

*‘To see ourselves as others see us’: Giovanni
Francesco Zaninello of Ferrara and the portrait
of Isabella d’Este by Francesco Francia*

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I will not write anything else to your Excellency except to say that your portrait, made by Francia on paper in this tumult, has not been concluded to his satisfaction and he does not wish me to see it in order to show it to me in better form. When the aforementioned John Francesco Tritapalle, having seen it, relates that it appears to him to be at the point at which it resembles you, then it will be brought for my opinion, because I have engraved on my soul the living likeness of Your Highness and will know if he deceives me because I can describe all of your true outlines, and I will write to you my opinion . . .

Lucrezia d’Este Bentivoglio to Isabella d’Este, 1511¹

The beautiful portrait of Your Excellency was presented to me by Master Cleophas, and I have presented it to our Giovanni Francesco Zaninello, who could not consider it more dear had I given him an entire kingdom. Such celebrations and happiness I have never seen anywhere, and he has begun to invite people to dine in order to show them this portrait. Two days from now he intends to invite eight or ten people for precisely this purpose and he told me to say nothing because he wishes it to be a surprise . . .

Battista Stabellino to Margherita Cantelmo, 1512²

In this paper I am going to trace the history of a portrait of Isabella d’Este made by Francesco Francia in 1511, from its origins in oral discourse to its

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¹ ‘*Altro non scrivo . . .*’ letter of Lucrezia d’Este Bentivoglio in Ferrara to Isabella d’Este in Mantua, 31 July 1511; Alessandro Luzio, ‘I Ritratti di Isabella d’Este’, Appendix to *La Galleria dei Gonzaga venduta all’Inghilterra nel 1627–28* (Rome: Bardi, 1974), 183–238, at 210 (first published in *Emporium*, IX, 56, 1900, 344–359). The documents concerning the Francia portrait are included in an appendix to Emilio Negro and Nicosetta Roio, *Francesco Francia e la sua Scuola* (Modena: Artiolì, 1998), 115–18. A summary of the documents is given by Julia Cartwright, *Isabella d’Este Marchioness of Mantua, 1474–1539, a study of the Renaissance*, 2 vols. (New York and London: J.P. Dutton and Co., 1905), I, 381–8. The only examination of the role Lucrezia d’Este Bentivoglio played in the creation of the portrait is Norman Land, *The Viewer as Poet, The Renaissance Response to Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 101–27.

² ASM, AG, b.283, Giovanni Battista Stabellino to Margherita Cantelmo, 12 March 1512, see Appendix.

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Fig. 1 Titian, *Isabella d'Este*, oil, c. 1536, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (ART50987, Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY)

status as an object of play within courtly social entertainments hosted by the collector Gian Francesco Zaninello in Ferrara and finally to its reinterpretation in yet another portrait of Isabella by Titian, the so-called *Isabella in Black* (Fig. 1).³ I will follow the Francia portrait from its origins in a negotiated process of conversations between the painter and his advisor in Bologna, Lucrezia d'Este Bentivoglio, to its 'completion' through staged courtly display and as

³ Negro and Roio, *Francesco Francia*, have published a portrait they identify as the lost Francia portrait of Isabella d'Este, recently rediscovered in a private collection, see. Cat. 71, 196–8. Titian's use of Francia's portrait was first discussed by Luzio, 'I Ritratti', 222–3.

a constituent in dialogic games of surprise after it came into Zaninello's possession in Ferrara. I will draw attention to the oral and discursive components of portrait making and portrait viewing that I believe characterized the dissemination and display of such images within the courtly milieu.⁴

As Joanna Woods-Marsden has pointed out, like many other aristocratic patrons, Isabella d'Este desired images of herself *al naturale*, portraits that seemed alive because they were imbued with the unique characteristics of attitude, thought and speech possessed by the sitter.⁵ Portraits were used to create and reinforce social identity and clients were willing to sacrifice absolute likeness and faithful physical verisimilitude in the interests of having an artist capture their individual essence, to represent qualities of mind, behaviour, thought and speech that cannot really be painted but must be implied and successfully read by an audience of viewers.⁶ Such essential qualities of character were most certainly conveyed through conversations with the painter by consultants during the portrait-making process, often when the actual sitter was physically absent. The transmission of 'likeness' through spoken discourse is especially true in the case of Titian. Scholars who have studied his portrait *oeuvre*, most particularly his portraits of aristocratic female patrons, have noted that he often based these images on earlier likenesses loaned to him by his subjects, and that he certainly must have relied on spoken descriptions and character sketches provided by courtiers, humanist agents, friends and other associates to fully flesh out his impressions of sitters that he himself knew only slightly, or had actually never met.⁷ To miss the importance of these conversations is to miss the vital oral and discursive components of portrait making, too often overlooked in the literature. It is equally important, when it comes to portrait art, to consider the rhetorical and conversational contexts of the reception of portraits among their intended audiences. The evidence for the critical reception of portraits in various social situations is one of my chief interests in this paper, because it helps us to understand that portraits were not primarily objects to be viewed in controlled circumstances

⁴ The documents are Archivio di Stato di Mantova (ASM), Archivio Gonzaga (AG), b.283 and b.1248. See my transcriptions of the relevant documents in the Appendix.

⁵ Joanna Woods-Marsden, "Ritratto al Naturale": Questions of Realism and Idealism in Early Renaissance Portraits', *Art Journal*, 46 (1987): 209–16.

⁶ Patricia Simons, 'Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women', in Alison Brown (ed.), *Languages and Images of Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 263–311. Simons makes the point that such active construction and reinforcement of social identity inevitably led to the idealization of appearance.

⁷ The question of the absent sitter is one that has received very little attention in the literature. For references to the necessity to study portraits made in *absentia*, see Simons, 'Portraiture, Portrayal and Idealization', 268–9; also Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits. European Portrait Painting in the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 190. The role of some husbands in guiding and directing Titian while he was painting portraits of their deceased wives is mentioned by Joanna Woodall, 'An Exemplary Consort: Antonis Mor's Portrait of Mary Tudor', *Art History*, 14/2 (June 1991), 192–224, notes 37 and 38 at 221. According to Pietro Aretino, Titian's portrait of Giulia Varano della Rovere was painted based only on her description by her husband, Guidobaldo della Rovere: Harold E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian. Complete Edition. II, The Portraits* (London: Phaidon, 1971), cat. 90, 136.

of display, but were constituents in dynamic forms of social play which combined visual and oral modes.⁸

In this case, my study is focused on depictions of Isabella d'Este, Marchesa of Mantua from the time of her marriage in 1490 to the lord of Mantua, Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, to her death in 1539. Widely considered 'the first lady of the Renaissance' because of her extensively well-documented career as a patron of artists and as a collector of antiquities, Isabella stood at the centre of a social network of male and female courtiers that extended from Ferrara, her city of origin, to Mantua, Urbino and Milan and beyond Italy to France and England.⁹ Her most famous commissions were for the painted allegories by Andrea Mantegna, Pietro Perugino and Correggio for her private *studiolo*, and she owned an ancient figure of a *Sleeping Cupid* attributed to Praxiteles as well as its modern counterpart by Michelangelo.¹⁰ Her social prominence, which was fundamental to her success as a collector, was carefully cultivated via a program of self-promotion nurtured through artistic commissions as well as field reports filed by various visitors to her collections. By contrast, throughout her married life, Isabella undertook surprisingly few high-profile religious commissions. When she became a widow, however, she acknowledged the necessity for any prominent female patron to bow to the political exigencies of carefully staged acts of public piety, and commissioned from Francesco Bonsignori an altarpiece honouring the local Mantuan mystic the Beata Osanna Andreasi that was installed in the church of the convent of San Vincenzo in Mantua, where her daughter, Ippolita Gonzaga, was a nun. In a particularly astute act of political self-fashioning, Isabella had herself included in the altarpiece in the act of worshipping this local *beata*, thus consolidating her new identity as pious widow.¹¹ But her chief arena for staging her public

⁸ As opposed to the literary reception of portraits, particularly in the case of Titian, see Luba Freedman, *Titian's Portraits through Aretino's Lens* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

⁹ Castiglione says: 'If you pass into Lombardy, you will find Isabella, Marchioness of Mantua, of whose most admirable virtues it would be offensive to speak as restrainedly as anyone must do here who would speak of her at all', *The Book of the Courtier by Castiglione*, trans. John Singleton (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 238–9.

