Fifteenth Century Italy has been called both the "golden age of bastards" and the "age of golden bastards."¹ But while scholars from Jacob Burckhardt to Lauro Martines have decried princely infidelity and the political problems resulting from the promotion of the inevitable bastards, they have not discussed a central character in the creation of such situations: the mother of those bastards or, more properly, the mistress of the prince.² "Golden bastards," male and female, could not have existed without the tacit cooperation of noble women and the men who protected them—husbands, fathers, and brothers. And herein lies a conundrum. Paternal, spousal, and/or fraternal consent to an illicit relationship which was, at best, a tenuous claim on the generosity of a prince might appear to violate the model constructed by family historians of a society concerned with preserving the honor of their women in order to enhance the family's position through advantageous marital alliances of the virgin daughters.³ The willingness of husbands not to oppose and even to donate their wives to the prince's pleasure contradicts Martines's assertion that "courtly ladies had no such license (to commit adultery), reaching for which they faced the penalty of death."⁴ On the contrary, evidence shows that adulterous wives of courtiers not only bore their bastards openly but were

¹A shorter version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in New York, 1990. I want to thank Susan Conner, Margaret King, Pat Simons, Randolph Starn, and most especially Gene Brucker for their advice and insights.

²The most famous commentary on illegitimacy in the fifteenth century is of course that of Burckhardt, 48 ff. See also Martines, 239.

³Obviously, bastards also came from casual liaisons, but by and large these scions were excluded from political roles (for the best example, see the case of Nicolò d'Este below). Having a mistress by definition implies a more long-term relationship.

⁴This literature is enormous. For Tuscany, see Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, and Kent; for Venice, Chojnacki. For an overview, see Diefendorf.
never executed for having carnal relations with the prince. Furthermore, these princely favorites, married or single, were openly recognized and honored ladies, some even holding property in their own right and achieving a degree of independence not normally available to Renaissance women. These data alone indicate that structures and definitions of what constituted socially acceptable behavior for women in fifteenth-century Italy were neither rigid nor uniform. Even more significant, evidence suggests that, contrary to modern belief, families found these liaisons advantageous and actively cultivated such relationships. While this current work is only a preliminary study, it is clear that further examination of the role of mistresses has the potential for revealing societal structures in cities under signorial rule in Renaissance Italy that were very different from the models of family dynamics than have been put forward for the republics of Florence and Venice.

The problems surrounding the historical study of mistresses either as individuals or as a generic group are complex. Since they have existed at all levels of society throughout history, no single set of criteria can be universally applied. Ecclesiastical battles over priests’ concubines went on for centuries. Mistresses were kept by the respectable citizens of Florence and Venice as well as despots and princes. What is common to all these women, however, is their virtual invisibility. The normal absence of women from the historical record has been taken one step further by the fact that concubines and mistresses had no legal rights whatsoever. For our period, most information concerning their lives must be adduced from indirect references in chronicles and letters, usually in association with their children. Indeed, without children the very existence of most of these women would be unknown. It is primarily through her offspring that a mistress becomes visible to history,

5This applies to both noble and common married women. See the appendix regarding Niccolò d’Este and the farrier’s wife.
6Brundage, passim.
7For two examples, see Brucker and Origo.
8Brundage.
9Other reasons for mention are appearances on state occasions, marriages of children, trips, funerals, and occasionally scandal. For example, Giovannola di Montebretto, mistress of Bernardo Visconti, caused a rupture between him and his general Pandolfo Malatesta because of an indiscreet dalliance. Azarii, 147–48. Sometimes these women become involved in politics, for which see below. There are, of course, literary sources such as love poetry, for which see below.
and it is precisely because of her offspring that the problem and person of the mistress must be considered to reach a better understanding of the connections between family structures, legitimacy, and power in Renaissance society.

