

Ariosto's Threshold Patron: Isabella d'Este in the *Orlando Furioso*



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Isabella d'Este makes three significant appearances in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.¹ It has always been assumed that all three are completely laudatory, the result of a particularly amicable relationship between Ariosto and Isabella, dating to a visit to Mantua in 1507 during which Ariosto entertained the marchesa with readings from early fragments of the poem. The delighted Isabella immediately wrote to her brother, Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, Ariosto's nominal patron, to report how much she had enjoyed the poem and the poet, and a friendly relationship appears to have been sealed.² Ariosto sent copies of the various editions of the poem to Isabella as gifts, and the two enjoyed a lengthy and friendly correspondence. Given Isabella's well-known penchant for gathering artists of all kinds around her and fostering their efforts, and given the proximity both physically and politically of the Mantuan court of Isabella to the Ferrarese where Ariosto worked, it is clear why Ariosto would have nurtured this

¹ This article is drawn from my dissertation, "Creating the Court Lady: Isabella d'Este as Patron and Subject," written under the supervision of Loren Partridge, Albert Ascoli, Randolph Starn, and Jacqueline Jung. I am indebted to them for their support, and for suggestions related to this piece. Quotes will be from the 1532 edition of the *Furioso*: Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso, secondo l'edizione del 1532 con le varianti delle edizioni del 1516 e del 1521*, a cura di Santorre Debenedetti e Cesare Segre (Bologna: Commissione Per i Testi di Lingua, 1960).

² Michele Catalano, *Vita di Lodovico Ariosto* (Geneva: Leo S. Oschki, 1931) II: 79–80.

relationship. If not expressive of genuine respect and affection, the few stanzas devoted to Isabella d'Este might be presumed to be at worst outrageous flattery, intended to win the favor of the marchesa.

Yet what was required to win the favor of a marchesa is precisely the issue which these passages about Isabella d'Este address. Ariosto's own patronage situation was, at least at the first publication of the *Orlando Furioso*, not secure, and he was operating in a courtly economy where winning patronage was often directly related to writings dedicated to powerful figures. In the courts of Ferrara and Mantua in particular a number of female patrons, including Isabella d'Este, offered an opportunity for advancement, largely because their perpetually vulnerable social position, and the rigid expectations held for their behavior, put them in constant need of praise. Ariosto's consideration of Isabella d'Este functions both as an enactment of that system and an indictment of it. Because Ariosto's own position, and that of his peers, was as vulnerable as that of the noble ladies, one can find hints of identification with these women, in particular with the figure of Isabella d'Este.³ But by the same token Ariosto was aware of the power both that the female patron held over him, in economic terms, and of that which he held over her by his control of the public perception of her virtues. The tension between these last two factors, when read through the lens of the contemporary transmission of treatises and poems, and the terms of patronage within the Mantuan and Ferrarese courts, yields a portrait of Isabella d'Este as an ambiguous and unresolved figure in Ariosto's pantheon of contemporary characters. I will argue that she is, within the *Orlando Furioso*, a figure of the vulnerable female patron. Where for the court lady chastity was the inevitable term of identity, for the court poet that term is flattery, endlessly produced in an effort to improve the author's standing. Writing itself is therefore the subject of Ariosto's description of Isabella d'Este.

Ariosto's position at the Este court was never entirely secure, and

³ A similar argument is made by Constance Jordan, who writes of Renaissance feminists that "the comments of such writers suggest that in the position of woman as the quintessential subject—that is, politically subordinate, economically dependent, and legally incapacitated—many Renaissance men saw reflected aspects of their own social situations" (Jordan 20). She specifically applies this argument to courtiers in her reading of Castiglione, where the courtier is "depicted without authority of his own and effectively powerless. His status vis-à-vis his lord is similar to that of a wife in relation to her husband." Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) 77–78.

never exclusively literary. Though he spent his years there attempting to establish a position as remunerated court poet, he was used more consistently for diplomacy, to his enormous resentment.⁴ His role at court from 1503 consisted almost entirely of diplomatic missions, most frequently to Rome. In 1517 Ippolito released Ariosto from his service for refusing to accompany the Cardinalacy to Hungary, where Ippolito had been assigned. Ippolito also cancelled the bulk of his benefices, with which Ariosto had been remunerated in place of a court stipend. Alfonso d'Este assumed Ariosto's patronage in Ippolito's place, asking him to read aloud to him more than to write, but even this position was cancelled in 1520 due to insufficient ducal funds. Ariosto was instead posted to Garfagnana, an Este backwater holding, where he was forced to stay for two years despite constant pleas to Alfonso that he be brought home. All of Ariosto's writing, therefore, was an effort to stabilize his position, and to impress his patrons into remunerating him as a poet rather than a bureaucrat. His resentment at their lack of appreciation is closely mingled with his praise, and reveals itself in his recognition of the poet's need for flattering lies.

That the *Furioso* is a largely ironic text has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship;⁵ that such arguments apply to Isabella d'Este's role in the poem has thus far gone unnoticed, and given her initial appearance in canto 13 this is perhaps unsurprising. Isabella is first mentioned by Melissa the sorceress as the great founding matron of the Este dynasty. A generally laudatory tone is initiated as Isabella's primary traits are laid out for Bradamante, who wants to know where her destiny with Ruggiero will lead:

De la tua chiara stirpe uscirà quella
 d'opere illustri e di bei studii amica,
 ch'io non so ben se più saggia e pudica,
 liberale e magnanima Isabella,
 che del bel lume suo di e notte aprica
 farà la terra che sul Menzo siede,

⁴ The basic information on Ariosto's relationship to and work for Ippolito d'Este can be found in Edmund Gardner, *The King of Court Poets: A Study of the Work, Life and Times of Lodovico Ariosto* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1906). Ippolito's role in the *Furioso* is analyzed by Albert Russell Ascoli, to whose account of Ariosto's relationship to his patrons I am heavily indebted. See Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony* 281–89.

