture of the Duchy of Bari as a guarantee of security for herself and her children. The third missive was written in 1513 to the emperor's envoy in the Duchy of Milan, Andrea da Borgo. In it she performs the identity of mother, with the aim of securing a specific marriage for her daughter and only surviving heir. The three letters reflect three performances of identities at three significant stages of Isabella's life: a daughter in need, a widow seeking support and a mother negotiating an advantageous match for her daughter.

I will argue that by constructing multiple relational identities, formed and reinforced through epistolary exchange, Isabella was also constructing her relationships to men in important ways. Isabella drew on gender ideologies of her day in her epistolary practice to conjure a range of positive responses in men, thereby securing the realisation of her objectives. For example, she narrated their histories and enumerated their responsibilities as significant male figures within her dynastic and diplomatic networks. I will also argue that the expressive language of her letters supported Isabella's political agency as a dynast in a performative practice of power. Indeed, her relational identities operate within a collective identity she maintains as an Aragonese dynast. The term *dynast* is understood here as a member of a dynasty who shares in the collective identity of the dynastic house; dynasts may act to advance simultaneously their personal and dynastic aims and objectives while sharing in a sense of collective identity of their dynasty. In all the letters, Isabella claimed authority as a member of the House of Aragon and employed specific emotional expressions to legitimise that status in her wider network of dynastic politics. I will also argue that analysis of the practice of correspondence by Isabella as a dynast contributes to an understanding of how early modern women in general used letters to construct multiple identities as a form of tactical play to their benefit.

Isabella's performance of her identities has not been subject to in-depth modern examination, perhaps because there is no single repository of her letters.¹ This may be due to a dispersed epistolary legacy, a consequence of her changing life circumstances, which took her from Naples to Milan, back to Naples and finally to Bari. Scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth century such as Achille Dina, Alessandro Luzio and Władysław Pocięcha have accessed portions of Isabella's letters to document certain events in her life in Naples, Milan and Bari, respectively.² They have not researched her letter-writing practice as a strategic tool as I do here. Occasionally, they make reference to the fact that some of the letters were written by Isabella in her own hand. More work is needed to gain an understanding of Isabella's use of secretaries and court scribes, particularly in relation to the collection of her letters from 1482 to 1499 in the *Carteggio Visconteo-Sforzesco*.³

Isabella's writings have not been studied through the lens of performativity – that is, with attention to Isabella's performance of gender roles as a form of practice that is shaped by her status as a dynast. Can the textual analysis of Isabella's letters expose her strategies when addressing powerful male correspondents? What do specific rhetorical forms and phrases within the epistolary text reveal about her connection with dynastic sources of power? How do the techniques that Isabella employs in her letters allow for the establishment of her identities used to persuade and thus prosecute her strategic aims? Can the political utility of the language employed in the letters be ascertained?

These questions guide this study. The letters are read here with attention to their distinctive emotive tones and invocation of paternal feelings, as well as to their references to dynastic belonging and the allusions to commonality of political goals.⁴ These techniques reflected the changing personal situation of Isabella, but they also aimed to position her as a dynastic actor whose influence went beyond her place as a daughter of the House of Aragon. Such an approach allows for a clear analysis of Isabella's performance as the exercise of power.

Isabella – relational identities of daughter and dynast

The identity of Isabella as a daughter seeking the help of her father is powerfully expressed in her letter, tentatively dated as 1493, addressed to Alfonso, Duke of Calabria.⁵ In 1493, Isabella found herself in a deteriorating position because of the actions of her husband's uncle. Although the original letter does not survive, its text was copied and commented upon by several sixteenth-century authors. The oldest of these was published in 1503 in the *Patria Historia* by historian Bernardino Corio, who ascribes Isabella's motives for writing the letter to her inability to suffer the indignity of living in servitude.⁶ The second most significant (but perhaps re-edited) copy was published by Paulo Giovio in the *Historiarum sui temporis*.⁷ Giovio also included Isabella in the *Illustrium virorum vitae*, where she features as the only woman among illustrious men.⁸ Giovio describes Isabella as a woman with the 'courage of a man'.⁹ Giovio attributes Isabella's letter with changing the history of Italy as a 'truly tragic act'.¹⁰ This early attention to Isabella's letter to her father highlights its significance and reflects her contemporaries' recognition of Isabella's power. The letter ignited 'the first sparks of the fire of wars that would envelope Italy'.¹¹

This 'fatal document' changed the course of history of Italy, according to Alessandro Dina, who considers the letter to be a genuine text dictated by Isabella herself.¹² Isabella's authorship, however, was questioned by Alessandro Colombo, who examined its early editions. He gave the letter an affective label of 'cry of anguish' (*grido di dolore*) and argues that discrepancies between Corio's and Giovio's version of the text suggest an imaginative forgery.¹³ Among Colombo's arguments is the point that the Latin letter published by Corio uses the phrase 'many years ago' to refer to the years elapsed between the time that the marriage took place and the writing of the letter. If this phrase, however, is read rhetorically, its inclusion does not prove an inconsistency, but it serves as a stylistic anchor to the past. Francesca Vaglianti, who recently examined Isabella's position as a dynast and a woman ruler, treats the letter as authentic, either dictated by Isabella herself or composed under her direction.¹⁴ Similarly, Cristina Panzera, when contrasting editions of Isabella's letter, explains that in Giovio's edition the letter is clearly summarily reworked with Giovio acting as 'the new interpreter of a historiographical tradition'.¹⁵ Isabella's epistolary voice is strong and clear when placed in the context of the events at the Sforza court.

In the course of early 1490s, diplomats residing in Milan reported on the increased tensions between the courts of Sforza and Aragon. The papal nuncio Giacomo Gherardi witnessed the public humiliation of the Aragonese envoy, Simonetto Belprato.¹⁶ With the death of Simonetto Belprato in 1492, Isabella lost her direct line of communication with Naples, prompting her to either write the letter herself or dictate it to a scribe. Any correspondence of a dynastic woman, suggests Deanna Shemek, was composed with the understanding that she may be under surveillance. This implied knowledge makes this very act of epistolary agency the emanation of Isabella's authority and power.¹⁷ Power, authority and agency are closely related concepts. Power is studied here though the actions of members of the dynasty whose status is upheld by their collective and individual identities.¹⁸ Power – its maintenance and exercise – is central to the operation of a dynasty, which, I argue, is understood as a socially constructed collective with shared identity based on history, bloodline and socialisation.

At the opening of the letter, Isabella invokes the figure of father and throughout places emphasis on the expressive and nurturing aspects of a culturally idealised father, a position bound by contemporary gender roles with certain expectations and responsibilities.¹⁹ By addressing her letter to her father, a powerful male figure in her life, Isabella establishes her right to speak to him as her protector, reminding him of his responsibility to care for her. This reminder brings into operation the central tenet of the dynasty's existence: the members of this socially constructed group can expect the dynasty's head to protect and support them. A dynasty is united by the perception of kinship, and the responsibility of its head is to act in its best interest, including the protection of its members. The authority of the dynasty's head is contingent on nuanced relationships with its members and the ability of the head to discipline, reward and protect individual dynasts.

