

Jessica O'Leary

**Renaissance  
Masculinities,  
Diplomacy, and  
Cultural Transfer**

Federico and Ferrante  
Gonzaga in Italy  
and Beyond

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# Renaissance Masculinities, Diplomacy, and Cultural Transfer

# Renaissance History, Art and Culture

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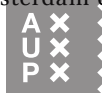
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# Renaissance Masculinities, Diplomacy, and Cultural Transfer

*Federico and Ferrante Gonzaga in Italy and Beyond*

*Jessica O'Leary*

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# Acknowledgements

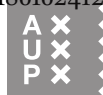
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# Abbreviations

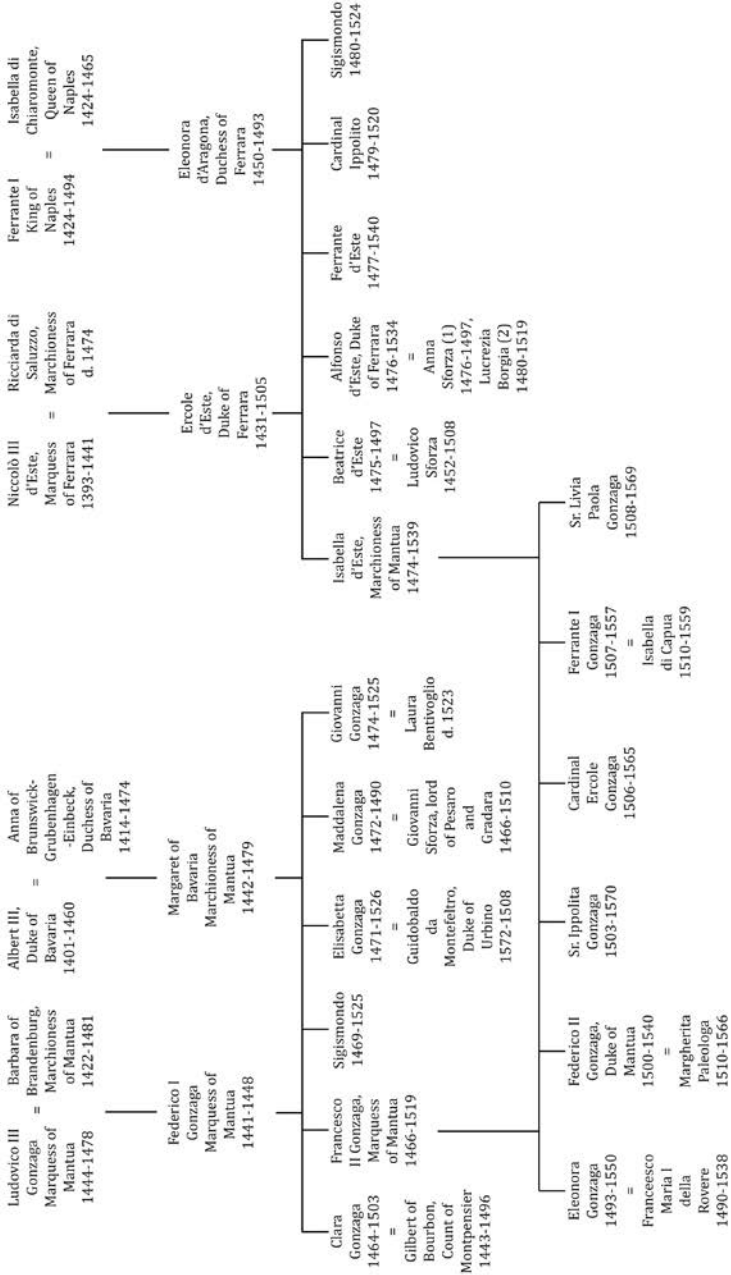
ASMi	Archivio di Stato, Milano
ASMn	Archivio di Stato, Mantova
AG	Archivio Gonzaga
b.	busta (box)
c.	carta (page)
doc.	document
fasc.	fasciolo (bundle)
ms.	manuscript
s.f no	foliation
n.p no	pagination



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# Genealogy of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga



Adapted from Carolyn James, *A Renaissance Marriage*.

Fig. 1 Genealogy of the Gonzaga. Adapted by the author from Carolyn James, *A Renaissance Marriage*.



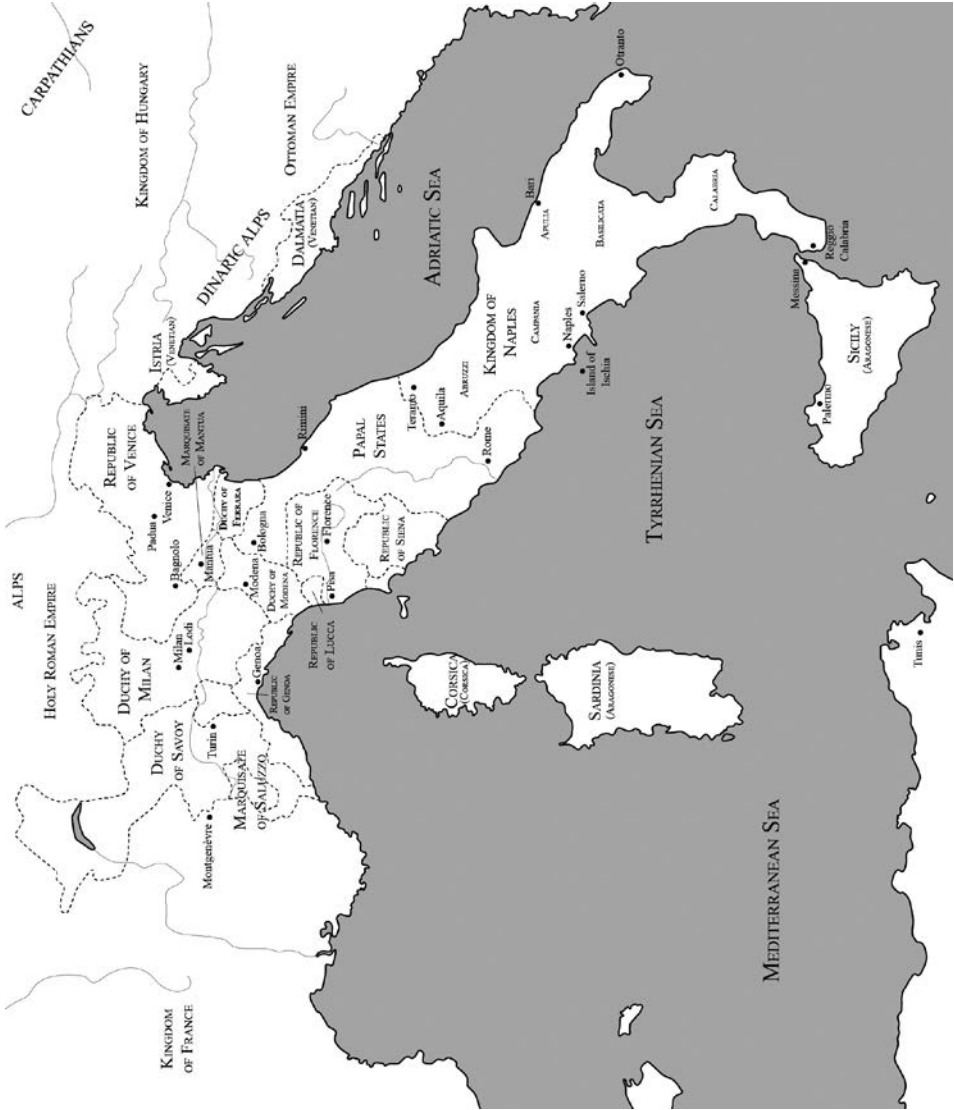


Fig. 2 Map of Italy in the late fifteenth century. Source: Author (Google API)