¹⁰ The description 'first lady of the Renaissance' is the eponymous title for a major exhibition of Isabella's possessions and for the catalogue *Isabella d'Este Fürstin und Mäzenatin der Renaissance: La prima donna del mondo*, ed. S. Ferino-Pagden (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1994). The most recent and comprehensive analysis of the iconography of the *studiolo* paintings is Stephen J. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros. Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004). For her collections and their installation in the *studiolo* and *grotta* in the Ducal Palace see Clifford M. Brown, with the collaboration of Anna Maria Lorenzoni and Sally Hickson, 'Per dare qualche splendore a la gloriosa città di Mantova'. *Documents for the Antiquarian Collection of Isabella d'Este* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2002) and Clifford M. Brown, *Isabella d'Este in the Ducal Palace in Mantua. An overview of her rooms in the Castello di San Giorgio and the Corte Vecchia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005).

¹¹ For the most recent examination of the Bonsignori altarpiece see Paola Bertelli, 'Venerazione della beata Osanna Andreasi', in Renata Casarin (ed.), *Osanna Andreasi da Mantova 1449–1505. L'immagine di una mistica del Rinascimento* (Mantua: Casandreasi, 2005), cat. 9, 134–43. There are differences of opinion about the dating of this work, but it is my opinion that it was commissioned specifically to mark Isabella's widowhood and that it was one of the last works Bonsignori completed before his own death in the same year. This altarpiece forms part of my forthcoming study *Widows, Mystics and Monasteries: Female Religious Experience in Renaissance Mantua*.



Fig. 2 Gian Cristoforo Romano, Portrait Medal of Isabella d'Este, recto, gold medal with precious stones, (1505), after the medal of c. 1498, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (ART77479, Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY)

persona was through the cultivation of her image in portraits given as gifts and widely circulated among her contemporaries.

Luke Syson has studied the genesis of the most famous portrait medal made of Isabella d'Este by the artist/goldsmith Gian Cristoforo Romano in the period 1495–98.¹² Isabella had a copy of this medal cast in gold and set with precious jewels, an obvious endorsement of its quality and acceptance, although it should be emphasized that the elaboration included some revisions to the profile on the recto as originally conceived by Gian Cristoforo (Fig. 2). The reverse of the medal unites a figure of Victory with the female allegorical figure of Isabella's astrological sign, Sagittarius, surrounded by the motto *BENMERENTIUM ERGO*, a phrase that has been interpreted by Jennifer Fletcher to mean 'for those who deserve well,' and by Syson as 'On account of high merits' both of which allude to the idea of the triumph of

¹² Luke Syson, 'Reading Faces. Gian Cristoforo Romano's Medal of Isabella d'Este', in *The Court of The Gonzaga in the Age of Mantegna: 1450–1550*, Atti del convegno, Londra, 6–8 marzo 1992/Mantova, 28 marzo 1992, ed. Cesare Mozzarelli, Robert Oresko, Leandro Venturi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1997), 281–94.

victory over vice achieved through personal merit.¹³ The motto was in keeping with Isabella's larger programme of self-representation in the allegories she commissioned for the decoration of her studiolo from Andrea Mantegna, Pietro Perugino and later by Correggio, all of which portray the victory of virtue over vice which permitted the arts to flourish under the aegis of Isabella.

The success of the Romano medal depended not only on its integration of image and motto and its fidelity to Isabella's personal agenda of self-representation, but also on the ability of recipients to appreciate its meaning. Syson's analysis of how individual recipients reacted to the medal offers important insight into how such visual messages were actually delivered. When Jacopo d'Atri, a courtier from Mantua, presented the medal to the ladies of the court of Naples, he supplemented the image with a lively and animated discourse on its meaning.¹⁴ He wanted to be certain that the recipients understood that the medal was not just an exercise in likeness and recognition, but an attempt to essentialize the merits and virtues of the sitter, intended to evoke a sense of Isabella's living image in the minds of the viewers. Of course, the image of any absent sitter immediately brings to mind their actual physical absence, conjuring up the longing for their presence that activates the sense memory. Portrait gifts like this one were intended both to evoke and to bridge temporal and spatial orders of separation, to make the sitter present in the memory and in the mind of the viewer.¹⁵ It is this immediate memory of presence, of likeness, of the swiftness of a change of features in certain moods and attitudes, a constancy of bearing or a changeability of expression, the movements of the eyes and head while speaking, that we recall most strongly when we look at images of people that we know.¹⁶ This 'living' component is what Isabella meant when she referred to the 'natural image' and the ladies of Naples, with the assistance of d'Atri's explanations, agreed that the medal conveyed Isabella's merit and intelligence and were even moved to kiss her image, as if receiving her in person.

The confirmation, via de' Atri's report, of the success of her portrait gift was extremely important to Isabella. If, in Isabella's estimation, a successful

¹³ The earliest attempt to discern a unifying theme in the cycle is Egon Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua* (New York: New York University Press for the College Art Association of America, 1971). For more recent analyses see Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*. J. M. Fletcher's translation of the inscription is found in 'Isabella d'Este, Patron and Collector', in David Chambers and Jane Martineau (eds.), *Splendours of the Gonzaga* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1981), 51–64 at 51. For Syson's discussion of the motto see 'Reading Faces', 291–2.

¹⁴ Syson, 'Reading Faces', 287–8. Jacopo d'Atri was a secretary to Francesco II Gonzaga and envoy to the court of Naples. His letter regarding the Romano medal is transcribed by Luzio, 'I Ritratti', 194.

¹⁵ For some reflection on portraits as surrogates for the physical presence of a sitter, and their communicative role, see John Shearman, *Only connect . . . Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 108; Jodi Cranston, *The Poetics of Portraiture in the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65; and Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, 220–21.

¹⁶ Alberti said that portraits could 'make the absent present, as friendship is said to do', and that painting 'makes the dead seem almost alive': Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, revised ed. 1966), 63.

portrait was one that achieved the requisite balance between the delineation of actual physical appearance, allowing the sitter to be recognized by a community of viewers, while also embodying a degree of idealization that would enhance the social purposes of the projected self, the success of this enterprise could only be confirmed or denied by those who received the image. De'Atri's report about the positive reception of her portrait medal in Naples was therefore a confirmation that it had effectively communicated her intentions.¹⁷

Isabella relied on this same conjunction of oral and visual affirmation in her own portrait viewing. In 1493, when she was sent some portraits of Isabella del Balzo, the Countess of Acerra, she thanked the countess for the gift but informed her that she had been informed by people who knew her (the countess) that the likenesses were inaccurate. The informant was once again Jacopo de' Atri, the Gonzaga envoy to Naples, who told Isabella that the portraits did not resemble their subject. Isabella therefore assured the countess that she would 'correct' the shortcomings of the artist by proposing to 'often look at [the portrait of the Countess] correcting the defects of the artist with the help of the information from Jacopo and others who have seen you, so that we may not be deceived in our concept of you'.¹⁸ This is a very telling statement, because it clearly demonstrates that Isabella wanted a likeness that spoke not only to the appearance but to the natural character of the sitter, and it further demonstrates that she was prepared to visually correct any inaccuracies by relying on word-of-mouth accounts.