The patriarchal nature of the dynasty is reinforced by the assumed gendered roles of dynasts, including perceptions of masculinity.²⁰ The patriarch's masculinity is a social construct that needs to be assumed, performed and accepted as a given, both by himself and others.

In Isabella's letter, she observes the convention expected of her as a member of the House of Aragon while constructing the identities of her correspondents as men in precise and gendered ways. She narrates the history of her fate when retelling Alfonso that it was he who had 'wedded her to Gian Galeazzo' on the understanding that her husband would in due time 'take the sceptre of his realm' as did his ancestors.²¹ In this way, Isabella asserts that she is the passive recipient of Alfonso's actions and that he needs to shoulder the consequences of his political strategies.

Isabella's marriage in 1489 to her first cousin, Gian Galeazzo Sforza, Duke of Milan, was intended to reinforce the existing political and military alliance between the Aragonese rulers of Naples and the Sforza of Milan.²² The anticipated benefits of these familial relations failed to materialise because the effective government of Milan rested not in the duke, but in the hands of his uncle, Ludovico Sforza.²³ The poor treatment of Isabella by Ludovico meant that relations between Milan and Naples became tense.²⁴ The mistreatment of Isabella by Ludovico Sforza reflected the mutual dislike of the Sforza and the next in line to the throne of Naples.²⁵ Alfonso's authority as father is constructed in Isabella's letter as derivative of his authority as dynast. Susan Broomhall asserts that authority is the 'practice of dominance by one individual or community over others', which involves specific methods of emotional persuasion.²⁶ In blending Alfonso's authority as father and dynast, Isabella's establishes her own form of authority as daughter; her authority gives her power and enables her agency, and she acts with the text of her letter in itself creating power.²⁷

Isabella's narration of Alfonso's own history in the letter explicitly constructs dynastic shared identity, one of Isabella's identities, which includes strategic marriage alliance and expectations of the historical continuity of the bloodline.²⁸ Isabella's performance of identity as Alonso's daughter is shaped by her agency as a dynast, which is dynamically constructed, often through the interaction and performance of members of the dynasty.²⁹ With the authority of the father and the dynasty established, Isabella's letter embraces her dynastic spouse. She moves to emphasise that Gian Galeazzo is now of age with the reference that 'he is himself a father'.³⁰ Again, the authoritative masculinity of both her father and husband are bolstered by the reminder of that powerful male trait and dynast's obligation: fatherhood.

Fatherhood was an expression of social relations and biological bonds indicating not only seniority and power but also care and protection. The concept of fatherhood reinforced the dominance of the father and constructed his responsibilities. Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent argue that fatherhood was a lived principle negotiated between members of the dynasty, frequently through letters.³¹ Alfonso's strength as a father and a dynast depended on affirmation by subordinate members of his house of his capacity to protect them and advance the interests of the dynasty. Isabella's letter delivers proof of his male governance, endorses his material and political power and asserts expectation of his capacity and duty to support and guide.³² Isabella's intentional attempt to establish (or re-establish?) Alfonso's emotional connection with his daughter contradicts the assumed traits of patriarchal masculinity; while his daughter demands his care and affection, she also reinforces his position as a senior dynast through constructing protective expectations of paternity.

In the next sentences of the letter, Isabella highlights this interrelationship as she states that Gian Galeazzo is now a father himself but 'not yet in possession of his dominions'. She points to the inconsistency of the expectations of Gian Galeazzo as duke and man with his actual status, as he 'can only obtain the actual necessities of life from the hands of Ludovico and his ministers' rather than through his own actions.³³

The supremacy of the powerful uncle is humiliating for a rightful ruler, who is at the mercy of 'Ludovico who administers the state' and discharges all the duties of the duke.³⁴ Indeed, this reduces the ducal couple 'to live as private persons' as he usurps all government.³⁵ Isabella's construction of the role of the father is focused on Alfonso's identity as a lawful ruler, as a dynast and as the protector of the subordinate members of the dynasty. This powerful idea of the membership of dynasty

emphasises the ties of kinship and is a vital element of a dynasts' consciousness.³⁶ Through her narrative, Isabella reconstructs Alfonso's actions and how they shaped her life as the Duchess of Milan, contrasting his expectations of her position with her present reality and the marginalisation inflicted upon her and her husband by Ludovico.

If the isolation of Isabella was the aim of Ludovico's action, it had the opposite effect of bringing Isabella and Gian Galeazzo together. The young couple became parents with the birth of their son Francesco Sforza on 30 January 1491, followed by three daughters: Ippolita (in 1493), Bona (in 1494) and Bianca (in 1495). In other circumstances, Isabella's dynastic role as wife and mother would have been fulfilled, cementing the alliance between Naples and Milan. For Ludovico, his nephew's growing family was a threat; for Gian Galeazzo and Isabella, it was the promise of future dynastic succession.

Isabella tells her father that her role as his daughter and as a dynast who ensures the bloodline of her house is now challenged by Ludovico Sforza, who strengthened his claim to power in Milan through a dynastic match with Beatrice d'Este (1475–1497), further highlighting his ambitions for the throne of Milan.³⁷

In her letter, Isabella turns to the birth of Ludovico's male heir as a sign of his desire to not only perpetuate his descent in the male line but also to establish a dynasty. Isabella uses the emotive claim that 'according to the popular belief', Ludovico's son received princely treatment from birth and will be soon named 'Count of Pavia', indicating that he is 'later to succeed as duke' in preference to her own son and Gian Galeazzo's heir.³⁸ This deliberate disclosure of Isabella's suspicion demonstrates the intensity of the rivalry between her and Beatrice. It may not have started after Beatrice and Ludovico's wedding, but Isabella's letter suggests that it certainly happened after Beatrice gave birth to Ludovico's heir, Massimiliano on 25 January 1493.³⁹

To accentuate this image of maltreatment and dispossession of legitimate dynasts, Isabella reveals her fears for her husband and children who now face 'risk to their lives'. This threat is amplified by Isabella's vision of the future, as she 'can already imagine herself as an inconsolable and deserted widow'.⁴⁰ Isabella's words here illustrate to her father the uncomfortable truth of her life at the Sforza Court in Milan – the personal was political and reflected the rapidly deteriorating alliance between the House of Aragon and the House of Sforza, where her husband was the legitimate heir but the government of Milan was usurped by her husband's uncle, Ludovico Sforza.