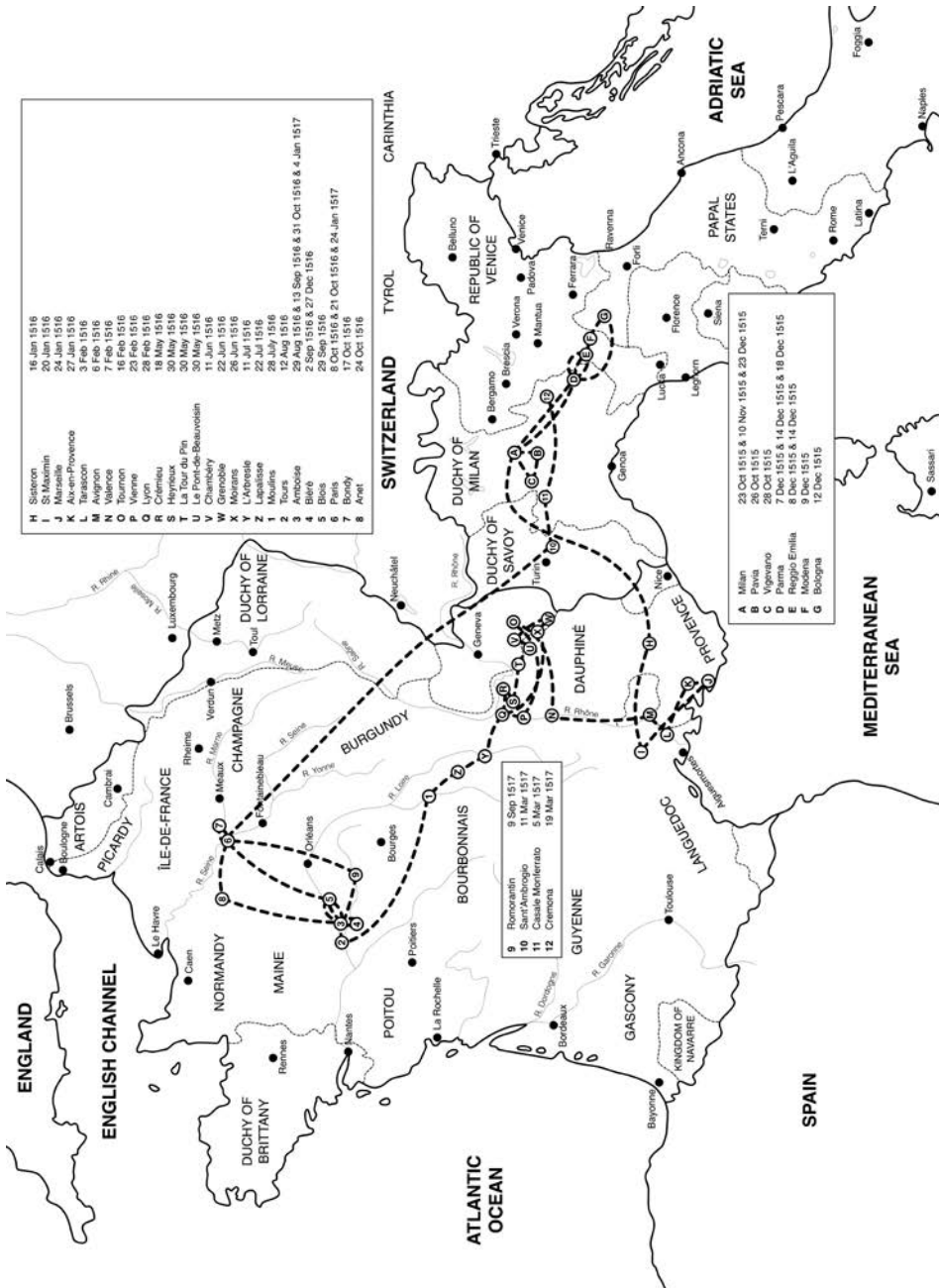


Fig. 3 Map of Federico Gonzaga's sojourn in France. Source: Author (Google API)

