
The Newly Discovered Correspondence of Isabella de' Medici and her Political Role in Renaissance Europe

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If it is true that in the glorious history of the Medici dynasty of Florence women have rarely played important political roles, it is also true that Isabella de' Medici (1542-76), favorite daughter of the Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo I and Eleonora of Toledo, was certainly a brilliant exception to this rule.

Isabella was one of the most cultured women of her time: she was able to converse in Spanish and French; she knew Latin and Greek; she was a talented musician and composed madrigals.¹ At the age of 14, she had been married to Paolo Giordano Orsini of Aragona, first Duke of Bracciano, scion of a powerful Roman family related to the pope, with the intent of strengthening the ancient connection between the Medici and the Orsini families. The religious ceremony was privately performed three years later, on January 28, 1556, shortly before Paolo Giordano left for one of several military campaigns in support of the pope. Although Orsini had made important renovation in his castle to make it a comfortable house, after Pope Pio IV instituted the Duchy of Bracciano, the couple, at the insistence of Cosimo I,² kept living in Florence, in Palazzo Medici in Via Larga (today's Via Cavour).³

For a decade (1565-1575), Isabella was a prominent figure in the Medici diplomacy and her role was acknowledged also by other European courts. Two official events sanctioned her importance: the wedding of her brother Francesco to Giovanna of Austria, and the papal investiture of Cosimo I as Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1570. On this last occasion, the papal Master of Ceremonies granted the Duchess the solemn entrance after her father, a privilege previously only reserved to her mother.

Intelligent, witty, brilliant, involved in the artistic trends of contemporary Florence, the Duchess was the center of a vivacious cultural salon, whose members were literary men, poets, musicians and aristocrats. Her contemporaries depicted her as Caterina of Alexandria and compared her to the goddess Athena. In the numerous literary works dedicated to her, we can still feel the genuine admiration of the writers, well beyond the wish to capture her benevolence.

To re-establish the historical truth and acknowledge Isabella's real political role, it is greatly relevant to examine her numerous letters, recently published and kept at the Capitoline Archive in Rome. The Duchess' correspondence can be divided into three sections: the

first one, the most substantial, includes missives to her husband, 548 of them, written between 1556 and 1576; the second one consists of missives to her family, mostly to and from her brothers; the third one contains missives to important figures of her time, showing the width of her network and her considerable role in the politics of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and of the Papal State in the middle of the 16th century.

Among her illustrious correspondents we find Giovanna of Austria (daughter of the Emperor Ferdinand of Augsburg and wife of the Grand Duke of Tuscany Francesco de' Medici), Margaret of Savoy, Elizabeth of Augsburg, Don Juan of Austria, Francesco Orsini, Madgalena Lamberg of the Earldom of Blagaj. Royals wrote to her too: Caterina de' Medici, Queen of France; Henry III of Valois, King of France; Catherine of Augsburg, Queen of Poland, to name just a few.

In addition, Isabella also corresponded with less famous, but historically important, people, for example Vittorio Cappello, brother of Bianca, the future second Grand Duchess of Tuscany, or Ridolfo Conegrani, ambassador of the Duke of Ferrara in Florence. She also wrote to minor figures of her time, who often asked for her *patronage*. With few exceptions, all her letters are signed, which makes her correspondence of special historical interest and shows the Duchess' prestige and diplomatic skills.

The analysis of her letter exchange with Paolo Orsini enlightens us on the relationship between the two spouses and offers a psychological interpretation of Isabella's murderer. The husband that the Grand Duke of Tuscany had chosen for his daughter was the nephew of two popes and lord of a small but rich Duchy. For Cosimo de' Medici, the marriage of his favorite daughter should guarantee both privileged relationships with the Roman court and political support from a State that occupied a strategic position in the heart of Italy. There was no room for feelings in the combined marriages among powerful families in the last centuries.³

The letters to Isabella start in January 1556, when the fifteen-year-old Paolo is called to Rome by Pope Paul IV to fight with the French in defense of the city against the Imperial army. During the years of their marriage, the Duke always alternated short periods of residence in Florence with long military campaigns and visits to the Duchy of Bracciano, to fulfill his duties there as Duke.