Yet, at this point in her letter Isabella turn to a rhetorical device and declares that she also feels 'courage and strength' because of the support of some of those around her.⁴¹ Isabella the daughter appeals to her 'father's compassion', 'his love of her' and hopes that the 'sight of her just tears' will move him to act. Isabella, the dynast, invokes Alfonso's 'royal generosity' to spare her from 'servitude, discrimination, insults' to have the 'rightful kingdom be restored' to her and her husband.⁴² Isabella ends with the exclamation that she would rather die at her own hand 'than bear the yoke of strangers'.⁴³

Isabella presents an identity that is far from a desperate 'cry of anguish' by Helen of Troy, as suggested by her contemporaries.⁴⁴ Her letter is a purposeful entreaty through which the daughter uses strategic language to construct her father's shared identity as a dynast. Isabella operates within contemporary gender norms and by defining herself as the daughter and a member of the House of Aragon, reaching out to Alfonso, Duke of Calabria in an attempt to secure her independence as a dynast within the roles of wife and mother assigned her by him. This dynastic identity may, as Jessica O'Leary demonstrated, involve dynasts acting to advance their personal and dynastic aims and objectives while having a sense of shared identity.⁴⁵

Gendered commentary in the sixteenth century by contemporaries such as Bernardino Corio, Paolo Giovio and Trajano Boccalini blamed Isabella's letter to her father as the chief cause of the French descent into Italy and their conquest of Naples. I argue, however, that the letter should be understood as a response to and reflection of a political and military alliance in decay by mutual mistrust between the Aragon and Sforza rulers. Ludovico's treatment of Isabella charted the course of the relationship between Naples and Milan. The rivalry between both dynasties, which intensified in 1492–1494, played a key role in bringing the Valois and Habsburg forces into Italy.⁴⁶ When Charles VIII of

France reached Milan in October 1494 to begin his campaign against Naples, Isabella's husband Gian Galeazzo was dying.

Isabella – relational identities of widow and dynast

Isabella became a widow on 21 October 1494. She was 24 and pregnant with her fourth child, her daughter Bianca.⁴⁷ The ceremonial audience given by Isabella on 20 January 1495 to Isabella d'Este served as a powerful statement of Isabella d'Aragona's deliberate performance of self, reinforcing her identity as the widow. Performative strategies that reinforced her identity as the widow played a key role in gaining public support and the loyalty of the Sforza court. Gian Galeazzo's widow received Isabella d'Este dressed in heavy mourning, secluded in a room draped in black. Isabella did not adopt the customary posture of a young widow, but that of a dowager duchess: the choice of dress and reception room highlighted that identity. In generating her own rhetorical identity performance, Isabella d'Aragona was not just a picture of grief, she was 'alone in misfortune' – her most powerful form of authority.⁴⁸

The deliberate and concerted grief programme performed by dynastic women, Susan Broomhall argues, formed an integral part of their identity as key players safeguarding their dynastic legacy.⁴⁹ For Isabella d'Aragona, her assumption of the identity of widow and custodian of her children's patrimony would from now on be incorporated into her epistolary practices and material presentations. Between the death of Isabella's husband and her departure from Milan in 1500, Isabella's sources of dynastic power were significantly diminished.⁵⁰ After leaving Milan, Isabella arrived in Naples on 7 March 1500 when the kingdom was still under the nominal control of her uncle, King Frederick.⁵¹ When French forces reached Naples in July 1501, Isabella and her daughters Bona and Ippolita took refuge on the Island of Ischia in the Gulf of Naples, together with members of the Aragon royal family.⁵² On Ischia, Isabella wrote a letter to the most senior member of the Aragon House, King Ferdinand of Spain.

Isabella's letter to King Ferdinand is dated 2 September 1501.⁵³ The letter is handwritten in Italian and most likely by Isabella's own hand, demonstrating her own determination to appeal to her addressee. Isabella addresses Ferdinand because she recognises that, with the advance of Spanish armies, her cousin, and the head of the House of Aragon, is in a position to ensure the security of her domain of Bari and of her other possessions in the south of Italy. The letter opens with the courtesy of rhetorical kissing of Ferdinand's hand, a customary mark of fealty and humility through which Isabella recognises the king as her elder, both in age and status as a senior dynast of her house.⁵⁴ This epistolary device differs significantly from Isabella's entreaty to her father as gesture and as the outward display of reverence towards the head of the house. Here she is a petitioner, and her words act in reverse: as an Aragonese dynast she places herself, her daughters and her possessions in Ferdinand's protection.

Isabella briefly refers to 'what is known to all the world' – the loss of her husband and the duchy of Milan, the loss of her father and brother and the captivity of her son, who was 'taken away' by the French in October 1499. She describes Naples as her 'final refuge' and moves directly to the matter that 'led her into this kingdom with two female children': the issue that concerns her most are the fiefs granted by King Frederick of Naples to her for her dowry according to and with the consent of Ludovico Sforza, the former duke of Bari.⁵⁵ This stress on legitimacy and lawful claim is tactical because it strengthens the perception of her as a dynast operating within the accepted and agreed norms of state.

Isabella refers to the fall of Aragon rule in Naples as another event that puts her and her 'poor daughters' at risk.⁵⁶ She then pledges herself as the 'obedient daughter' of the House of Aragon and presents herself as 'a young woman and widow' who requests his support to 'preserve her honour', which is threatened unless she leaves Naples not to 'remain in alien power'.⁵⁷ This dynamic reflects Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender as performative because 'one does not "do" one's gender

alone. One is always “doing” it with or for another’.⁵⁸ Accordingly, Isabella turns now to her supplication asking Ferdinand to consider her worthy of confirming her invested estates in Puglia and Calabria so she would not be ‘forced to go begging with these poor daughters’. Here the phrase ‘poor daughters’ is used by Isabella rhetorically again to emphasise the plights of her as a widow deprived of the means of support.

Isabella’s letter to King Ferdinand is similar to the letter addressed to her father in her deliberate reference to a shared sense of dynastic identity, revealing that she operated in a considered way to influence normative masculine behaviour.⁵⁹ Her ability to engage in such epistolary practice was deeply grounded in her education, which had been directed by her mother, Ippolita Sforza. Ippolita employed leading Neapolitan humanist scholars to educate her children – Isabella and her brothers.⁶⁰ Ippolita’s own letters revealed her ability to influence and persuade, as Diana Robin, Lynn Westwater, Evelyn Welch and Judith Bryce have demonstrated.⁶¹ Similarly, Veronica Mele, who examined almost 500 letters of Ippolita, shows that the success of elite women as dynasts was often based on their public performance and diplomatic skills, the result of their education.⁶² Isabella’s education included the study of Latin and Greek composition and rhetoric, and she repeated this approach to education with her own son and her daughter Bona.⁶³ Maria Bogucka, Meredith Ray and Sarah Ross see women’s epistolary tradition as deeply grounded in the humanist education embraced by dynastic Italian mothers and maintained by their daughters.⁶⁴

As in the letter to her father, in the letter to Ferdinand the Catholic, Isabella evokes her position as a dynast of the House of Aragon, placing her descendants in the care of Ferdinand and reminding him of his responsibility to protect his relatives. She trusts in the king’s good will and his ‘pure compassion’ towards them as ‘members of the House of Aragon’, as she explicitly reminds him. She draws on shared identity of the House of Aragon constructed by shared history, heritage, bloodline and interests.⁶⁵ Yet, she places herself in a subordinate position to Ferdinand II because her ability to negotiate is based on power expressed through her actions as a member of the dynasty whose status is upheld by their collective and individual identities.⁶⁶ That power gives her ‘the capacity to achieve a wide range of individual, family, House and dynastic interests’.⁶⁷ The reinforcement of her position comes in the customary end of the letter. She signs off as the king’s ‘obedient servant’, ‘cousin’ and uses her trademark phrase: ‘alone in misfortune’.⁶⁸ This style of personal appellation was adopted by Isabella after the forced removal of her son and accompanied her signature in the majority of her future letters.⁶⁹ On the surface, this powerful designation reflected her state of abandonment by allies and the collapse of her support networks, but when read in the context of Isabella’s actions, it was a powerful statement of her self-reliance, her authority, her singlehanded determination to shape her destiny – a deliberate act of self-identification.

