



Elizabeth Louise Bernhardt

# Genevra Sforza and the Bentivoglio

Family, Politics,  
Gender and Reputation  
in (and beyond)

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Renaissance Bologna

Genevra Sforza and the Bentivoglio



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# Genevra Sforza and the Bentivoglio

*Family, Politics, Gender and Reputation in (and beyond)  
Renaissance Bologna*

*Elizabeth Louise Bernhardt*

Amsterdam University Press



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*for Daphne*



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# Table of Contents

Illustrations, Tables, Figures, and Documents	9
Abbreviations of Archives and Libraries	11
Acknowledgements	13
Introduction	17
1. Genevra Sforza de' Bentivoglio (ca. 1441–1507): Lost and Found in Renaissance Italy	37
2. Twice Bentivoglio Genevra Sforza on the Marriage Market (1446–1454 and 1463–1464)	73
3. Genevra Sforza and Bentivoglio Family Strategies Creating and Extending Kinship on a Massive Scale	109
4. Genevra Sforza in Her Own Words Patron and Client Relationships from Her Correspondence	181
5. The Wheel of Fortune Genevra Sforza and the Fall of the Bentivoglio (1506–1507)	217
6. Making and Dispelling Fake History Genevra Sforza and Her 'Black Legends' (1506–present)	257
Conclusions	309
Index	317



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# Illustrations, Tables, Figures, and Documents

Figure 1.1	Portrait Medal of Genevra Sforza by Antonio Marescotti (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)	62
Figure 1.2	Diptych Portrait of Giovanni II Bentivoglio and Genevra Sforza by Ercole de' Roberti (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)	62
Figure 1.3	Bentivoglio Family Donor Portrait by Lorenzo Costa (Church of San Giacomo Maggiore, Bologna; Wikimedia)	63
Figure 1.4	Portion of Genevra Sforza's vita by Jacopo Filippo Foresti (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; World Digital Library)	64
Document 1.1	Transcription of Genevra Sforza's vita by Arienti	64
Document 1.2	A Sforza-Bentivoglio Family Tree	67
Table 3.1	Genevra Sforza's Eighteen Pregnancies	110
Table 3.2	The Bentivoglio Children	146
Table 3.3	Bentivoglio Serving as Godparents in Bologna	153
Table 3.4	Political Destinies of Bentivoglio Children	162
Table 3.5	Wedding Festivities of Bentivoglio Children	168
Table 3.6	Ecclesiastical Vocations of Bentivoglio Children	172
Map 3.1	Political Destinies of Bentivoglio Offspring	175
Table 4.1	Letters Exchanged Between the Bentivoglio and Gonzaga	187
Table 4.2	Letters Currently Known and Attributable to Genevra Sforza	208
Table 4.3	Letters Currently Known to Have Been Received by Genevra Sforza	214
Figure 6.1	A 1911 postcard featuring a hybrid reconstruction of Palazzo Bentivoglio in Rome	277
Figure 6.2	Another 1911 postcard featuring the same reconstruction of Palazzo Bentivoglio in Rome	277



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# Abbreviations of Archives and Libraries

AAB	Archivio Arcivescovile, Bologna
ASB	Archivio di Stato, Bologna
ASFE	Archivio di Stato, Ferrara
ASFI	Archivio di Stato, Florence
ASFZ	Archivio di Stato, Faenza
ASMI	Archivio di Stato, Milan
ASMN	Archivio di Stato, Mantua
ASMO	Archivio di Stato, Modena
ASPE	Archivio di Stato, Pesaro
ASPR	Archivio di Stato, Parma
ASRI	Archivio di Stato, Rimini
ASVE	Archivio di Stato, Venice
BCB	Bologna, Biblioteca Comunale, 'L'Archiginnasio'
BUB	Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria
CAS	Carpi, Archivio Storico Comunale
FEBA	Ferrara, Biblioteca Ariostea
FIML	Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana
MIBA	Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana
MRBC	Mirandola, Biblioteca Comunale
MOBE	Modena, Biblioteca Estense
MRP	Mirandola, Biblioteca Comunale
NYPM	New York, Pierpont Morgan Library
PBN	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale
PBC	Pesaro, Biblioteca della Curia Arcivescovile
PBO	Pesaro, Biblioteca Oliveriana
PRBP	Parma, Biblioteca Palatina
RIBG	Rimini, Biblioteca Gambalunga
SAR	Spilamberto, Archivio Rangoni
SBCC	Sassuolo, Biblioteca Comunale Cionini
VEBM	Venice, Biblioteca Marciana



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# Introduction

*Ginevra Sforza helped poison her husband Sante so she could marry his young cousin Giovanni—since they had secretly been in love. She acted viciously in the Malvezzi vendetta and alone ordered the slayings of the Marescotti brothers. She was impious, maligning, avaricious and wicked. Her mother had been a Jew. Like a termite, she gnawed at and eroded Palazzo Bentivoglio. Savonarola called her the devil who disturbed the word of God; in retaliation she sent out men to kill him. She demanded to discuss politics directly with the pope. She was a cruel and ambitious woman, the evil genius of the Bentivoglio family. Her proud boiling sforzesco blood made her commit cruel acts. Against her husband's knowledge she tried to pull together an army to retake Bologna. He wrote her a nasty letter, blaming her for the ruin of his family—and after she read it, she dropped dead. Her corpse was abandoned in the nettles. She is the first of the four most damned souls of Bologna's past and one of the most troubled characters in history. When the Bentivoglio palace was destroyed, the family papers all perished, and there are no surviving contemporary documents about her—so it's impossible to know anything more about Ginevra Sforza. She was such a terrible woman, who would want to study her anyway?*