As hinted earlier, Paolo would have preferred to live in Bracciano with Isabella but, bending to the will of the Medici family, the couple never moved. Therefore, the two spouses were often apart and wrote to each other frequently, about twice a week.

Although an efficient postal system connected Rome and Florence, the couple preferred to entrust their mail to trustworthy people. It is often difficult for the historian to put the facts in context, because the fear of revealing names or other information forced the two to use short, obscure hints. Many sheets are still today blackened by the fire of the candles used to reveal words written with lemon juice or other means, and that leads us to understand that their letters were especially sought after for their possible sensitive data and references.

To freely express their feelings seemed to be what the couple was not afraid of doing and, contrary to expectations, we can still perceive a deep affection between them, at least at the beginning of their relationship. We often find reciprocal reproaches for not answering sooner and Orsini often tries to get closer to the woman he loves by abandoning the “Vostra Signoria” (Your Lordship) in favor of “musino mio caro” (my dear pretty face). The letters of the two teenagers betrothed reveal a reciprocal passion. Isabella is jealous of her future husband and demands repeated confirmation of his love.

Through the years the couple continued to fill the time of the absences with a dense correspondence, where the initial affection and tenderness slowly combined with a strong complicity with the arrival of the children, and eventually grew into incomprehension with the rise of serious political and economic problems in the Duchy of Bracciano. In the letter number 173, from August 1565, Isabella writes:

Illustrious and excellent lord husband and careful master... I am doing what you bid me to do and write immediately post haste, because there is nothing I wish more than to serve you. Here it is so hot that it has become unbearable. I adore you and, without you, I feel dead. But please love me, I kiss your hands. May the Lord give you all that you wish. From Donna Isabella Medici Orsina, servant and wife of your illustrious Excellence, who adores you and who slept alone in her large bed.⁴

Isabella's writing is clear and calm, and her letters reveal a complex woman, with a strong personality, honest, ironic and practical. She knew, like all the young princesses of her time, that her role demanded her to mix qualities such as beauty, elegance, fertility and education of the children with virtues like courage, strength of character, political intelligence and the ability to cooperate with her husband in the shadows.

However, the relationship with Paolo Giordano Orsini, born as a political alliance and not deprived of tenderness, slowly transformed into reciprocal tolerance, although this feeling was carefully hidden behind a formal affection, for the benefit of the court secretaries who would read the letters before their legitimate addressees. Both spouses, after all, had other relationships: the grand-ducal court knew about the *liaison* of Isabella with Troilo Orsini as well as about Paolo Giordano's interest in the Roman prostitutes⁵ and – during Isabella's last years – about his intense passion for the woman who would become his second wife, Vittoria Accoramboni.⁶

Isabella tried to obtain military assignments and the best armies for her husband; she established relationships that were important for his career; she also followed his several legal controversies. However, she also criticized his volte-face towards Philip II in order to go to the French side. In her letter number 200 of October 12, 1566, she wrote:

It seems very strange to me that you want to leave what is certain in favor of the uncertain and that you want to show the world that you have a fickle brain...because neither Philip nor the King of France will ever trust you again. Therefore I beseech you, think carefully, because these are matters about which one has to reason for a very long time before acting.⁷

Starting in 1566 Isabella, endowed with a sharp political intelligence, that had been refined at the Florentine court and that was hard to suppress behind the mask of the devoted wife, abandoned the tone of the submissive spouse and openly criticized the actions of Paolo Orsini, whose fragility, political naivete and weakness she saw clearly.

The Duchess, who had never wished to leave Florence to bury herself in the small Duchy of her husband, had not only cultural but also political ambitions in her native city. Such ambitions became more evident in her last years, when she grew more and more self-confident, more and more often evading the schemes and the conventions of her time and defying the strict code of behavior that imposed to the aristocracy to never show emotions. With her extrovert character, she instead rejected obligations and simulations: for example, she openly cried in public for the almost simultaneous deaths of her mother and her brothers Giovanni and Garzia; she also fainted in front of everyone in the church at the funeral of her brother Giovanni, scandalizing the Florentine aristocracy of the time.