In Isabella’s letter to King Ferdinand, reason and emotion are inseparable. The letter, deliberately written in her own hand, allows for this blurring of the two. As a dynast, Isabella invokes reason; as a widow, she uses emotion to induce a reaction in her correspondent. These overlap to give way to Isabella’s construct of identity as a widow, mirroring the strategy of her letter to her father. The gendered norms of the day expected her to demonstrate her female traits but her authority rests on her reason as a dynast: in order to be successful both letters allow reason and emotion to intersect. Indeed, her intended recipient, King Ferdinand, is likely to have expected Isabella’s use of affective strategies, and when the letter conformed to his expectations, it reinforced his perception of Isabella’s sophisticated dynastic rationality.

Isabella’s letter is strategic in the use of emotive language. She employs tone and phrases that are apologetic and draw attention to her condition as a widow and mother who is dispossessed of her children’s inheritance. Ferdinand’s masculinity and authority are uncontested because Isabella does not project superiority, complaint or threat. Quite the reverse, she highlights the threats she is subjected to, as well as the loss of dignity – not only as a mother but, more importantly, as a member of the House of Aragon. The bond of blood shared between both dynasts, members of the same house, is of critical importance here, with Ferdinand acknowledged as the patriarch of the dynasty. Isabella, as a subordinate dynast, chooses submission, acknowledging Ferdinand as the head of her house, even

though he is in fact the head of a junior branch of the dynasty. She deliberately focuses on dynastic identity. Her agency as a dynast is simultaneously being shaped and controlled by it. While fighting for survival, Isabella strategically constructs her place according to conventional gender ideologies and does not challenge patriarchal norms to further her own political goals. In the letter, she chooses to endorse these practices in order to benefit from their operation by representing herself as an agent of patriarchal ideology. She is pragmatic, with her letter arguing her case strategically to exploit the gender hierarchy of male dominance and female submission. At the same time, she uses affective language related to her position and that of her children to construct Ferdinand's dynastic obligations. She is performing her identity because this is an effective way she can achieve her aims. When Isabella presents herself as victim, it is deliberate and draws on an intricate network of traversing discourses of sovereign power, dynastic identity and gender. Her identities are not inert phenomena but depend on the historical and social contexts in which they operate. They also contributed to Isabella's success with her appeal to Ferdinand the Catholic delivering a positive outcome. The king confirmed her earlier investiture as the Duchess of Bari in her own right in 1502.⁷⁰

Dynastic women were expected to facilitate and maintain alliances between ruling families – as mothers to assure the continuation of the dynastic bloodline, as widows to guard the patrimony for their children, and, when acting with the agency of a ruler in their own right, to combine all these roles with the exercise of sovereignty.⁷¹

Isabella – relational identities of mother and ruler

Isabella's identity as ruler in her own right was the primary identity she performed after her investiture as the Duchess of Bari by Ferdinand II of Spain. She was now able to shape the destiny of her dominion and take care of her successors.⁷² The letter written in 1513 is addressed to the imperial envoy in Milan and reveals how Isabella performed her identities as ruler and mother.⁷³ Isabella did not leave the Isle of Ischia for Bari until at least April 1502 because of armed conflict in Calabria between French and Spanish forces.⁷⁴

In Bari, Isabella established a new court and took care of the education of her daughter Bona, her only heir. Bona was also the only legitimate successor of Gian Galeazzo to the duchy of Milan after the death of *il Duchetto*, Isabella's son Francesco Sforza (1491–1512) in France.⁷⁵ Born in 1494, shortly before her father's death, Bona Sforza was raised at the court of her mother in Milan, Naples and Bari. With Milan at the centre of the Valois–Habsburg Wars, Bona had little immediate prospect of regaining the duchy. After the first seizure of Milan by the Valois in 1499 and the subsequent capture of Ludovico Sforza in 1500, the French held Milan until 1512, when Ludovico's son Massimiliano was installed as duke with imperial assistance. After defeat at Novara (6 June 1513), the French were forced to retreat from Italy. Isabella was keenly aware of the Sforza restoration in Milan and her correspondence discloses that she made Bona's return to Milan, though marriage to Massimiliano Sforza, the primary aim of her diplomacy.

Isabella's intentions were known to King Ferdinand, who, in September 1513, mentioned in diplomatic despatches that his intention was for Isabella's daughter to marry Giuliano de Medici. He admits that the 'task is difficult' because Isabella informed him that 'she wishes to marry her daughter to the Infante Ferdinand, or to the present Duke of Milan' and that she also asked the emperor to marry her daughter.⁷⁶

Isabella's letter examined here is dated 27 October 1513. It is a handwritten missive that survives in the original and bears Isabella's own signet seal, suggesting Isabella's initiative and deliberate traversing of personal and state business.⁷⁷ It was written in the aftermath of the battle of Novara, which enabled Massimiliano Sforza's return to the Duchy of Milan. Her correspondent is Andrea da Borgo, one of the most capable diplomats in imperial service and a trusted intermediary of Maximilian I.⁷⁸ Andrea da Borgo (1467–1533) was a Sforza courtier who entered the service of Maximilian I after the French conquest of Milan in 1500.⁷⁹ Borgo represented the emperor as his signatory to the Treaty

of Blois on 12 December 1509 and during the Valois–Habsburg Wars worked closely with Matthäus Lang von Wellenburg (1469–1540) in securing Milan for Massimiliano Sforza.⁸⁰ From December 1512, Andrea da Borgo (as Maximilian I's ambassador), Raimondo di Cardona and Cardinal Matthäus Schiner formed the triumvirate that governed Milan, depriving Massimiliano Sforza of effective rule over the duchy.⁸¹

Studies of letter-writing by women in the early modern period demonstrate the diversity of women's engagement in literary, political, economic, social and religious correspondence. Analyses by Judith Bryce and Carolyn James give insight into the epistolary practice of elite women in the context of their political and cultural activities.⁸² Susan Broomhall, in comparison, places this practice in light of gendered performances of power, demonstrating that the epistolary practice by early modern women was in itself production of power.⁸³ Likewise, Isabella's letters demonstrate the key importance of expressive language as the means of crafting and supporting identities, while at the same time being designed to connect with readers for political effect.

Isabella's letter to Andrea da Borgo as the emperor's envoy in Milan is direct and written from a strong position of power. Isabella, while asking for help, maintains the commanding tone of a ruler who is addressing one who is not her equal. She opens the letter to her 'dearest friend' with a gentle reproach, maintaining that Andrea da Borgo should not be surprised by her letter as she 'does not cease to admonish him in this matter'. Letters written by women often mimicked personal conversation, argues Deanna Shemek, creating a perception of interlocutors speaking directly with one another.⁸⁴ This letter, in its almost chatty style, represents an attempt by Isabella to create a fictitious conversation and, as such, stands apart from Isabella's letter to her father and King Ferdinand.