⁵ For example, see Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony*, in particular Ascoli's discussion of Ariosto's subversion of Ippolito d'Este. See also Robert Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1965).

a cui la madre d'Ocno il nome diede:
 dove onorato e splendido certame
 avrà col suo dignissimo consorte,
 chi di lor più le virtù prezzì et ame,
 e chi meglio apra a cortesia le porte.
 S'un narrerà ch'al Taro e nel Reame
 fu a liberar da' Galli Italia forte;
 l'altra dirà: "Sol perché casta visse,
 Penelope non fu minor d'Ulisse."

(XIII, 59–60)

Canto 13 describes the Este women separated from the men, who appear much earlier, in canto 3, and include such problematic figures as Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, Isabella's brother. Isolated in a particularly female realm, cited as models for female behavior, and discussed only by the two women, Melissa and Bradamante, the Este women of canto 13 shape a privileged view of the virtuous noble lady. She is set on a pedestal throughout the poem, and in the case of Isabella d'Este, exists well within established social boundaries, being specifically praised for cultivating arts and letters while her husband performs more masculine arts on the battlefield.

Yet Melissa's speech culminates in a comparison of Isabella d'Este to Penelope, whose chastity rendered her the equal of Ulysses. That the poet praises Isabella's virtue by reference to a similarly exemplary woman thus invites the reader to believe that she is a patron worthy of a poet's kindness. Penelope, however, appears elsewhere in the poem, in canto 35 as the particularly troubling culmination of a lengthier discussion of the role of poets in concealing the unworthiness of patrons. Cantos 34 and 35 concern Astolfo's voyage to the moon to retrieve the wits lost by the mad Orlando in canto 23. John the Evangelist acts as Astolfo's guide, and points out the reputations of famous people littering the moon's surface, a description which includes an encomium to Ippolito d'Este, Ariosto's sometime patron. The Evangelist describes himself as a poet, and points out to Astolfo that the terms of a patron's fame are entirely matters of authorial discretion: "Non fu sì santo nè benigno Augusto / come la tuba di Virgilio suona. / L'aver avuto in poesia buon gusto / la proscrizione iniqua gli perdona. / Nessun sapria se Neron fosse ingiusto, / nè sua fama saria forse men buona, / avesse avuto e terra e ciel nimici, / se gli scrittore sapea tenersi amici" (XXXV, 26). If patrons are to be famous (rather than infamous), they must reward poets; if poets are to be rewarded, they must praise patrons. All court writing, and thus

the *Furioso* itself, is implicated as false and self-serving speech, directed at praise and calumny alike.⁶

The Evangelist pairs women with male patrons as demanding praise and fearing slander, but places the poet's focus firmly on matters of chastity. A woman represented by a court poet is clearly in one of two positions, elucidated by the examples of Penelope and Dido. Homer misrepresented the Trojan war, giving Agamemnon the victory, and making "Penelopea fida al suo sposo / dai Prochi mille oltraggi avea sofferti" (XXXV, 27). The truth, St. John explains, is different: "che i Greci rotti, e che Troia vittrice, / e che Penelopea fu meretrice" (XXXV, 27). In contrast, St. John invokes the notorious figure of Dido: "Da l'altra parte odi che fama lascia / Elissa, ch'ebbe il cor tanto pudico; / che riputata viene una bagascia, / solo perchè Maron non le fu amico" (XXXV, 28). St. John closes with a near threat to the poet's patrons, warning that "sono i poeti e gli studiosi pochi; / che dove non han pasco nè ricetto, / insin le fere abbandonano i lochi" (XXXV, 30). The woman patron who does not reward poets is, like Dido, doomed to be called a whore, and the only virtue any woman will ever know is that given to her by poets.

In canto 13, we recall, Ariosto invokes Isabella's patronage by his description of her as a friend of fair studies, who prizes and cherishes excellence. The culmination of that description in a reference to Penelope, however, invokes canto 35 and marks the hollowness of his praise of Isabella, which is motivated by the desire for reward.⁷ More importantly, if Penelope is understood as a whore, then her comparison to Isabella impugns not only the marchesa's patronage but her

⁶ Albert Russell Ascoli suggests that by allowing the evangelist to compare himself to lying flatterers, Ariosto threatens to reduce the bible to a literary fiction. See Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony* 288. The point is also made by David Quint, both in his book *Origin and Originality* and in an earlier article on the lunar episode. See David Quint, "Astolfo's Voyage to the Moon," *Yale Italian Studies* I (1977): 378–402. Also David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature: Versions of the Source* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 87.

⁷ The technique of *interlacement*, with which the *Furioso* is written, demands that it be read backward as well as forward. Ariosto is unique, however, in his use of *interlacement* for the purpose of ironic inversion, which becomes evident only if one traces references through the poem with no regard for chronology. Thus canto 35's description of Penelope shapes one's reading of canto 13. For Ariosto's variant of the medieval romance tradition of *interlacement*, see Albert Russell Ascoli, "Ariosto and the 'Fier Pastor': Form and History in *Orlando Furioso*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001): 489–90. Marina Beer, *Romanzi di cavalleria: Il Furioso e il romanzo italiano del primo Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1987). Daniela Delcorno-Branca, *L'Orlando Furioso e il romanzo cavallaresco medievale* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1973).

chastity. As St. John reveals Penelope's "true" nature in canto 35, so in canto 13 Ariosto refers to his power to unmask Isabella d'Este as well, precisely through the praise he writes of her.⁸ This hidden implication of the act of writing in the construction of virtue is repeated and expanded in canto 29.

