ISABELLA & LEONARDO

FRANCIS AMES-LEWIS

ISABELLA AND LEONARDO

THE ARTISTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISABELLA D'ESTE AND LEONARDO DA VINCI, 1500–1506

FRANCIS AMES-LEWIS

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

PUBLISHED WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE GETTY FOUNDATION

Designed by Gillian Malpass

Printed in China

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Ames-Lewis, Francis, 1943–
Isabella and Leonardo : the relationship between Isabella d'Este and
Leonardo da Vinci / Francis Ames-Lewis.
p. cm.
English; correspondence in Italian and English.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-300-12124-7 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Isabella d'Este, consort of Francesco II Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua,
1474–1539–Art patronage.
2. Isabella d'Este, consort of Francesco II Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua,
1474–1539–Correspondence.
3. Leonardo, da Vinci, 1452–1519.
4. Artists and patrons–Italy–Mantua.
I. Title.
II. Title: Relationship between Isabella d'Este and Leonardo da Vinci.
N5273.2.I73A44 2012
709.2'2--DC23
[B]

2011044207

A catalogue record for this book is available from
The British Library

Frontispiece Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait Drawing of Isabella d'Este.*
Paris, Louvre

Page vi Correggio, *Young Christ*, detail.
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection

ISABELLA AND LEONARDO

FOR

JUSTINIAN, ORLANDO AND JULIET,

THEIR SPOUSES AND THEIR CHILDREN

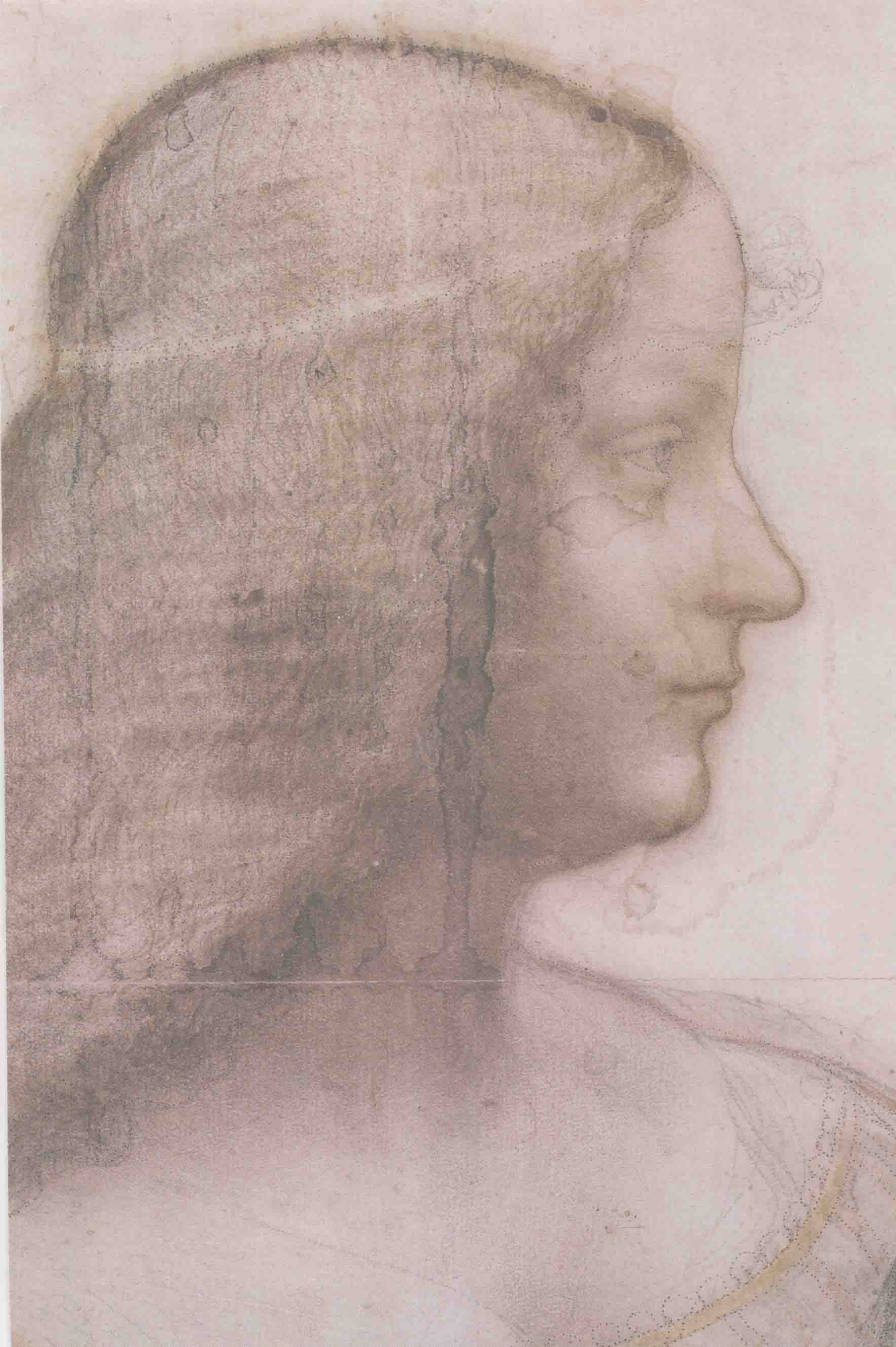
PREFACE

This book started life as a projected exhibition that was intended as one of the series mounted under the auspices of the 'Universal Leonardo' project in 2006. I am deeply grateful to Martin Kemp for putting his faith in me by inviting me to serve as curator for this exhibition. That it could not in the event be mounted is due to a variety of circumstances outside the control of both me and 'Universal Leonardo'. But when it became clear that the exhibition could not go ahead, I had already done a considerable amount of background research, and it seemed wasteful that this should not be utilised in some other form. Hence my decision to write this book. For various reasons, it has taken considerably longer than it should have done to reach publication.