Isabella uses the letter's affective power to validate both the fact of her letter and the request it expressed. This also suggests that negotiations between Isabella and the emperor had been conducted for some time. It is a friendly turn of phrase and is followed by her restatement of the 'trust she places' in him. The reason for her frequent missives is obvious – 'the desire to bring this thing to fruition'. 'This matter' and 'this thing' refer to the proposed marriage between her daughter Bona and her cousin Massimiliano Sforza, now by imperial grace the Duke of Milan. In the course of 1512 and 1513, when the Sforza's victory against the French seemed almost assured, Isabella must have hoped to finalise Bona's return to Milan as the bride of Massimiliano. Isabella provides an excuse of maternal concern for her 'admonitions' and continues: 'I am still a mother and I want to see my daughter happy while I am alive, and every hour seems to me a thousand years'.

Here, Isabella chooses to remind her correspondent of her duties as mother. This reinforces the understanding that identity is a dynamic concept, with its plurality underpinning the socially structured position of Isabella within the constraints of gender. Identities of early modern women were relational, shaped by phases of their lives as daughters, wives, mothers and widows.⁸⁵ Maria Bogucka, who undertook an analysis of the identities performed by Isabella's daughter, Bona Sforza – Queen of Poland at the different stages of her life – demonstrates that early modern elite women experienced and responded to similar challenges across different cultural contexts. In each phase, women were defined by their relationship to men.⁸⁶

What follows in Isabella's letter is enticement for Andreas de Borgo to act 'as we hope and as you have done so far', with Isabella offering him rhetorical assurance that 'he will have' in Bona 'a person who will always have respect for him and consider him to be her father'. This affective gesture, evoking the ambassador's paternal responsibilities, would be recognised by the imperial ambassador as overt expressive dissimulation used by Isabella. Dissimulation of the objectives by means of epistolary practice, argued Sarah Cockram, equally belonged to the arsenal of Isabella d'Este who often manipulated the epistolary form in the pursuit of her aims.⁸⁷

Isabella pursues this convenient and highly controlled affective strategy by telling Andrea da Borgo that he will be able to be able to treat Bona as if 'she was his daughter' because 'she will be so grateful for his help' and even more 'grateful and obliged for everything'. This places Bona in a highly vulnerable position but is tactical: a trusted man of the emperor would be able to pursue his highly successful career at the side of the Duchess of Milan. While Isabella successfully weaves diplomatic

threads of private, familial and state interests, her appeal to a ‘father figure’ differs from the tactical use of the same trope in the letter to her own father. Here she acts as an Aragon dynast who invites the confidence of a man of lower rank; while using the letter as a diplomatic channel of communication, she uses it as a deliberate power strategy to influence a useful man and extend her patronage – and also engage in imperial diplomacy. As in the other two letters, Isabella functions as a political actor and relies upon gendered identity performances available to elite early modern women. Similar to Catherine de Medici – whose credibility, explains Katherine Crawford, was built upon her gendered performances as ‘a deferential woman, an obedient wife, a dutiful mother, a devoted widow, and when possible, a benign peacemaker’ – Isabella performed all her identities and operated successfully within contemporary gender norms.⁸⁸

In her letter to Andrea da Borgo, Isabella also uses the rhetoric of maternal concern, placing him in the position of a man who by assisting women confirms his social standing as a member of the masculine elite, who is defined by helping women and is thus associated with a male concept of honour. Honour was commensurate with standing within one’s social circle. For Andrea da Borgo, who was only recently elevated to nobility by the emperor, honour and reputation were interchangeable and linked with preservation of the hegemonic dominance of the nobility. Isabella, a dynast, allows the language of her missive to Andrea da Borgo to transcend different social strata and invites the imperial’s envoy into her familial circle with words of future paternal familiarity with her daughter. Isabella concludes then by asking for the whole matter to be concluded quickly because it has been going on for so long. Isabella signs off with her appellation ‘alone in misfortune’ which by 1513 is her trademark.⁸⁹

In early 1514, the prolific Venetian diarist Marino Sanuto reported in Venice that ‘the duke of Milan, married his cousin from Bari’.⁹⁰ Shortly, after Isabella d’Este’s visit to Naples in December 1514, Isabella d’Aragona asked her subjects to raise funds to pay for Bona’s dowry.⁹¹ The marriage between the Sforza cousins did not take place, however. Pope Leo X summed up his disappointment to Isabella’s envoy in April 1515: if Massimiliano was ‘reasonable and took counsel of the wise’, then both branches of the Sforza dynasty ‘would reconcile through the marriage’ with Bona.⁹²

The hopes of Isabella were ruined when the armies of King Francis I of France took Milan in the aftermath of the battle of Marignano (Melegnano) on 13–14 September 1515. Massimiliano Sforza surrendered Castello Sforzesco on 4 October 1515 and was taken captive by the French. When on 23 January 1516 Ferdinand the Catholic died, the cause of Isabella’s daughter’s marriage was taken on by Maximilian I. The Emperor’s diplomats worked towards another highly strategic and advantageous match in the expectation that Bona would fulfil her duty in accordance with Isabella’s tactical offer. Isabella’s performance of identities triumphed with Bona’s coronation as Queen consort of Poland on 15 April 1518.⁹³

Conclusion

This study is the first ever analysis of Isabella d’Aragona’s letters from the view of her performances of identities. Isabella’s letters examined here demonstrate how she constructed her identities in order to influence and persuade her male correspondents. In addition to her targeted use of emotional language, Isabella’s strategy included the intentional shaping of her correspondents’ masculinity, for the purpose of invoking responses consistent with her own aims. The three letters analysed in this study are representative, albeit as a select sample, of Isabella’s correspondence composed at critical points of her life. As her life circumstances changed, Isabella’s performances of self were related to her position as daughter, mother and widow, and in performing those roles she fashioned her relationships with men.

Isabella’s contemporaries chose to place great significance on her letter to her father seeking help attributing to it the subsequent fall of the houses of Aragon and Sforza, and ultimately to the ruin of all of Italy. This highly gendered contemporary response and its treatment in the historiography is an

important area for future research. The modern analysis of the letter in this work allows for reconsideration of this 'fatal document' as a performative act by a dynast constrained by the assumed gender roles of a hostile court. Far from being oversimplified as a 'cry of anguish', Isabella's letter demonstrates the power wielded by a dynastic daughter and an elite early modern Italian woman. A striking aspect of Isabella's letter to her father is the way that it irrevocably linked her identities with that of her natal dynasty. Consequently, the reversal of the fortunes of Naples affected Isabella profoundly. Her subsequent letters analysed here show how Isabella used the extended dynastic network to her advantage.

Isabella's letters also reveal how the patriarchal structure of dynasties are reinforced by construction of masculinities by male and female dynasts, and how the authority of a head of the house is established by negotiated practice. The letters also confirm that in the world of high politics on the Italian Peninsula in the sixteenth century, the shaping and wielding of political power by women was possible in practice. For Isabella, letters were tools and letter-writing the means to shape rhetorical presentations to further her own ends. Through letters, Isabella gained access to her discursive authority as dynast by tactically using the medium of communication, while being mindful of men's expectations and their own gender roles.