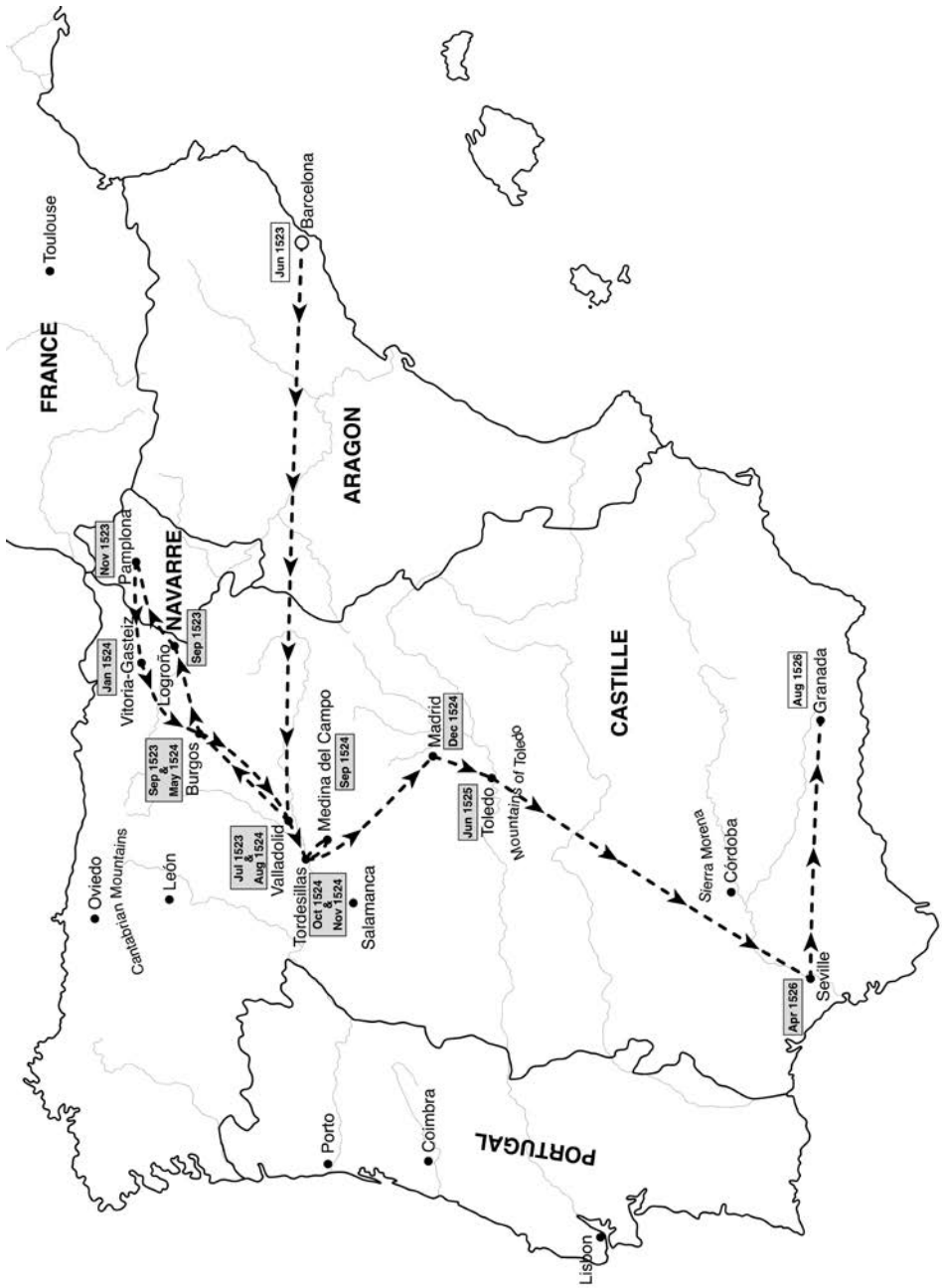


Fig. 4 Map of Ferrante Gonzaga's sojourn in Spain. Source: Author (Google API)

# Introduction

On October 21, 1515, a fifteen-year-old Federico Gonzaga (1500–1540) arrived in Milan to pay homage to Francis I (1494–1547), King of France. Federico was the heir to the Marquisate of Mantua, a small principality located 150 kilometres to the east of Milan. His voyage likely took him several days and required the use of one of his father's gilded state barges to transport his household of fifty servants and forty-one horses.<sup>1</sup> Francis was in Italy to continue his predecessors' attempts to conquer parts of the Italian peninsula in a conflict that became known as the Italian Wars (1494–1559).<sup>2</sup>

In September 1515, Francis had expelled the Duchy of Milan's former ruler, Massimiliano Sforza, in a pivotal battle and had taken up residence in the Sforza Castle. When Federico arrived in Milan, he met with his French cousin, Charles of Bourbon (1490–1527), the Constable of France, who took Federico to meet the monarch.<sup>3</sup> Attentive to protocol, Federico tried to kiss the king's hand, but Francis rose to his full six feet and pulled

1 Raffaele Tamalio, ed., *Federico Gonzaga alla corte di Francesco I di Francia nel carteggio privato con Mantova (1515–1517)* (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1994), 242–44 (242, 244). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

2 The Italian Wars is beginning to gain traction in recent historiography, particularly from the perspective of social and cultural history. See, for example, Stephen D. Bowd, *Renaissance Mass Murder: Civilians and Soldiers During the Italian Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Gerry Milligan, *Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); John Gagné, *Milan Undone: Contested Sovereignties in the Italian Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021). See also Michael Mallett and Christine Shaw, *The Italian Wars, 1494–1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012); Marco Pellegrini, *Le guerre d'Italia 1494–1559* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017); and Idan Sherer, *The Scramble for Italy: Continuity and Change in the Italian Wars, 1494–1559* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

3 Federico's first cousin was Charles III, Duke of Bourbon, Constable of France. See Denis Crouzet, *Charles de Bourbon: connétable de France* (Paris: Fayard, 2003). Federico Gonzaga to Francesco Gonzaga, October 22, 1515. Tamalio, ed., *Federico Gonzaga*, 81–84 (81). Bourbon would eventually defect to Charles V after being accused of treason by Francis. See Charles V to Lope de Soria, Pamplona, December 14, 1523. Manuel Fernández Álvarez, *Corpus documental de Carlos V: (1516–1539)* (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1973), 87–92 (89).



the boy into a tight embrace.<sup>4</sup> It is unknown if the informal greeting was disconcerting for Federico, but he was able to discharge his filial duty satisfactorily by delivering a message from his father, Francesco II Gonzaga (1466–1519), that expressed the marquis's regret that he was unable to pay homage to His Majesty personally.<sup>5</sup> Federico expected his stay to be brief and had already made plans to be home for Christmas.<sup>6</sup> However, the prolonged conflict between Francis I and the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I (1459–1519), meant that he did not see his parents again until the spring of 1517.

Almost a decade later, Federico's sixteen-year-old brother, Ferrante (1507–1557), arrived at the Castilian city of Valladolid to fulfil a similar obligation to the new, youthful Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V (1500–1558).<sup>7</sup> To reach the Castilian court from Mantua, however, required a much longer and arduous journey. Ferrante left Mantua sometime in May 1523 and travelled to Genoa before sailing west across the Mediterranean, eventually reaching Barcelona in late June. Unfortunately, the twenty-three-year-old emperor was some 750 kilometres to the northwest. Notwithstanding the unforgiving Spanish summer, a lack of mules, the cost of grain, and two servants dying of the plague, Ferrante and his small entourage finally caught up to the emperor's court in July.<sup>8</sup> Ferrante reported to his mother, Isabella d'Este (1474–1539), that he had kissed Charles' hand and was advised to enter the emperor's chambers whenever he pleased.<sup>9</sup> Despite tensions with his

4 Federico Gonzaga to Francesco Gonzaga, October 22, 1515. Tamalio, ed., *Federico Gonzaga*, 81–84 (82). Elis Gruffudd de Calais described the king's physicality in Prys Morgan, "Un chroniqueur gallois à Calais (Note sur l'histoire de Calais sous les Anglais)," *Revue du Nord*, 47.185 (1965), 195–202 (198–99). The Italian traveller Antonio de Beatis also described him as a "great womaniser [who] readily breaks into others' gardens and drinks at many sources." Antonio de Beatis, *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis: Germany, Switzerland, the Low Countries, France and Italy, 1517–1518*, trans. by J. R. Hale (London: Hakluyt Society, 1979), 107.

5 Federico Gonzaga to Francesco Gonzaga, October 22, 1515. Tamalio, ed., *Federico Gonzaga*, 81–84 (82).

6 See Federico Gonzaga to Francesco Gonzaga, December 6, 1515. Tamalio, ed., *Federico Gonzaga*, 142–43.

7 Charles was also the king of Spain. His ascension unified the kingdoms of his grandparents: Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, the Catholic Monarchs. See Geoffrey Parker, *Emperor: A New Life of Charles V* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

8 Pandolfo Pico della Mirandola to Isabella d'Este, July 14, 1523. Raffaele Tamalio, ed., *Ferrante Gonzaga alla corte spagnola di Carlo V: nel carteggio privato con Mantova (1523–1526), la formazione da "cortegiano" di un generale dell'Impero* (Mantua: G. Arcari, 1991), 80–86 (81). Ferrante Gonzaga to Isabella d'Este, September 2, 1523. Tamalio, ed., *Ferrante Gonzaga*, 93–95 (94).

9 Ferrante Gonzaga to Isabella d'Este, September 2, 1523. Tamalio, ed., *Ferrante Gonzaga*, 93–95 (94).



mother over the funding necessary to sustain his presence at court, Ferrante stayed until he was given a military commission in August 1526. Ferrante's appointment coincided with the aftermath of January's Treaty of Madrid (1526), which forced Francis to cede territory and custody of his two sons to the emperor.<sup>10</sup>

These adolescent experiences reverberated throughout the lives of each brother as they navigated the tumults of sixteenth-century Italy. Federico became the marquis of Mantua in 1519 and reigned for almost two decades until his premature death in 1540.<sup>11</sup> During his tenure, he cleverly negotiated the intricacies of the Italian Wars, forming alliances with the French and Spanish as necessary to avoid unnecessary conflict. The marquis accomplished this difficult task through skilled diplomacy, but also through learned insight into the minds of those who possessed significant—and destructive—power. Ferrante also took advantage of his apprenticeship at the Spanish court to forge an unprecedented career as a soldier and later statesman, eventually becoming the viceroy of Sicily and then governor of Milan.<sup>12</sup> His imperial training coupled with his Italian heritage informed his governance, granting him a certain ideological flexibility that made him an effective and trustworthy leader for the Holy Roman Emperor.