Canto 29 describes the suicide-by-proxy of the character Issabella, who has become the object of lust of Rodomonte, the poem's central villain and figure of uncontrolled carnal urges. To protect her chastity and her devotion to the memory of Zerbino, her lover who died earlier in the poem, Issabella concocts a plan to resist Rodomonte's increasingly forceful advances. She promises Rodomonte that she will make a potion which will, if he douses himself in it, make him invulnerable to any assault. In return, she asks him to swear to stop his pursuit of her. Rodomonte, greedy for the protection of the potion, agrees to the bargain but duplicitously determines to have his way with Issabella nonetheless. Issabella, having prepared the drink, demonstrates its good effects by dousing herself with it and inviting a tipsy Rodomonte to try his sword on her body, which she claims is now invulnerable. Rodomonte promptly cuts off her head, and Issabella's dedication to her chastity has defeated both the wits and the rapacious assaults of the knight.

The story is taken directly from Francesco Barbaro's treatise *De re uxoria* (On Wifely Duties). Ariosto, however, adds a postscript found nowhere else, in which God looks down from heaven and, admiring the chastity of the self-sacrificing Isabella, apotheosizes her name: "Per l'avvenir vo' che ciascuna ch'aggia / il nome tuo, sia di sublime ingegno, / e sia bella, gentil, cortese e saggia, / e di vera onestade arrivi al segno: / onde materia agli scrittori caggia / di celebrare il nome inclito e degno; / tal che Parnasso, Pindo et Elicone / sempre Issabella, Issabella risuone" (XXIX, 29). It has always been assumed that the Isabella in this stanza is Isabella d'Este, as she is the most elaborately praised of the Isabella's appearing earlier in the poem.

Yet the apotheosis of the name of Isabella in canto 29 does leave room for other readings, precisely because it does not specify which Isabella is meant. Though, as we shall see, the Issabella stanzas of canto 29 were constructed around one of Isabella d'Este's personal devices, the text apotheosizes the name in general. Thus while canto

⁸ In the lunar episode, St. John becomes a parallel figure to Ariosto himself, thus allowing the reader to perceive St. John's comments as Ariosto's own. See Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony* 296.

13 points out the importance of Isabella d'Este and leads to the perfectly reasonable assumption that it is she to whom the later passage refers, Caretti notes in his edition of the *Orlando Furioso* that other Isabellas are also possible candidates—including the wives of Ferdinando and Federico III of Naples, the wife of Ferdinand of Spain, or the wife of Guidobaldo della Rovere.⁹ One might add the possibility of Isabella Colonna, referred to elsewhere in the poem. All of these, as noble ladies, are Isabellas of the caliber of Isabella d'Este, so the question is one of multiple references rather than of one exclusive one, even if the reference to Isabella d'Este is primary. We might simply leave it that this passage is *mostly* Isabella d'Este.

Yet the multiple readings that are invited by Ariosto's lack of specificity on the question of exactly whose name is being invoked constitute merely the first of a number of destabilizing moments in canto 29's verses. There is also the problem raised by the discussion of chastity which the story of Isabella initiates and which culminates, apparently, in Isabella d'Este. If the personal chastity of a marchesa must be absolutely inviolate, its association, even by negation, with issues of and assaults on the chastity of other women is itself an act of violation. This is particularly true when one considers the metaphorical language obvious in the final assault on Issabella by Rodomonte: Issabella offers "il collo ignudo" to Rodomonte, "quel uom bestial," who then attacks her "si con la mano e si col ferro crudo," thus robbing her of her head, "già d'Amore albergo" (XXIX, 25). Rodomonte's sword effectively becomes the phallus which has its way with her despite her suicide, in a very bodily onslaught which stands in for a sexual assault, and which is described as a physical attack on the seat of love. The implication is that Issabella has, in language though not in fact, lost the war for her chastity. Worse yet, God's voice links the figure of Issabella the martyr to the name of Isabella by comparison to Livy's Lucretia: "At this incomparable, this amazing act [Isabella's suicide], the Creator looked down from heaven and said: I commend you more than Lucretia, whose death deprived Tarquin of his realm." God then goes on to make a law that all Isabellas will be similarly virtuous, which is to say, like Issabella the martyr and Lucretia. Lucretia had triumphed over Tarquin by a similar kind of suicidal action—but in her case, too late to save her chastity from assault. The tale of Lucretia, as understood in the Renaissance, was a problematic allegory of virtue: the

⁹ Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, a cura di Lanfranco Caretti (Tonno: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1966) II: 881.

narrative was generally pretended to be about the virtue of a woman's defense of her chastity, but in fact was largely about the violation of that chastity, whether with her willing cooperation or not.¹⁰ The poet invites us to view Lucretia in the most unsavory light by his mention in canto 13 of Penelope, who teaches us that virtue is merely a performance.

I will return to the problem of Lucretia. But for the moment we should note that metaphorical moments such as this one, linking the name of a great lady to sexually questionable textual moments, indicate a subtext to Ariosto's treatment of Isabella d'Este which has thus far been missed. The purpose of this destabilizing activity is not, I argue, to call the literal chastity or virtue of Isabella d'Este into question. Rather, when mated with other moments from the *Orlando Furioso* which address Isabella d'Este and the other ladies of the North Italian courts, this moment expresses anxieties which Ariosto would likely have felt in his relationships with these women. Here such anxieties are expressed through these women's greatest vulnerability, their chastity. If the vulnerability of the noble lady, and the insecurity of her hold on her reputation, was directly related to the insecurity of the courtiers beneath her, these insecurities were negotiated precisely through the act of writing, which served both to establish (or malign) the woman's public virtue and directly to control the courtier's position at court. But by the same token, it is important to recognize that the favor of powerful women was a competitive commodity, a commodity purchased through their concern with the public acclaim of their virtues, a fact which Ariosto cleverly demonstrates in cantos 13 and 29, and in one further passage in the *Orlando Furioso*.