Isabella's letters reflect early modern women's practice of power through the use of the letter as a formidable tool, which opened the way for gendered performances of identity within contemporary gender norms. For Isabella, as for other elite women, strategic letter-writing ensured their agency and served as the statement of their authority, with the letter becoming their tool in achieving their agendas. Isabella's performance of identities as a part of her epistolary practice was an effective act of power in mobilising men's decision-making and resources in her favour.

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ENDNOTES

¹To my knowledge, there is only one study of the text of Isabella's letter to her father, see Alessandro Colombo, 'Il 'grido di dolore' di Isabella d'Aragona duchessa di Milano', *Studi di storia napoletana in onore di Michelangelo Schipa* (Napoli: ITEA, 1926), pp. 331–46. The other study dealing with Isabella's letter examines the dating of Isabella's letter to Ferdinand the Catholic, see Patrick Zutshi, 'An unpublished letter of Isabella of Aragon, Duchess of Milan', *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 4 (2006), pp. 494–501.

²For example, Alessandro Luzio and Roderico Renier, *Delle relazioni di Isabella d'Este Gonzaga con Ludovico e Beatrice Sforza* (Bardolotti di Giuseppe Prato, 1890); Achille Dina, 'Isabella d'Aragona alla corte aragonese', *Archivio storico lombardo* 46 (1919), pp. 593–610; Władysław Pociecha, *Królowa Bona, 1494–1557*, 4 vols. (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 1949–1958).

³Archivio di Stato di Milano [=ASMi], Carteggio Visconteo–Sforzesco, Potenze sovrane, Cartella 1466.

⁴See, Sophie Ruppel, *Verbündete Rivalen. Geschwisterbeziehungen im Hochadel des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006); Bożena Czwojdrak and Agata Aleksandra Kluczek, *Kobiety i władza w czasach dawnych* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2015).

⁵Paul M. Dover, 'Royal Diplomacy in Renaissance Italy. Ferrante d'Aragona (1458–1494) and his Ambassadors', *Mediterranean Studies* 14 (2005), pp. 57–94, see especially pp. 83, 5.

- ⁶ Bernardino Corio, *Bernardini Corii viri clarissimi Mediolanensis Patria Historia* (Mediolani: Minutianum, 1503), cols f. R ii r-v. Modern edition: in Anna Morisi (ed.), *Storia di Milano*, 2 vols. (Torino: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1978), pp. 1481–82.
- ⁷ Paolo Giovio, *Historiarum sui temporis* (Apud Robertum Foüet, 1598), pp. 38–40.
- ⁸ *Illustrium virorum vitae* (s.l.: Torrentini, 1551). T. C. Zimmermann, *Paolo Giovio. The Historian and the Crisis of Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 243.
- ⁹ Giovio, *Illustrium virorum vitae*. Quotes from the Italian edition. ‘Il coraggio di un uomo’. *Elogi degli uomini illustri*, tr. Andrea Guasparri (Torino: G. Einaudi, 2006), p. 812.
- ¹⁰ ‘Un atto famigerato e davvero tragico che ci ha portato alla rovina’. *Elogi degli uomini illustri*, p. 812. Achille Dina, ‘Isabella d’Aragona Duchessa di Milano e di Bari’, *Archivio Storico Lombardo* 48 (1921), pp. 269–457, see especially p. 335. Alessandro Colombo claims that the letter is a forgery because of the discrepancies between Corio’s and Giovio’s versions. Colombo, ‘Il ‘grido di dolore’’, pp. 331–46. Cristina Panzera disagrees and argues that Giovio’s edition is simply a summarily reworked edition. Cristina Panzera, ‘Dai libri di storia ai libri di lettere: su alcune fonti epistolari di Francesco Sansovino (Del Secretario, libri IV–VII)’, in Luca D’Onghia and Daniele Musto (eds), *Francesco Sansovino, scrittore del mondo* (Sarnico: Edizioni di Archilet, 2020), pp. 331–56, see especially pp. 346–47.
- ¹¹ ‘Fu lei a scatenare le prime scintille dell’incendio di guerre che avrebbe avvolto l’Italia’. Giovio, *Elogi degli uomini illustri*, p. 812.
- ¹² Dina, ‘Isabella d’Aragona Duchessa di Milano e di Bari’, p. 335 (Italian text of the letter is given on pp. 337–38). Dina’s earlier work about Isabella concentrated on her life before the marriage, see ‘Isabella d’Aragona alla corte aragonese’.
- ¹³ Colombo, pp. 331–46.
- ¹⁴ Vaglianti, pp. 609–15; Vaglianti, pp. 455–84.
- ¹⁵ Cristina Panzera, ‘Dai libri di storia ai libri di lettere: su alcune fonti epistolari di Francesco Sansovino (Del Secretario, libri IV–VII)’, in Luca D’Onghia and Daniele Musto (eds), *Francesco Sansovino, scrittore del mondo* (Sarnico: Edizioni di Archilet, 2020), see especially pp. 346–47. Panzera also compares extracts of the 1580 edition of the letter published in Italian by Francesco Sansovino. *Francesco Sansovino, Del segretario di M. Francesco Sansovino libri VII* (Venetia: Appresso gli Heredi di Vincenzo a Valgrisi, 1580), 120r–121r.
- ¹⁶ Enrico Carusi, *Dispacci e lettere di Giacomo Gherardi, nunzio pontificio a Firenze e Milano, 11 settembre 1487–10 ottobre 1490* (Roma: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1909). Dover, ‘Royal Diplomacy’, pp. 83–85.
- ¹⁷ Deanna Shemek, *Isabella d’Este. Selected letters* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017), p. 13.
- ¹⁸ Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent (eds), *Gender, Power and Identity in the Early Modern House of Orange–Nassau* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p. 2; Czwojdrak and Kluczek, *Kobiety i władza*.
- ¹⁹ Ruppel, *Verbündete Rivalen*, pp. 54–62.
- ²⁰ Liesbeth Geevers and Mirella Marini, ‘Introduction’, in Liesbeth Geevers and Mirella Marini (eds), *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe: Rulers, Aristocrats and the Formation of Identities* (Farnham: Routledge, 2015), pp. 18–35.
- ²¹ ‘Multos iam ante annos, pater, Ioanni Galleatio me copulasti, ut, ubi aetas virilis adfuisset, sui imperii ipse scepra regeret; patremque Galleatium, avum Franciscum Sfortiam, et proavos Vicecomites sub exemplo sequeretur’. Corio, *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ²² Francesca M. Vaglianti, ‘Isabella d’Aragona, duchessa di Milano’, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Roma: 2004), pp. 609–15. See also Kate Trauman Steinitz, ‘The Voyage of Isabella d’Aragon: from Naples to Milan, January 1489’, *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 23, no. 1 (1961), pp. 17–33.
- ²³ Gino Benzoni, ‘Ludovico Sforza, detto il Moro, duca di Milano’, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (2006), pp. 437–38.
- ²⁴ Carolyn James, ‘Friendship and Dynastic Marriage in Renaissance Italy’, *Literature and History* 17, no. 1 (2008), pp. 4–18, see especially p. 9. David Abulafia, *The French Descent into Renaissance Italy, 1494–1495* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), p. 14.
- ²⁵ John Gagné, *Milan Undone. Contested Sovereignties in the Italian Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), p. 31.
- ²⁶ Susan Broomhall, ‘Introduction’, *Authority, Gender and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 1–17, see especially p. 1.
- ²⁷ Broomhall, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.
- ²⁸ Wolfgang Weber, *Der Fürst. Ideen und Wirklichkeiten in der europäischen Geschichte* (Köln: Böhlau, 1998), p. 95.
- ²⁹ Judith Butler, ‘Gender as Performance’, in Peter Osborne (ed.), *A Critical Sense. Interviews with Intellectuals* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 109–25.
- ³⁰ ‘Tempora iuventutis adimplevit, ut parens effectus sui adhuc imperii impos est’. Corio, *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ³¹ Broomhall and Van Gent, *Gender, Power and Identity*, pp. 16–18.
- ³² ‘In the Name of the Father: Conceptualizing Pater Familias in the Letters of William the Silent’s Children’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2009), pp. 1130–66, see especially pp. 1130–66.
- ³³ Ludovico’s decision to limit Isabella’s stipend infuriated her grandfather Ferrante. Dispatches of Giacomo Trotti, Archivio segreto Estense, carteggio degli ambasciatori, Milano, Archivio di Stato, Modena. Report of 11 February 1489.
- ³⁴ ‘Vix et maximis quidem precibus a Ludovico eiusve ministris ad vitam opportuna conceduntur: omnia illius libito administrantur; paces, bella tractantur’. Corio, *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.