The above paragraph summarises the dominant historiographical tradition about Genevra Sforza de' Bentivoglio (ca. 1440–1507), a tradition that has endured for over five centuries. It is the purpose of this book to show how flawed that tradition is and how it stems from a deeply misogynistic perspective, one that has hidden the real Genevra who dedicated herself and succeeded in fulfilling the gendered role demanded of her by society. Genevra's story has been easily masked as the records of her life have been scattered over dozens of archives, museums, and libraries. My aim is to reconstruct the real Genevra from those documentary fragments and to analyse how and why her story has been so maligned, beginning around the time of her death, and why the *damnatio memoriae* of her achievements has been sustained even in modern historiography.<sup>1</sup>

1 Because she signed her name in her own hand as '*Genevra*', her own spelling of her name will be used in this text. Some common fifteenth-century variant spellings include *Genebra*, *Gianevera*, *Ginebra*, *Gynevera*, *Zanevera*, *Zenevra*, *Zenevrega*, and *Zinevra* (or variants, as seen in contemporary documentation in Bologna, Milan, Mantua and other places).

The chapters of this book display a historical and thus revisionist view of a previously unexamined fifteenth-century woman who lived a long life at the apex of Bolognese society. This book is therefore not a project about the luxurious life of a wealthy Renaissance aristocrat but instead a critical investigation and re-evaluation of an important woman who has been misrepresented because until now Genevra has served mainly as a target for malicious stories, a scapegoat for explanations about the ruin of the Bentivoglio and of an independently governed Bologna. By grounding this predominantly biographical work on documents contemporary to Genevra's lifetime, this book aims to contribute to our understanding not only of her life but also to our knowledge of fifteenth-century gender roles, cooperative power and collaborative effort among members of a large Italian family, and crucial elements of family life and relationships in Renaissance Italy. This book also seeks to further our understanding of Bentivoglio-era Bologna, a significant international university city ruled in a unique fashion featuring a shared government: part local and republican led by a group of men calling themselves the *Sedici Riformatori dello Stato di Libertà* and part Roman led by papal representatives (*legati papali*) and the pope himself. Despite that official diarchy, the Bentivoglio de facto rulers aspired to become *de jure signori* (legally-recognised lords) like many of their peers across Northern and Central Italy. And Genevra, sent by Milan to serve in Bologna as consort to two consecutive Bentivoglio leaders and unofficial 'first lady' for over fifty years, performed her life role there in the fullest capacity.

## Bologna as Backdrop

Bologna is where the histories (and stories) of this book have unfolded. Located on an enormous fertile plain in Northern Italy, it has been a popular place to live since prehistoric times. In historic times, the Etruscans called it *Felsina* ('hospitable place'), and the Romans named it *Bononia* ('good', 'wealth', or 'advantage'). Throughout the millennia, various peoples have tried to control the area due to its inhabitants' capacity to create wealth through agriculture and sophisticated items for trade; its central geographic location along a road that became the Via Aemilia (completed 187 BCE) further boosted traffic and its relative importance.

The early medieval city was founded as a commune with a charter granted by Holy Roman Emperor Henry V (1116), and its golden age, the twelfth century, was marked by the foundation of its famous *studium* (the University of Bologna, popularly recognised today from 1088) and the creation of Piazza Maggiore: a large public square and important symbol of Bologna's autonomy. The city created and experienced diverse types of alternating governments and high political volatility



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as it became part of the Papal States (from 1278) and was fought over by military leaders, local and foreign families and papal legates. Legates serving various popes governed intermittently from 1325 before *Signore* Taddeo Pepoli and his sons' rule (1337–1350) led to selling the city to the Visconti that in turn led to a popular revolt and restoration of the free commune (1376). Sharing authority between a legate and Bologna's oligarchy (the '*Anziani*', *the senior government officials*) began in 1377. By 1389 the Bolognese began building an ex-voto monument, the Basilica of San Petronio, as an enormous symbol of gratitude for having escaped Milanese subjection. Their gigantic, highly visible house of worship constructed by the people in their new town square was meant to dwarf the nearby Cathedral of San Pietro (representative of and sponsored by Rome) located merely along a widened section of the former *cardo maximus* (the ancient north-south main street). San Petronio had been designed to dwarf even the original San Pietro in Rome—an indication of how the Bolognese felt towards Roman intervention. Over the centuries, *libertas* (self-rule or freedom from others' rule) became a civic goal and a symbol of the commune—although it was rarely attained.

According to myth, the Bentivoglio family descended from a thirteenth-century love affair of a king called Heinrich (Enrico or Enzo in Italian), a legitimised son of Holy Roman Emperor Federico II, and a country girl named Lucia from Viadagola, a hamlet outside Bologna. Instead of pronouncing the words in their proper order as '*ti voglio bene*', German-speaking Enzo, who was learning Italian, allegedly told Lucia '*ben ti voglio*' – thus the family name. According to archival documentation, the Bentivoglio existed several generations before Enzo appeared in Bologna, and many Bentivoglio worked as butchers within the *Arte dei Beccai*, a prominent and wealthy guild but one forever tied to images of violence due to the realities of the family's trade: sharp sets of knives and saws, constant slaughterings, and filthy-looking bloodstained aprons and hands.