When I began work on the project, I was well aware of the extraordinary qualities of Leonardo da Vinci as artist and thinker. While writing the book, my respect for him and his qualities (some would say 'genius', but I prefer to eschew this term) has increased by leaps and bounds. But more so has my understanding of – and respect for – Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, not least as a collector and a patron of the major artists of her day. Originally this book would have been called 'Leonardo and Isabella', but it gradually became clear that 'Isabella and Leonardo' is the correct title. As a result of my researches into Isabella and her personality, I have come to wish to correct what seems to me often to be an anachronistic interpretation that emphasises her perceived ungrateful and demanding nature: in fact, her activity as an art patron was subtle and flexible. Like many before me, I have been won over by her

extraordinary determination to perform as an equal in a man's world, and impressed by the many routes along which she travelled in order to succeed in this aspiration.

I am indebted to many scholars past and present who have guided me in my understanding and interpretation of a pivotal moment in Renaissance art patronage, both in Mantua and throughout the peninsula. For anyone studying Renaissance Mantua in general, and Isabella d'Este in particular, the work of Clifford M. Brown is indispensable: I readily acknowledge my great debt to his publications, and I hope that I have not too often misunderstood them or erred in my interpretation of them. The studies of many scholars, from Charles Iriarte, Alessandro Luzio, Julia Cartwright and others up to the present day, have been invaluable. For the present, I am especially grateful for the advice of Francesca Allegri, Carmen C. Bambach, Juliana Barone, Caroline Brooke, John Brooke, Beverly L. Brown, Dorigen Caldwell, Sarah Blanche Cochrane, Paul Davies, Daniela Ferrari, Liz Freeman for her help with the translation of the Isabella–Leonardo correspondence, Paul Joannides, Martin Kemp, Amanda Lillie, Deanna Shemek, Luke Syson, Marina Wallace and Evelyn Welch. I am also deeply grateful to my wife, Christabel, for commenting on the draft typescript from the layperson's point of view, and at Yale University Press to Nancy Edwards, whose eagle-eyed copy-editing ironed out numerous inconsistencies and errors (those that remain, however, are, of course, my responsibility), to Sophie Sheldrake, who dispatchfully and efficiently collected the illustrations, and to Gillian Malpass for her customarily positive and helpful editorial advice.