As this article is a preliminary study, it is limited to the mistresses of Italian despots between ca. 1350 and 1485, primarily but not exclusively at the courts of Milan, Ferrara, and Rimini. It was during this period and at these courts that the princely mistress achieved her apogee of importance for Italian history. Her bastards were routinely incorporated into the household of the prince and even recognized as legal heirs, on occasion supplanting siblings born in wedlock. More commonly, the sons became important military personages, supporting or opposing their families, and the daughters entered into the social mainstream playing the traditional role of pawns in family marriage strategies. But the large number of princely bastards with different mothers and the limited choices even for legitimate children required an alternative hierarchy to accommodate all. What resulted was a structure wherein some bastards were more equal than others, their status directly derived from the social status of their mothers. The crucial role played by maternity in determining a bastard's place in Renaissance court society has significant ramifications, not least of which is how much noble families stood to gain social status, power, and property by allowing their women to bear the bastards of their prince.

Such a strategy was a gamble. Princes did not limit their extramarital activities to noble women, unmarried women, or one woman at a time. Even a primary mistress, that is, the woman who was openly recognized as what could be called the prince's alternative wife, could find herself supplanted at any time. Nonetheless, many of these liaisons were stable and long-lasting, and contemporary observers had no doubt about who was the prima favorita. For the period under investigation these known "favorites" do in fact have a fairly consistent profile. They came from noble families, usually from the towns which the prince ruled. Concubina, the preferred term to describe these women, seems to have been descriptive rather than pejorative. The wife was designated as uxor or

\[10\] The most famous example is Leonello d'Este, for whom see below.
"consort" and the mistress as concubina. Similarly, bastards were differentiated from legitimate offspring with the adjective naturale. Typically, the chronicler identified the wife by family while the mistress was more often referred to as "the concubine of . . . ." If named, she was given respect equal to that of the wife. Hence, the mother of Francesco Sforza was described in 1399 as "domina Lucia ipsius d. Sfortie concubina" and thereafter as "domina Lucia." The same was true for Francesco's mistress Giovanna de Acquapendente, but the mother of Francesco's bastard Tristan (born while Giovanna was prima favorita) is described differently. Due to a lacuna in the manuscript she has lost her name, but her position is clear: "domina . . . concubina Morelli de Parma Jemi domini du-cis Filippi amorum familiaris." She is not Francesco's woman but that of a dear friend. (Sharing one's mistress with the prince seems to have been as accepted as sharing one's wife.) On the other hand, in 1390 the established mistress of Giangaleazzo Visconti, Agnese Mantegazza, was mentioned as "domine Agnetis, concubine do-mini comitis Virtutum" while at the same time a woman who is otherwise unknown was designated "domine Lusote, amasie do-mini comitis Virtutum." When in the 1460s Pius II wrote that Isotta degli Atti was the concubina of Sigismondo Malatesta, he was deliberately denying their 1456 marriage. In contrast, the Cronaca Malatestiana, written during the period when she was indeed his mistress, always referred to "madonna Isotta," the same term used for Sigismondo's wife Polissena Sforza.

The case of Isotta degli Atti is unique. More information is available about her than for any other fifteenth-century mistress, primarily because Sigismondo was passionately in love with her and was

