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Deanna Shemek. In Continuous Expectation: Isabella d'Este's Reign of Letters

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Deanna Shemek. *In Continuous Expectation: Isabella d'Este's Reign of Letters*. Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2021. Pp. 214. ISBN 9780772725240.

In Continuous Expectation: Isabella d'Este's Reign of Letters is a unique volume that considers Isabella d'Este's written correspondence as both historical evidence, testifying to the lives of premodern elite women, and scripted performance striving to proliferate a persona through the material medium of the letter. The volume is written in tandem with an English edition, consisting of 830 of Isabella d'Este's letters, edited and translated by Deanna Shemek. Born into the Este family, de facto rulers of Ferrara, Isabella d'Este (1474–1539) was betrothed to Francesco II Gonzaga (1466–1519), heir to the marquisate of Mantua, when she was five years old. Isabella married Francesco at sixteen and seems to have thrived in her role as co-regent. She was an avid collector of art. Her collection included works by Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506) and the lost *Sleeping Cupid* by Michelangelo (1475–1564). Her likeness was painted by Tiziano Vecellio (1488/90–1576), known as Titian, and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). Isabella was also a strong political figure and intermittently governed Mantua and the little town of Solarolo with aptitude. Reflecting on a selection of Isabella's 15,884 extant letters, Shemek probes deeper into the marchioness's political philosophy, ideological persuasions, and personal struggles, moving beyond conventional ideas that describe Isabella d'Este as "haughty, authoritarian, and possessive" (21).

Shemek structures her reflections in seven chapters. The first chapter, "What News Occurs to Me," also works as the book's introduction outlining the author's research methods and general approach. Shemek discloses that her methodological framework draws from Hayden White's *The Content of the Form* (1987) and Harry Berger Jr.'s "Interpretive Shuttle" (2005).

Building upon White and Berger Jr., Shemek considers the expressive and documentary aspects of early modern letters as interrelated functions of the epistolary form. The letter becomes a multifarious instrument of utility, rhetoric, power, desolation, self-fashioning, and self- propagation. Recognizing Isabella d'Este's gendered position bound to the domestic sphere, Shemek approaches the marchioness's epistolary production as a technology that materially extended Isabella's presence across the Italian peninsula.

Chapter 2, "'Ci Ci and Pa Pa': Script, Mimicry, and Mediation in Isabella d'Este's Letters," is a reworking of Shemek's 2003 article bearing the same title. According to Shemek and echoed in the "Ci Ci and Pa Pa" part of the title, Isabella

accustomed herself to her absent husband by dictating the sounds and evoking the voice of their pre-literate son Federico II Gonzaga (1500–40) in her letters. The author convincingly illustrates Isabella d'Este's rhetorical efficacy in transmitting orality to signal the intimacy of a private conversation even when the letters were not written in her hand. To corroborate Isabella's epistolary authorship of dictated correspondence, Shemek claims that by dictating her letters, the marchioness projected herself "not as an author but as an authority" (64) in a comparable manner to how, for instance, Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92) dictated his letters from a position of dominance (48). Shemek claims that even though Isabella's epistolary production was a collective process, "we must certainly consider her correspondence to be hers" (64). Differently, historian P. Renée Baernstein in "'In My Own Hand': Costanza Colonna and the Art of the Letter in Sixteenth-Century Italy" (2013) shows that court secretaries could be far from neutral, especially concerning female voices. Where Shemek poignantly recognizes Isabella's gendered position about the physical boundaries of her political agency, she neglects to acknowledge the same circumstance regarding the existence of divergent scribal hands and eliciting congruence with Lorenzo de' Medici's epistolary practices.

Shemek reflects on the disruptive function of the secretary's hand in her consideration of the letters' materiality in chapter 3, titled "In Continuous Expectation." According to Shemek, the sequential nature of epistolary praxis—composing letters and awaiting responses—created a discrete temporality in which Isabella found herself recurrently isolated and in "continuous expectation" of inclusion in her husband's life, the Ferrara court, and the broader political activities. In Shemek's words, letters as "mnemonic tokens" served "to reconstitute corporeal presence over distances" (79). She claims secretarial hands could weaken these bodily extensions since the Christian persuasion was that "the body's interface with the soul" was the writing hand (83). In chapter 4, Shemek unearths Isabella's advocacies for other women, which the author claims cut across class categories.

"Our Art and Our Fiction," the book's fifth chapter, conveys Isabella's cunningness in fabricating letters for both amusement and diplomatic administration. Isabella successfully counterfeited a letter to placate Borgia's envoy while negotiating the marriage contract between her son Federico and Cesare Borgia's daughter, Luisa Borgia (1500–53). "Neither Hope Nor Fear"—the translation of Isabella's famous motto "*nec spe, nec metu*"—is the title of chapter 6 that scrutinizes the marchioness as a political ruler. Focusing on Isabella's management of Mantua during Francesco's captivity in Venice from August 1509 to July 1510, Shemek reveals the marchioness's exertions to sustain Mantua's dominion. The

book's last chapter advances analogies between Isabella's letters and messages addressed to Barack Obama during his presidency. The author compellingly asserts that Isabella's abundant correspondence can be mined for information about "ordinary people" (173) alongside insights about artistic patronage and politics.

Shemek's focus on the materiality of the letters and their function as spiritual and bodily extensions is insightful and thought-provoking. Shemek, however, does not consider the letters' materiality comprehensively. For example, there is no analysis of the paper, ink, and wax seals. The materiality of the letters is asserted as metonymic. In contrast, historian Stephen Kelly in "In the Sight of an Old Pair of Shoes" (2010), demonstrates how metonymical interpretations of historical artifacts in reference to material analyses risk aestheticizing and homogenizing individual objects and experiences as representational, thus undermining the material approaches which they comport. Overall, *In Continuous Expectation* is an overdue addition to scholarship with relevance to a variety of scholars and historians of premodern European women, gender, art, and politics, among other topics skillfully interwoven throughout Shemek's affluent narrative.

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