Giovanni I Bentivoglio was the first (and last) member of his family to dominate the city as an actual *de jure signore*, which meant that he obtained from the *Sedici* the legal right to rule, a position he held for just over one year before he was defeated then stabbed to death by the Visconti (1402). The Visconti, papal legates, other Bolognese families, and a condottiere each again vied for command before other Bentivoglio succeeded at returning to power. Giovanni's son, Antongaleazzo, a professor of civil law turned condottiere (and the only Bentivoglio to obtain a university degree), led a revolt in 1416 and headed the *Sedici* before suffering exile for fifteen years; in 1435 upon his return, the Bolognese joyously received him—until he was decapitated by the papal governor, Bishop Daniele Scotti, who considered Antongaleazzo threatening due to his popularity. Antongaleazzo's illegitimate son, Annibale, was captured by a condottiere, Niccolò Piccinino, but became a hero after escaping imprisonment in Varano. Annibale returned home to lead a quasi



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*signoria*—a nearly independent court—but for only two years (1443–1445) when he was murdered by the main factional enemies of the Bentivoglio, the Canetoli men.

By mid-century so many killings had reduced the Bentivoglio to a family with no grown men left alive to lead in Bologna—so an unlikely candidate in the form of a young wool worker named Sante, an illegitimate grandson of Giovanni, was searched out and ‘discovered’ in Tuscany. He was invited to Bologna to head both the Bentivoglio family and especially the *Sedici* as no other senior member onboard within that committee was interested in such a contested position. Some of Sante’s success came from the Bolognese familiar with ‘one-family’ leadership practiced in nearby cities (e.g. Este Ferrara, Visconti then Sforza Milan, Gonzaga Mantua, Malatesta Rimini, Medici Florence, etc.), and a significant part of his success and credibility came from his ties to the powerful city of Milan represented by his marriage to Genevra Sforza (concluded 1454). Another major component of his accomplishment came from the ratification of a formal political contract with Rome defined by certain agreements called *Capitoli* (1447); from that point forward some refer to Bologna’s government as a republic—but merely by contract.<sup>2</sup> The unique and ambiguous nature of that Bolognese and Roman agreement (ushering in the period of *governo misto* or mixed government) forced local ambassadors to travel immediately to Rome for its re-confirmation with the investiture of each successive pope—so this renewal happened twice under Sante then seven more times under Giovanni II. Bologna’s government could further be understood as a *governo condiviso* (a shared government), a hybrid experiment in which the *Sedici* held some power but the pope in Rome ultimately managed the city. Despite those two governing frameworks, in the second half of the fifteenth century, Bologna began to function much like an independent court (*signoria*) as the Bentivoglio aspired for it to become the capital city of the region, modelling itself on how other important cities across Northern Italy functioned. Thanks to Sante’s natural leadership abilities and his ties to Florence and later Milan, Bologna became relatively independent and stable until Sante’s death, seventeen years after his arrival.

By that time, Giovanni II, son of Bologna’s hero of *libertas* and great-grandson of Giovanni I, had grown into a man and was ready to become someone. Together with Genevra as his new wife, they greatly furthered the Bentivoglio cause, actively negotiating their image and reputation in numerous ways. They created the largest family in the city (and one of the largest in Italy) thanks to Genevra’s contribution of eighteen legitimate children (and Giovanni II’s additional contribution of roughly as many more illegitimates), and they successfully arranged for their children to marry into the most prestigious Italian families of their time. The couple continued the development and decoration of the greatest Bolognese family palace ever

2 De Benedictis (1995).



built, a two-acre complex along Strà San Donato (today Via Zamboni) adorned by the most skilled artists and artisans available. In addition, Giovanni II became the only Bolognese to obtain the right to coin money. Their distinctive *sega* (the family's coat of arms: a trenchant red and gold saw) could be seen across the city on permanent structures as well as on paper versions posted on the homes of hundreds (or perhaps thousands) of openly *bentivoleschi* partisans. The family sponsored city-wide tournaments for the entertainment of the community while simultaneously displaying their own dominance, including the great tournament of San Petronio of October 1470 and reaching a visual and material peak at the teen wedding extravaganza of their son Annibale II and Lucrezia d'Este (January 1487). Both the tournament and Lucrezia's entry parade (and many events sponsored over the final decades of the fifteenth century) entertained the Bolognese, making them feel like part of the Bentivoglio community and the great court culture of the era. The family performed such events, working hard to appear dominant, fully in charge, and representative of the largest political base possible.

Furthermore, the family successfully fashioned themselves as descending from both a king (Enzo) and a country girl (Lucia) thus promoting their half European/royal, half local/peasant roots. Their palace included expensive imported marble details and exclusive artistic masterpieces yet was fundamentally built out of locally fired brick from the area's earthen resources. The children were married into some major ruling families across Italy but also into local Bolognese ones—as Giovanni II had offspring with his Sforza wife but also with multiple servant girls of his domestic staff. One of the best examples of their bicultural image comes from the commissioning at their main summer palace of an important fresco cycle—whose subject was not fantastic historical deeds or famous mythological stories—but instead featured the many steps behind the process of baking a loaf of bread (*La storia del pane*). In order to achieve their goals, the Bentivoglio tried hard to represent, associate with and please people from all walks of life.