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11There are occasional exceptions, such as the chronicler of the Annales Forolivienses who calls the former mistress and later wife of Obizzo d'Este, Lippa degli Ariosti, "una pulcerima meretrice Bononie." Annales Forolivienses, 61.
12Parodi, 336, 337.
13Ibid., 339.
14For other examples, see below the cases of Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Lucrezia Landriani and Piermaria Rossi and Blanchina Pellegrini Arluno.
15Biblioteca della Società Storica Subalpina, 505, nos. 212 and 214. This is the only known mention of Lusota and her two Visconti bastards, Antonio and Daniele. Agnese's son Gabriele went on to rule Pisa briefly from 1503–05. See below n. 41.
16Pius II, 167. For the marriage, see below, n. 17.
17Cronaca Malatestiana, 199, 125, 128.
not shy about proclaiming that fact. His commissioning of a series of poems and medals to commemorate their love has inspired a highly romanticized picture of their relationship. From internal evidence extracted from the poetry as well as from a few scattered documents, Augusto Campana has managed to construct her biography. Born between 1432 and 1433, Isotta was the daughter of a wealthy wool merchant and his second wife, the daughter of a town functionary. The Atti were a branch of a noble lineage from Sassoferrato whose members had immigrated to Rimini at the beginning of the fourteenth century to engage in trade. By the 1440s Isotta’s father had become a counsellor to Sigismondo. According to the Liber Isottaeus, the book of poems celebrating their love, the 26-year-old Sigismondo was immediately smitten when he first laid eyes on the 10-year-old Isotta. At the time the Lord of Rimini was involved with two women. He was married to his second wife Polissena Sforza, the illegitimate daughter of Francesco Sforza, and had as his mistress Vanetta Toschi, daughter of a noble family of Fano. Vanetta bore him at least two children, Roberto in 1442, immediately after his marriage to Polissena, and Contessina in 1445, the year before Isotta became his mistress. By the time she was 13, Isotta had replaced Vanetta, for she had a son who died soon after birth in May 1447. Her status was unequivocally established by the fact that the child was buried with “grandissimo onore di tutti gli ordini e da tutto il popolo” in the Malatesta dynastic church of San Francesco in the same sarcophagus as Sigismondo’s predecessor as Papal Vicar of Rimini, Carlo Malatesta. Indeed, these three women provide a perfect example of the fluidity surrounding honor and legitimacy in the Italian Renaissance. Vanetta and Isotta, both legitimately born into respectable families, entered into illicit relationships with the consent of their families while the bastard Polissena entered the conventional mainstream through her marriage.

After being replaced as Sigismondo’s mistress, Vanetta and her children remained in Rimini, while Isotta took her place at court opposite Polissena. This menage ended with Polissena’s death.

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18 For a summary, see Pasini in the 1974 reprint of Ricci.
19 For what follows, see Campana.
20 For Vanetta Toschi, see Sorzano.
21 Cronaca Malatestiana, 119.
22 Isotta’s exceptional status was underlined by the fact that in 1448 she was allowed to begin building a tomb chapel for herself complete with papal indulgences in San Francesco.
from the plague in 1449. Instead of contracting another political marriage, Sigismondo remained unmarried with Isotta as his concubine. To insure the succession, he had both Vanetta’s son Roberto and Isotta’s son Malatesta legitimated by papal fiat in 1450. Shortly after this, Sigismondo commissioned his court poet, Basinius of Parma, to write the *Liber Isottaeus*. From this source some insights can be gleaned concerning a family’s strategy in order to justify their daughter’s relationship with the prince. It must be remembered that the women being discussed were legitimately born daughters, sisters, and even wives of noblemen. How would the loss of their chastity out of wedlock or in an adulterous relationship affect their families? The *Liber Isottaeus* presents two poems in the form of a dialogue between Isotta and her father at the moment of decision. He tries to dissuade her from what he calls a crime of immoral desire, but Isotta counters by answering that she cannot resist the power of love. It must be stressed that this interplay does not necessarily reflect any actual dialogue between the two parties because ultimately neither Isotta nor her father would have been able to resist the prince’s desires. Rather, it should be seen as a literary justification to protect the honor of both the family and the lady. The father is blameless because he has opposed the illicit relationship, while the daughter argues that the power of love raises it above the level of mere lust and desire to a higher—one might even say a Petrarchan—plane where love triumphs over chastity. More importantly, the loss of chastity is not seen as a fate worse than death nor even one that merited consideration of such a drastic solution.

Whatever qualms she or her father may have felt, Isotta became Sigismondo’s mistress at the earliest allowable moment, and the family was handsomely rewarded. Her father remained in the inner circle of advisers, and in a splendid ceremony in 1448, Sigismondo

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Francesco. The chapel was situated on the same side of the church as Sigismondo’s chapel and directly opposite that of Sigismondo’s first wife, Ginevra d’Este, who had died in 1440. Polissena was granted no such privileges and was subsequently interred with her predecessor. Ricci, 423–53.