Because court literature about women almost invariably focused on chastity, it held its subjects as passive objects of scrutiny, for whom rebuttal was impossible. As Eleonora d'Aragona, Isabella's mother, pointed out to her in a letter, there was no defense against assaults on one's character: "Et chi è quel che con tutto il ben operare del mondo possa a maldicenti chiudere la bocca, de quali natura è di sempre più esercitarse contra chi merita esser più lodato."¹¹ The court lady was, therefore, only as good as her court poets' praises. For

¹⁰ There is a significant and ever expanding literature on Lucretia in the Renaissance, but I am particularly indebted to Stephanie Jed's study of the continual reproduction of the rape of Lucretia as both a victim on trial and a voyeuristic exercise. See Stephanie H. Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989).

¹¹ Vittorio Cian, "Una baruffa letteraria alla corte di Mantova (1513)," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 8 (1886): 398, doc. 2.

Isabella d'Este, cultural power was generated by the circle of followers who made her name among the most elegized in Italy.

The center of this circle was certainly Mario Equicola, for many years her tutor and from 1519 her secretary, who published both in Italian and Latin.¹² Equicola had spent a great deal of time at the Ferrarese court, in the service of Giulio Cesare Cantelmo and his wife Margherita, and was from that time forward a friend of Ariosto's. Equicola, like Ariosto, wrote a number of works describing the virtues of Isabella d'Este. While in the service of Margherita Cantelmo and her husband he wrote *De mulieribus*, a treatise on women, in which he describes three contemporary women, one of them his patron, another, at even greater length, being Isabella d'Este.¹³ This treatise was apparently an effort on Equicola's part to move from Margherita's court to the more prestigious one of the Mantuan marchesa. This explains her privileged position in the text, and the format of a defense of women, a form designed to please women perpetually in need of praise. And, in fact, the treatise seems to have served partly as a defense of Isabella d'Este in the wake of inappropriate behavior by ladies of her court at the marriage festivities of Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso d'Este.¹⁴ Additionally, the treatise offers not only a discussion of Isabella's virtue, her patronage of the arts, and her gift for playing the lyre, but also includes a physical description of her beauty, which we should note is exactly what is not present in Ariosto's discussion of the elevation of the name of Isabella.

Equicola followed *De mulieribus* in 1505 with a treatise offered to Isabella as a birthday gift, discussing one of her insignia, the Latin phrase *Nec spe nec metu*, designed to represent Isabella's equanimity in the face both of fear and of hope. Certainly this is one virtue of the noble lady, whose identity is a reflection of her husband's achievements and not of her own personal gains and losses.¹⁵ But in that it

¹² For the life of Mario Equicola and discussions of his works, see Stephen Kolsky, *Mario Equicola: The Real Courtier* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, S.A., 1991). Stephen Kolsky, "The Good Servant: Mario Equicola. Court and Courtier in Sixteenth-Century Italy," *The Italianist* 6 (1986): 34–60. Domenico Santoro, *Della vita e delle opere di Mario Equicola* (Chieti: Nicola Jecco, 1906). Giulio Bertoni, "Nota su Mario Equicola bibliofilo e cortigiano," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 66 (1915): 281–82.

¹³ The treatise is discussed in Kolsky 69–76. Also Conor Fahy, "Three Early Renaissance Treatises on Women," *Italian Studies* 11 (1956): 30–55.

¹⁴ Kolsky 69–70.

¹⁵ Constance Jordan discusses the idea, found in Francesco Barbaro's widely disseminated *De re uxoria*, that a wife was to be "transparent"; i.e. that her actions were to be completely true to her husband's, and to seem in all respects to reflect his nature rather than her own. See Jordan 44–45.

was Isabella's personal device it was a projection of at least her public personality. Such devices were important to Isabella, which is presumably why the 1516 and 1521 editions of the *Orlando Furioso* place the apotheosis of her name in canto 27, stanza 27, since one of her favorite devices was the number XXVII, set in the ceiling of her *grotta* alongside the motto *Nec spe nec metu*.¹⁶ Twenty-seven (*ventisette*) is a pun on *vinti sette*, on its phonetic similarity to the sects of her enemies having been conquered.¹⁷

Isabella's fondness for her devices does not seem to have extended to the reception of Equicola's treatise on *Nec spe nec metu*. While she politely thanked Equicola for the gift, saying "non seria dono di oro nè di alcun' altra preciosa cosa, essendo in nostro honore alzata tanto et sublimata la piccola impresa nostra,"¹⁸ she told Margherita Cantelmo that she thought it excessive for so insignificant a motto.¹⁹ Presumably she felt that its praise of her went too far, beyond the appreciation of virtue and into the realm of immodesty. The treatise itself contained no physical description of the marchesa, but it was broken into 27 paragraphs, in honor of the same insignia as that of which Ariosto made use.²⁰ I am not suggesting that Ariosto's use of this motto was directly related to Equicola's, but the employment by both men of these same mottos for ostensibly flattering purposes demonstrates

¹⁶ Isabella's multiple devices are discussed by Mario Praz, "The Gonzaga Devices," in *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, ed. David Chambers and Jane Martineau (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1981) 65–72. See also Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renier, "La coltura e le relazioni letterarie di Isabella d'Este," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 34 (1899): 49–52. For the device of the musical score, see L. Fallay-D'Este, "Un symbole néo-platonicien: la devise du silence au *studiolo* d'Isabella d'Este," in *Symboles de la Renaissance*, ed. C. Giarda, E. H. Gombrich and M. Schapiro (Paris: L'École Normal Supérieure, 1976) I: 79–85.

A full discussion of the use of "XXVII" in the *Orlando Furioso* can be found in Georges Güntert, "Le imprese di Isabella d'Este e l'*Orlando Furioso*," *Il Rinascimento: aspetti e problemi attuali* (Firenze: Leo S. Oslchki, 1982) 445–54. Güntert's conclusion, that the device was activated throughout the Isabella incident uncritically to invoke the wisdom, prudence and chastity of Isabella d'Este is at odds with my argument that a contextual understanding of the intent of writing about these devices destabilizes one's reading of Ariosto.