For those reasons and others, Giovanni II's position of leadership in his city was fairly recognised, and his titles reflected his relatively certain position: *quasi signore, para-signore, de facto signore, primo inter pares, primo cittadino, P.P., patriae princeps ac libertatis columen, crypto-signore, pseudo-principe, semi-signore*, or oftentimes simply *Signore*—Lord—and even if that final title was perhaps the most commonly used, its sense of certainty remained misleading. On the other hand, and besides the various papal legates representing Rome and despite the many other powerful men of the *Sedici*, Giovanni II's huge palace and the many Bentivoglio who filled it (and all of their eventual marriage partners and their offspring and extended families plus their enormous domestic staffs) strongly confirmed his position as the most powerful man in Bologna. He dominated his city politically, economically, socially, symbolically and visually for forty-three years, an unprecedented amount



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of time in a place that had been unscrupulously fought over for millennia. As great-grandson namesake of Bologna's first *signore* and son of a hero, Giovanni II was also heir of the community's longstanding aspiration toward civic *libertas*.<sup>3</sup> For many he served as the incarnation of the potential eventual hope for *libertas*—as he personally represented Bologna's ongoing aspirations despite heavy alternate claims by Rome and Milan.

Bentivoglio Bologna could be considered closest in political form to nearby Medici Florence, both theoretically republican but strongly tied to one powerful leading family; although, unlike the Medici who controlled an independent banking empire, the Bentivoglio depended on income through tax collection and existed in an ambiguous limbo as a satellite of Rome. And unlike many other Northern Italian court cities like Ferrara or Mantua, Bologna was more open and diverse as a sophisticated university city as well as a hub for religious studies (thanks to the active monasteries of San Francesco and San Domenico) attracting students from across Europe and all while located on an essential thoroughfare that crossed and connected the peninsula. Genevra's husbands played many roles on the Bolognese political scene, serving simultaneously as quasi courtly princes, chivalrous condottieri, figurehead puppets, and mere *popolani* because technically they were only Bolognese citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Giovanni II alongside Genevra successfully led the Bentivoglio family for decades until, ironically, they became too powerful and were forced into exile when Pope Julius II himself headed a mission to destroy them (culminating in November 1506). After they fled, Julius organised a larger collective body of more acquiescent Bolognese patricians, a Senate, that would govern Bologna but answer more directly to him in Rome. Despite a brief restoration of Bentivoglio power led by Annibale II (May 1511– June 1512), answering to Rome has become Bologna's fate ever since.<sup>5</sup>

## Genevra among Women

Just as Bologna was a community ambiguously defined by its mixed government and its de facto rulers, Genevra Sforza was in a position that had many unique

3 For more on the Bentivoglio de facto *signoria*, see especially Ady (1937); Orlandelli (1967); Sorbelli (1969); Bocchi (1970, 1971, 1976); Prodi (1982); Basile (1984); De Benedictis (1984, 1995); Robertson (2002); Zangheri and Capitani (2007); Blanshei (2018); Duranti (2018); for *libertas*, see Duranti (2018), p. 276.

4 Many have noted that the Bentivoglio functioned as part princes, part *popolani*; see Ady, p. 168; Furlotti, p. 139; Basile (1984), p. 10.

5 For Bolognese socio-political histories, see Ady; Berselli; Blanshei; Bocchi; De Benedictis; Dondarini; Duranti; Fasoli; Orlandelli; Prodi; Robertson; Terpstra; Zangheri and Capitani; and others, as listed in the Bibliography here below.



facets. Her socio-political fluidity made her unique as she was born in unrecorded circumstances yet was eventually placed into the hub of a complicated web of the most elite Bolognese social and political structures. From childhood Geneva had been carefully groomed for an important negotiated position in marriage, and as she grew older, she would carefully invent herself within the Bentivoglio context over the course of her long adult life. At first Geneva shared common characteristics with illegitimate girls born into the Sforza and other leading Italian families although she remained in a particular sub-category with no dowry; she later shared commonalities with wives of various leaders of other oligarchies and republics, with women of families vying for more official power within the Papal State, with the whole body of patrician women in Bologna and with courtly women in other cities in which she and the Bentivoglio were most closely associated across Northern and Central Italy.<sup>6</sup> She also shared similarities with any other wife and mother in Bologna, as she had been married, technically, to mere citizens.

Early modern women in Bologna, like those across the peninsula, enjoyed significant influence in many spheres related to family life (as wives, mothers, advisors, intermediaries, mediators, elders, etc.) while they were simultaneously denied many political and legal rights. Italian noblewomen were considered powerful and important influencers based on the status of their birth families (and their ongoing relationships with them after marriage), their understanding and behaviour related to chastity and honour, the status of their husband's family and the quantitative dowry that they brought into marriage, their capacity to develop and maintain important social circles and courtly networks that could serve their families, and their capacity to produce healthy male children. Despite those significant female powers enjoyed by the elite, like all women, the Bolognese were subject to their fathers (and later their husbands) as the paterfamilias ruled over his household in a patrilineal society and held legal power over fellow family members (*patria potestas*)—as most principles in regards to women and their judicial status derived directly from Roman law (a substantial part of the *ius commune*). Patrilocality after marriage was practiced—so women moved out of their natal homes, becoming part of their husbands' families, and their children born into the relationship were legally his. Furthermore, there was often a significant age difference between spouses—so although women could influence their oftentimes older husbands, men held legal and much practical power over their younger wives who were often less-experienced in worldly ways. In fifteenth-century (pre-Trent) Italy, marriage was not yet controlled by the Church—so the only requirement was

6 For similar Sforza women, see Daenens; Eiche; Webb. For similar Medici women, see Pernis and Adams; Salvadori; Tomas. For similar women within the Papal State, see Luchs; Murphy; Nico Ottaviani. For similar Bolognese women, see Kovesi Killerby; Muzzarelli; Terpstra.