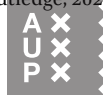
This book examines the boyhood and adult experiences of Federico and Ferrante Gonzaga to reflect on the cultural and gendered diplomatic strategies adopted by elite Italians to respond to conflict and crisis in a global age. The first- and third-born sons of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga spent part of their formative years at the courts of Francis I of France and Charles V of Spain as a response to the political crisis of the Italian Wars.<sup>13</sup> During this time, they learned valuable lessons about the transnational social codes and rituals central to sixteenth-century political

10 Ferrante's need for money dominated correspondence with the Gonzaga. Ferrante was already at war with his mother over funding his military exploits from his very first letter: Ferrante Gonzaga to Isabella d'Este, September 2, 1523. Tamalio, ed., *Ferrante Gonzaga*, 93–95 (94).

11 There is no biography of Federico Gonzaga, but see the edited collection by Mattei on his patronage: Francesca Mattei, ed., *Federico II Gonzaga e le arti* (Rome: Bulzoni editore, 2016).

12 Likewise, there is no biography of Ferrante Gonzaga, but see the exhibition catalogues commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death: Gianvittorio Signorotto, ed., *Ferrante Gonzaga: il Mediterraneo, l'Impero (1507–1557): atti del convegno di studi, Guastalla, 5–6 ottobre 2007*, Biblioteca del Cinquecento (Rome: Bulzoni, 2009) and Giuseppe Barbieri and Loredana Olivato Puppi, eds., *Ferrante Gonzaga: un principe del Rinascimento* (Parma: Monte Università Parma, 2007).

13 See Alexander Lee and Brian Jeffrey Maxson, eds., *The Culture and Politics of Regime Change in Italy, c.1494–c.1559* (London: Routledge, 2022).



life in Europe.<sup>14</sup> As adults, they applied these lessons in their political and martial collaborations with Charles V in the wider Mediterranean world, supporting his dominions in Italy, celebrating his attempted colonisation of northern Africa, and praising his attacks on Muslim pirates in the Italian Mediterranean as displays of loyalty and fealty to the emperor. After their deaths, writers preserved their legacies as vital collaborators of the Holy Roman Empire and defenders of Christianity.

The experiences of the Gonzaga brothers are not meant to stand in for all Renaissance princes and mercenaries, but their lives can be usefully analysed to understand the crisis precipitated by the Italian Wars because of their unusual level of documentation. Due to the amount of travel each brother did in their youth, we are able to chart their changing political realities across all parts of their lives. Until recently, most studies of the Wars have focused on the political narrative or military innovations that they produced.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the rise of Protestantism, the Counter-Reformation, and knowledge of worlds new to Europe competed with wartime destruction to change the attitudes, values, and rituals of elite and ordinary Italians. Recent work by John Gagné, Carolyn James, and Stephen Bowd analysing the breakdown of Milan, elite strategies for survival, and civilian experiences of war, respectively, have begun a historiographical re-evaluation of the Italian Wars as a vehicle of significant cultural change during an already tumultuous century.<sup>16</sup> A recently edited collection on shadow agents during the Italian Wars further stresses the importance of looking to unexpected protagonists of the war's different faces.<sup>17</sup> By analysing the lived experiences of two brothers who led intersecting, yet divergent lives, this book contributes to such scholarly conversations by providing a nuanced analysis of cross-cultural relationships in sixteenth-century Italy and beyond. Expanding the analysis from Italy

14 On this marriage and the political partnership it spawned, see Carolyn James, *A Renaissance Marriage: The Political and Personal Alliance of Isabella D'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). See also Sarah D. P. Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

15 Mallett and Shaw, *The Italian Wars*.

16 See John Gagné, "Counting the Dead: Traditions of Enumeration and the Italian Wars," *Renaissance Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2014), 791–840; Carolyn James, "The Diplomacy of Clara Gonzaga, Countess of Montpensier-Bourbon: Gendered Perspectives of Family Duty, Honour and Female Agency," *Renaissance Studies* 35, no. 3 (June 2021), 486–502. See also the essays in Humfrey Butters and Gabriele Neher, eds., *Warfare and Politics: Cities and Government in Renaissance Tuscany and Venice* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

17 Stephen D. Bowd, Sarah D. P. Cockram, and John Gagné, eds., *Shadow Agents of Renaissance War: Suffering, Supporting, and Supplying Conflict in Italy and Beyond* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).



to the Mediterranean will enable this book to speak to global conversations about power, networks, and diplomacy.

Federico and Ferrante interacted with a number of Mediterranean political cultures over the course of the sixteenth century, to varying degrees. They developed a meaningful understanding of French and Spanish values and practices through periods of intense learning at each court, but only shallow connections with rulers of the Ottoman Empire, the Ḥafṣid Sultanate and other territories throughout the Mediterranean Sea. Both of these dynamics merit further investigation to unpack the implications that such relationships had on local identities in heterogeneous spaces.<sup>18</sup> One of the aims of this book is to consider the brothers' experiences within the culturally and politically diverse network of imperial vassals—and enemies—in the wider Mediterranean in order to reflect on the processes of coexistence and negotiation of multi-ethnic populations throughout the Sea.

There is a significant body of research on the idea of the Mediterranean and its usage by historians to locate historically specific practices and values. In 1949, Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* first introduced the approach of treating Mediterranean history as a whole, without regard to religious or ethnic boundaries.<sup>19</sup> Braudel's revolutionary historiographical method advocated for a "total history" that took account of marginalised voices and rejected the primacy of political history as the dominant narrative. Throughout the twentieth century, and well into the twenty-first, resonances of *The Mediterranean* continue to influence historians working on Mediterranean histories, even as historiographical trends move away from Braudel's original interventions in social history to take account of the different "turns" that have characterised the last thirty years of historical practice.<sup>20</sup> While this book may have a more

18 See, for example, Andrew Tzavaras, "Two Perceptions of Süleyman's 'Magnificent' Navy during the Later Italian Wars," *War & Society*, February 15, 2023, 1–17.

19 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. 1, trans. Sian Reynolds, reprint (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

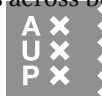
20 See, for example, Geoffrey Symcox, Teofilo Ruiz, and Gabriel Piterberg, eds., *Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World 1600–1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita, *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, Wiley Blackwell Companions to World History (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014); Fariba Zarinebaf, *Mediterranean Encounters: Trade and Pluralism in Early Modern Galata* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Patricia M. E. Lorcin and Todd Shepard, *French Mediterraneans: Transnational and Imperial Histories* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); and Robert John Clines, "Jesuit Thalassology Reconsidered: The Mediterranean and the Geopolitics of Jesuit Missionary Aims in Seventeenth-Century Ethiopia," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2016), 43–64.



limited scope than Braudel's expansive macrohistory, its inquiries are shaped by the ways in which political and cultural interactions and frictions have created both connections and tensions within the region.