Isabella clearly saw portrait viewing as a negotiated process, partially inspired by the portrait itself and then enhanced through additional description provided by a reliable witness. Given her belief in this negotiated viewing process, it is not surprising to find that portraits of Isabella were also made through a process of spoken and pictorial negotiation, resulting from interactions between patrons, artists and advisors. Often, the advisors on these portrait projects were women. In 1506 Eleonora Orsini del Balzo, Marchioness of Crotone (in Naples) commissioned a sculptor from Messina to carve a marble portrait bust of Isabella. The sculptor based his portrait on Gian Cristoforo's medal and his work was guided by Eleonora herself who, according to a correspondent from Naples, held the image of Isabella 'so well-stamped on her heart that even at many miles remove from [you] she is able to perfectly make your portrait'.¹⁹ The portrait project was therefore conceived as a demonstration of friendship and devotion between the two women, one

¹⁷ For some insight into Isabella's attitude towards portraits of herself, see Woods-Marsden, 'Ritratto al Naturale', 209; Jennifer Fletcher, 'Isabella d'Este, Patron and Collector', in *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, 51–64; Land, *Viewer as Poet*, 111–16; Stephen Kolsky, 'Images of Isabella d'Este', *Italian Studies*, 39 (1984), 47–62.

¹⁸ Quoted from Land, *Viewer as Poet*, 115.

¹⁹ The documents for this exchange are found in Luzio, 'I ritratti', 202–03. For insights into the Eleonora del Balzo and her correspondence with Isabella, see Anna Maria Lorenzoni, 'Tra francesi e spagnoli. Le fortunate vicende di Eleanora Orsini del Balzo, Marchesa di Cortone, attraverso carteggi inediti dell'Archivio Gonzaga', in Anna Maria Lorenzoni and Roberto Navarrini (eds.), *Per Mantova una vita, Studi in memoria di Rita Castagna* (Mantua: Amministrazione Provinciale di Mantova, 1991), 113–44.

in which Eleonora set out to demonstrate that the strength of her recollection of Isabella was so strong that she carried a perfect image of her in her mind.

A similar episode occurred in 1511. This time the portrait of Isabella was to be painted in Bologna by Francesco Francia, under the supervision of Isabella's half-sister, Lucrezia d'Este Bentivoglio.²⁰ Isabella knew of Francia, having unsuccessfully negotiated with him in 1505 for an allegory to hang in her studiolo.²¹ In 1510, she received her first work from him, a portrait of the ten-year-old Federico II Gonzaga (Fig. 3). The portrait was intended to be a memento for Isabella since the young prince was leaving Mantua to spend an extended period in Rome, 'detained' at the papal court in exchange for the liberation of his father Francesco II Gonzaga from Venetian custody.²² En route he was to stop in Bologna, where Francia was able to complete his initial sketches. The finished portrait was completed in only ten days and sent to Isabella in Mantua. Isabella pronounced herself very pleased with the picture, although she did return it to Francia's studio demanding that he darken Federico's hair, which she found '*troppo biondo*'.²³

The portrait of Isabella was begun just months later, probably at the instigation of Lucrezia, perhaps to thank Isabella for hosting the Bentivoglio in Mantua during their expulsion from Bologna in 1506–1508. Francia's likeness was to be based on an existing portrait of Isabella by Lorenzo Costa, often identified with *the Young Woman with a Lapdog*, made in 1507, now in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court.²⁴ Costa's original portrait of Isabella was her favorite image of herself. A copy was sent to Francesco II Gonzaga

²⁰ Lucrezia was the daughter of Ercole I d'Este and Ludovica Condulmer; she married Annibale II Bentivoglio in 1487 and the sumptuous wedding is described in Cecilia M. Ady, *The Bentivoglio of Bologna. A study in despotism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 172–4. After Annibale was expelled from Bologna in 1512 Lucrezia moved to Ferrara with her children. She died in 1518 and was buried in the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in the city; G. Berengan, M. Calore, L. Camozzi, I. Carletti, I. Diodato, E. Licci, P. Miglioli, E. Roncoli (eds.), *Le dame della Corte Estense. Itinerari al femminile per incontrare la città attraverso i luoghi e la vita delle donne che ne hanno segnato la storia* (Ferrara: Casa di Risparmio di Ferrara, 1998), 152–3.

²¹ Isabella wrote to Girolamo Casio in Bologna on 2 April 1505 to clarify the iconographical programme for the painting, composed by Paride da Ceresara and already forwarded to Francia. The painting never materialized, despite the fact that Francia was sent some ultramarine. In a letter of 29 November 1510, probably capitalizing on the near-fiasco over the disappearance of the portrait of Federico Gonzaga (see below), Isabella told Casio to ask Francia again about the *camerino* painting, see the summary of documents in Negro and Roio, *Francesco Francia*, 115 and 117. A recent summary of the commission is found in Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 285.

²² Francesco II Gonzaga was commander of the Venetian forces (1489–98) and went on to serve the French, the Florentines, and then Julius II against Bologna. In 1509 he was imprisoned by the Venetians who agreed to release him on the stipulation that the pope hold Federico II in Rome: see Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, II, 41–44; also Alessandro Luzio, 'Federico Gonzaga ostaggio alla corte di Giulio II', *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria*, 9 (1887), 509–852.

²³ The portrait was sent back to Francia in Bologna, and disappeared for some time; on 7 November Casio reported that a certain Zoanpietro da Cremona had sent it to Rome and that Francia was adamant that he was not going to create another '*per tuto lo oro del mondo*'. By November 20 he was able to report that the portrait was back in Francia's studio and about nine days later Isabella reported that it was safely back in Mantua: see Negro and Roio, *Francesco Francia*, 116–17.

²⁴ For the Costa portrait see *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, cat. 112, 162–64. Silvia Ferino Pagden, 'Portrait of Isabella d'Este', in *Titian, Prince of Painters* (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 1990), cat. 25, 218. The use of this portrait by Francia was first mentioned in Luzio, 'I Ritratti', 210.



Fig. 3 Francesco Francia, Portrait of Federico II Gonzaga, 1510, oil, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913 (14.40.638) Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

when he was being held hostage in Venice in 1509 and Francesco elected to give another copy to Henry VIII as a diplomatic gift in 1514.²⁵ One reason for its success was undoubtedly the fact that Isabella actually sat for the painter, something she categorically refused to do when Lucrezia d'Este Bentivoglio proposed a new portrait by Francia in 1511.²⁶

In September 1511 Lucrezia made a rather disappointing initial report. Having visited Francia's studio in Bologna, she was sorry to say that she thought Francia had made Isabella too thin and too severe. Lucrezia thought

²⁵ *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, 112.

²⁶ One reason for refusing Francia might have been to avoid offending Costa, who had worked in Mantua since 1506 and who would not like his portrait superseded by this new commission on the part of his former Bolognese colleague, as suggested by Luzio, 'I ritratti', 211.

the situation would be improved if Isabella were to sit for the painter. Isabella refused to do so, announcing to Lucrezia that she had long ago lost the patience to sit still for hours. She trusted Lucrezia to correct whatever defects she might find with Francia's work. By October, the portrait was finished and Lucrezia was able to report that Francia was satisfied that he had produced an image that was superior to the model he'd been given. Furthermore, she added: 'In our city all those who know Your Excellency, on seeing this portrait, are in agreement in affirming that it is the living image of you'.²⁷ The strength of this consensus in court conversation, duly reported to Isabella, must have been seen by Lucrezia as positive reinforcement of the power of the portrait to evoke both the likeness and the presence of the sitter, a likeness and presence that is all that more remarkable since Francia achieved it without ever having Isabella sit for him. Isabella's own reception of the portrait is more difficult to gauge; 'You have made us far more beautiful by your art than nature ever made us, so that we thank you with all our heart,' she wrote, a phrase which reveals an awareness that, to her eyes, the likeness was less than honest. Just as she had with the portrait of Federico II, she asked the painter to 'correct' the portrait, claiming that he had made her eyes too dark. With considerable diplomacy and, as Norman Land has pointed out, a remarkable acuity about pictorial values of colour, light and shadow (probably articulated to her by Francia) Lucrezia was able to dissuade Isabella from the change, claiming that the balance of the painting would be ruined by such a change, prompting a new varnish that would spoil the overall effect. Isabella agreed.²⁸

In their 1998 monograph on Francesco Francia, Emilio Negro and Nicosetta Roio identified a portrait of a woman, currently in a private collection, as the long-lost Francia portrait of Isabella d'Este.²⁹ The work, so far reproduced only in black-and-white in their publication, remains somewhat problematic. It shows a female sitter, half-length, wearing a rather generic gown with a pattern of grape vines and leaves embroidered on the bodice, decorated sleeves, and a *balzo*, the turban-like headdress that was favoured by women at this time.³⁰ In her right hand she holds an open octavo volume and in her left she grasps a pair of gloves. There is no marked likeness to Isabella d'Este as she appears on the Romano coin, in the profile pencil drawing by Leonardo now in the Louvre nor, more importantly, to Francia's model, the portrait by Costa at Hampton Court. Nor is there much resemblance to the portrait that Titian made after the Francia in 1536 (Fig. 1). There are no other female portraits documented by Francia, so the identification of this work as the lost

²⁷ Luzio, 'I ritratti', 212.