consent by the two parties involved (plus the legal age: twelve for girls, fourteen for boys); in reality consent was an afterthought since decisions ultimately made by male elders for the good of the family were the organising principles behind most marriages, especially for the ruling class. In Florence, women were appointed a formal legal guardian (*mundualdus*) in order to sign contracts, engage in legal proceedings or represent themselves in court; and in Bologna females were also under the guardianship of male relatives.<sup>7</sup> So despite their social connections and their related potential (unquantifiable) ability to influence the men in their lives, women could not hold public office, participate in public affairs, earn an income by opening a workshop or enjoy the benefits of guild membership, or study at the university.<sup>8</sup> Women were also tied to their quantifiable worth set in their dowry (their share in their father's estate that determined their position in life and their marketability as potential wives), which they were not allowed to manage until they became widows; they were also quantified in material terms by the clothing and accessories that they were allowed to wear according to their class status determined by sumptuary legislation created in 1454. Women were also fundamentally tied to their bodies—as every woman in every pregnancy risked her life and was tied to sheer luck at the time of childbirth. Because the lives of married women often revolved around reproduction, from the time of marriage they lived at great risk and had to be seen as replaceable by husbands and families in need of children, especially sons. Elite Bolognese women thus created and influenced their children, organised aspects of their households, spent most of their lives within their homes according to respectable early modern norms, raised their children and influenced them and (to unquantifiable extents) arranged their children's futures, and sometimes communicated through scribes with other elite friends and relatives. Ruling-class women also had the privilege of patronising artisans and artists; and they certainly enjoyed more material comforts than others but often lived far from their own mothers and female relations, their childhood homes, birth families, and natal cities.

Into our era, many of Geneva's blood relatives and relations through marriage have been the focus of study including Isabella d'Este, Beatrice d'Este, Eleonora d'Aragona, Lucrezia Borgia, Bianca Maria Visconti, Bona of Savoy, Caterina Sforza, Battista Sforza, Ippolita Maria Sforza, and others—and these works are part of a

7 Many thanks to Sara Cucini who provided me with a 1454 rubric reference (the 65th of the 4th book) to a Bolognese text establishing that unmarried women are under the guardianship of their male relatives: see ASBO, Comune-Governo, *Statuti*, Volume XVIII n. 51 (1454–1463) fols. 347v.–349v.

8 Although this book is set in a city featuring a major university, studying there was out of the question for females who would have been considered monstrous, utterly in disaccord with their role in life that idealised their chastity, modesty, piety and silence. Only in 1732 did a female, Laura Bassi, graduate from the University of Bologna.



well-established field of early modern Italian women's studies.<sup>9</sup> Despite Geneva's mixed background and the ambiguities in her life, Carolyn James explains that Arienti had been cautious not to group Geneva directly with other Italian court women while recognising that in reality she was very similar to them.<sup>10</sup> Early works about courtly women laid foundations for further research and led to the possibility of addressing individual women within larger contexts and to a greater understanding of the complexity of the early modern elite family experience. Some of the most recent and innovative scholarship involving Italian patrician women has focused on groups of women and men, on courts and societies at large, on gendered power and spheres of influence, on the teamwork of ruling couples regarding art and material culture as well as politics and daily life, the use of piety by princely consorts to reinforce moral authority, and as participants in various diverse narratives and previously unaddressed topics.<sup>11</sup>

Geneva Sforza was not the only early modern Italian woman whose reputation changed over time—but her story might be one of the most unique in that its adherence to its characterisation from early modern legend survives into our times. Over the centuries many stories, rumours, gossip and misinformation has circulated about females in positions of power who were oftentimes feared, severely criticised, or associated with evil; and so elements of the history of Geneva's image are similar to ones that have circulated around some others including Lucrezia Borgia, Alfonsina Orsini de' Medici and Catherine de' Medici.<sup>12</sup> Natalie Tomas summarises how most powerful females have stood: 'criticisms of women in power are simply part of a continuing tradition of vilifying women of power who strove beyond the acceptable model of the charitable, unassuming queen [or other sort of ruler]'.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, images of women enduring the opposite fate have also been possible—some more neutral images of early modern women have changed for the better. Some have become known in hyperbolically positive fashions as heroines, mythical viragos and miraculous exceptions to their sex including Geneva's own politically-active cousin, Caterina Sforza, whose image exploded after her death

9 For sample early monographs on Italian court women, see Arici; Bellonci; Cartwright; Chiappini; Pasolini dall'Onda; Terni de Gregory. For more recent works on these women, see Breisach; Mazzanti Bonvini; Hairston; Pizzagalli; Lubkin; King; Weisner.

10 James (1996), p. 85.

11 For a sample of recent materials on Italian court women, see the work (and the bibliographies) of Bourne; Cavalli; Cockram; De Vries; Ghirardo; Hurlburt; Laureati; Shemek (2005), (2017); Tomas; Welch.

12 For Lucrezia, see Felloni; Vancini; Laureati. For Alfonsina, see Tomas (2000), (2003); Reiss. For Catherine, see Sutherland; Knecht; Kruse; ffolliott. Geneva's story, in comparison to those of each of these three women in particular, will be treated extensively in Chapter Six here.