The first key theme the book wishes to address is: How did the Gonzaga family navigate changing political systems and crises, and how did this change from generation to generation? The Italian Wars radically reshaped the political landscape in Italy and in Europe. The Gonzaga family was faced with numerous challenges during this period, including the threat of invasion, famine and disease, and shifting alliances between major powers. Despite such challenges, they maintained their grip on power by adapting their strategies to the changing circumstances, initially relying on political brinkmanship and double diplomacy that eventually gave way to cultural strategies and alliances with the Holy Roman Empire. These changes occurred through generational change following the different political experiences and trainings of the parents and their children. The interpretation and exercise of power changed over time as the Gonzaga family found ways to bolster authority through cultural methods. By examining Italian dynastic responses to these crises, we can gain insights into the nature of power in sixteenth-century Italy and the ways in which individuals and families negotiated complex and rapidly changing political systems in the wider early modern world.

The second key focus of this book is: How did the Gonzaga family use diplomacy to bridge cultural differences and confront political realities, and what can we learn from their experiences about the power and limitations of diplomacy in a changing world? The Gonzaga family employed various diplomatic strategies, including cultural diplomacy, propaganda campaigns that acted as acts of loyalty, and crisis diplomacy, to survive the Italian Wars. Each strategy was contingent on local circumstances and sentiment and was modulated according to exigency. Initially, the Gonzaga relied heavily on crisis diplomacy that included making and breaking treaties, sending their children abroad, and secret agents to grapple with the vulnerabilities of their geographical situation. However, as the Wars progressed and that status quo shifted to dominance in Italy by the House of Habsburg, they moved towards cultural diplomacy and magnificence to secure their continued collaboration with imperial authorities. These responses shed light on early modern understandings of an alliance, and the display of friendship and its intersections with loyalty and fealty. Their experiences offer valuable insights into the power and limitations of diplomacy in a changing world, as well as the challenges of navigating cultural differences and building meaningful relationships across borders.



The final key question the book seeks to answer is: How did the cultural and political differences between France, Spain, Italy, and the Ottomans impact the political strategies and practices of the Gonzaga family, and what was the role of cultural circulation and transfer in imperial networks, that is, the circulation of Spanish, Italian, Ottoman, and, later North African, cultural elements, from horse breeds to language, artistic trends to social organisation? The Gonzaga family's political fortunes were intertwined with the broader geopolitical context of the Mediterranean world in the sixteenth century, which was marked by intense competition and conflict among the major powers, but also people and objects travelling from one place to another in Charles's territories. As rulers of a small northern Italian state, the Gonzaga had to navigate complex power dynamics to maintain their independence, which they did through cultural diplomacy or soft power. Their interactions with France, Spain, the Ottomans, and even North Africans were shaped by cultural differences and linguistic barriers, but they also presented opportunities for cultural circulation and knowledge-sharing, offering the best of what Mantua and, later, Milan, represented culturally and seeking collaboration through appealing to the senses and egos of foreign rulers.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the Gonzaga drew upon their understanding of foreign cultures to support their political ambitions, and they actively sought out opportunities to showcase their own cultural traditions and artistic achievements. The cultural circulation between the Gonzaga court and other European powers had a profound impact on the family's political strategies and practices, and it contributed to the development of a distinctive Gonzaga identity that was shaped by both local and global influences. Overall, the study of dynastic strategy during this time can help historians understand the political transformation of the region.

To answer these questions, this book examines the representation and enactment of normative attitudes, values, and assumptions in political culture and cross-cultural relations in a wide variety of sources. I rely mainly upon letters, diplomatic records, and other chancery documents preserved in archives in northern Italy, principally the state archives of Mantua and Milan, the Biblioteca Estense in Modena and Biblioteca Maldotti in Italy in

21 See F. Federici and D. Tessicini, *Translators, Interpreters, and Cultural Negotiators: Mediating and Communicating Power from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). On cultural transfer, see Joan-Lluís Palos and Magdalena S. Sánchez, eds., *Early Modern Dynastic Marriages and Cultural Transfer*, *Transculturalisms, 1400–1700* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015) and Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly and Adam Morton, eds., *Queens Consort, Cultural Transfer and European Politics, c. 1500–1800* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).



Guastalla. The first half of the book focuses on the letters of Federico and Ferrante to their parents, which have been published while the parental responses are preserved in the *copialettere* books of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, at the Archivio di Stato di Mantova.<sup>22</sup> The letters include reports on daily life and interactions, requests for subsistence, and emotional reflection. There are also the volumes of diplomatic reports sent to Mantua during the brothers' sojourns, as well as published ambassadorial reports sent by English, Venetian, and other foreign representatives. They offer remarkable access to a key period in youth that ordinarily is opaque to historians. Their letters allow a sustained analysis of relationship-building; the development of self-image, including a masculine identity; and how individuals acquired competency in the cultures of foreign lands through immersive and on-the-ground experiences in the early modern period.

The latter half of the book uses archival material as well as unpublished manuscripts held at the Biblioteca Palatina di Parma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, and Biblioteca Marciana, in addition to sixteenth-century printed books. There are the unpublished copybooks of each brother held at the state archives of Mantua and Milan, as well as copies held at the Biblioteca Maldotti and the Biblioteca Estense. Copies of letters from Charles V, Andrea Doria, Prince of Melfi and Genoese statesman, and the Ḥafṣid ruler, Abu Abdallah Muhammad V al-Hasan, known as Muley Hassan (r. 1526–1543), are also vital, as well as correspondence from other family members, like the third brother, Ercole Gonzaga, who became an important cardinal and papal figure during the Council of Trent.<sup>23</sup> Finally, chronicles, literary works, and occasional visual and material objects are usefully analysed as outcomes of the strategies put into place by each brother.<sup>24</sup>

In order to consider how the cultural identities and practices identified in the sources were formed, contested, and intertwined, this book draws upon advances made in the fields of gender and cultural history. The works of historians like Sanjay Subrahmanyam on “entangled histories” and Stephen Greenblatt on “cultural mobility” have resulted in innovative studies that revisit dominant political narratives to generate polyphonic analyses of

22 Tamalio, ed., *Federico Gonzaga and Ferrante Gonzaga*. The replies from Francesco and Isabella to Federico are found at Archivio di Stato di Mantova (hereafter ASMn), Archivio Gonzaga (hereafter AG) 2121–2123 whereas the replies from Isabella to Ferrante are found at ASMn, AG 2127–2131.

23 See Paul V. Murphy, *Ruling Peacefully: Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga and Patrician Reform in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

24 See, for example, the work of Maria F. Maurer on the Palazzo Te: Maria F. Maurer, *Gender, Space and Experience at the Renaissance Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

critical moments in early modern history.<sup>25</sup> Thinking about the ways in which gender can be used to usefully expand such arguments can lead to important new insights concerning the political landscape of sixteenth-century Italy, especially in the context of elite masculinities. Federico and Ferrante created opportunities for strategic friendships by learning new masculinising traditions and unlearning Italian attitudes that did not serve them in unequal environments. It is evident that the relational aspects of superordinate (royal) masculinities and subordinate (vassal) masculinities of elite men had significant impacts on politics and society, but there has been little investigation of how cross-cultural interactions that contained gender-specific activities, like the tournament, shaped and reshaped important diplomatic relationships.