CONTENTS

I

ISABELLA'S INTELLECTUAL PREOCCUPATIONS

POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL SELF-PRESENTATION

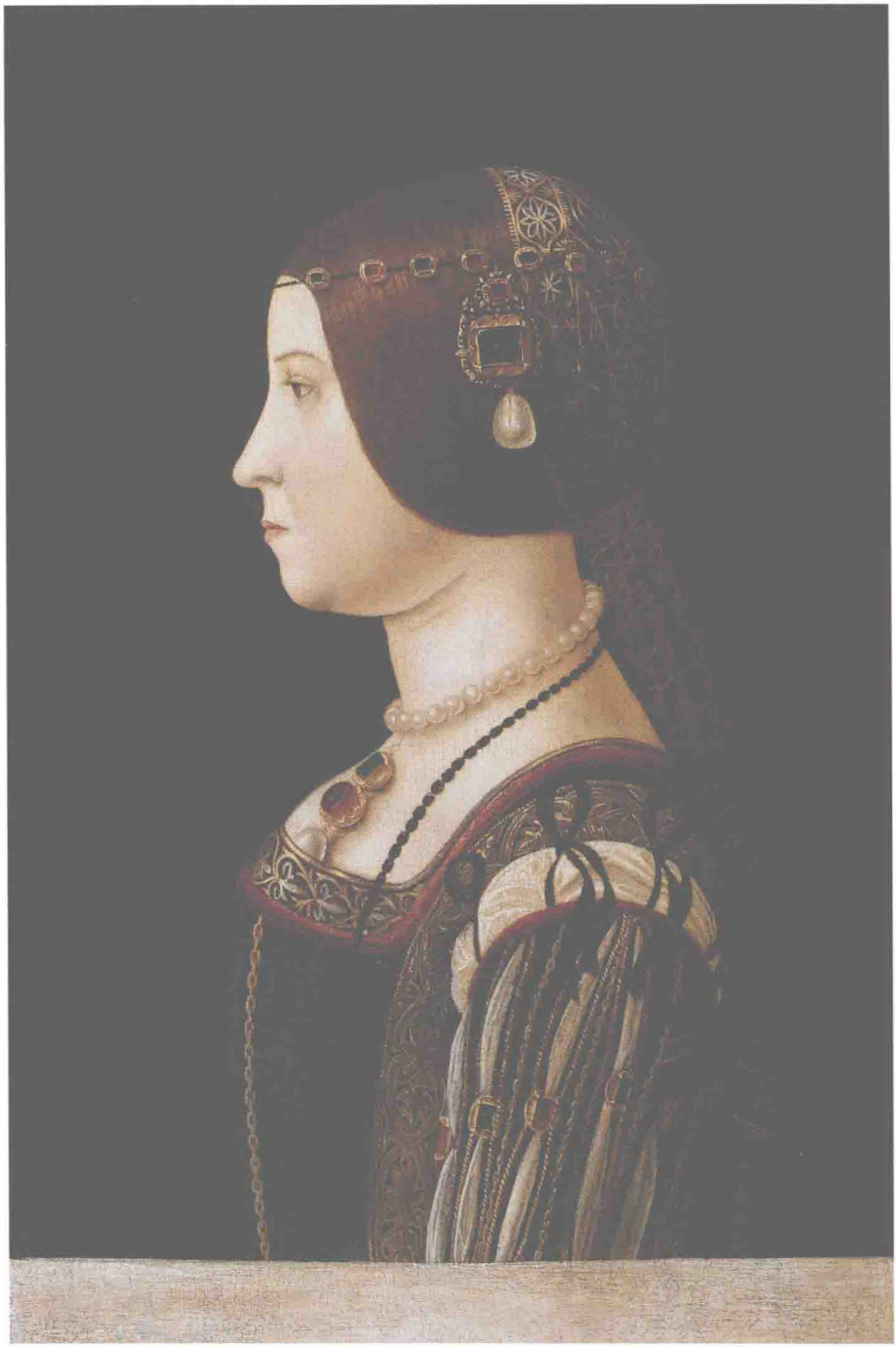
In the portrait drawing of Isabella d'Este (Paris, Louvre; pl. 1 and see pl. 62) that Leonardo da Vinci made in early 1500, the sitter is represented in pure profile facing to the right.[1] In this, as in other respects, Leonardo followed the format used by Gian Cristoforo Romano in his portrait medal of Isabella (see pl. 57), cast in 1498.[2] Female portrait medals of the Italian Renaissance that show the right profile are relatively common.[3] On the other hand, although not unknown before 1500, for a painted profile portrait to show the right side of the female sitter's face is very unusual. Two earlier examples, both Central Italian, stand out: Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Woman* (?Simonetta Vespucci) in Frankfurt, and its derivatives; and Piero della Francesca's *Battista Sforza* (Florence, Uffizi). The first is a poetic, idealised image of femininity, and in no sense a likeness: it occupies an equivocal position in the history of portraiture. As has recently been said of this work, 'the fact that it is much larger than contemporary portrayals and that the woman unconventionally faces right suggests that the painting is not an ordinary portrait. Above all, it is not concerned with likeness.'[4] Probably based on a death mask, the portrait of Battista Sforza is one of a pair of likenesses: in its pendant, the portrait of Federigo da Montefeltro is famously in left profile due to a disfiguring wound to his right eye. Piero's portrait diptych is exceptional in showing the male of the partnership on the sinister panel, and the female on the dexter panel, in the position of greater authority and status.