13 Tomas (2000), p. 84; Shemek (1998). For powerful and/or educated early modern women as monstrous, see Grafton and Jardine. The Geneva legends reached the levels of stories about Vittoria Accorambuoni (1557–1585), Bianca Cappello (1548–1587), and Beatrice Cenci (1577–1599).



although she had already been famous during her lifetime; Genevra's relation through marriage, Isabella d'Este, whose reputation became exaggerated within the sector of culture and politics; and the Venetian Queen of Cyprus, Caterina Corner, who became known as a famous patroness and beauty thanks to Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani*.<sup>14</sup> And the case of Genevra's aunt, Duchess Bianca Maria Visconti, is also unique: she was once a powerful woman, loved and respected by *milanesi*—and yet her story has remained remarkably constant in time, a fate nearly unknown to the reputations of many other important early modern women.<sup>15</sup>

### Much Bentivoglio History—But Not Many Bentivoglio Histories

As a result of the Bentivoglio lack of interest in recording their own history in their times, we never read the family's understanding (factual, idealised or entirely fabricated) of how they saw their own past, how they understood or justified their position in their era, or how they wished to be remembered. In the fifteenth century the Bentivoglio do not seem to have felt ready to use history to serve their present. Although he had a printing shop under his roof, Giovanni II never commissioned a version of his life printed there—nor did he hire Arienti or anyone else to write his biography although Arienti was often nearby (living across a narrow street from Palazzo Bentivoglio), impoverished and in search of courtly writing commissions.<sup>16</sup>

The Bentivoglio lack of interest in having their family history written down in no way implies their lack of interest and awareness of their own past. On the contrary, the Bentivoglio were perhaps too aware of their past and what it implied. They had illegitimate ancestors, multiple questionable family lines and narratives, they never ruled with granted titles (except for one year) during the entire fifteenth century, and nearly all Bentivoglio men came to tragic ends at the hands of enemies. Even Genevra, Sante's (and Bologna's) prized Milanese bride, had major flaws as an illegitimate girl with no dowry; and as Giovanni II's wife, her position as his sexually experienced older aunt-turned-wife and still with no dowry, looked odd, to say the least. Any of the above elements would have been highly questionable (and unavoidable) in a formally composed family history.

As proof of his understanding of his family's sketchy past, Giovanni II wished to raise up his family in his own time—and perhaps one day creatively refashion his family's past—but in the meantime he focused fully on shaping his present. His

14 For Caterina Sforza see De Vries, pp. 236–67; Breisach, p. 256; Hairston; Brogi; Ravaglia; Pasolini. For Isabella d'Este, see Kolsky (1984); Reiss and Wilkins (2001); Shemek (2017); Bourne; Bellonci. For Caterina Corner, see Buenger Robbert.

15 Lubkin, pp. 151, 246.

16 See James (2002), pp. 13–24.



own multiple mottos '*NUNC MIHI*' ('now is my time'), '*SPES MEA*' and '*HIC OF*' (the former 'my hope', the latter a corruption of the German *ich hoffe*, 'I hope'), '*SIC MENS EST ANIMUS*' ('the mind is the soul' or 'it is in my mind'), and '*UNITAS FORTIOR, DIVISIO FRAGILIS*' ('unity [is] stronger, division fragile') all distill his history-related sentiments.<sup>17</sup> But by commissioning no history of their own, the Bentivoglio risked leaving their family traces and image for posterity in the hands of *fortuna*.

Due to their circumstances of late 1506 onwards, the family was in fact forced to leave the interpretation of their past and its fashioning to Bolognese historians (and non-partisans) who remained in town after their exile—and then to Bolognese (and later foreign) historian strangers who did not begin to take them into consideration for several centuries after their Bolognese period. Apart from contemporary manuscript documentation mostly left un-consulted (yet carefully preserved) in various archives, as the centuries passed some histories have been written and published about the Bentivoglio. The Bentivoglio feature prominently in the monumental synthesising work of Fra Cherubino Ghirardacci (in manuscript form from the 1590s, published in 1932) followed by a biography of Giovanni II by Count Giovanni Gozzadini (published 1839).<sup>18</sup> Gina Fasoli published much about early modern Bologna for decades, including an illustrated booklet, *I Bentivoglio* (1936), that addresses their political, artistic and cultural issues.<sup>19</sup> Cecilia M. Ady led the way in English with *The Bentivoglio of Bologna: A Study in Despotism* (1937), which remains a reliable scholarly study of many aspects of the political and cultural history of the family; that same year Titina Strano published on Genevra Sforza, but grounded her version in popular legends.<sup>20</sup> Gianfranco Orlandelli addressed early modern Bolognese politics, government and finance that necessarily underlines much about the Bentivoglio (1967).<sup>21</sup> The director of Bologna's famous Archiginnasio Library, Albano Sorbelli, also worked on a rendition of the family's history (written pre-1943, published 1969).<sup>22</sup>

17 These mottos can be seen in numerous places; for example, *nunc mihi* is on a Bentivoglio *cinquedea* dagger at the Museo Civico Medioevale (Bologna) and was also used at the time of Annibale II's wedding (1487); *spes mea* is in the Palm Room at the Bentivoglio country palace at Ponte Poledrano; *Hic of* was described as within Palazzo Bentivoglio by Arienti in *Hymneo Bentivoglio*, c. 11r; *unitas fortior, divisio fragilis* is in the courtyard at Ponte Poledrano and on the ceramic floor of the Bentivoglio chapel at San Giacomo; various other Latin mottos (*brevi*) were stitched into the clothing worn at Annibale II's and Lucrezia d'Este's wedding (1487); see my Chapter Three here. Another important motto, '*per amore tutto bene voglio soffrire*' ('for love, I want to suffer everything well') remains more ambiguous—seen on the *Catastro Croce* at ASFE, on a *coffannetto* at the Museo Civico Medioevale (Bologna), and on a door of the Sala Grande within Palazzo Bentivoglio, as reported in Arienti's *Hymneo Bentivoglio*.