²⁸ Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, II, 385–6 and Land, 'Viewer as Poet', 115–16.

²⁹ Unfortunately the work could not be reproduced here but see Negro and Roio, *Francesco Francia*, cat. 71, 196–8.

³⁰ From the description by Negro and Roio, *Francesco Francia*, 197.

portrait of Isabella is tempting, but there is, to my mind, no overwhelming evidence to support the claim.³¹

Perhaps because of its successful reception in Ferrara, the Francia portrait itself became a constituent in another permutation of oral and visual games. In fact, almost as soon as it arrived in Mantua, Isabella gave the Francia portrait away to a brand new acquaintance, Gian Francesco Zaninello of Ferrara. Examining what Zaninello did with the portrait provides unique and fascinating insights into some strategies for public modes of portrait display, linked to the milieu of games and dialogues that characterized the social dimension of courtly culture. Within these courtly games emerge further strategies for the animation of portrait art in the context of spontaneous, spoken responses.

Very little is known about Zaninello, except that he was a minor poet, an acquaintance of the better-known Antonio Camelli, called Pistoia, and a socialite of some reputation in Ferrara.³² In 1511, via an intermediary, he sent Isabella an illustrated manuscript of the *Sonetti Facetiae* by Pistoia, for which he himself painted the illuminations and which he prefaced with a dedicatory letter to Isabella (now in Milan, Ambrosiana Library).³³ His overture captured Isabella's interest and she immediately asked acquaintances of Zaninello to advise her as to an appropriate reciprocal gift. Her chief advisor on the matter was Battista Stabellino. Despite his contemporary reputation as a poet, Stabellino remains largely undefined and the chief evidence of his literary output is found in the letters he wrote to Isabella over a period of almost twenty years, which attest to a highly decorative, imaginative and descriptive writing style.³⁴ He seldom signed his letters with his own name, preferring instead the aliases 'Apollo' 'Demogorgon' and 'Pignata'. Many of his letters detail courtly entertainments staged among the Ferrarese elite at the Palazzo Schifanoia. He writes vastly entertaining accounts of outdoor dining and courtly and hunting games played in the gardens of the palace, offering extremely detailed descriptions about the costumes and deportment of the Ferrarese nobility. He describes these garden parties as a kind of assembly of the Muses, dedicated in their leisure time to the worship of Apollo and Diana. It is not difficult to image the appeal these accounts might have had to Isabella, who adorned her most intimate personal spaces with mythological paintings that shared the spirit of the Ferrara entertainments. Under Stabellino's influence Isabella consistently reveals a distinctly playful aspect of her character, offering commentaries of the romantic intrigues of

³¹ The painting first appeared at auction at Christie's in 1882, when it was attributed to Bernardino Luini; for subsequent attributions see Negro and Roio, *Francesco Francia*, 197.

³² D. DeRobertis, 'Cammelli, Antonio, ditto il Pistoia', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana 1960–), Vol. 17, 277–86. Pistoia and Zaninello were close friends. In one of his sonnets, Pistoia named Zaninello among the executors of his estate, along with the well-known poets Nicolò da Correggio and Girolamo Casio, both of whom were also familiars of Isabella d'Este, 280.

³³ Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Fondo Manoscritti, Ms. H 223 inf., printed as *I sonetti faceti di Antonio Cammelli secondo l'autografo ambrosiano*, ed. E. Percopò (Naples: N. Jovene, 1908).

³⁴ These are found in the ASM, AG, chiefly b.2997.

the mythologized assembly (the lords and ladies assumed classical aliases) and often addressing her correspondent as 'Divine Apollo', host of courtly entertainments and holiday masques.³⁵

Stabellino is important in the history of the Francia portrait because he engineered Isabella's reciprocal gift to Zaninello, whom he evidently knew through his socialite circles. Zaninello, he said, would appreciate nothing better in return for his manuscript gift than to have the two portraits recently completed by Francesco Francia; that of the ten-year-old Federico II Gonzaga and the recently completed portrait of Isabella herself (see Appendix).³⁶ This request for mother and son portraits is certainly unusual, but not nearly as surprising as Isabella's willingness to comply. Why did she choose to part with the two portraits by Francia? In the case of Federico's portrait, Stabellino's correspondence indicates that he thought Isabella intended to send a copy, but in a letter to Matteo Ippoliti on 24 May 1512 Isabella clearly stated that she had given away the portrait of Federico made for her in Bologna (to Zaninello) and that she needed to replace it.³⁷ It is possible that she intended to do the same with her own portrait since she did indeed borrow it from Stabellino's heirs several years later so that it could be duplicated by Titian, a fact I will return to shortly.

Of course portraits were regularly given as diplomatic gifts; in this case the diplomatic currency seems to have been Isabella's desire to establish relations with a fellow collector, someone who shared her interest in accumulating and displaying paintings and perhaps even antiquities. Isabella was a shrewd cultural strategist and, much as she might have appreciated Zaninello's attentions and welcomed his shared interests, she also knew that it was in her best interest to keep an eye on a rival collector and on a collection from which she might hope to eventually acquire something for herself; the portraits were undoubtedly part of this stratagem.³⁸

Upon receiving the portraits of mother and son, Zaninello told Isabella that he had hung the portraits side-by-side in his own *studiolo*, which he called his *basso tugurio* (his 'modest hut'). He then compared the twinned

³⁵ For example, ASM, b.2997, lib. 36, f.18r, 13 January 1519, Isabella d'Este in Mantua to Battista Stabellino in Ferrara: 'Per obedire alli preghi et commandamenti del Gran Dio Apollo: quali più e tutti li altri dessideramo servaro. Volontieri haveressimo fatto parte della caccia fu fatta li giorni passati alla congregatione de la fede. Quando più per tempo non fossino stato advertite. Per il che bisogna che Apollo ci excuse per hora. Essendo mangiata già più giorna la caccia e li porci la capra dessiderato da la nostra Blanda cara non é ancho pressa speramo che lei debba ritrovarsi qui in tempo che ni potra mangiare se la si pigliara. Il scriver vi fu fatto che Apollo era tenuto mendace. Non volemo attribuiti non ad obfusione non ad ignorantia di che scrisse anzi e da commendare. Perché com andato ch'a Diana volse obedire sui precesti. Ho per levarni ogni sospetto sapiati che Diana non commisse tal ditto per inferire che questio nostro Dio Apollo fosse mandace. Perché intendeva deli response dil Antiglio e non Moderno Apollo. (. . .).' For more on the activities of Isabella and her coterie of female companions, and the spirit of these entertainments, see Lodovico Frati, 'Giocchi ed amori alla corte d'Isabella d'Este', *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, series II/9 (1898), 350–65.

³⁶ Stabellino letter about the portraits of Isabella and Federico, see Appendix.

³⁷ Luzio, 'I ritratti', 215.

