

# ISABELLA D'ESTE

*First Lady of The World*

(CA. 1474 - 1539)

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*This month's essay deals with one of the most noted women of the Italian Renaissance who played a key role in Italian politics and culture. She was an influential person during an age that was dominated by men. Thus, she represents another side of the Renaissance that sometimes is ignored by historians who primarily focus on the male-centric upheavals and tensions of the period. She was Marchesa of Mantua and was a patron of the arts as well as a leader of fashion, whose innovative style of dressing was copied by women throughout Italy and at the French court. She served as the regent of Mantua during the absence of her husband, Francesco II Gonzaga, the Marquess of Mantua, and during the minority of her son, Federico, Duke of Mantua. She was an effective diplomat for her city in the struggles to maintain its independence against both foreign and domestic opponents. (In 1500, at the age of 26, she met King Louis XII of France in Milan on a diplomatic mission to persuade him not to send his troops against Mantua).*

## Her Early Life

Isabella d'Este was born in Ferrara on May 18, 1474 to Ercole I d'Este, Duke of Ferrara and Leonora of Naples. Leonora was the daughter of Ferdinand I, the Aragonese King of Naples, and his wife Isabella of Taranto. Isabella d'Este received a fine classical education and met many famous humanist scholars and artists throughout her life.

One year after her birth, on June 29, 1475, her sister Beatrice d'Este was born, and in 1476 and 1477 two brothers, Alfonso and Ippolito arrived. In 1479 and 1480 two more brothers were born; they were Ferrante and Sigismondo. Of all the children, however, Isabella was considered to have been the favorite of her parents.

In the year of Ferrante's birth (1479), Isabella travelled to Naples with her mother and siblings. When her mother returned to Ferrara, Isabella accompanied her, while the other children stayed behind with their grandfather for eight years. It was during this journey with her mother that Isabella acquired her skill in diplomacy and statecraft.

Since she was naturally gifted and intellectually precocious as a young girl, Isabella received an excellent education. (Not a very typical thing for girls during the Renaissance). As a child she studied Roman history, and rapidly learned to translate Latin and Greek, which would become her favorite language. Because of her outstanding intellect, she often discussed the classics and the affairs of state with ambassadors. Moreover, she was personally acquainted with the painters, musicians, writers, and scholars, who lived in and around the court. Besides her knowledge of history and languages, she could also recite Virgil and Terence by heart. Isabella was also a talented singer and musician and was taught to play the lute by Giovanni Angelo Testarossa. In addition to



Portrait by Titian  
Circa 1530s  
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all these admirable accomplishments, she also was an innovator of new dances, having been instructed in the art by Ambrogio, a Jewish dancing master.

In 1480, at the age of six, Isabella was betrothed to Francesco II Gonzaga, the heir to the Marquis of Mantua. Although he was not handsome, Isabella admired him for his strength and bravery; she also regarded him as a gentleman. After their first few encounters, she found that she enjoyed his company and spent the next few years getting to know him and preparing herself to be the Marchesa of Mantua. During their courtship, Isabella treasured the letters, poems, and sonnets which he sent to her as gifts.



Portrait by Workshop of Fermo Ghisoni  
Francesco II Gonzaga  
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Ten years later (on February 11, 1490), at age 16, she married Francesco II Gonzaga, who had by then succeeded to the marquisate. Isabella became his wife and Marchesa amid a spectacular outpouring

of popular acclamation. Besides Marquis, Francesco was also Captain General of the armies of the Republic of Venice. Isabella brought as her marriage portion, the sum of 3,000 ducats in addition to valuable jewelry, dishes, and a silver service. Prior to the magnificent banquet which followed the wedding ceremony, Isabella rode through the main streets of Ferrara astride a horse draped in gems and gold.

Francesco, in his capacity as Captain General of the Venetian armies, was often required to go to Venice for conferences which left Isabella in Mantua living on her own at La Reggia, the ancient palace which was the family seat of the Gonzagas. She did not lack company, however, but passed the time with her mother, her sister, Beatrice, and with Elisabetta Gonzaga, her 18-year-old sister-in-law. The two women quickly became close friends. They enjoyed reading books, playing cards, and travelling about the countryside together. Once they journeyed as far as Lake Garda during one of Francesco's absences, and later travelled to Venice. They maintained a steady correspondence until Elisabetta's death in 1526.

Almost four years after her marriage in December 1493, Isabella gave birth to her first child. Together Isabella and Francesco had eight children: Eleonora (called Leonora, for short) Gonzaga (December 31, 1493 – February 13, 1570), who married Francesco Maria I della Rovere, Duke of Urbino; Margherita Gonzaga (July 13, 1496 – September 22, 1496); Federico II, Duke of Mantua (May 17, 1500 – August 28, 1540), who married Margaret Paleologa; Livia Gonzaga (1501 – January 1508); Ippolita Gonzaga (November 13, 1503 – March 16, 1570), who became a nun; Ercole Gonzaga (November 23, 1505 – March 2, 1563), who became the Cardinal-Bishop of Mantua; Ferrante Gonzaga (January 28, 1507 – November 15, 1557), a **condottiero** who married Isabella di Capua; and Paola Gonzaga (August 1508 – March 11, 1569), who became a nun.