18 Ghirardacci; Gozzadini.

19 Fasoli (1936).

20 Ady; Strano.

21 Orlandelli.

22 Sorbelli.



The second half of the twentieth century saw more publications in the field of Bentivoglio studies. Francesca Bocchi contributed a pioneer account of the family's economic patrimony at the time of Genevra Sforza's brief widowhood, *Il patrimonio bentivolesco alla metà del Quattrocento* (1970), as well as many other publications related to the economic and political position of the family.<sup>23</sup> Bruno Basile edited a collection of articles about the Bentivoglio quasi-court in his *Bentivolorum magnificentia* (1984) that opens with an important article by Angela De Benedictis questioning official Bentivoglio title and status; also within that volume Paolo Fazion examines writing by Filippo Beroaldo for the marriage of Annibale II Bentivoglio to Lucrezia d'Este, and Basile himself treats Arienti's description of their nearby country estate, *Zardin viola*.<sup>24</sup> Basile (together with Stefano Scioli) has recently returned to publish on the 1487 wedding.<sup>25</sup>

Although the field of Bentivoglio history continues to remain fairly small, several more important contributions include the work of Barbara Furlotti and Anna Maria Trombetti Budriesi on the family's main country estate at Ponte Poledrano (now called *Bentivoglio*);<sup>26</sup> Georgia Clarke on Giovanni II's construction of his civic and personal magnificence and Randi Klebanoff on him as Sant'Agricola on the *arca* of San Domenico—both part of a collection of articles on Bologna and its subordinate yet negotiated position with Rome in a special volume edited by Nicholas Terpstra (1999).<sup>27</sup> David J. Drogin has added much to our understanding of the Bentivoglio artistic agenda tied to patronage within San Giacomo and the family palace (2004 onwards).<sup>28</sup> Carolyn James' article about Arienti's rendition of the 1487 Bentivoglio-d'Este wedding celebration analyses fascinating details within Palazzo Bentivoglio (1997); her monograph on Arienti and a subsequent publication of his letters (1996 and 2002) both carefully address one writer's literary path while client of the Bentivoglio and d'Este.<sup>29</sup> Stephen Kolsky has widely published on various aspects of the early modern books about famous Italian women, courts, and courtiers, and often addresses Arienti's *Gynevera de le clare donne* (1992–2005).<sup>30</sup>

Ian Robertson's work on Bolognese politics and Roman papal concerns under Pope Paul II brilliantly analyses the actions of the *Sedici* and includes much on Giovanni II in particular (2002).<sup>31</sup> His work together with that of Paolo Prodi, Angela De

23 Bocchi.

24 Basile (1984).

25 Basile and Stefano Scioli (2014).

26 Furlotti (1994); Trombetti Budriesi (2006).

27 Clarke; Klebanoff; Terpstra; and Terpstra has since also made other major contributions to our understanding of early modern Bologna.

28 Drogin.

29 James.

30 Kolsky.

31 Robertson.



Benedictis and Tommaso Duranti represent the finest detailed studies of Bolognese politics of the fifteenth century. Paolo Prodi has investigated the Bologna-Rome legal and political relationship focusing on the temporal power of the papacy (1982).<sup>32</sup> De Benedictis has made major contributions in the fields of political and legal studies, focusing on Bologna's complex relationship with Rome (1984 onwards), including her 1995 *Repubblica per contratto* and more recent work treats Julius II's takeover of Bologna and the fall of the Bentivoglio (2004).<sup>33</sup> Duranti has focused instead on questions regarding Bologna's *libertas* and on diplomacy among many other related topics (2007 onwards).<sup>34</sup> Finally, Aldino Monti has contributed a lengthy multi-faceted article about Bologna's long fifteenth century that covers many topics related to Bologna under the Bentivoglio (2007).<sup>35</sup>

Most recently, Gian Mario Anselmi, Angela De Benedictis and Nicholas Terpstra organised an exciting conference called *Bologna: Cultural Crossroads* (Bologna, 2011) featuring recent Anglo-American scholarship and yielding a collection of scholarly articles.<sup>36</sup> *A Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna* (2018), edited by Sarah Rubin Blanshei, also offers essays in English about Bologna's past and is an excellent summary of the current state of Bolognese studies across the board; her 'Introduction' to the series is our most current and thorough historiographical essay on early modern Bolognese studies and is essential reading for anyone interested in studying the city.<sup>37</sup>

## Why Recover Geneva's Story?

It is interesting to consider how and why Geneva's story has persisted for so long in Bologna, *la dotta*, home of Europe's first university specialising in the highly complex and detailed study of facts and interpretations of facts behind canon law and civil law—which have strongly represented part of the city's core identity for nearly one millennium already. The critical thinking skills of the Bolognese brought great fame to the city, as they still do. Since the eleventh century when the university was founded, the city has boasted a long tradition revolving around advanced studies, famous professors and a wealthy, thriving Latin-speaking pan-European university community—and all part of a strong and uniquely male cultural identity (until relatively recently when women were legally allowed to enrol and study there

32 Prodi.

33 De Benedictis.

34 Duranti.

35 Monti.

36 Anselmi, et al.

37 Blanshei, pp. 1–25.



too, from 1876). In that same city, a gendered story rife with misinformation and miseducation representative of a strain of patriarchal and misogynistic thinking has developed and thrived for over half of a millennium. Nobody within or beyond Bologna's scholarly community set out to critically review the case of one of the best known and most exaggeratedly construed females from one of the city's most famous eras—the Renaissance; and the work of those who participated in the slandering of Genevra (or simply in the repetition of stories) has been left unchecked. Misrepresentations of Genevra have grown into the twenty-first century despite decades of revisionist work on much early modern women's history, although we are well into fourth-wave feminism as a global movement, and besides the fact that Bologna was considered to have been a city where at least some early modern women excelled and were believed to have enjoyed certain greater advantages when compared to females of all other Italian cities. The strong Bolognese scholarly tradition alone makes one question how one woman got caught up in unscholarly tales invented and propagated in the most erudite of European cities.