23Malatesta did not survive childhood, and Isotta’s second son, Sallustio, became Sigismondo’s designated successor. Jones, 205, 245.

24Basinius of Parma, 1–74.


26She also, of course, conforms to the prevailing ideas that women could not resist carnal desires. See Maclean, passim.
knighted Isotta’s brother and presented him with assorted cloths and a variety of items in silver. Isotta herself gave him 200 gold ducats.27 Nor was Isotta estranged from her kin, for she inherited the family palace when her brother died in 1458.28 Not all fathers expressed the concern that Basinius puts in the mouth of the elder Atti, however. Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, was actively encouraged by men seeking to garner favor at court to make advances toward their daughters and even wives.29

Despite his many professions of love for Isotta, Sigismondo did not guarantee her any monopoly on his affections. In another poem from the Liber Isottaeus, Isotta complains bitterly that Sigismondo is being unfaithful to her with a woman named Alba.30 While this also fits into the tradition of courtly love poetry, it is a fact that Sigismondo did have several illegitimate children by other women during his relationship with Isotta.31 In the only letter we have between the two, dated 1454, Isotta expressed her displeasure at his affection for his distant cousin Aritea di Galeazzo Malatesta di Pesaro. She also described what the children at court were doing, but not all of them were hers. In the same cache are letters from Roberto, who was governing Rimini in his father’s absence, and his mother Vanetta Toschi reporting on Sigismondo’s daughter Contessina, who was with her mother in Fano.32 Since it was standard practice for the wife to raise her husband’s illegitimate children born from other women of high social rank, these letters reveal the shift in Isotta’s position.33 As the lady of the house she now had to tolerate her lover’s other bastards alongside her own.

27Cronaca Malatestiana, 124–25.
28Clementini, 458; Campana, 550. Vanetta also remained close to her family. Sorzano, 177–78.
29Lubkin, 74.
30Basinius, 29–32.
31In 1452 two daughters and one son of Sigismondo were legitimized by Nicholas V, and two other sons married daughters of Rodolfo Varano. Jones, 209 and 245, n. 3. For other children, see Campana, 550; and Clementini, 474–76.
32Archivio di Stato di Siena, Particolari famiglie forestiere b. 8, Carte Malatestiana. See also Campana, 550; and Sorzano, 179.
33It appears that bastards of both sexes were usually raised as part of the extended princely family. The fact that Federigo da Montefeltro was exiled from court after being formally adopted as Guidobaldo’s son speaks more for his questionable paternity than Caterina Colonna’s jealousy. Federigo himself raised his own bastards alongside his legitimate children. Franceschini, 431ff; Tommasoli, 7ff.
Thus, by 1454 Isotta had become a visible pseudo-wife while Sigismondo’s other women remained historically invisible. Such invisibility reinforces the difficulty of drawing a clear picture of the lives of these women. Where were they housed? How were they treated? Who raised the children? There is no simple answer to any of these questions. The prima favorita had no clearly defined place of abode. She could have an apartment in the palace or live nearby, but she could also be kept in another town. The mother of Leonello and Borso d’Este was present at court, as was Isotta from the time she became Sigismondo’s mistress. The last mistress of Galeazzo Maria Sforza traveled with the Duke and his wife while maintaining a separate household in Milan where she bore his son. Agnese del Maino, mistress of Filippo Maria Visconti, brought up his only child, Bianca Maria, at Abbiategrasso. The mistress sometimes kept her children, other times not. Evidence indicates that in Rimini, at least, these decisions were gender-related. Vanetta Toschi was allowed to keep her daughter with her and live in Rimini, but Roberto went to the Castello Sismondo with Isotta and Sigismondo. Sigismondo and his siblings were removed from their birth-mothers and raised by their uncle Carlo and his wife Elisabetta Gonzaga in Rimini as their legitimate heirs. Of their real mothers no more is heard, but the three boys formed a close