¹⁷ The interpretation of "conquered sects" is discussed by Julia Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua 1474–1539: A Study of the Renaissance* (London: John Murray, 1907) I: 281. Also by Güntert 448. See also Luzio and Renier 50.

¹⁸ This letter is partially quoted in Luzio and Renier 4.

¹⁹ Isabella wrote to her friend Margherita Cantelmo, at that time Equicola's actual employer, "perchè de la alteza dil ingegno suo serrà sublevato un motto che da noy cum tanti misterii non fu factio cum quanti luy gli atribuisse." Kolsky 93.

²⁰ Luzio and Renier 4n.

that there existed a developed language for the praises of a great lady, praises which circled closely around a publicly articulated, constructed set of virtues.

The vulnerability of the noble lady within the circulation of courtiers' writings is, I would argue, one source for Ariosto's description of the apotheosis of the name of Isabella in canto 29 and its link to violated chastity. Paradoxically, making a woman the subject of a treatise puts her at risk, as Pamela Benson argues, "by definition, the need for praise indicates present or past weakness."²¹ Addressing a lady's virtue in writing contains further dangers. As chastity was a matter of public perception much more than private action, and as a noble lady's identity was largely disseminated through the texts of courtiers, a great lady's reputation was in some sense in the hands of her courtiers. As she could never appear to have anything to hide, any defense would appear as guilt. Hence Isabella's polite reception of Equicola's treatise in her letter to him, accompanied by a cautionary word in the ear of his patron.

The constant scrutiny to which Isabella subjected issues related to her own public image is provocatively demonstrated by an incident in Mantua in 1513, an incident which, in an inviting coincidence, involves the calumny of the chastity of another Isabella.²² A rivalry arose between two humanists at the Mantuan court, both vying for the favors of the marchesa and her husband. Antonio Tebaldeo, involved in a lengthy dispute with Mario Equicola over the question of whether Tuscan or court dialect should form the basis of the literary vernacular, managed to obtain a letter of Equicola's on this very subject. Tebaldeo altered the letter, though it is not certain in exactly what way, such that the final version committed two crimes: it quoted the marchesa describing Equicola's vernacular writing as "il migliore di tutti gli altri che componeno," thus implying her vanity

²¹ Pamela Benson, *The Invention of Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992) 12.

²² My account of this incident is taken largely from Vittorio Cian, "Una baruffa litteraria alla corte di Mantova (1513)," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 8 (1886): 387–98, and Filippo Cavicchi, "Una vendetta dell'Equicola," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 37 (1901): 94–98. It is also discussed by Kolsky 137–49, and by Cartwright 87–90. For Tebaldeo in general, see Tania Basile, *Per il testo critico delle rime del Tebaldeo* (Messino: Centro di studi umanistici della Università, 1983). Also Silvio Pasquazi, *Rinascimento ferrarese: Tebaldeo, Bendedei, Guarini* (Caltanissetta, Italy: S. Sciascia, 1957).

and poor literary judgment; and it implicated Equicola in a romantic tryst with one of Isabella's *donzelle*, Isabella Lavagnola.²³ Lavagnola was the daughter of Isabella d'Este's former dancing instructor, and her name over time has been associated with Federico Gonzaga, Isabella d'Este's son.²⁴ It is quite possible that Equicola was having an affair with Lavagnola. But this is only secondary: it was not the first time one of the *donzelle* had been accused of misbehaving,²⁵ and it was the second time that Lavagnola's name had been linked with Equicola's for the purpose of slandering him.²⁶ On both occasions, readers less acquainted with the people involved mistook the mention of Isabella to mean Isabella d'Este, thus implicating her in a love affair with Equicola. Whether this last interpretation was intended cannot be known, but the materials were made very public: Tebaldeo's letter was not only printed in Rome, but on All Saints' Day a series of sonnets reiterating its claims also made their appearance around Mantua, nailed to the city's walls.

Isabella d'Este was furious. Immediately, she wrote to her brother Ippolito demanding his assistance in informing influential friends that the letter was a slander and that she condemned it.²⁷ She defended the virtue of her *donzella*, then herself, on the grounds that she had never asserted the preeminence of Equicola's treatises in the vulgar, and finally offered a defense of Equicola. In Isabella's letter,

²³ Cian 390.

²⁴ Isabella Lavagnola's somewhat ambiguous relationship with Federico Gonzaga, negotiated largely with Equicola acting as intermediary, is discussed in Luzio and Renier 11–12.

²⁵ Another of Isabella's *donzelle* behaved in what was considered a scandalous manner in 1513 in Milan, at celebrations for the victory of the League of Cambrai. These events prompted a sharp letter of reprimand from Francesco Gonzaga to Isabella d'Este. See Cartwright II: 80–86.

²⁶ Carlo Dionisotti reprints in its entirety a document of 1512, printed in Rome, that pretends to be a letter of Equicola's in six languages, three versions of Latin and three dialects of Italian. The letter is certainly intended as a prank, and its linguistic confusion is a reference to Equicola's role in the ongoing "questione della lingua," and his views against pure forms of Ciceronian Latin and Tuscan Italian. The Latin and vernacular halves of the document each concludes with a dedication to his beloved Isabella. Dionisotti notes this Isabella as Isabella Lavagnola, but he also writes that the absence of a last name, and the literary use of language, both referred court readers to Isabella d'Este, for whom Equicola had by 1512 composed in both Latin and the vernacular. I would go farther and say that this confusion was certainly part of the authors' intention, given their desire to insult Equicola both personally and professionally. See Carlo Dionisotti, *Gli umanisti e il volgare fra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Firenze: Felice Le Monnier, 1968) 117–21, 127.

²⁷ The letter from Isabella to Ippolito d'Este, dated 4 November 1513, is printed in its entirety in Cian 395–97, doc. 1.

the slander of Isabella Lavagnola is linked to Equicola's own writings on the subject of love: "per il sonetto conoscerà la impudicitia et maligna natura sua [i.e. Tebaldeo's] a non havere rispetto a maculare l'honore de una giovenetta per odio che porti ad uno che fa l'amoroso piu presto per soggetto di scrivere che per affecto, come so che V. S. et tutto il mondo judica et vede."