Paolo Giordano Orsini, on the other hand, would never abandon his military education and lifestyle. In an attempt to keep a stubborn political autonomy, moreover, he lost his battle against the unscrupulous power games

of Renaissance Italy. The distance between him and Isabella widened, with an increase of misunderstanding that would eventually lead to tragic events. In a letter of May 1575, Isabella brusquely replied to her husband's accusation of neglecting him in favor of State matters, saying: "I have no State to govern... My brother takes good care of his States without my help."⁸

As mentioned before, Isabella de' Medici kept a dense network of correspondence for her whole life, also with her family members. She was, in fact, the only surviving woman of the Medici family, guarantor of the familiar cohesion, referee of the "team game" of her dynasty, and supporter of the old Cosimo, who never recovered from the loss of his beloved Eleonora of Toledo. Her correspondence with her brothers Piero and Ferdinando, a cardinal, show how they tried to discredit and vilify Paolo Giordano Orsini, while acknowledging Isabella's importance in the family and political dynamics of the Grand Duchy. They asked for her advice and showed an admiration rarely shown for the women of the time.

The exchange of letters between Isabella and the wives of princes, as well as the men in power of her time offer once again important clues about the Duchess' diplomatic relationships and her influence over the figures who actually governed the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, namely first her father and then her brother. Isabella's letters to Don Giovanni of Austria aimed at helping her husband find a military assignment (letter of March 4, 1574), but her missive to the Prior of Castiglia, don Fernando Alvares of Toledo, sent one month after the Imperial confirmation of Francesco de' Medici's title of Grand Duke, in February 1576, has a different tone. The Prior had contributed to the confirmation and the Duchess had found the right channel to intercede for her brother with Philip II, who had to give his assent to the new title too.⁹

Isabella's position and diplomatic skills allowed her to participate in the dense web of relationships connecting the wives of the sovereigns, in a continuous exchange of favors and secret alliances flourishing outside the official channels. We have an interesting example of this in the letters sent to Isabella by Marguerite of Valois, the cultured Duchess of Berry, daughter of the French King Frances I and wife to Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy. In a missive Marguerite asks for protection for a favorite of hers; in another she asks for Cosimo's opinion.¹⁰

Some letters are unfortunately lost, but from the moved and affectionate reply of the French Queen Caterina de' Medici, we gather that the monarch had asked her "bonne cousine Isabella" some important advice about delicate matters. Caterina is also thankful "for the help given to the affairs of my son the king" (letters 601-602 of May 29 and December 8, 1574).¹¹ The queen's letter presumably refers to the loan granted to the French king

by the Grand Duke of Tuscany Francesco, a loan supported by Isabella.

Even these few examples prove that the "Medici star"—as Isabella is remembered by posterity—was at the center of a network of favor exchanging and alliances making that represented a diplomatic channel "parallel" to, but not less important than, the official one. Courageous, of modern views, Isabella also used the prestige of her position to protect and save some personages disliked by the Inquisition and had a sincere friendship with the Venetian Bianca Cappello, the controversial second wife of her brother Francesco, defying the hostility of the Medici court.

Isabella also had an important role in female patronage, protecting or encouraging women's careers. It is not by chance that Maddalena Mezari, called la Casulana, famous madrigalist, and the first woman in history to publish her compositions, dedicated to Isabella the *First Book of Madrigal in Four Voices* (published in Venice in 1568). The dedication opens with Isabella asserting the role of women in the professional field: "I want to show the world the stupid mistake of men, who so believe themselves the only masters of the high gifts if intellect, that they don't think these gifts can be in common with women."¹²

The light of the "star" of the Medici house was turned off suddenly and violently on July 16, 1576,¹³ proving how difficult it was to be a woman of power in the male universe of the Renaissance. Isabella's assassination¹⁴—caused either by her adulterine affair with Troilo Orsini or by Paolo Giordano's wish to get rid of his inconvenient wife and remarry—had a wide echo all over Europe both for the celebrity of the victim and for the dramatic circumstances of her death, contributing towards making her the protagonist of a long literary and historiographic tradition between 1600 and 1800.