## Isabella and Lucrezia Borgia

In 1502, a year after marriage to Isabella's brother, Alfonso, the notorious Lucrezia Borgia became Francesco Gonzaga's mistress. Isabella had given birth to a daughter, Ippolita, at about the same time, and she continued to bear Francesco children throughout his and Lucrezia's long, passionate affair, which was more sexual than romantic. Lucrezia had previously made overtures of friendship to Isabella which the latter had coldly and disdainfully ignored. From the time Lucrezia had first arrived in Ferrara as Alfonso's intended bride, Isabella, despite having acted as hostess during the wedding festivities, had regarded Lucrezia as a rival, whom she sought to outdo at every opportunity. Francesco's affair with Lucrezia, whose beauty was renowned, caused Isabella much jealous suffering and emotional pain. Francesco's and Lucrezia's liaison ended when he contracted syphilis as a result of encounters with various prostitutes.

Isabella played an important role in Mantua during the city's troubled times. When her husband was captured in 1509 and held hostage in Venice, she took control of Mantua's military forces and held off their invaders until his release in 1512. In the same year 1512, she was the hostess at the Congress of Mantua, which was held to settle questions concerning Florence and Milan. As a ruler, she appeared to have been much more assertive and competent than her husband. When apprised of this fact upon his return, Francesco was furious and humiliated at being upstaged by his wife's superior political ability. This caused their marriage to break down irrevocably. As a result, Isabella began to travel freely and live independently from her husband until his death on March 19, 1519.

After the death of Francesco, Isabella ruled Mantua as regent for her son, Federico. She began to play an increasingly important role in Italian politics, steadily advancing Mantua's

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Portrait by Dosso Dossi, c. 1515  
Lucrezia Borgia  
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position vis-à-vis the other city-states. She was instrumental in promoting Mantua to a Duchy, which she obtained by wise diplomatic use of her son's marriage contracts. She also succeeded in obtaining a cardinalate for her son Ercole. She further displayed a shrewd political acumen in her negotiations with Cesare Borgia, who had dispossessed Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, duke of Urbino, who was the husband of her sister-in-law and good friend Elisabetta Gonzaga in 1502.

Throughout her marriage and during her regency, when she was not conducting affairs of state, Isabella preferred to spend her free time engaged in cultural pursuits. She read books, wrote letters, and played the lute. She enjoyed the latter so much that she soon wanted to experiment with all the new musical instruments that were being made available. In addition to playing music, she collected art, and sponsored philosophers, poets, and painters, such as Titian, Raphael, Giovanni Bellini, and Leonardo da Vinci. She repeatedly requested that Leonardo paint her. For many centuries, only a drawing was known to have been made of her by Leonardo, but the final painting was eventually discovered in a private collection. She complained in a letter to Leonardo that her husband had given the drawing away and requested another, which she never received. Her requests for a painting of any other subject were apparently ignored as well.

Since she was a leader of fashion, she ordered the finest clothing, including furs as well as the newest distillations of perfume, which she concocted herself and sent as presents. Her style of dressing in simple, boyish caps contrasting with gowns that were richly embroidered with plunging décolletage was imitated throughout Italy and especially at the French court. Anne of Brittany, Queen consort of Louis XII, often copied Isabella, and had a fashion doll made in her likeness.

Isabella had met Louis XII in Milan in 1500 on a successful diplomatic mission which she had undertaken to protect Mantua from French invasion. Louis had been impressed by her alluring personality and keen intelligence. It was while she was being entertained by Louis, whose troops occupied Milan, that she offered asylum to Milanese refugees including Cecilia Gallerani, the mistress of her sister Beatrice's husband, Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, who had been forced to leave his duchy in the wake of French occupation. Isabella presented Cecilia to King Louis, describing her as a "lady of rare gifts and charm".

As a widow, Isabella at the age of 45 became a "devoted head of state". Her position as a Marchesa required her serious attention, therefore she was required to study the problems faced by a ruler of a city-state. To improve the well-being of her subjects, she studied architecture, agriculture, and industry, and followed the principles that Niccolò Machiavelli had set forth for rulers in his book *The Prince*. In return, the people of Mantua respected and loved her.

Isabella left Mantua for Rome in 1527. She was present during the catastrophic Sack of Rome, when she converted her house into an asylum for about 2000 people fleeing the Imperial soldiers. Isabella's house was one of the very few which was not attacked, due to the fact that her son was a member of the invading army. When she left Rome, she managed to acquire safe passage for all the refugees who had sought refuge in her home.

## Later Years, Death and Legacy

After Rome became stabilized following the sacking, Isabella left the city and returned to Mantua. She made it a center of culture, started a school for girls, and turned her ducal apartments into a museum containing the finest art treasures. This was not enough, however, to satisfy her.

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Already in her mid-60s, she returned to political life and ruled Solarolo, in Romagna, until her death on February 13, 1539.

During her lifetime and after her death, poets, popes, and statesmen paid tribute to Isabella. Pope Leo X invited her to treat him with “as much friendliness as you would your brother”. The Pope’s secretary, Pietro Bembo, described her as “one of the wisest and most fortunate of women”; while the poet Ariosto deemed her the “liberal and magnanimous Isabella”. The diplomat Niccolò da Correggio entitled her “The First Lady of the world”.

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Isabella in Red, Rubens  
Circa 1530s  
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## CREDITS

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