Performative masculinity was an essential aspect of sixteenth-century dynastic spaces, but it is an underdeveloped area of political studies. What we know of such masculinities comes to us implicitly through mirror for princes manuals like Desiderius Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), and perhaps Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (c. 1513, published 1532) or Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528).<sup>26</sup> These texts variously describe how to be a virtuous man, what sort of abstract characteristics a king and his kingdom ought to possess, and how to manage affairs of state with wisdom, justice, and honour.<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, we might look to chivalric culture and the romantic poetry and prose which popularised the figure of the warrior-king. Texts such as the allegorical poem *The Resolute Knight* (1486) and thinly disguised prose autobiographies such as Maximilian I's *Der Weiss Kunig* (*The White King*) (c.1505–1516) affirmed that the ideal king was both a wise ruler and an experienced soldier.<sup>28</sup> Scholars have suggested that kings who emulated chivalrous characters received and maintained access to power irrespective

25 See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997), 735–62; Stephen Greenblatt and Ines G. Županov, eds., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge New York Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For example, Anna Valerio, *Venetians and Ottomans in the Early Modern Age: Essays on Economic and Social Connected History*, vol. 6, Hilâl (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2018).

26 See Clara Auvray-Assayas et al., eds., *Le Prince au miroir de la littérature politique de l'Antiquité aux Lumières* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications de l'Université de Rouen et du Havre, 2007).

27 See Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

28 On *The Resolute Knight*, see Susie Speakman Sutch, "La réception du Chevalier délibéré d'Olivier de la Marche aux XVe et XVIe siècles," *Le Moyen Français*, 57–58 (2006), 335–50. On Maximilian I's pseudo-biography, see Pierre Terjanian, ed., *The Last Knight: The Art, Armor, and Ambition of Maximilian I* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019), 54, 156, and 222.



of their failings, while those who did not perform chivalric masculinity were challenged by other elite men and struggled to retain control.<sup>29</sup>

While elite literature helps us to understand normative masculinities, it offers comparatively little insight into how those norms were performed, negotiated, and, above all, learned at court. By contrast, letters offer historians a different kind of access to the complex relationship individuals had with gender.<sup>30</sup> Elite men and women commonly used letter-writing to record news, make requests, and describe their surroundings.<sup>31</sup> The Gonzaga brothers were no different. Both Federico and Ferrante wrote and received hundreds of letters to and from their parents in which they disclosed the stressful nature of coming of age far from home. These anxieties were usually provoked by the desire to conform to court culture. Therefore, we can use their letters to understand how young people adapted their assumptions about gender to different contexts where values differed, even if only slightly. Their correspondence vividly describes the challenging nature of growing up in a foreign land and the importance of support networks.

Scholars like Alexandra Shepard and Jennifer Jordan, for example, have shown that there were multiple manhoods; patriarchal, subordinate, anti-patriarchal, and other alternatives that sometimes deviated from the married, economically independent, head-of-the-household model.<sup>32</sup> Both scholars have argued that manhood and patriarchy were not synonymous, and those who did not achieve the requisite social standing demanded by patriarchy were still seen as men. Furthermore, as Jordan argues, manhood and manliness were differentiated: manhood was prescribed, and manliness perceived.<sup>33</sup> Despite these gradations, most scholarship has focused

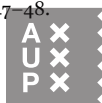
29 For an earlier example, see Janna Nickerson Kestner, "The Performance of Chivalric Masculinity: The Plantagenet Kings and Maintaining Political Power" (Unpublished PhD Dissertation: University of Wyoming, 2014).

30 See, for example, Meredith K. Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). See also Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent, "In the Name of the Father: Conceptualising *Pater Familias* in the Letters of William the Silent's Children," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 62.4 (2009), 1130–66.

31 See, for example, Carolyn James, "Marriage by Correspondence: Politics and Domesticity in the Letters of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 65.2 (2012), 321–52.

32 Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11–12. Alexandra Shepard, "From Anxious Patriarchs to Refined Gentlemen? Manhood in Britain, circa 1500–1700," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 281–95. Jennifer Jordan, "'To Make a Man Without Reason': Examining Manhood and Manliness in Early Modern England," in John H. Arnold and Sean Brady, eds., *What Is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 245–62.

33 Jordan, "To Make a Man," 247–48.



on normative manhood.<sup>34</sup> There is limited scholarship on the transition from youth to adult and the effect gender had on this process, and even less scholarship on the ways kings performed early modern masculinities, and how these masculinities were supported and exploited by ambitious companions.<sup>35</sup>

Glenn Richardson has sought to address the absence of studies concerning lived masculinities among rulers in Europe's most prominent courts. In his analysis of the Field of Cloth of Gold, the diplomatic summit held between France and England in 1520, Richardson first identified the constraints kingship terminology placed on analyses of masculine performances.<sup>36</sup> Kingship scholars, for instance, only implicitly reference masculinities through terms like "chivalry" or "personal honour," which creates several issues. Firstly, these terms are often used in place of sustained analysis of behaviour. Therefore, they do not directly address why, for example, Henry VIII and Francis I wrestled during the Field of Cloth of Gold, or why Charles V decided to grow a beard because he heard Henry VIII had started imitating Francis I's facial hair.<sup>37</sup> Neither chivalric ethos nor personal honour quite captures the dynamic of either situation, but gender and performativity may offer a more satisfactory explanation.<sup>38</sup>

The gendered nature of elite cross-cultural friendships is further complicated by its intersection with youth. The age of majority was twenty or

34 Studies have mostly only covered England: Aysha Pollnitz, *Princely Education in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Richard Preiss and Deanne Williams, *Childhood, Education and the Stage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). A French exception: Mark Edward Motley, *Becoming a French Aristocrat: The Education of the Court Nobility, 1580–1715* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). Italian studies highlight prescriptive pedagogy: Monica Ferrari, Isabella Lazzarini, and Federico Piseri, *Autografie dell'età minore: lettere di tre dinastie italiane tra Quattrocento e Cinquecento* (Rome: Viella, 2016).

35 See, for example, Ruth Mazo Karras, "Young Knights Under the Feminine Gaze," in Konrad Eisenbichler, ed., *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society, 1150–1650* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 189–206 and Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

36 Glenn Richardson, *The Field of Cloth of Gold* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

37 On the impromptu wrestling match, see Robert Fleuranges, *Mémoires du maréchal de Florange, dit le Jeune Adventureux*, ed. Robert Goubaux and André Lemoisne, vols. 1 and 2 (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1913), 272. On the contest, see Sebastiano Giustiniani, "A.D. 1517: February 10 to April 13," in *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII: Selection of Despatches Written by the Venetian Ambassador, Sebastian Giustinian, and Addressed to the Signory of Venice, January 12th, 1515, to July 26th, 1519*, trans. by Rawdon Lubbock Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29–62.