1 (*facing page*) Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait Drawing of Isabella d'Este*, detail. Paris, Louvre

Probably because of the strength of the portrait diptych convention, the sitters in Italian early Renaissance female portraits are nearly always shown in left profile. This is almost universally the case, for example, of the group of some forty Florentine female portraits dating from around 1440–70.[5] It is also true of the smaller group of portraits of Milanese noblewomen of the 1490s in which each sitter becomes primarily a framework for the display of fashionable and rich dress and jewellery. One example of this type is the portrait in Christ Church, Oxford (pl. 2), usually identified as Isabella's younger sister, Beatrice, Duchess of Milan; another is the portrait drawing (see pl. 72) recently attributed to Leonardo da Vinci and identified as of Bianca Sforza, an illegitimate daughter of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan.[6] For her portrait, Isabella d'Este broke with convention, but for neither of the reasons that Botticelli's and Piero della Francesca's female sitters face to the right. By appropriating the pose normally taken up by the male sitter of a portrait diptych, she made a statement about her status and authority at the Mantuan court. This is a small example of the strategies adopted by Isabella d'Este to encroach onto male territory, and to be seen as equal in courtly authority and status to her male peers, not least to her husband Marquess Francesco II Gonzaga. Such perceptions were especially important to her image, and to her self-image, when she ruled as regent over the Mantuan state on the not infrequent occasions when Francesco Gonzaga was out of Mantua.

During the last two decades of the fifteenth century, increasing political and diplomatic responsibility settled on courtly ladies such as Eleonora d'Aragona, Duchess of Ferrara, and her daughters, Isabella and Beatrice, during periods of absence of their princely husbands. This may well have stimulated a perceived need in intellectual circles for a theory of gender equality that gave rise to an increase in output in the literary genre of the treatise in praise of women. In 1501 Mario Equicola wrote his *De mulieribus*, a treatise on women that features Isabella as an exemplary woman.[7] It was commissioned by Isabella's close friend Margherita Cantelmo, the daughter of a wealthy Mantuan notary, to whom Agostino Strozzi also dedicated his *Defensione delle donne* in 1501.[8] The production of such treatises may suggest that women established within north Italian court circles at the turn of the century felt the need to find ways to assert their position in a male-controlled political environment, and to claim equality with their male peers in cultural and intellectual life.