Equicola's own response on behalf of himself and his patron involved the publication of *Nec spe nec metu*, which defended Isabella's person and her Latin simultaneously, as well as his own commitment both to her and to writing in Latin. The issue of the treatise's excesses was apparently less threatening than the immediate issues of morality and credibility. Isabella dismissed Tebaldeo, who went to work in Rome. He reappears in the North Italian courts in canto 42 of the *Orlando Furioso*, however, where he is shown in adoration of Lucrezia Borgia, Isabella d'Este's rival.

It might be tempting to read this incident literally into the *Orlando Furioso*, as involving one of the other, less divine Isabella figures to whom Ariosto might be referring. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Ariosto consciously intended such a reading. Rather, I take this incident as connoting a number of the concerns that are evident in Ariosto's concise description of a female patron: the vulnerability of the woman patron to the charge of moral shortfalls is matched by the vulnerability of the courtier both to the calumny of his peers and also to the wrath of the patron if she considers her reputation in jeopardy. Because, unlike their husbands, female nobles did not wield absolute power, their rewards and punishments functioned much like a courtier's treatise: on the level of flattery, favoritism, and innuendo. The episode also points out the extent to which the female patron considered her identity linked not only to the behavior but also the writings of her courtiers: if Equicola's love poetry were to be taken too literally, the reputations of both Isabellas would be at risk.

The threat of calumny is written into canto 29 of the *Furioso* via the references which Ariosto chooses to transform the character Issabella into the name of Isabella. The story of Brasilla from *De re uxoria* from which the death of Isabella is taken comes in a discussion of the regulation of lovemaking, where the accusation is leveled that women are inclined to be lustful instead of properly modest.²⁸ Barbaro cites

²⁸ One significant detail is added in Ariosto's text, which is at least thematically related to my argument. The addition of Rodomonte's drunkenness, not found in Barbaro's account, seems to me suggestive of the story of Judith and Holofernes, a story

the incident of Brasilla as an example to contemporary women, who are not inclined to be so avid in the protection of their chastity: "If wives would want to be as they ought to be, there would be no need of further examples and exhortations."²⁹ Ariosto preserves this link by commenting that women like Isabella, specifically with a name for chastity, are unknown in his own day: "Alma, ch'avesti più la fede cara, / e 'l nome quasi ignoto e peregrino / al tempo nostro, de la castitade, / che la tua vita e la tua verde etade" (XXIX, 26). In Ariosto as well as Barbaro the invocation of an exemplary woman is the basis for a slander of contemporary women. The poet then says that he commends this Isabella more even than Lucretia, "la cui morte a Tarquinio il regno tolse" (XXIX, 28, 4). There are two relevant issues within this reference: first, Lucretia's assault and suicide were brought about by a verbal description of her which inflamed Tarquin's lust, demonstrating that speech is the primary agent in the defense or defeat of a woman's virtue.³⁰ Second, Tarquin's threat to Lucretia is also related to words. Her fear is clearly not of dying, but of the slander with which he threatens her, a slander specifically targeting her chastity, and one against which there is no defense. She would rather actually be violated and attempt a recuperative effort than remain physically pure but have it said she was unchaste, precisely because her name would then remain undefended.³¹

Ariosto appears to have been aware of this implication, which he demonstrates twice in these verses. While he sings Lucretia's praises, he points out that she was unsuccessful in defending her chastity by

similarly involving the drunkenness of a man resulting in his decreased caution and eventual decapitation at the hands of a woman. It is a story which, by the Renaissance, had begun to be reinterpreted such that Judith's virtue, likewise that of a widowed woman under assault by a man, was called into question. Though the biblical account is very clear on the fact that Judith was in no way sexually involved with Holofernes, by the sixteenth century the assumption was that she had seduced him. Thus sixteenth-century painted representations of the story invariably reference Judith's sexuality, or state of relative undress.

²⁹ Kenneth R. Bartlett, *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992) 155.

³⁰ Ronald Martinez points out that "Sextus conceives his desire for Lucretia *because* of her husband's ostentatious demonstration of her superior beauty and virtue," meaning that, "thus Sextus desires Lucretia *because* she is chaste, *because* she belongs to another." See Ronald L. Martinez, "The Pharmacy of Machiavelli: Roman Lucretia in *Mandragola*," *Renaissance Drama*, ed. Leonard Barkan (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1993) 13, 14.

³¹ Stephanie Jed argues that in Salutati's *Declamatio* Lucretia, through death, "hopes not only to escape infamy and vindicate her loss of chastity, but to recover her chastity in death." See Jed 42.

saying that her suicide deprived Tarquin of his kingdom—"il regno tolse"—but not, by implication, of his pleasure. The reference is clearly to the rallying of the Romans around the dead body of Lucretia and their subsequent defeat of Tarquin's army, but it also subtly brings into view the underlying fact that Lucretia's primary objective was not successful. Furthermore, the narrative link from the death of Isabella to the mention of Lucretia is mediated by an injection of the poet's voice, addressing Isabella, and wishing that his poet's art had the power adequately to sing her praises: "Così i miei versi avesson forza, come / ben m'affaticherei con tutta quella / arte che tanto il parlar orna e còme / perché mille e mill'anni e più, novella / sentisse il mondo del tuo chiaro nome" (XXIX, 27, 2–6). The double link between the calumny told against women and the role of the courtier-poet in hyperbolically singing and defending the virtues of women, particularly if one reads this passage as a lead-in to the figure of Isabella d'Este, puts Ariosto self-consciously within the economy of related treatises and slanders exemplified by such real-life episodes as Tebaldeo's spat with Equicola.