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34 The mother of Lucrezia Malatesta may have been Gentile del fu ser Giovanni da Bologna, although this is disputed. Lucrezia was betrothed in 1447 to Cecco Ordelaffi. He claimed her as bride in 1450, and in 1453 she was legitimated by Nicholas V. The marriage was never consummated and was formally dissolved 15 December 1455. In February 1456 Lucrezia married Alberto d’Este, for whom see above n. 14. Cronaca Malatestiana, 119, n. 1.

35 Gundersheimer, 77–78; Cronaca Malatestiana, passim. Other examples of mistresses living openly at court or nearby are the two successive mistresses of Bernabò Visconti, Giovannola Montebretto and Donnina dei Porri, and Giangaleazzo Visconti’s mistress Agnese Mantegazzo. Canetta, 6; Comani, 240; Muir, 124.

36 Lubkin, 76.

37 Muir, 218.

38 The question of the maternity of the three Malatesta boys is a vexed one. The various sources suggest the following: Galeotto Roberto (1) Isabella, wife of Pandolfo Malatesta, (2) Allegra Mori of Brescia, or, most likely (3) Caterina del Catellano. According to Sigismondo’s court historian, Caterina was a noblewoman of Brescia sent to Rimini specifically to give birth under the guidance of Elizabetta Gonzaga. Sigismondo: (1) Antonia Castellani, (2) Allegra de’ Mori, or (3) Antonia da Barignano. Domenico (Malatesta Novello): (1) Caterina del Castellano or (2) Antonia da Barignano. Clementini, 227, 271, 299.
relationship with their aunt, and her death in 1432 was the occasion for much grief.39

Sigismondo may have had foreboding about the future control of Rimini, for in 1456 he married Isotta, probably to insure that her children succeeded him rather than Vanetta’s son Roberto.40 Such moves, however, were no guarantee of success. Although Bernabò Visconti seems to have gone through some sort of marriage ceremony to legitimate his children by Donnina dei Porri, his nephew Giangaleazzo had it invalidated once he had seized power, thereby reducing these rival claimants once again to bastardy.41 On the other hand, Niccolò d’Este chose not to marry Stella de l’Assassino even though her sons were his designated heirs.42 In the case of Isotta, the combination of outside political pressures and her own unpopularity as well as that of her son Sallustio caused the people of Rimini to rally behind Roberto as the new ruler. Isotta finished her days in Rimini in genteel retirement, dying at the age of 40. She was buried with all due honors in her tomb in San Francesco which had aroused such rage in Pope Pius II.43

In marrying Sigismondo, Isotta was the exception and not the rule.44 What became of women like Sigismondo’s mother who lost both her chastity and her child? Evidence indicates that the prince endowed his mistress with property and income for her lifetime so that she could have financial security. We know, for example, that

39Elisabetta and the boys led the procession to Loreto when their father remarried in 1427, and they were legitimated by Martin V in 1428. Amiani, 351. Jones, 167. For Elisabetta’s death, see Cronaca Malatestiana, 63–64. There are other, more practical, examples of bonding between legitimate and illegitimate family members. In 1480 Lucrezia Pico della Mirandola, widow of Pino Ordelaffi, allied herself with his natural son Sinibaldo in an effort to maintain control of Forli. Cronica Gestorum in Partibus Lombardie et Religis Italie, 74.

40This was a clandestine marriage that was never openly proclaimed. The 1456 date has been established by the change in Isotta’s name in documents from “de Actis” to “de Malatestis.” Campana, 550. Exactly why Sigismondo should marry Isotta and not make it public is not known, but it may have been because of her unpopularity among the people of Rimini.

41Muir, 203.