38 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).



twenty-five in most regions, but some considered that political maturity was not reached until thirty.<sup>39</sup> Federico and Ferrante were still boys in the eyes of their peers when they travelled abroad, while their hosts had barely traversed the precipice of adulthood. All four men needed supervision, either by counsellors who formulated and executed the vast majority of policy decisions, or governors and Mantuan ambassadors. Such supervision was believed to be necessary because boys were considered prone to violence and sexual excess, behaviour that had to be curbed through mixing with elite society.<sup>40</sup> Socialisation was imperative because these young men represented their kinsmen, and poor behaviour could have political consequences. Therefore, elite offspring were often thrust into the cultural and political world of the court from a young age and expected to mimic the behaviour of the parent of the same sex.<sup>41</sup> They were, however, still minors and had limited social and legal authority until they had experience, “the mother of prudence,” as one former duke of Milan put it, to make wise decisions.<sup>42</sup>

It is challenging to trace the acquisition of experience systematically and holistically. While Charles V and Francis I inherited their kingdoms at a young age, little has been written about how they managed the shock of adapting to their new role.<sup>43</sup> Even less has been written about young Europeans who travelled abroad as quasi hostages.<sup>44</sup> Yet, spending a significant amount of time in foreign courts where one did not speak the native language and local customs were mysterious and confusing affected the formation of adult identities. Learning how to communicate across cultural and linguistic borders while simultaneously building a political nous contrasted with the typical childhood of dynastic children, confined to their parents’ courts.

39 Glenn Richardson, “Boys and Their Toys: Kingship, Masculinity, and Material Culture in the Sixteenth Century,” in Sean McGlynn and Elena Woodacre, eds., *The Image and Perception of Monarchy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 183–206 (198).

40 Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 5. See Katherine Crawford, *The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

41 Ferrari, Lazzarini, and Piseri, “Lettere autografe di principi in fieri: Gonzaga, Este e Sforza nel lungo Quattrocento,” in *Autografie dell’età minore*, 18.

42 “Ordini di Lodovico il Moro intorno al governo dello stato di Milano dopo la sua morte, nel caso della minorità del Figlio” in Giuseppe Molini, ed., *Documenti di storia italiana, copiati su gli originali autentici* (Florence: Tipografia all’insegna di Dante, 1836), 297–330 (298).

43 See, for example, Anthony B. Cashman III, “Performance Anxiety: Federico Gonzaga at the Court of Francis I and the Uncertainty of Ritual Action,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 33.2 (2002), 333–52. Cashman discusses the role of ritual in adapting to foreign courts.

44 Jessica O’Leary, “Cultural Immersion: Diplomacy, Learning, and Mobility in the Childhood of Federico II Gonzaga during the War of the League of Cambrai (1508–16),” *Parergon* 38, no. 2 (January 1, 2021): 13–42. Parts of this article have been reproduced here with the permission of the publisher.

Here, diplomatic studies that directly address how elite men coped with being immersed in the new and the unknown are useful starting points to examine the youthful acquisition of knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

Much scholarship on how individuals from different courts communicated with one another is found in the so-called New Diplomatic History.<sup>46</sup> These studies, rooted in cultural history, have disrupted the master narrative of modern diplomacy, which claimed that ambassadors alone were empowered to negotiate on behalf of early modern rulers.<sup>47</sup> Instead, there were very few restrictions on who might act on behalf of a sovereign, prince, pope, city, or enterprise like the Dutch East India Company during the early modern period. Scholars have shown that the absence of an official mandate granted unattached individuals the ability to ingratiate themselves into local networks, adopt native cultural codes, and open new lines of communication inaccessible to ambassadors who had to conform to stricter ritualistic and hierarchical behaviours.<sup>48</sup>

Central to all diplomacy, of course, was communication across cultural boundaries.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the first half of this book draws on the work of diplomatic historians to interpret how young men might have adapted to unfamiliar situations.<sup>50</sup> What emerges is a period of initial trial and

45 Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Introduction: Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 20.4 (2016), 313–30. The special edition of the journal discusses the role of understanding cultural practices when conducting diplomatic activities, and how this was learned and worked through in practice.

46 See the work of Isabella Lazzarini, especially *Communication and Conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350–1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Daniela Frigo, *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450–1800*, trans. by Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and John Watkins, "Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38.1 (2008), 1–14; Catherine Fletcher, *Diplomacy in Renaissance Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Tracey Sowerby and Jan Hennings, eds., *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c.1410–1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

47 Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London: J. Cape, 1955).

48 See Fokko Jan Dijksterhuis, ed., *Regulating Knowledge in an Entangled World* (London; New York: Routledge, 2023); Lisa Hellman and Birgit Tremml-Werner, "Translation in Action: Global Intellectual History and Early Modern Diplomacy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 82, no. 3 (2021), 453–67.

49 Although a later periodisation, see Jeroen Duindam, "Crossing Boundaries: Diplomacy and the Global Dimension, 1700–1850," *The International History Review*, 41.5 (2019), 1092–99. On gender and how it intersected with global routes, see Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

50 One example is Matthew W. Mosca, "Comprehending the Qing Empire: Building Multilingual Competence in an Age of Imperial Rivalry, 1792–1820," *The International History Review*, 41.5 (2019), 1057–75.



error in which youths tested their understanding as part of an informal apprenticeship in political affairs. Without a strict curriculum, these men relied on older individuals who had already endured the trials of youth and had an extensive understanding of the political and cultural dynamics of the courts at which they were resident. Such mentors contributed to the support network of mostly, but not exclusively, male friends who stepped in to help their mentees financially or politically not only during times of crisis but also to offer young men opportunities to improve their standing and accomplish dynastic or individual goals.

The second half of this book explores how the Gonzaga oversaw, or were the subject of, cultural productions that served as ciphers for imperial loyalty and balanced dynastic and civic identities with the imposition of Spanish markers of authority. In Italy, historians have examined the impacts of Spanish governance on Italian city-states throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the cross-fertilisation of the two cultures on local and imperial identity and agencies.<sup>51</sup> In Mantua and Spanish Milan, evidence of such dialogues was present, despite the power imbalance between the Spanish Crown and Italy's small northern city-states.<sup>52</sup> For instance, both brothers used the triumphal entry to link local ideologies with those of Spanish Habsburgs to project a putative political unity. Similarly, Federico dissimulated his family's longstanding trade relations with the Ottoman Empire following Charles V's 1535 victory in Tunis to participate in the emperor's subsequent propaganda campaign. Finally, writers and poets memorialised such initiatives in funeral orations and other posthumous tributes so that the Gonzaga's ties to the Spanish Habsburgs continued even in death. All of these were cultural diplomatic strategies that aligned the Gonzaga with the Habsburgs through conscious collaboration on shared political projects driven by masculinising and, eventually, crusading ambitions.

Examining the processes and outcomes of such cultural productions will shed light on the intersection of politics, gender, and diplomacy in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean world. In so doing, the book is indebted to the work of cultural historians who have examined the cultural codes

51 Thomas James Dandeleet and John A. Marino, eds., *Spain in Italy: Politics, Society, and Religion 1500–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Piers Baker-Bates, "Between Italy and Spain: Cultural Interchange in the Roman Career of Sebastiano Del Piombo," *Renaissance Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007), 254–65; Stefano D'Amico, *Spanish Milan: A City within the Empire, 1535–1706* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Miles Pattenden and Piers Baker-Bates, eds., *The Spanish Presence in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Images of Iberia* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018).