³⁸ For an examination of the networking strategies Isabella deployed in the acquisition of her collections see Rosemary San Juan, 'The Court Lady's Dilemma: Isabella d'Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance', *Oxford Art Journal*, 14/1 (1991), 67–78 at 75.

images to Venus and Cupid, a rather unusual conceit but certainly consistent with the playful spirit of the Ferrarese academy.³⁹ Through the offices of Stabellino, Isabella later supplied Zaninello with another work for his *studiolo*, a portrait by Francesco Bonsignori of Zaninello's friend Pistoia, the author of the collection of poems that had initiated their acquaintance. This portrait of Pistoia was intended specifically for Zaninello's collection, which included portraits of other *uomini illustri* in the tradition of the *studiolo* of Federico da Montefeltro in Urbino and of Paolo Giovio in his villa near Lake Como.⁴⁰ Isabella showed a keen appreciation of the quality of Zaninello's portrait collection when she refused to give Zaninello a drawing of Pistoia by Bonsignori, instead insisting that the artist do another 'which you will not be embarrassed to place next to the other poets in your studio because it is, in our estimation, a fine head and most natural'.⁴¹

In February of 1512, Stabellino wrote to Isabella and enclosed a sonnet that Zaninello had written about her, which had been circulating to great approbation at the court of Ferrara. On March 21, Stabellino reported to Isabella's close friend Margherita Cantelmo, who had been involved in orchestrating the gift to Zaninello, that the portrait of Isabella had arrived in Ferrara and that he had delivered it personally to Zaninello (see Appendix, the portrait of Federico II was to follow a few months later). He told her that Zaninello was so pleased with the gift that he immediately invited a number of guests to a dinner party, where he displayed his new acquisition to them *all'improvvisa*. The assembled lords and ladies were so stupefied by the sudden unveiling of the portrait of Isabella that they didn't know 'which way to turn'.⁴²

In another letter to Cantelmo of April 2, Stabellino elaborated on a similar spontaneous portrait display that Zaninello had staged the previous evening.

³⁹ His letter is given in Luzio, 'I ritratti', 214–15, also Negro and Roio, *Francesco Francia*, 118 and 195–6.

⁴⁰ Zaninello's collection, of which we know virtually nothing, is mentioned in connection to Paolo Giovio by T. C. Price Zimmerman, *Paolo Giovio. The Historian and the Crisis of Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 160. See also Linda Klinger Aleci, 'Images of Identity. Italian Portrait Collections of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', in Nicholas Mann and Luke Syson (eds.), *The Image of the Individual. Portraits in the Renaissance* (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 67–79 at 76. According to Luzio, Zaninello died in 1518: 'I Ritratti', 215.

⁴¹ The letter from Isabella to Zaninello accompanied the portrait gift and is dated 31 May 1513: A. Cappelli and S. Ferrari, *Rime edite ed inedite di Antonio Cammelli detto il Pistoia* (Livorno: Vigo, 1884), doc. XIV, 41. Bonsignori had earlier drawn Pistoia from life because the portrait is the centerpiece for Sonnet XLII of the *Sonetti Faceti*, which begins: 'Chi vuol la effigie mia, l'ho scritta in carte/ch'ogni facetia mia in versi sona/vada a mostro Francesco da Verona/ chi la vuol veder pinta e cum grand'arte . . . Dunque, so alcun se intropia/ nel Veronese mio, vedrà in disegno/ nel formarmi Natura senza ingegno (. . .)', *Sonetti Faceti*, ed. Percopò, 84–85.

⁴² A similar kind of emotional response to Isabella's 'presence' in her portrait likeness can also be detected in a letter written by another female acquaintance, Beatrice de' Contrari, on 10 April 1495. Having been given a portrait of Isabella, she reported that she propped it up opposite her when she sat at the table so that she could imagine that Isabella was there with her. The letter, dated 10 April 1495, from Beatrice de' Contrari in Ferrari to Isabella d'Este, is found in Luzio, 'I Ritratti', 186: 'Come scia V.S. quando la ando a Urbino la Hypolita portò in qua un suo retrato et come vado a tavola lo fazio ponere suso una cadrega per scontro a me, che vedendolo me pare pure essere a tavola cum V.S.' The incident is also referred to by Fletcher, 'Isabella d'Este, Patron and Collector', *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, 57.

He identified the guests present as members of *nostra academia*, listing among them several aristocratic lords and ladies, evidently the same group of aristocrats who formed the Schifanoia coterie. In the spirit of the academy several of the ladies and gentlemen seem to have had mythological pseudonyms. Also among the assembled guests were the artist and goldsmith Cleofas dei Donati and a musician and instrument maker identified only as 'Mr Sebastiano.' Again, the purpose of the gathering was to show the assembly '*all'improvvisa il bel retratto de' la vostra illustrissima madama*'. Stabellino was particularly delighted with the surprised reaction of the ladies present, who seemed to form an important nucleus of animation for the gathering (see Appendix).⁴³

Stabellino's accounts of these staged portrait presentations, held in conjunction with dinner parties, help to contextualize the importance of spontaneous, spoken responses to portraits in general, and help us to understand how such likenesses might have been received. Word games were an important nexus for social occasions in Renaissance culture. In some ways, Zaninello's game was not unlike the one that directs the social interactions of the assembly of guests at the court of Urbino who participated in the dialogues of Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* in order to undertake 'the task of forming in words a perfect Courtier'.⁴⁴ This portrait depended very much on the participants in the dialogue, who functioned as both the authors of, and audience to, the making of the *Courtier*.⁴⁵ If creating a word-portrait seems to be the opposite of Zaninello's portrait game, it still employs similar strategies in terms of portrait making, and Castiglione's own reliance on the metaphor of the portrait is significant in this context of making a portrait through oral discourse in a staged social situation.

More conventional rhetorical responses to portraits are well known in the Renaissance. In response to the famous portrait made of him by Raphael, Castiglione wrote a sonnet from the point of view of his wife Ippolita in which he has her say that the portrait is a great comfort to her when he is absent. The more she contemplates his image the more it seems to speak and to console her. The animation of the portrait in her own mind is accomplished through her recollection of her husband's actual presence. This example is frequently used to demonstrate the communicative efficacy of portraits in the Renaissance.⁴⁶ In the case of the Francia portrait of Isabella d'Este, I would argue that we

⁴³ ASM, AG, b.283, unnumbered. The guests are identified as Guido Strozzi, Alfonso Trotto, 'il Bagno', Piero de Venturino, Madonna Simona, Madonna Alba, Madonna Leonora de Trotti (the wife of Horatio Testarello) and 'Mx. Sabastiano Ex.mo maestro de far lauti et violi et altri . . . mirabile de legnami'.

⁴⁴ Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, trans. Singleton, 25.

⁴⁵ Eduardo Saccone, 'The Portrait of the Courtier in Castiglione', in *Baldesar Castiglione. The Book of the Courtier. The Singleton Translation, An Authoritative Text Criticism*, ed. Daniel Javitch (London and New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2002), 320–39, 330 and 339.

⁴⁶ For an analysis of Castiglione's sonnet in the context of portrait viewing see David Rosand, 'The Portrait, the Courtier and Death', in Robert W. Hanning and David Rosand (eds.), *Castiglione. The Ideal and the Real in Renaissance Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 91–130; John Shearman discusses the sonnet in *Only Connect*, 135–46; also Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, 220.

are in the same social world of the *Courtier*, one in which the portrait is not only communicative but is also a catalyst to discursive responses, in this case in the context of spontaneous recognition and using the element of surprise. Zaninello saw this portrait display as the catalyst for a courtly game, one in which the members of his 'academy' might perhaps be moved to speak about their reaction to Isabella's portrait. This game was an exploration of seeing and saying, in which Isabella's sudden 'appearance' would evoke her presence among the assembled guests, who would then supplement that image through their conversation. By enhancing the image through their spontaneous spoken reactions the guests would be fulfilling the completion of the portrait *al naturale* desired by Isabella. Certainly the Francia portrait, which began partly as an exercise in portrait making through words, was best appreciated in an interpretive setting that demanded an oral response from viewers.

