



**James, Carolyn. A Renaissance Marriage: The Political and Personal Alliance of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519**

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human emotions, values, and reactions together to create visual statements about humanity, society, and their underlying foundations. An enjoyable read, Honig's book encourages us not only to reflect on the many conversations that Bruegel's art could have engendered, but also to use his work to explore our own ways of understanding human nature.

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**James, Carolyn.**

*A Renaissance Marriage: The Political and Personal Alliance of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 224. ISBN 978-0-1996-8121-1 (hardcover) \$80.00.

Isabella d'Este is usually portrayed as a paragon of noble Renaissance womanhood and female patronage. Since Alessandro Luzio's scholarship a century ago, studies of early sixteenth-century Mantua have often emphasized her statesmanship, at the expense of her husband, Marquis Francesco Gonzaga. In a study of their marriage, Sarah Cockram challenged this view, showing how they shared power relatively equally (*Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court*, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2013). Carolyn James's new monograph seeks to take this further, drawing new conclusions about their intimate relationship and about how the balance of power shifted between the couple over almost three decades of marriage. Like Cockram, she draws on the more than three thousand extant letters between Francesco and Isabella, as well as those of family and courtiers. Despite often being dictated, and with formal epistolary conventions, James discerns changes in sentiment between the two, from the protestations of love in the early days to the mutual appreciation, worry, and finally frustration of later years.

James has written extensively on Renaissance noblewomen, including Isabella and her mother, Eleanora of Aragon, recently focusing on women's correspondence and female roles in male domains. Her gendered approach now concentrates on Isabella d'Este as an example of a successful regent during

her husband's frequent absences. However, rather than emphasize Isabella's exceptionality, James shows how typical she was among the daughters of northern Italian courts. In the process, Francesco and his role in statecraft are again diminished.

The book is divided into eight chapters that progress chronologically, clearly demarcating the evolution of the couple's relationship, allowing the author to frame each chapter along a different theme. The chapters are further grouped into three phases of their marriage. The first discusses their decade-long betrothal, their marriage in 1490, and the awkward transition that followed. Recent scholarship on dynastic marriage has focused on cultural transfer between states, or the isolation of the new bride in a foreign land. However, this study shows the efforts to build relationships between the two children, and between Mantua and Ferrara, long before the marriage, aligning two families of comparable standing and under similar political threats. Francesco's affinity for "male" pastimes, and his active extra-marital sexual life are discussed, but more attention is paid to Isabella's struggles as a naïve, new wife. Their relationship in this early phase was almost non-existent, with Francesco travelling often and Isabella frequently returning home to Ferrara.

The second period follows the birth of their first child and the beginning of the Italian Wars, when Isabella began to take on a larger role in the running of the state in her husband's absence. The patronage for which they are known is discussed, as Isabella created an image of legitimate regency and virtuous "virile femininity" (59), and Francesco projected his strengths as a warrior. Their new closeness is illustrated in their affectionate correspondence, preoccupied with their children. They spent more time together during this period, having six children in eight years, Isabella therefore fulfilling her duty as an aristocratic wife. She also proved to be more than competent as a regent and adviser, allowing both of them to pursue statecraft and protect Mantua's sovereignty in separate but complementary spheres. However, it is Isabella's shrewdness that is highlighted, making up for Francesco's brashness and vacillations.

The third phase began in 1508, when Francesco was forced to withdraw from battle with syphilis. He was taken hostage by the Venetians, which James suggests was a pivotal point in their marriage; Isabella rose to the occasion, assuming greater autonomy than previously allowed. In the years preceding his death in 1519, tensions arose between them as she spent more time away, involved in diplomatic negotiations on behalf of both her natal family and the

Gonzaga. Francesco's commands that she return were largely ignored; James argues his attempts to reassert control, from a weakened physical state, were due to his attachment to his virile masculine identity (138). This section most closely follows their correspondence, tracing their political actions and personal travels narratively over their last decade together.

This is ostensibly a straightforward case study of dynastic marriage and shared power in a late Renaissance princely state. However, for much of the book its two subjects are discussed separately, undercutting the premise that it is about their intimate relationship and shared political life. Francesco is depicted less generously than Isabella, and James stresses the tension between her ascendance and his decline. The ways in which they were constrained by or contravened gender conventions is a major theme: Isabella is able to gain authority in Mantua and beyond because of her husband's liberal views of female governance, and then later despite his need to reassert his masculine dominance. Only chapter 6, linking their closeness in 1500–08 with their mutual affection for their children, addresses in any detail the intimate nature of their marriage. This is likely due to the limitations of the source material, which by definition only illustrates their relationship when they were apart. More could have been said about their life in Mantua, and how much their courts overlapped, although it appears that they were rarely in the same place and occupied parallel and intertwined but distinct spheres.

Beyond satisfying those interested in Isabella d'Este, dynastic marriage, and female authority, this volume illuminates multiple facets of aristocratic cultural history. The insights into noblewomen's ability to assume significant political power are invaluable. There are discussions of the lack of sexual education of new brides and the surveillance they were under; gift giving and collecting; parental affection, child-rearing, and the preference for sons over daughters; the early spread of syphilis and its attempted treatments; and inter-familial connections both before and after marriage. As well, in tracing the changes of allegiance, military service, and negotiations that the Gonzaga pursued, this work provides an excellent overall history of the political circumstances of Mantua in the late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento.

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