52 See Giovanni Muto, "La città, lo stato, l'impero: il ducato di Milano dagli Sforza all'impero," in Giorgio Politi, ed., *Storia di Cremona*, vol. 4 (Azzano San Paolo: Bolis Edizioni, 2003), 12–57.

that underpin artistic, literary and linguistic representations constructed by historical actors.<sup>53</sup> Just as Peter Burke, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, and others have used culture as a means to understand (but not completely reconstruct) social and political realities, I use the Gonzaga brothers to examine the changes and continuities cultural diplomacy during this period. By seeking out the assumptions that motivated the brothers' manifestations and perceptions of Italian, Spanish, French, Turkish, and Tunisian cultures, however flawed or superficial, I seek to explore the wider relationships between the brothers and their social, political, and cultural worlds in the early modern Mediterranean.

Evidence of these intersections will emerge over the course of six chapters. The first chapter begins by locating the Gonzaga family within the crises generated by the Italian Wars. It examines the Gonzaga family's ability to avoid destruction during the Italian Wars despite being a small marquisate. The family achieved this through strategic alliances, dynastic networks, cultural circulation, and good fortune. As the Wars progressed, the strategies employed by the Gonzaga rulers changed due to generational differences. While the rulers initially used intra-Italian tactics that served them well in the Italian League, their children modified these methods to reflect deeper relationships with French and Spanish powers and an increasing awareness of Ottoman naval supremacy. This led to tensions between parents and children, reflecting a period of discomfort in Italian history where Italy was no longer dominated by its own power. The chapter aims to place the Gonzaga family within the context of the crisis diplomacies of the Italian Wars and explore the changes in their strategies over time.

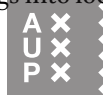
The second chapter examines the tensions produced by generational differences in the French diplomacy of Federico Gonzaga, especially with respect to royal masculinities. During his eighteen months in France, Federico and his governor, Stazio Gadio, corresponded frequently with his parents. Their letters provide insight into the strategies employed by princely Italian families to navigate change during the Wars. The surviving 447 letters reveal continued debates on Federico's appropriation of French customs, his participation in dangerous activities like tournaments, and advocacy for the Gonzaga in Italy. Francesco expected Federico to act as a proxy and

53 See, for example, Carolyn James, "Political Image Making in Portraits of Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua," *Gender & History* 35, no. 1 (2023), 20–41; Sarah A. Bendall, "Female Personifications and Masculine Forms: Gender, Armour and Allegory in the Habsburg–Valois Conflicts of Sixteenth-Century Europe," *Gender & History* 35, no. 1 (March 2023), 42–67; Sarah A. Bendall, "Adorning Masculinities? The Commissioning and Wearing of Hat Badges during the Habsburg–Valois Italian Wars," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 52, no. 3 (January 1, 2021): 539–70.

follow his instructions, but Federico at times resisted, complaining that his parents did not understand the delicate manner with which one had to treat Francis I. The two men had vastly different understandings of diplomacy based on cultural and generational differences. Isabella also directed her son in her letters, invoking her maternal authority to guide him on matters at the women's court. The chapter analyses the wider generational shifts produced by the Italian Wars and how they were interpreted by individuals at different stages of their life cycles.

The third chapter focuses on Ferrante Gonzaga and his ability to establish a working relationship with the Holy Roman Emperor, despite cultural, linguistic, and social differences. Unlike his brother, Ferrante did not return to Mantua to become its ruler and instead carved out a career in the service of Charles V. This allowed him to form a deeper connection with a foreign court, which created tension with his mother, Isabella d'Este. The chapter analyses the approximately two hundred letters exchanged between Ferrante, Pandolfo, Federico, and Isabella, which highlight the challenges that arose due to the asymmetrical positions of the brothers on the dynastic hierarchy. Although the marchioness suggested the sojourn, she did not provide Ferrante with the same financial support as Federico, and so Ferrante charted his own career path with the assistance of men at the imperial court. The chapter sheds light on how young men from middling backgrounds were able to create successful careers in transnational armies as a result of the Italian Wars.

The fourth chapter analyses the use of the city as a stage for Gonzaga loyalties in the state visits of Charles V and Philip II to Mantua and Milan. It argues that the brothers strategically used elements of Italian stately magnificence as a diplomatic tool to underscore their loyalty to the Habsburgs while affirming the importance of continued Italian government in territories under official or implicit imperial oversight. The brothers decorated the cities with triumphal arches, provided entertainment in the form of theatre and tournaments, and treated the Habsburgs to lavish banquets attended by the local elite. All of these practices were common to fifteenth-century Italian civic pageantry, usually reserved for returning rulers or important foreign dignitaries. The brothers adapted these practices into the sixteenth century to suit the masculinising tropes of the Habsburg dynasty, embellishing the city with the family's arms and Charles's personal maxim, *plus ultra*. However, they still retained elements of the city's emblems and those of their family's, to link both to the Habsburgs, depicting the government of those cities as an Italo-Hispanic enterprise. Moreover, the co-option of the Habsburgs into local forms of leisure was utilised to create

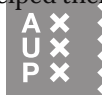


a personal connection between each ruler, who had never met each other, in the hopes that such a relationship would yield dividends in future conflicts.

The fifth chapter focuses on the Gonzaga family's involvement in the military and cultural conflict between the Spanish Habsburgs and the Islamic Mediterranean. The chapter explores the Gonzaga changing relationship with North Africa and the Ottomans in line with their shifting alliances on the continent. The Gonzaga had a long history of trade with the eastern Mediterranean prior to the outbreak of war in 1494. During Federico and Ferrante's sojourns at the French and Spanish courts, they received requests from courtiers and princes for horses and offered prized beasts as gifts to potential patrons. However, following Federico's promotion to duke, his court began a cultural programme that spread anti-Ottoman rhetoric and advertised new connections to North Africa. Ferrante, as viceroy of Sicily, remained in contact with the sultan of Tunis and fostered trade between the Gonzaga and the Ḥafṣids. The brothers' rejection of their Ottoman connections in favour of Charles V's foreign policy is a further example of how the Gonzaga interpreted their alliance with the Holy Roman Empire, and of loyalty and fealty in imperial networks.

In the final sixth chapter, the focus is on the legacies of Federico and Ferrante Gonzaga, and how their lives were remembered and celebrated by writers, biographers, secretaries, and artists in the sixteenth century. The tumultuous political and military climate of the time, including the threat of Ottoman invasion and confessional conflict, led to a crisis of masculinity in Italy. To combat this crisis, biographers of Ferrante used his life as an example of the ideal man, promoting his military successes and virtues as a pedagogical tool for young men. Federico, on the other hand, was remembered for his role in bringing peace to Mantua through his alliance with Charles V, which was praised using both classical and contemporary traditions. The combined effect of their legacies reveals how the Gonzaga family, despite their local identities and regional connections, ultimately aligned themselves with the Spanish Habsburgs and their imperial ambitions, with exceptional results worthy of imitation.

Ultimately, this book is a cultural history of the Gonzaga's diplomatic responses to the crises of the Italian Wars. By examining their political and gendered strategies, it explores how they encountered, responded to, and remembered the conflicts that shaped their world. The Gonzaga employed diverse approaches to navigate the complex political landscape of Renaissance Italy, from diplomatic alliances and military campaigns to cultural propaganda. These strategies, often predicated on a preoccupation with manliness, not only helped them survive but also elevated their status





and enriched their reputation. Analysing the multifaceted dimensions of war beyond military conquests will show how cultural production and political manoeuvring were all essential components of rulership and diplomacy during this time. By contextualising the brothers' and indeed their parents' actions within the broader political and cultural climate of the time, this book offers a nuanced account of the Italian Wars and their impact on wider European society and culture.