It is important to understand the ludic agency that portraits possessed in a culture in which much social interaction was an orchestration of highly codified behaviour. Verbal games that hinged on guessing and role-playing were vital forms of courtly social interaction, and are discussed in the dialogue that forms the central conceit of Girolamo Bargagli's *Dialogue on Games* (1586).⁴⁷ Other games based on collections of portrait miniatures were also popular during the Renaissance. For example, a book of portrait miniatures made for the court of Francis I now in the Bibliothèque Méjanes in Aix-en-Provence was created with this notion of a game in mind – the portraits are covered with moveable flaps and inscribed with verses below.⁴⁸ Viewers would engage with the manuscript, trying to guess the identity of the sitter by reading the accompanying verse, prompting a kind of guessing game. Another book of miniatures in the Biblioteca Trivulziana in Milan, also with movable flaps and also dedicated to Francis I, contains miniatures of 'the Ladies of the King', and might have been used for a similar purpose, although the verses are not as visually descriptive.⁴⁹

That Zaninello's impromptu portrait display was viewed as a form of play can be further inferred by reading some of Pistoia's *Facetious Sonnets*.⁵⁰ These

⁴⁷ Frederick Crane, *Italian Social Customs of the Sixteenth Century and Their Influence on the Literature of Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1920), 290.

⁴⁸ The French manuscript is after Jean Clouet, *Recueil Montmor*, Rés. MS 20, Bibliothèque Méjanes, Aix-en-Provence. I am grateful to the Bibliothèque Méjanes for supplying me with a microfilm of this manuscript. An examination of the manuscript is provided by Louis Dimier, *Histoire de la peinture de portrait en France au XVIe siècles*, 3 vols. (Paris and Brussels: G. van Oest et cie, 1924–27), Vol. III, 5–15. For a brief examination of how the manuscript was used at the French court see Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, 204–05. The second manuscript is Ambrogio Noceto, *Tutte le Dame del Re*, 1518, Codice Trivulziana n.2159, Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, published in a facsimile edition by Giulia Bologna, *Tutte le dame del Re. Ritratti di dame Milanesi per Francesco I di Francia*, 2 vols. (Milan: Biblioteca Trivulziana, 1989).

⁴⁹ For an examination of these manuscripts in the context of courtly games, see Sally Hickson, '“Pretty Maids All in a Row”: Some Thoughts on Collections of Female “Beauties” in the Renaissance', in Leslie Boldt-Irons and Ernesto Virgulti (eds.), *Beauty and the Abject: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 117–30.

⁵⁰ For Cammelli's sonnets see *Sonnetti Faceti*, ed. Percopò and *Rime edite ed inedite*, eds. Cappelli and Ferrari, as above.

verses make it clear that Zaninello, Stabellino and Pistoia took their games and entertainments very seriously. No less than four of the sonnets are about dinner parties held by, or in honour of, Gian Francesco Zaninello in Ferrara. Stabellino, in the guise of 'Pignata', also appears in the verses, which alternate between praising the delights of a well-set table and then poetically describing a perfectly horrible meal.⁵¹ The conceit seemed to be to tease Zaninello in a satirical vein about the opulence of his hospitality. Other individuals mentioned in these verses can be identified with members of the Ferrarese academy, including Hieronymo de Casio, Lelio Manfredi and Paride da Ceresara. All of these sonnets are exercises in comic description that form part of the verbal/visual play that characterized Ferrarese court society.⁵² Based on the satirical impulse that marked these dinner parties, we might even go so far as to infer that the reactions of Zaninello's guests to Isabella's portrait were not entirely along the lines of conventional, rhetorical praise, but there is no direct evidence to support this conclusion.

After it arrived in Ferrara, the Francia portrait of Isabella d'Este was once again embroiled in a process of word-of-mouth and visual creation, orchestrated in part by Battista Stabellino. Gian Francesco Zaninello died in 1518, but it was not until 1524 that Isabella asked Stabellino to borrow the Francia portrait back from his brother and heir Sebastiano Zaninello (see Appendix). And, it was not until March 1534 that the portrait was mentioned again by Stabellino who told Isabella that Sebastiano Zaninello was still expecting that it would be returned, even though by this time it had been sent to Venice, where Titian was using it as a model to create the famous portrait of Isabella now in Vienna. Just as Francia had relied on the Costa portrait to supply Isabella's likeness, Titian relied on Francia. But while Francia's likeness had been achieved with the assistance of Lucrezia Bentivoglio's descriptions, Titian had no such mediator.

Instead, he certainly had recourse to the physical description of Isabella that formed the centrepiece of a dialogue called *I Ritratti* (*The Portraits*), written by the Vincentine humanist Giangiorgio Trissino, published in Rome in October 1524.⁵³ Trissino, who frequented the same social circles as Zaninello, Stabellino and Pistoia, originally wrote the *Ritratti* before 1514, setting his fictional dialogue in Ferrara, at the home of Isabella's close friend Margherita Cantelmo, the same Margherita who had been involved in the gift of the Francia portrait to Zaninello. In fact, in 1514, while the two women were travelling at Lake Garda, Cantelmo gave Isabella an early draft of Trissino's

⁵¹ See sonnets 22, 29 and 30 in the *Sonnetti Faceti*, ed. Percopò.

⁵² As cited above, Sonnet XLII is about Pistoia's portrait by Bonsignori, *Sonnetti Faceti*, ed. Percopò, 84–5.

⁵³ The text of *I Ritratti* is reprinted in Willi Hirdt, *Gian Giorgio Trissino's Porträt der Isabella d'Este. Ein Beitrag zu Lukian-Rezeption in Italien* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1981), 19–28. I also consulted the text as printed in Gian Giorgio Trissino, Di M. Giovan Giorgio Trissino. *La Sophonisba, Li Ritratti, Epistola. Oratione al serenissimo Principe di Vinegia*, Venice, 1549.

manuscript.⁵⁴ As was the case with the Francia portrait, Isabella's praise for Trissino was touched with faint criticism; 'We should like you to alter some particulars in the description of our person, which we will point out when we meet'.⁵⁵

The speakers in Trissino's dialogue are Pietro Bembo, who knew Isabella well, and a certain Macro Vincenzo of Milan, and the centrepiece of their conversation is Macro's detailed description of a beautiful woman he glimpsed in Ferrara. Based on this description, Bembo is able to recognize that the woman was Isabella d'Este, thereby transforming Macro's words into the living model. Within the dialogue the speakers identify Isabella as the living paragon of female beauty, a conceit borrowed from Lucian's *Icones* (or *Portrait Study*) an antique exercise in *paragone* in which the vivid and animated word-picture of the emperor's mistress Panthea is intended to rival any likeness in stone or paint.⁵⁶

Macro describes his glimpse of Isabella as she descended from her carriage and entered a church. He notes the details of her costume and her glittering jewels, and describes that as she walked she carried an open book in her hands that she seems to have read only a moment before and that she is speaking to someone in her company. In this word-portrait, Isabella moves and speaks in a fleeting moment captured and frozen in time:

So she dawned upon my eyes, a lady more radiant than the sun, with golden hair falling on her shoulders, loosely caught in a tan-coloured silk net, with knots of fine gold, through which her locks shone like bright rays of light; a sparkling ruby and large pearl glittered on her forehead, a rope of pearls hung from her neck to her waist, her black velvet robe was embroidered in gold – in short, everything she wore was the work of the finest craftsman.⁵⁷

That Bembo is able to recognize Isabella from the word picture drawn by Macro demonstrates the effectiveness of the word-portrait. It is then left to the poet to embellish this physical description by describing Isabella's other virtues, such as her beautiful speech and her singing voice.⁵⁸ The inducement to animate the likeness with the natural, living qualities of the subject portrayed is similar to Zaninello's use of Isabella's portrait as a catalyst for

⁵⁴ At the beginning of the dialogue Trissino writes: 'Ritrovandosi Messer Lucio Pomilio inferraa, et in casa di Madonna Margarita Cantelmo Illustra Duchessa di Sora, ne laquale v'era una brigata di valorose donne . . .'; Trissino, *I Ritratti* (1549 ed.), f.39v. For Cantelmo's gift of Trissino's book to Isabella, Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, II, 101–05. On Cantelmo's friendship with Trissino from 1512–1514 see Bernardo Morsolin, *Giangiorgio Trissino Monografia di un letterato nel secolo XVI* (Vicenza: Tipografia Gir. Burato, 1978), 60–62.

⁵⁵ Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, II, 105.