- ³⁵ 'Nos privati, omni auxilio atque ope destituti, vitam inter privatos agimus'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v; 'Et omnia principis munera adimplens veri ducis officium exercet'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ³⁶ Geevers and Marini, 'Introduction', pp. 18–35.
- ³⁷ Carolyn James, 'What's Love Got to Do with It? Dynastic Politics and Motherhood in the Letters of Eleonora of Aragon and her Daughters', *Women's History Review* 24, no. 4 (2015), pp. 528–47, see especially p. 535; Francesca M. Vaglianti, '«Governare, io donna». Isabella d'Aragona principessa delle due Italie', in Patrizia Mainoni (ed.), *Con animo virile. Donne e potere nel Mezzogiorno medievale, secoli XI-XV* (Roma: Viella, 2010), pp. 455–84.
- ³⁸ 'Nuper puerum ex uxore suscepit quem comitatui Papie preficere velle cuncti predicant, ex quo ad principatum succedat et erga puerperam omnes principis honores collate'. Corio, *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ³⁹ James, 'What's Love Got to Do with It?', pp. 535–36; Gagné, *Milan undone*, p. 224.
- ⁴⁰ 'Iam vidua tamque et desolata omnique auxilio destituta mihi videar'. Corio, *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ⁴¹ 'Corpore animus et ingenium'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ⁴² 'Si paterna te pietas' *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v; 'Si mei amor'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v; 'Iustae lacrymae flectere possunt'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v; 'Corpore regia magnanimitas viget'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v; 'Servitute, discrimine, contumeliis'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v; 'Regnum dolo ablatum restituas'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ⁴³ 'Libet potius propriis manibus cadere quam aliorum iugum substinere'. *Viri clarissimi*, f. R ii r-v.
- ⁴⁴ 'Et ex ea omnia mala in Italia orta sunt, et fuit uti Helena Troiae'. Jacob van Royen, *Antiquitates Belgicae* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Royen, 1701), col. caput I: 1492.
- ⁴⁵ Jessica O'Leary, 'Wife, Widow, Exiled Queen. Beatrice d'Aragona (1457–1508) and Kinship in Early Modern Europe', in Lisa Hopkins and Aidan Norrie (eds), *Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 139–58, see especially p. 144. Weber, *Der Fürst*, p. 95.
- ⁴⁶ Dover, 'Royal Diplomacy', p. 83.
- ⁴⁷ Bianca Maria Sforza was born 1 March 1495.
- ⁴⁸ Luzio and Renier, *Delle relazioni*, p. 105. [letter dated 20 January 1495] Dina, 'Isabella d'Aragona', p. 395; 'Isabella d'Aragona', p. 389.
- ⁴⁹ Susan Broomhall, 'Catherine's Tears. Diplomatic Corporeality, Affective Performance, and Gender at the Sixteenth-Century French Court' (Amsterdam: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), pp. 55–72, see especially p. 55; 'Making Power. Gender, Materiality and Catherine de Medici', in Elise M. Dermineur, Åsa Karlsson Sjögren and Virginia Langum (eds), *Revisiting Gender in European History, 1400–1800* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 145–68.
- ⁵⁰ Isabella's grandfather Ferrante died on 25 January 1494, her father Alfonso II abdicated on 23 January 1495 (he died on 18 December 1495) and her brother Ferrandino died on 7 September 1496.
- ⁵¹ Giacomo Notar, *Cronaca di Napoli* (Napoli: Stamperia Reale, 1845), p. 233.
- ⁵² *Cronaca di Napol*, p. 242.
- ⁵³ Letter of Isabella d'Aragona to Ferdinand II of Aragon dated 2 September 1501, Add. MS. 4100(2), Cambridge University Library. See also published text of the letter in Zutshi, 'An unpublished letter'.
- ⁵⁴ 'basando le mano ala Maesta Vostra' 'An unpublished letter', p. 500.
- ⁵⁵ 'ultimo refugio' 'An unpublished letter', p. 500.
- ⁵⁶ 'queste povere figliole' 'An unpublished letter', p. 500.
- ⁵⁷ 'hobidente figlia' 'per conservacione de mio honore et per non restare in Napole in potere degente aliene, essendo io dona guvene et vidua' 'An unpublished letter', p. 500. Paolo Giovio commented that Isabella was a woman 'possessed by the spirit of hostility against the French'. Giovio, *Illustrium virorum vitae*, p. 203.
- ⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.
- ⁵⁹ Katherine Crawford, *Perilous performances. Gender and regency in early modern France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 27.
- ⁶⁰ Jeryldene Wood, *Ippolita Maria Sforza. The Renaissance princess who linked Milan and Naples* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), pp. 226–8.
- ⁶¹ Judith Bryce, 'Fa finire uno bello studio et dice volere studiare: Ippolita Sforza and her Books', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 64, no. 1 (2002), pp. 55–69, see especially pp. 56–61; Evelyn Welch, 'Between Milan and Naples. Ippolita Maria Sforza, Duchess of Calabria', *The French Descent into Renaissance Italy 1494–1495* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), pp. 123–36, see especially pp. 124–6; Diana Maury Robin and Lynn Lara Westwater (eds), *Duchess and Hostage in Renaissance Naples. Letters and Orations* (Toronto: Iter Press), p. 4.
- ⁶² Veronica Mele, 'La creazione di una figura politica. L'entrata in Napoli di Ippolita Maria Sforza Visconti d'Aragona, duchessa di Calabria', *Quaderni d'italianistica* 33, no. 2 (2012), pp. 27–75.
- ⁶³ Władysław Pociecha, *Królowa Bona (1494–1557)*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 1949), pp. 149–79.
- ⁶⁴ Maria Bogucka, *Bona Sforza* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1998), pp. 22–24; Meredith K. Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 22–23; Sarah Gwyneth Ross, *The Birth of Feminism Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 9–10.
- ⁶⁵ Liesbeth Geevers and Mirella Marini (eds), *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe: Rulers, Aristocrats and the Formation of Identities* (Farnham: Routledge, 2015).