In *The White Devil*, the famous tragedy by the English playwright John Webster (c. 1578 – c. 1632) staged in London in 1611, the Duchess dies while kissing the poisoned portrait of her husband. In his *Storia d'Italia* (History of Italy, 1824), Carlo Botta (1766–1837) was instrumental in bringing about the nineteenth-century 'black' legend of Isabella de' Medici, describing her as the incarnation of the ambiguity of evil, at the same time victim and executioner, innocent and perverse. The Italian historian inspired the French writer Alexander Dumas (1802-1870), who imagined an incestuous relationship between Cosimo and his daughter in his book *I Medici: Splendore e Segreti di una Dinastia senza pari* (The Medicis: Splendour and Secrets of an Unparalleled Dynasty).¹⁵

Isabella is also the beautiful and perverse protagonist of the famous historical novel by Domenico Guerrazzi

(1804 – 73) entitled *Isabella Orsini, duchessa di Bracciano* (Isabella Orsini, the Duchess of Bracciano), published in 1845, while the painter Domenico Gnoli (1933 – 70) portraits her as the innocent victim of her unfaithful husband.

If art and literature were fascinated by Isabella de' Medici for her cultural eclecticism and her diplomatic role in late-Renaissance Florence, her bad reputation was promoted and propagandized by anti-Medici chronicles, by slanderous libels of Florentine exiles and by diplomatic correspondence of powers who were hostile to the pope and the Grand Duchy—all sources of evident political, not historical, matrix.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ At the age of five, she started studying Latin and Greek under Antonio Angeli da Barga and Pier Vittori. Her music teacher was Mattia Rampollini, court musician from 1551 to 1554. At the age of nine, she was defined as “dotta” (learned) by her tutor Mariotto Cecchi who, in a letter to Pier Francesco Riccio, says about her that “she composes Latin verses longer than a Bible” (Treccani, p. 228, my translation).
- ² In her letters to her husband, Isabella never expressed the intention of living under his same roof, using as excuses her family's desire to keep her in Florence or her poor health, that prevented her from travelling. After the death of her sisters and mother in 1562, Isabella was the only woman in Cosimo I's family and, being still childless, she was called by her brother Francesco, heir to the throne, to take care of her younger brothers and her father, whose health was rapidly deteriorating.
- ³ See Isabella de' Medici. *La gloriosavita ela finetragica diuna principessa del Rinascimento* by Caroline P. Murphy (Milano Il Saggiatore, 2011).
- ⁴ Lettere tra Paolo Giordano Orsini e Isabella de' Medici, ed. by Elisabetta Mori (Roma, Gangemi, 2019), p. 303, my translation.
- ⁵ Orsini was involved in several tavern riots and accused of violent behavior by some prostitutes. The trial papers are in the Vatican archives. See Isabella de' Medici. *La gloriosa vita e la fine tragica di una principessa del Rinascimento* by Caroline P. Murphy (Milano, Galli Thierri, 2011), chapters 1-2.
- ⁶ To marry his mistress, Orsini had her husband murdered by paid assassins.
- ⁷ Lettere fra Paolo Giordano Orsini e Isabella de' Medici, p. 343, my translation.
- ⁸ Lettere tra Paolo Giordano Orsini e Isabella de' Medici, p. 766, my translation.
- ⁹ Lettere tra Paolo Giordano Orsini e Isabella de' Medici, p. 908.
- ¹⁰ Lettere tra Paolo Giordano Orsinie Isabella de' Medici, p. 877.

- ¹¹ Lettere tra Paolo Giordano Orsinie Isabella de' Medici, p. 728, my translation.
- ¹² *Il Primo libro dei Madrigali a Quattro voci* by Maddalena Casulana (Venice, 1568), Introduction, my translation.
- ¹³ Isabella was strangled in the Medici villa of Cerreto Guidi.
- ¹⁴ Among the numerous handwritten reports, let's remember: *Tragico fine della s.ra Eleonora di Toledo moglie di Cosimo primo de' Medici e d'Isabella figlia d'ambidue e moglie del sig. Paolo Giordano Orsini e di molti altri cavalieri seguita gli 11 luglio 1576* (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Mss., 2098); *Casi tragici occorsi per lo più in vari tempi nella città di Firenze* (Florence State Archive, Mss., 165); *Memorie fiorentine... compilate da Francesco Settimanni, nobile fiorentino e cavaliere di Santo Stefano* (ibid., 128).
- ¹⁵ Original title *Les Médicis: Splendeur et secrets d'une dynastie sans pareille*, published in 1845. The Italian edition is edited by Viviana Carpiave, Florence, Clichy, 2018.

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