Important precedents for these Mantuan treatises were a group of treatises on women composed in Ferrara during the last third of the fifteenth century.[9] All of these Ferrarese treatises list Isabella's mother, Eleonora d'Aragona, amongst their groups of prominent contemporary women. Eleonora was



2 ?Giovanni Ambrogio de Predis, *Beatrice d'Este*. Oxford, Christ Church Gallery

generally seen in these texts as an important example of a woman who, faced with the inadequacies of her princely husband as administrator of the state, took power into her own hands and efficiently conducted the affairs of Ferrara. As a daughter of the King of Naples, who, however, married nobility rather than royalty, Eleonora is not likely to have discouraged characterisations of these sorts. As though in response to Eleonora's new seigneurial responsibilities, Antonio Cornazzano wrote for her in around 1479 his *Del modo di regere e di regnare*, a text on how a ruler should conduct himself or – in her unusual case – herself, and the qualities such as strength and wisdom that the ruler requires.[10] In the frontispiece (pl. 3) to the dedication manuscript of this treatise, Eleonora d'Aragona is shown holding a wand of authority and in profile facing right, as in her daughter's portrait drawing. Eleonora provided her daughter with a noteworthy role model when Isabella came to shape for herself her own image as ruler of the Mantuan state, especially when Francesco Gonzaga was absent on military duties.[11] Like her mother, Isabella took close interest in both the political and the cultural developments of her time, and she proved herself more than competent in promoting them and in exercising her political and administrative powers.

In his *De mulieribus* Equicola appears to be persuaded of the essential equality between the sexes, and he strives to counter standard arguments for the inferiority of women. Isabella d'Este takes first place, and is accorded the most extensive and fulsome description amongst all the contemporary women discussed. She is characterised as level-headed and incisive in her conduct of political affairs.[12] Given her tendency towards plumpness, Isabella is perhaps somewhat idealistically praised for the classical *mediocritas* of her figure.[13] Equicola in particular praises her for three personal traits: her beauty, her political ability and her cultural sophistication. This last is highlighted in terms of her musicianship, and especially of her 'divinely inspired' skills as a lyre player. In this, Isabella is comparable to Apollo, a parallel that may already have been suggested in Mantegna's *Parnassus* (see pl. 29). Hung in her *studiolo* just four years earlier, Mantegna's painting can be interpreted as showing Venus, who has tamed and captured the warrior Mars, presiding over the harmony generated by the dance of the Muses to Apollo's accompaniment. This may in turn suggest that Equicola sought to propose a neo-Platonic interpretation of Isabella as the woman destined to restore harmony to a fractured society. Amongst the flattery, the exaggerations and the idealisations of Isabella, however, there is probably more than a grain of truth in Equicola's assessment of her abilities and achievements.

Isabella maintained close associations with a number of humanist intellectuals based at the Mantuan court. At the time in the later 1490s when

3 Cosmè Tura, *Eleonora d'Aragona*.
New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.731 fol. 2v

she started to furnish her *studiolo* and to plan the paintings for this important display space, the principal court humanists were the ageing Baptista Spagnoli, known as Mantuanus, and Paride da Ceresara. Born in 1447, Mantuanus was taught in Mantua by Giorgio Merula and especially Gregorio Tifernate, and studied philosophy at the University of Padua.[14] He became a Carmelite monk in 1463, and rose to be Prior of the Mantuan convent in 1479 and general of the order in 1513. He was tutor to Marquess

Federigo Gonzaga's children, including Francesco II Gonzaga: pendant terracotta busts of Virgil (the most celebrated Mantuan of classical times) and of Mantuanus originally flanked Francesco Gonzaga's bust (see pl. 76) on the Porta Nuova at Mantua. His major publication, a series of ten eclogues entitled *De adolescentia*, was dedicated to Paride da Ceresara on 16 September 1498: this became a popular and critically acclaimed textbook in grammar schools throughout Europe. Paride da Ceresara himself, a wealthy and learned lawyer noted for his erudition in Greek and Latin, was born in Mantua in 1466 and was already associated with the Gonzaga court by 1494.[15] A letter that he wrote on 19 March that year to Francesco Gonzaga concerns the dispatch of a book, probably a copy of the recently published *Liber chronicorum* by Hartman Schedel, to the marquess.[16] Early in 1503, by then firmly established in Isabella's service, Paride wrote the celebrated programme for the *Battle of Love and Chastity* (see pl. 11), to be painted by Pietro Perugino for Isabella's *studiolo*.[17] It seems likely that Paride had already been involved in helping to devise the imagery for the two paintings by Mantegna for the *studiolo*, the *Parnassus* (see pl. 29), the first painting in the room, mounted for display in 1497; and the *Pallas Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue* (see pl. 30), which was probably completed by 1502.