42Instead he married Parisina Malatesta (Sigismondo’s aunt) whom he executed in 1425 along with Stella’s eldest son Ugo for their adulterous/incestuous affair. This incident created such a sensation it is mentioned in virtually every chronicle of the period. Diario Ferrarese, 17; Gundersheimer, 78.

43Sallustio and his brother Valerio were mysteriously murdered in 1470. Jones, 240ff. Other examples are Lippa degli Ariosti and Isotta Albaresani, both in Ferrara. See above, n. 9 and below, n. 56.
Niccolò d'Este gave Stella de l'Assassino 292 campi at Saguedo and Barbuglio, and his maid Filippa/Camilla della Tavola land in both Ferrarese and Bolognese territory. Although Stella remained single and Niccolò’s mistress until the end of her life, Filippa was married to a Bolognese citizen who lived in Ferrara. Clearly the land served as a generous dowry for a woman who had begun life as the “fante de lo illustre signore messer Niccolò.” A more unusual example of princely largesse is that of the last mistress of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Lucia Marliani, a woman of Milanese patrician stock. She was actually purchased by the Duke from her husband and his mother for 8,000 ducats and additional sinecures. However cold-blooded that may seem—and one must remember it was not wise to oppose one’s prince—Lucia was honored with the titles of Countess of Melzo and Gorgonzola on the condition she have sexual relations with no other man but the duke without his express permission. Such negotiations confirm the flexibility of Renaissance mores when it came to matters of adultery and also serves as a clear example of a husband treating his wife as property. More positive examples of princely largesse include Giangaleazzo Visconti, who gave his mistress Agnese Mantegazza the Castello Sant’Angelo, and Pier Maria Rossi of Parma, who showered his mistress Blanchine Pellegrini Arluno with castles and capital as well as insuring for the well-being of her children by her husband. This is also another example wherein both parties were already married.

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45Dean, 60, n. 164. Stella was buried “con grande honore” in the church of San Francesco in Ferrara in 1419. Diario Ferrarese, 16. Filippa, who was also known as Camilla, married “Jacomo Benedecto da Bologna, cittadino e habitore in Ferrara.” Their daughter, the half-sister of Alberto and Gurone, was married in 1470 to “Bonvicino de la Carte, factore generale del prefacto duca Borso.” Diario Ferrarese, 63. Filippa is also named in a papal brief of 26 April 1471 granting spiritual favors to “Alberto Extensi et Camille genitrici sue.” Gardener, 33, n. 1. The successor as Niccolò d’Este’s mistress, Maria Anna di Roberti, outlived Niccolò by 40 years. She clearly remained well taken care of in Ferrara, for she too was buried “con grande honore” by her son “Signore messer Raynaldo Da Este, naturale del marchexe Niccolò” in 1483. Zambotti, 148.

46Diario Ferrarese, 63.
47Lubkin, 74–76.
48Bueno de Mesquita, 40; Woods-Marsden, 556–57. Interestingly enough, the two children mentioned in Piermario Rossi’s will of 1463 are given the surname of Blanchine’s husband. They are never mentioned in the chronicles, whereas two other bastards whose mother(s) is (are) unknown, Bertrando and Ugolino, played important roles in Parma politics between 1477 and 1482. Cronica Gestorum in Partibus Lombardie et Religuis Italie (1476–1482), 114, 115, 210, 213.
Although we have no evidence of compensation to the displaced husband, Signor Arluno did stay discreetly in Milan where the future lovers had met at court.