- ⁶⁶ Broomhall and Van Gent, *Gender, Power and Identity*, p. 2; Czwojdrak and Kluczek, *Kobiety i władza*.
- ⁶⁷ Broomhall and Van Gent, *Gender, Power and Identity*, p. 5.
- ⁶⁸ ‘De Vostra Maesta obidiente serva et nepote. Ysabella de Aragonia Sforcia. Unicha in desgracia’ Zutshi, ‘An unpublished letter’, p. 501.
- ⁶⁹ The first known Isabella’s letter with the appellation ‘alone in misfortune’ is dated 11 December 1499. Dina, ‘Isabella d’ Aragona’, p. 389.
- ⁷⁰ Ludovico Pepe, *Storia della successione degli Sforzeschi negli stati di Puglia e Calabria, e documenti* (Bari: Commissione provinciale di Archeologia e Storia Patria, 1900), pp. 110–12.
- ⁷¹ Susan Broomhall, *The Identities of Catherine de’ Medici* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).
- ⁷² Document issued on 10 April 1500. Pepe, *Storia della successione*, p. 110.
- ⁷³ Letter of Isabella d’ Aragona to Andrea da Borgo dated 27 October 1513, Carteggio Visconteo–Sforzesco: Potenze sovrane, Cartella 1475, Archivio di Stato, Milano.
- ⁷⁴ Pocięcha, *Królowa Bona*, 1, p. 127. On 21 April 1502 the Castle in Bari was transferred into Isabella’s control by Spanish forces.
- ⁷⁵ Bona’s elder sister Ippolita died on the Isle of Ischia in 1501.
- ⁷⁶ Ferdinand II to Cardinal Francisco Remolini, *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers Relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain Preserved in the Archives at Simancas and Elsewhere* (London: Longman, 1862), pp. 156, doc. 32, September 1513. Later, Ferdinand acknowledges that Massimiliano ‘must be obliged to accept a wife from the hand of the Emperor’; marry one of Ferdinand’s and Maximilian’s granddaughters or ‘the daughter of the Duchess of Milan’. *Calendar of letters*, pp. 170, doc. 42.
- ⁷⁷ Letter of Isabella d’ Aragona to Andrea da Borgo dated 27 October 1513.
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APPENDIX 1**LETTER ALFONSO OF ARAGON, DUKE OF CALABRIA, DATED FOR 1493.⁹⁴**

Many years ago, father, you wedded me to Gian Galeazzo, on the understanding that he should, on attaining the age of maturity, himself take the sceptre of his realm following in the example of his father Galeazzo, his grandfather Francesco Sforza and of his Visconti forefathers.

He is now of age and is himself a father; but he is not yet in possession of his dominions and can only obtain the actual necessities of life from the hands of Ludovico and his ministers. It is Ludovico who administers the state, decides upon war and peace, confirms the laws, grants privileges, imposes taxes, hears petitions, and raises money. Everything is in his power, while we are left without friends or money, and are reduced to live as private persons.

Not Gian Galeazzo, but Ludovico, is recognised as lord of the kingdom. He places prefects in the castles, raises military forces, appoints magistrates, and discharges all the duties of the duke. His wife has lately borne him a son, who everyone prophesies soon be called Count of Pavia, and will succeed to the dukedom, and royal honours were paid him at his birth, while we and our children are treated with contempt, and not without risk to our lives that we remain under the roof of the palace, from which he would remove us in his envious hatred, leaving me widowed and desolate, destitute of help and friends. But I have still spirit courage of my own; the people regard us with compassion, and look upon him with hatred and curses, because he has robbed them of their gold to satisfy his greed. But I bend beneath the unequal weight and am forced to suffer every kind of indignities. There is no one here to whom I can speak, for even our servants are given us by him.

If your fatherly responsibility, if your love for me, if the just tears are able to persuade you, if you are moved by the royal benevolence, I implore you to come to our help, and deliver your daughter and son-in law from the fear of slavery and restore them once more to their rightful kingdom. But if you will not help us, I will rather die by my own hands than bear the yoke of strangers, which would be a still greater evil than to allow a rival to reign in my place.

LETTER TO KING FERDINAND OF SPAIN

Dated 2 September 1501. Island of Ischia.⁹⁵

Your Sacred Majesty, kissing the hands of your Majesty. Since my grievances are known to the whole world, I believe your Majesty already has news of it: that of the loss of husband and of the state of Milan and of father and brother, and my son taken away. As a last refuge, by order of the Majesty of King Frederick, I was led into this kingdom with two female children where his Majesty consigned to me for my dowry, by the will of the Lord Ludovico, the duchy of Bari and the principality of Rosano and county of Borelo, which in this realm were held by the aforementioned Lord Ludovico and with these I have sustained my life and of these poor daughters until now, this being until another accident of the expulsion of the said King Lord of this kingdom. I offer to be an obedient daughter of his Majesty and not to miss my debt but to preserve my honour, not to remain in Naples in sufferance of an alien power, since I am a young woman and a widow.

I brought myself here to Ischia with his Majesty where I am removed from every office and where I have no way to live with these two poor daughters and I plead that all the

estate that I held in Puglia and Calabria under my jurisdiction, will be confirmed, as I have kept in the past, by Your Majesty so that to support myself and not forced to go begging with these poor daughters, whom I entrust in the good will of Your Majesty; provide for us from pure compassion of being of the House of Aragon and for this grace Your Majesty will earn merit with our Holy God and the perpetual glory to the world.

I remit my [letter] though the bearer don Antonio de Cardona on my behalf, whom in turn to Your Majesty's good grace I continue to recommend.

LETTER TO ANDREA DA BURGO (ANDREAS DE BURGO OR ANDREA DAL BURGO, DA BURGO)

Dated 27 October 1513, Bari (?). Archivio de Stato Milano, Cartella 1475. Potenze sovrane A-B.

May it not surprise you, Signore Andrea, that we do not cease to admonish you in this matter, for the reason for this is the trust we place in you and the desire to bring this thing to fruition and finally to start agreements. I am still a mother and I want to see my daughter happy while I live, and every hour seems to me a thousand years. We ask you to do so as we hope and as you have done so far. And with our daughter in that country, you may be convinced that you will have a person who will always have respect for you and consider him to be a father, and whom you can dispose of as a daughter, and she will be so grateful for your help that you will find out that you have done a favor to those who are grateful and grateful for everything. We therefore ask you, as soon as we can, to bring the whole matter to an end quickly and not to allow it to be dragged on, given how long it has been going on.

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