By 1500 or soon thereafter, two other humanists became significant figures in Isabella's intellectual circle. Battista Fiera incurred Isabella's wrath through his indecorous interpretation of the representation of Venus and Mars in Mantegna's *Parnassus*, in which he fairly explicitly identified the adulterous Venus with Isabella herself.[18] This episode has some significance for our understanding of that painting, of which the interpretation, in the absence of a written programme to complement that for Perugino's painting, is problematical.[19] In his *Sylvae*, Fiera published in 1515 a poem comparing the different qualities of Francesco Bonsignori and Lorenzo Costa as painters.[20] But perhaps more important for intellectual activity in Mantua shortly after the turn of the century was Mario Equicola. Born around 1470 and educated in Florence by the neo-Platonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino, Equicola's earliest surviving contact with Isabella is in a letter written from Ferrara on 17 May 1503 in which he sent Isabella birthday greetings and offered her his loyalty and service. For her birthday in 1506 Mario Equicola wrote an ingratiating treatise, *Nec spe nec metu*, on her favourite motto ('neither elated by hope nor cast down by fear'), which she herself had devised two years earlier; and in 1508 he moved to Mantua to become her secretary and tutor.[21] His principal work was the *Libro de natura de amore*, written for the most part in 1509–11 although not published until 1525, which includes not only an informative description of Isabella's *grotta* but also considerable discussion of the

nature of love that casts light on the imagery of the *studiolo* paintings and their meanings for Isabella and her contemporaries.[22] Equicola may well have lent a hand in devising the *invenzioni* for Lorenzo Costa's two canvases for Isabella's studiolo;[23] and it was also he who a few years later wrote the programmes for the paintings made by Titian and others for the *camerino d'alabastro* of Isabella's brother Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara. These 'fables' (*favole*) were based on texts by Catullus and Philostratus: the manuscript of the first vernacular translation, by Demetrius Moschus in around 1510, of Philostratus's *Imagines* was dedicated to Isabella in the prefatory letter by Equicola. This was the book that in a letter of 1515 Isabella asked her brother to return, reminding him that she had lent it to him 'already several years' earlier.[24]

Isabella d'Este had been provided with the best humanist education that Ferrara could offer in the later fifteenth century.[25] Both her parents were themselves highly educated, and her mother Eleonora d'Aragona appears to have harboured ambitions for her daughter's intellectual and cultural prowess. Isabella was taught alongside her brothers by important humanists of the time, such as Battista Guarino (son of the celebrated Guarino da Verona), her first tutor. As early as April 1480, when Isabella was not yet six, the Mantuan envoy Beltramino Cusatro, who was sent by Federigo Gonzaga to Ferrara to negotiate the betrothal of Isabella to his son Francesco, wrote that he had 'questioned her on many subjects, to all of which she replied with rare good sense and quickness. Her answers seemed truly miraculous in a child of six, and although I had already heard much of her singular intelligence, I could never have imagined such a thing to be possible.'[26] At times when she was under pressure from domestic matters such as childbirth and child-rearing, and from political and administrative matters when Francesco Gonzaga was absent from Mantua, her pursuit of the knowledge of classical literature may have faltered. Nevertheless, on and off during the 1490s she returned to her studies of Latin; and although she was never an accomplished Latinist, it was probably unjust of Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, the great Neapolitan humanist, to dismiss her in 1499 as 'senza lettere': lacking in classical learning.[27] Writing from Ferrara on 25 March 1490, shortly after Isabella moved to Mantua, her tutor Jacopo Gallino reminded her wistfully that 'on Saturdays [you] would translate for me all of this: all of Virgil's *Bucolics*; the first, second and part of the third book of Virgil; several of Cicero's Epistles; part of the *Herotimate*; and many other grammar materials'.[28] For a while at least, Isabella d'Este also tried to write vernacular poetry. Antonio Tebaldeo, who claimed to have been Isabella's tutor at one time, commented on her talent for poetry; and in 1504 Vincenzo Calmeta sent her 'some precepts and observations pertinent to composing poetry in the vernacular'.[29] Recently, however, her efforts