Isabella d'Este arguably may have been the most prestigious of the female patrons of the North Italian courts, but she did have competitors for poets' attentions. In her immediate circle, similar treatises to those of Equicola discussing the virtues and possible equality of women were circulated with dedications to Margherita Cantelmo, Isabella's close friend; to Lucrezia Borgia, her sister-in-law; and to Eleonora Gonzaga, her daughter, to name only a few.³² Movement from one woman patron to another appears to have been fairly common: Equicola and Giangiorgio Trissino both defected from Cantelmo's camp to sing the praises of Isabella d'Este, and Niccolò da Correggio and Ercole Strozzi both moved from Isabella to Lucrezia Borgia. This last pair appears to have prompted a rivalry between Isabella and Lucrezia, demonstrating that the noble lady very much needed her adoring courtiers in order to remain viable;³³ her power was primarily one of captivation, exhibited either through her beauty, her virtues, or her artistic achievements, and testified to by ranks of courtier-poets. In light of this proliferation of patrons, the subtext of the few stanzas of canto 29 which I have discussed raises a problem

³² Several of these defenses are discussed in Benson 34–106; Fahy.

³³ This rivalry has become more famous than the evidence really suggests; though there appears to have been some coldness between the two women, their relationship never erupted into open conflict. See Cartwright I: 215. See also Kolsky 108, 125.

endemic to the economy of laudatory praises of the patron, specifically that courtiers must offer praise whether there is any object worthy of it or not. The disingenuousness of the writing generated by the patronage system in which Ariosto operated, and of which the *Orlando Furioso* forms a piece, remains just under the surface. Yet it is recognizable in the poem in the figure of the female patron.

Women appear to have functioned in the courts of Mantua, Ferrara and Urbino in particular as “threshold patrons,” or figures the rising courtier could approach as a road to employment with their husbands or another nearby male figure. I have noted that Mario Equicola began his career with Margherita Cantelmo; but he ended that career not with Isabella d’Este but with her son, Federico Gonzaga. Before leaving Margherita Cantelmo’s service for that of Isabella d’Este, he attempted to replace the Cantelmi with Ippolito d’Este.³⁴ Unsuccessful, he settled for Ippolito’s sister, Isabella. Ariosto, likewise, may well have seen pleasing Isabella d’Este not as a road to her patronage of him, but to better standing with her brothers Alfonso and Ippolito. The women of these courts were notable for their literacy, and for their appreciation for the writings of courtiers, which meant an expanded market for the attempts to ingratiate oneself.³⁵ The movement from one to another female dedicatee indicates, on the one hand, that the women were in perpetual danger of losing their devotees to their peers and thereby losing status. On the other hand, the courtiers were in the position of obvious disingenuousness and hypocrisy within a very close society, where all actions were in some sense public.

This unusual community of women and their attendant courtiers receive what appears to be a tribute in the last cantos of the *Orlando Furioso*, on a fountain at the center of the courtyard of the palace of the cuckolded knight in canto 42.³⁶ Eight women carved in stone appear around the fountain, each supported by two open-mouthed figures—

³⁴ For Equicola’s involvement with Ippolito d’Este, see Kolsky 86, 90–91, 97. In 1507 Equicola produced a treatise for Ippolito which was similar to his *Nec spe nec metu*. This treatise, *De opportunitate*, similarly treated one of the desired patron’s devices—in this case, Ippolito’s device of a falcon perched on a clock.

³⁵ Benson 34.

³⁶ The fountain is discussed with specific reference to the economic relationship of poet and lady, and its negotiation through praise and favors, by Katherine Hoffman, “The Court in the Work of Art: Patronage and Poetic Autonomy in the *Orlando Furioso*, Canto 42,” *Quaderni d’Italianistica* 8 (1992): 113–24, and Ronald L. Martinez, “Decapitalizing Rinaldo: The Money of Tyranny in Niccolò da Correggio’s *Fabula di Cefalo* and in *Orlando Furioso* 42–43,” in *The Italian Epic and its International Context Annali d’Italianistica*, ed. Dino S. Cervigni, 12 (1994): 87–114.

except for the eighth, who has only one figure to support her. All are in the Este circle, by birth or marriage, and constitute the great wives and daughters of the North Italian courts. Among the eight are: Lucrezia Borgia, supported by Antonio Tebaldeo and Ercole Strozzi; Isabella d'Este, supported by Giangiacomo Calandra and Giangiacomo Bardellone; Elisabetta Gonzaga, with Giacomo Sadoletto and Pietro Bembo; Eleonora Gonzaga with Baldessare Castiglione and Muzio Arelio; and Beatrice d'Este with Niccolò da Correggio and Timoteo Bendedei.

Some of these are names we have already encountered. Yet here they are not necessarily paired with the women we might expect, demonstrating the degree to which in this circle the courtier-poets moved from patron to patron. Isabella d'Este, notably, appears without Mario Equicola, her most published laudator, and instead in close proximity with Lucrezia Borgia, her rival, who is paired with the disgraced Tebaldeo, and with Ercole Strozzi who had also written for Isabella before moving over to Lucrezia's court. Niccolò da Correggio had likewise been Isabella's, though lost twice, first to Lucrezia Borgia and then to Beatrice d'Este. Castiglione, who placed Elisabetta Gonzaga at the center of his *Book of the Courtier*, appears instead with Eleonora Gonzaga. Pietro Bembo supports the figure of Elisabetta Gonzaga, but could just as easily be paired with Lucrezia Borgia, to whom he dedicated his *Asolani*. Isabella's represented singers include the almost unknown Bardellone, who wrote in her honor in a very limited circle, but nothing that was in any circulation outside her immediate environs.³⁷ At the time of the writing of the *Furioso* Isabella's other singer, Giovanni Giacomo Calandra, had written in her honor a work called the *Aura*.³⁸ It was discussed by Equicola in his *Libro de Natura de Amore*, which was soon circulating in manuscript. *Aura* was a work in memory of a much beloved dog of Isabella's, the death of which spawned a wave of poetry in Mantua.³⁹ Calandra himself moved from the praise of Isabella to a position as secretary to Federico Gonzaga, Isabella's son.