With these themes in mind, this book investigates false histories invented and recycled about a female historical figure. It traces the development of them and serves as an explanation as to how they came about, how they survived for so long, and why one woman has been so detested in the local historiography. It is a study of historical facts and the repeating of inventions until they nearly became 'facts' as part of a papal-led and Bolognese-supported *damnatio memoriae* campaign. This book brings two main points forward: it is a fact-driven biography of an important early modern Italian woman who has never been treated in a scholarly fashion. It is based on contemporary documentation uncovered in masses of material housed in over thirty archives and libraries. It recounts the story of one of the relatively few people of fifteenth-century Bologna whose individual biography is able to be written in the first place thanks to surviving contemporary documentation. It contributes to our understanding of a unique elite woman and her participation in marriage, family and socio-civic life of Renaissance Italy that can be compared to the lives (and histories) of some of Genevra's relatives and acquaintances (named above). It also adds to our understanding of a woman's place in early modern Bologna—an understudied city when compared to Florence, Venice or Rome—one with different politics, and one where it has been claimed that women had greater opportunity.

There are definitely some unusual parts to Genevra's story and some gaps: her birth records have not surfaced, and we do not know who her mother was. She was married twice into the same family and never had a dowry. She died in exile and has no death marker. Palazzo Bentivoglio, her home and Bologna's grandest fifteenth-century palace was destroyed—completely razed to the ground. Although much from the palace was saved or has otherwise survived elsewhere, the loss of their enormous residence promoted the general idea that few traces survive about the



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family. Beliefs continue to circulate about how little exists about Geneva or other Bentivoglio in the archives due to the loss of the family's chancery records; however, the Gonzaga for example kept two-way records of their correspondence with the Bentivoglio; and even the surviving one-way correspondence, as in the case with the Sforza, can yield significant findings. The Bentivoglio '*guasto*' (the enormous rubble heap left after everything valuable or salvageable had been removed from the dismantled and destroyed palace, and as depicted on Bolognese maps drawn from 1507 until the eighteenth century when the Teatro Comunale was built upon parts of its foundations) lives on in *la via del Guasto* and the *Giardino del Guasto*; but the word '*guasto*' itself, referring to something ruined and destroyed, does not attract positive attention or make one believe there could be much worthy Bentivoglio material available to study. Geneva was also left unstudied due to inconvenience: it has been difficult to study the life of someone whose details are often fragmentary or embedded in other dense (and often un-inventoried) archival materials; and after the Bentivoglio were forced to flee to numerous locations across Northern Italy, each taking certain items with them and corresponding from a variety of locations, traces about Geneva's circumstances have been spread thinly and across many archives. These facts and the negativity surrounding Geneva in the Bolognese historiography surely turned off a lot of potential historian investigators: who would want to study such a 'negative' and 'un-researchable' person? Overall Geneva's historical past and creative posthumous situation force us to consider the roles played by patriarchy as well as *fortuna* across history—including the circumvention of her history despite archival documentation.

This book therefore offers a revisionist explanation that strives to report about and analyse the life story of one person in the past—and it shows how one person's life has necessarily been tied up with the lives and histories of many others: that of her father and uncle (the duke of Milan), her two husbands (Sante and Giovanni II Bentivoglio), her many children/grandchildren/stepchildren, the Bentivoglio family at large, Pope Julius II, the city of Bologna and its place within the Papal State, the history of gendered relations between Renaissance Italian women and men, and the history of the Italian family and of early modern women in relation to it.

This text builds on the Bolognese scholarship mentioned above and begins by introducing Geneva Sforza as an historical figure explored in a variety of ways. The first chapter gives us an idea of how she was seen by her contemporaries—and is based on a wide variety of fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century archival sources—including contemporary public information recorded in chronicles, miscellaneous fifteenth-century publications and art. Chapter Two stems from an analysis of correspondence between the Bentivoglio and the Sforza, now carefully preserved in Milan. It focuses on the private, behind-the-scenes details of her two forced marriages to Bentivoglio men and the role played by her manipulating uncle,



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Duke Francesco Sforza. Chapter Three explores Genevra over the course of many years as a loyal wife and prolific mother (one of the most prolific of early modern Italy) and how she and especially Giovanni II (and his own additional brood of illegitimates) organised the lives of so many children for the progressive good of the family. Information on these children stems from Bolognese baptismal records and other contemporary sources leading to further investigations in archives and libraries across Italy.

Chapter Four analyses Genevra's correspondence with Italian courtly families, especially with the Gonzaga in Mantua, yielding information about Genevra's role and understanding of herself, her family and her staff; Genevra's letters were found among thousands of letters exchanged and then examined in context. Chapter Five looks at how Genevra and the Bentivoglio were forced out of Bologna and what became of them thereafter—in multiple locations—until her death shortly afterward. Chapter Six stands alone as it explores the development of legends invented about her that have been snowballing since the time of her exile and death. What could one person have done to merit such a reputation for so long? How should we understand Genevra's life in contrast to the legends repeated about her? How do untruths enter our understanding of the past, and why do we allow them to continue to do so, especially in relation to women? What was Genevra's life like, and what can we learn about it and from it? These are some of the questions that drove my research for years and whose answers are the heart of this book.

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