⁵⁶ For Trissino's origins in Lucian see Mary Rogers, 'The decorum of women's beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the representation of women in sixteenth-century painting', *Renaissance Studies* 2/1 (1988), 47–88 at 49–50. Also see Hirdt, 'Trissino's Porträt', and M. Beer, 'Idea del ritratto femminile e retorica del classicismo: I Ritratti di Isabella d'Este di Gian Giorgio Trissino', *Schifanoia* 10 (1990), 151–73.

⁵⁷ This translation is Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, II, 103.

⁵⁸ Rogers, 'Decorum of Women's Beauty', 49.

conversation at his dinner parties. We should further consider that Trissino's description was based directly on the Francia portrait, which he could easily have seen in the Zaninello collection in Ferrara. The *Ritratti* was printed in Rome in October 1524 and only a month later, in November of the same year, Isabella borrowed the Francia portrait from Zaninello's brother, suggesting that Trissino's written description had prompted a comparison with the painted image. Trissino's word-portrait might, in fact, be considered the penultimate derivation of the games of likeness and identity surrounding Isabella's image in Ferrara, since it should seriously be considered as a direct source for Titian when he undertook Isabella's portrait in 1534.⁵⁹

At the time Isabella commissioned this portrait she was over sixty years old and she asked specifically that he use the Francia portrait, which was sent to him in Venice, to create a portrait of her as she appeared when she was young.⁶⁰ The resulting *Isabella in Black* (Fig. 1) is therefore not really a portrait at all but the ultimate derivation of the games of likeness, identity and creative invention that began with Costa's portrait many years before. Titian not only set out to surpass Francia's art, which was a fiction in itself, but to challenge nature and to create a 'living image' of Isabella in her youth. Like the Francia commission, it was Titian's willingness to participate in Isabella's project of self-invention that helped establish, extend and refine the ludic permutations of the game of representation. 'Art is more powerful than nature' (NATURA POTENTIOR ARS) was the phrase Ludovico Dolce invented for Titian's *impresa*.⁶¹ The sonnets that Pietro Aretino wrote in praise of Titian's portraits of sitters like Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino and his wife, Eleanora Gonzaga (both now in Florence, Uffizi) are rich in praise of Titian's ability to conjure and to capture the essence of a sitter *al naturale*.⁶² In fact, Aretino praised Titian's ability to do this even when working in the absence of an actual sitter, as he did in 1545, when Titian completed the portrait of Giulia da Varano, wife of Guidobaldo II della Rovere (now in Florence, Palazzo Pitti).⁶³ Aretino reported to Giulia that

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Cropper 'On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo and the Vernacular Style', *The Art Bulletin*, 58 (1976), 374–94, suggests that Augustino Nifo's praise of Giovanna of Aragon in his *De pulchro et amore* helped guide the portrait of her in the Louvre (1518), now attributed to Giulio Romano, establishing a precedent for this practice among portrait painters, n.60, 384.

⁶⁰ Titian's use of the Francia portrait as a source for this youthful depiction of Isabella is discussed in many sources but was first discovered by Luzio, 'I Ritratti', 222–3 and then discussed by Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, II, 353–7.

⁶¹ The motto is discussed by David Rosand, 'Titian and the Critical Tradition', in David Rosand (ed.), *Titian, His World and His Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1–40, 28 and n.16, 36.

⁶² Sonnets in praise of the portraits of Eleanora Gonzaga and Guidobaldo della Rovere were sent by Aretino to Veronica Gambara, accompanying a letter dated 7 November 1537, see Pietro Aretino, *Lettere I*, (1538), (machine-readable transcript, Cambridge, 1998, Chadwyck Healey, *Art Theorists of the Italian Renaissance Full-Text Database*), no. 222, LXXr and v; these portraits are discussed in Paolo Dal Poggetto (ed.), *I della Rovere* (Milan: Electa, 2004), 'Ritratto di Francesco Maria I della Rovere', cat. V.1, 304–307 and 'Ritratto di Eleonora Gonzaga della Rovere', cat. V.2, 307.

⁶³ *I della Rovere*, 'Portrait of Giulia Varano', cat. VI. 2, 318–21; also Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, 144–5.

Titian was making the portrait based solely on her husband's description, supplemented, as the portrait progressed, by the inclusion of garments and accessories belonging to the duchess sent from Urbino at the painter's request. The resulting likeness ('everyone who sees it will recognize it as you') was a testament to the notion that the image of the duchess lived in the soul of the duke, and that his ability to describe her accurately was the basis for a verbal *ekphrasis* given life, form and colour through Titian's art.⁶⁴ The ultimate success of the portrait, in Aretino's eyes, was as Titian's unique and exemplary visual expression of the duke's description to the painter.

Unfortunately, we have little evidence to attest to the degree of success that Titian's portrait of the youthful Isabella enjoyed among a wide audience of viewers after it arrived in Mantua. Two examples will have to suffice. Isabella's sole recorded response was to thank Titian and to comment wryly that 'the portrait by Titian's hand is of so pleasing a type that we doubt that at the age that he represents us we were ever of the beauty it contains'.⁶⁵ Pietro Aretino put the matter more plainly. In a potentially libellous passage he described how Titian's portrait had failed to adequately capture 'the monstrous Marchesana of Mantua' with 'teeth of ebony' and 'eyelashes of ivory', 'dishonestly ugly and most dishonestly made more beautiful'.⁶⁶ The play between poet and portrait points out precisely that art itself is dishonest in the face of nature, and that it is the painter, and not the subject, who wields power over time and decay. This is another way of saying, in Aretino's typically facetious and subversive manner, that art is indeed more powerful than nature. This, of course, was probably precisely the point of Isabella's commission, although it is virtually certain that she did not wholly approve of Aretino's way of phrasing the matter. Ultimately, then, Titian's ideal portrait of the youthful Isabella was the result of a complicated process of negotiated meanings between the spoken and the visual, a continuous game of likeness, identity, and image, recognition and idealization, presentation and reception, which is located in that liminal territory between seeing and saying in which all true portraits ultimately find their origins and meaning.

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⁶⁴ Aretino's letter was written in October 1545: 'E di qui viene, che Titiano ha compreso il vostro esempio ne le parole del Duca ne piu ne meno; vivo e vero, che vero, e vivo in voi se stessa si sia. L'animo, nel quale sua eccellenza vi tiene col proprio spirito isculpita; gli pose in modo cotal vostra imagine ne la lingua; che non altrimenti naturale vi ha ritratto, che si foste stata senza far motta in presenza. Onde ciascun che vi vede dipinta, vi riconosce per tale', Pietro Aretino, *Le Lettere III*, no. 333, 181r and v.

⁶⁵ Luzio, 'I Ritratti', 223;

⁶⁶ See entry in *Titian, Prince of Painters*, cat. 25, 218.

*Documents concerning the display of the Francesco Francia portrait of
Isabella d'Este in Ferrara (1511–1512)*

1. ASM, AG, b.283, from Battista Stabellino in Ferrara to Margherita Cantelmo in Mantua, 26 December 1511.

Stabellino writes to tell Margherita that in order to thank Gian Francesco Zaninello for his illuminated manuscript of sonnets by the poet Pistoia, Isabella d'Este should send him the recently completed portraits of her and of her son, Federico II Gonzaga, made by Francesco Francia in Bologna.

(. . .) Questa matina ho havuto la littera di V.S. de xxi del presente, per la quale intendo quella haver visto il libro dil Pistoia mandato per Zoan Francesco Zaninello a quella Ill.ma et fortunata Marchesana, et veramente le albe de quel libro sono bellissime, et quelli lettere grande hebree cum quelli gruppi son tutte de hebano intagliate ne le albe, che è grande magisterio, et di grande fatica. Ho visto et lecta la littera de la S. Marchesana a Zoan Francesco, la quale hebbe più chara che se sua Ex.tia gli havesse donato mille ducati et l'ha mostrata a tutti gli amici suoi cum grande alegreza. Et per un'altra sua ha ringratiato la S. sua Ill.ma de tanta humanità et de le offerte. Et perchè la S.V. mi scrive che la Marchesana vuol gratificar Zoan Francesco altramente che cum littera, renditive pur certa che non gli potrà fare maggiore gratificatione di quella che gli ha facto, niente dimeno se qualche galante cosa gli farà donata, credo la reponerà per eterna memoria ne le sue cose più chare; credo gli seria charissimo il retracto di sua Ex.tia et del figliolo, né più charo presente se gli potrebbe fare. Zoan Francesco fra pochi giorni vuol mandare a sua Ill.ma Signora un'altra bella cosa (. . .).