³⁷ Mario Emilio Cosenza, *Biographical and Bibliographical Dictionary of the Italian Humanists and of the World of Classical Scholarship in Italy, 1300–1800* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1962) I: 422.

³⁸ For the life and works of Calandra, see "Calandra, Giovanni Giacomo," *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana (Roma: Società Grafica Romana, 1964) 8: 427–31. Also Cosenza I: 762–63.

³⁹ One might take the proliferation of humanistic poetry in Latin in memory of a dog as amusing proof of the disingenuousness of much of the poetry produced by these courtiers to please their patrons. Equicola and Tebaldeo were also among those writing in honor of the dog, with Equicola writing its Latin epitaph. See Luzio and Renier 44–47.

From this complex genealogy one can see the difficulty of the pairing of these poets with one woman, for whom they constitute the proof of virtuous identity (the women have people to sing their praises, therefore they have virtues to praise). The songs of the poets are only contingently linked to the women they support, and their appearance in pairs makes this clear, as there is little differentiation between the figures, either of women or of poets. While the women are initially described as “d’abito e di faccia differente,” the poet qualifies this with “ma grazia hanno e beltà tutte ugualmente” (XLII, 80, 7–8). As no physical description is offered of any of the figures, their identification is completely dependent on the inscriptions which accompany them, inscriptions which are essentially condensed versions of exactly the kind of praise which the courtiers would sing. Isabella d’Este physically is “non men gioconda statua né men bella” than her neighbor Lucrezia Borgia, but her praises are particularly tied to the credit her virtues are to Ferrara, her birthplace: “Ecco la figlia d’Ercole, Issabella, / per cui Ferrara si terrà felice / via più, perché in lei nata sarà quella, / che d’altro ben che prospera e faitrice / e benigna Fortuna dar le deve, / volgendo gli anni nel suo corso lieve” (XLII, 84). The Gonzaga women, Elisabetta and Eleonora, are similar credits to Mantua—“sí gloriosa la terra di Manto, / che di Vergilio, che tanto l’onora, piú che di queste, non si darà vanto” (XLII, 86, 4–6). But while this piece of praise sets them apart from Isabella, they are otherwise indistinguishable as they are also paired in virtue and appearance, as “due donne son, che patria, stirpe, onore / hanno di par, di par beltà e valore” (XLII, 45, 7–8). This reduction of a woman’s virtue to a reflection of the *patria* would not seem outside the generally chauvinistic style of Renaissance writing, were it not for the vividly contrasting appearance of the eighth woman.

The eighth woman has only one courtier to support her; she is the most carefully described figure, the only one given physical attributes, clothing and a face, let alone visible thoughts or emotions. This figure is not only carved of a different material than the others (she is in alabaster, where the others are in marble), but she is also “di tanto e sì sublima aspetto, / che sotto puro velo, in nera gonna, / senza oro e gemme, in un vestire schietto” (XLII, 93, 4–6). In addition to her dress one is invited to examine—“contemplando fiso”—her face which, in the next stanza, despite the attractiveness of her singer, “parea sdegnarsi che con umil canto / ardisse lei lodar sì rozzo ingegno” (XLII, 95, 3–4). It has long been believed that this

figure is Alessandra Benucci, mistress and later wife of Ariosto, and that she stands on a self-portrait of Ariosto himself.⁴⁰ If so, she is the only one of the women whose praises are the result of a purely personal relationship. She is also, significantly, the only figure to react to a poet's praises. Her expression is one of skepticism.

If the other court women are petrified by their poets' praises, then Alessandra Benucci is Pygmalion's sculpture, brought to life by her creator's passion. The contrast in representation and in the roles of the poets is rooted in the inability to make present a body which is to be kept perpetually hidden—the body of a marchesa, for instance. For while such women must be beautiful they must also not be perceived as the objects of lust. The songs of the paired courtiers are literally empty, directed at an absence, because they cannot make present their objects. The hollowness of their praises is pointed out by comparison to Benucci's sculpture. Yet, like the link to Lucretia in canto 29, the placement of Alessandra Benucci on the fountain with the noble ladies serves uncomfortably to tie the praise of woman to libidinal desire. Most obviously, however, the opposition of this description of Alessandra Benucci with that of the other court ladies and their poets makes a pointed contrast between the empty praise of the paired courtiers, demonstrated by Ariosto's hollow description of their reified forms, and genuine admiration, evident in the poet's own set-piece description of his lady-love as a representation of a nameless stranger.

The eighth woman, like the fight between Antonio Tebaldeo and Mario Equicola, illustrates both the difficulties of the courtier-poet's position relative to a female patron, and his awareness of the need to tread carefully in the area of a woman's public virtue. While winning a woman's patronage demanded testimonials to her virtue, such testimonials were direct references to the social vulnerability of both patron and writer. Ariosto's representation of Isabella d'Este in the three cantos of the *Orlando Furioso* which I have discussed subtly addresses exactly this dual vulnerability, not only by raising the issue of chastity with the name of a great lady, but also by pairing chastity with references to the act of writing itself. As the activities of Ariosto's peers demonstrate, peers brought into view within the poem, the production of testimonials to female virtue was the necessary conse-

⁴⁰ This identification is a commonplace of Ariosto scholarship, dating back to sixteenth century commentators. It is discussed in detail, although to different conclusions than I will draw, in Hoffman 113–24.

quence of an unusually lively community of women, a community which depended on its celebration by courtiers. While Ariosto's references to Isabella d'Este help to shape this economy, they also uncomfortably display the cynicism underlying much of the hyperbolic praise which fills such writings. The descriptions of Isabella d'Este in the *Orlando Furioso* become, by this understanding, an act of self-criticism, demonstrating the emptiness of the economy in which the poem itself participates, and threatening what they claim to preserve.

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