2. ASM, AG, b.283, from Battista Stabellino in Ferrara to Margherita Cantelmo in Mantua, 10 Feb. 1512.

Stabellino sends Isabella d'Este, via Margherita Cantelmo, some sonnets written by Gian Francesco Zaninello in Ferrara.

(. . .) Zoan Francesco Zaninello, il quale tutto si offre a V.S., mi ha dato il qui incluso sonetto ch'io lo mandi a quella, et di sua mano è scritto. Così l'invio, et cum una lettera alla Ill.ma S. Marchesana, la quale in mio nome sera apresentata a sua Ex.tia et così ancho il sonetto li fareti vedere per contento di Zoan Francesco. Questo sonetto hora va in volta per Ferrara; credo fra pochi giorni ne verano degli altri.

3. ASM, AG, b.283, from Battista Stabellino in Ferrara to Margherita Cantelmo in Mantua, 21 March 1512.

Stabellino writes to Cantelmo to report that the woodworker Cleophas de' Donati has presented the Francia portrait of Isabella d'Este to him, and that

he has given it to Zaninello in Ferrara. He describes a dinner-party that Zaninello held in order to display the portrait to his assembled guests.

(...) Il bellissimo retratto de la vostra Ill.ma et Ex.ma Madama mi fui presentato da M[aest]ro Cleophas, del quale ne ho facto un presente al nostro Zohan Francesco Zaninello, che l'ha havuto più charo s'io li havesse donato un reame. Et ne fa tanta festa et tanta alegrezza che non sa dove se sia, ha cominciato a convidar persone suoi (?) a manzare per mostrarli questo retratto, et domatina fa convido a octo o diece pur per questo effecto et dice a mi ch'io non dica niente ch'el vuol mostrargelo all'improviso, et io li rispondo ch'el fa bene a farli sta zuntaria, et lo Bertegio mi ha ditto ch'el vuol dare un bel disnare a M.a Simona, all'Alba a M.a Costanza, moglie del Conte Lorenzo, et a certe altre donne et homini pur per mostrarli questo retratto all'improviso. In fine le in tanta alegrezza ch'el non sa da qual canto voltarsi dove il potesse haver più gratia letitia, et sopra questo non voglio dir altro se non che le tutto de V.S. in corpo e in spirito a quella sta modo il comandarli. (...).

4. AG, ASM, b.283, from Battista Stabellino in Ferrara to Margherita Cantelmo in Mantua, 31 March 1512.

In the postscript to a letter written to Cantelmo, Stabellino writes again about the general festivities that occurred in Ferrara to celebrate the arrival of Isabella's portrait by Francia, and reports that Cleophas is in Venice.

(...) A Vostra S. Humilmente mi racomando. La quale per mie lettere debbe havere inteso del retratto gionto a Ferrara portato per Cleophas, et cum quanta letitia l'habbiamo raccolto, il quale Cleophas non è ritornato da Venezia. Lo aspectamo de giorno in giorno. Ve degnareti raccomandarmi in bona gratia de la Ill.ma Vostra patrona, accadendo la oportunitade.

5. AG, ASM, b.283, from Battista Stabellino in Ferrara to Margherita Cantelmo in Mantua, 2 April 1512.

Stabellino reports to Cantelmo on another dinner-party held by Gian Francesco Zaninello to celebrate the arrival of Isabella's portrait by Francia. He has been thinking about how the portrait of Federico II, also by Francia, should be sent to Ferrara.

Hiersera cenassimo cum Zohan Francesco Zaninello cum grande piacere, ne la qual cena vi intervene Mx. Guido Strozza, Mx. Alfonso Trotto de la nostra accademia, il Bagno, M.ro Piero de Ventorino, nostro spenditore, che ne tenne tutti in piacere; da l'altro canto M.a Simona vi era anchor lei cum l'Alba, et M.a Leonora de Trotti moglie di Horatio Testarello, M.ro Sabastiano Ex.mo maestro de far lauti et viole et altri intagli mirabili de' legname. Questo sta col Car.le nostro Estense, de le cui opere spero vedereti non

passarà molto, et forse non vi parerano m'anco belle di quelle de Cleophas. Eravi anchora molti altri, tutti gente da piacere, et tra noi vi so dire che affanno alcuno non vi era. Tutto questo fu facto per mostrare all'improvisa il bel retratto de' la vostra Ill.ma Madama: spero ad ogni modo ch'el non passa questa stagione che questo retratto costarà a Zohan Francesco cinquanta ducati, già tre cene habia facto bellissime et si pensa farne de le altre, hor pensati mò s'el venisse lo altro retratto del suo Ill.mo figliuolo come andarebbe, racordando a V.S. ch'el spera de haverlo et per il mezo di quella come ha havuto l'altro, et s'el non potrà haver quello che hora è presso de sua Ex.tia spera haverne uno tolto da quello. Aspectavamo Cleophas cum grande desiderio ma non è anchora ritornato da Venezia. (. . .)

6. Letter of Gian Francesco Zaninello in Ferrara to Isabella d'Este, 30 May 1512.

Zaninello thanks Isabella for the Francia portrait of Federico II Gonzaga, and tells her that he has hung the portraits of mother and son in his own *studiolo* in Ferrara.

Dal siscalco altramente Pignatta per parte di V. S. Ill.ma mi è stata presentato la delicate efige de lo ex.te S.r Federico suo figliuolo, a me tanto grato et accetto dono quanto alcuno altro ch'io potessi ricevere: in questo me atribuisco poco favore, essendosi privata la Ex. V. de sì caro et famoso pegno per farne dono a me suo minimo servitore, demonstrandomi quella apertamente in quanto bono credito io sono appresso di V.S. la quale ornatissimamente ha ornato el favorito insieme con lo ritratto suo il mio basso tugurio, benchè hora se po' dire alto, et già assaissime persone vi concoreno, ove vedendo così benigno et gratioso spectaculo ne restano amirative et forse con qualche invidia per havere ne la stantia mia et Venere et Cupidine. Rengratiare non posso et manco io so la Ex. V. di tanto dono et resto con grad.mo adispiacere ch'io non sia atto se non in tutto almeno in qualche picciola parte mostrargli la servitù mi anche affectionatamente gli porto. Et a V.S. Ill.ma humilmente mi raccomando. In Alessandro Luzio, 'I Ritratti d'Isabella d'Este', in *La Galleria dei Gonzaga venduta all'Inghilterra nel 1627–28*, Rome, Bardi, 1974, pp. 214–215 (no collocation given).

7. ASM, AG, b.1248, unnumbered. Letter of Battista Stabellino to Isabella d'Este, 1 November 1524.

Stabellino writes to Isabella regarding her request to borrow her portrait back from the estate of Gian Francesco Zaninello in Ferrara.

Alla riceputa di quella di V.Ex. di xxx dil passato data in Sermede, me m'andai a Sabastian dei Gianninello [the brother of Gian Francesco] et allui fatta la dimanda del retratto di V.S. in nome di quella. Mi ripose che di bona voglia et molto voluntieri me lo daria, et così l'hebbi et co' questa mia per Gerolamo di la Ilus. S. Cantelmo l'invio alla Ex. V. La quale prego in nome

del ditto Sabastiano et fratello li voglia haver et collocarli per servitori in quel loco che era il nostro caro compagno Giovanni Francesco, et io in lor compagnia offerendosi sempre pronti et parati al servitio di quella eternamente.

8. Letter from Stabellinio dated 3 March 1534 'di Schivanoia in Ferrara,' to Isabella regarding the portrait borrowed from the Zaninello heirs, and Isabella's reply of 6 March saying that the portrait had been sent to Titian in Venice, for which see Luzio, 'I Ritratti', note 1, p. 222.

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