The fate of most mistresses, however, appears to have been more like that of Filippa della Tavola: marriage as arranged by the prince, the deal sweetened by the prince paying the dowry. The mother of Francesco Sforza was married off by her lover Attendolo to a fellow soldier because he hoped to marry the illegitimate daughter of a prince, and later in the century Ludovico il Moro disposed of his mistress to a Cremonese count by giving her a dowry of jewels and property. Such endowment could also enable women to live independently if they chose to remain single or if the prince was unable to find a suitable husband. Vanetta Toschi lived as a single woman and got her revenge on Isotta by helping her son Roberto defend the town of Meldola when he was engaged in consolidating his power after Sigismondo’s death. Vanetta not only outlived Isotta to become the honored mother of the new ruler of Rimini but also continued to rule Meldola as his governor. Perhaps the supreme irony was her burial in San Francesco with much pomp in 1475, her position legitimated for eternity by inclusion in the Malatesta dynastic church with Sigismondo and his wives. Another striking story of mother and son is that of Agnese Mantegazza and her son Gabriele Visconti. Despite the fact that Giangaleazzo Visconti had granted her a castle for her residence, she chose instead after his death to follow her son to Pisa, which he had seized in 1403. When Gabriele was driven out in 1405, the angry crowd exhumed her body and dragged it through the streets.

The overall picture that emerges is that, as a rule, mistresses of Italian signori were not seduced and abandoned by their lovers. Some sort of provision was made for their welfare. More significantly, these women seem to have had a choice between remaining unmarried and living outside a convent, as in the case of Vanetta Toschi, or marrying. In all cases that I have been able to confirm,
the prince assumed financial responsibility for his mistress. This in turn relieved the woman’s family of any obligation to provide a dowry. This preservation and potential enhancement of the patrimony may have been a major contributing factor in making concubinage an acceptable or even attractive strategy to noble families. To have a daughter or sister become the mistress of the prince not only assured princely favors; it also eliminated one claim on the family wealth, resulting in larger portions for those remaining. There were other positive possible benefits for the family. Increased wealth and prestige might well have promoted better marital liaisons for the remaining members and even preserved sisters from being forced into convents. This potential for advancement and riches would present an additional attraction for families considering an alliance with the family of a princely favorite. The political and social impact of the Renaissance mistress went far beyond the simple pleasures of a prince and the promotion of princely bastards to positions of power and influence. It set off a chain of complex reactions that affected family dynamics in signorial cities in ways that have not yet been studied.

But even the few women whose names are known would have remained invisible to history without their children.53 These bastards had somehow to be fit into a sophisticated society where the establishment of political legitimacy often took precedence over social convention. The problem of legitimacy and inheritance was not of course limited to Italy. In England, where the weakness of the dynastic claims of the Plantagenets led to greater stress on the importance of coronation rites and recognition by Parliament, a bastardy doctrine developed in the fourteenth century that could very well have applied to Italy in the fifteenth century: “It is better to be acknowledged and holden as son, albeit you are not heir, than to be the very heir in blood but not acknowledged and holden as such.”54 But in both fourteenth-century England and France questions of legitimacy focused on the presumed adultery of the women and the subsequent questionable paternity of the offspring.55 In Italy the problem was reversed. The fidelity of mistresses to their princely lovers was not at issue. Rather, it was the overabundance

53See appendix.
54Wood, 18.
55Ibid, passim.
of bastards of unquestioned paternity but varied maternity that re-
quired new solutions. The result was a situation in which the
mother was the determining factor for where each bastard stood on
the social scale. Only those children born of women of sufficient
social rank could be considered for the succession, high marriage,
or noble honors.

To date, the best documentation of this is to be found at the court
of Ferrara. The question of legitimacy and inheritance had been a
matter of conflict there since the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{56} All the sons
of Obizzo III by his “beautiful whore” and later wife were legit-
imated, but they did not succeed without a struggle. Niccolò III
(1383–1441) was the fifth illegitimate offspring to succeed in Fer-
rara. His mother Isotta Albaresani did not come from the highest
aristocracy, but her position was raised by the fact that her lover
Alberto d’Este married her after the death of his wife Giovanna
de’Roberti and had their son legitimated.\textsuperscript{57} It is ironic that subse-
quently Niccolò should have among his many mistresses one from
the Roberti family and one from the Albaresani.

Niccolò III had so many natural offspring (over thirty) that a
popular rhyme claimed, “Here and there along the Po, all are chil-
dren of Niccolò.”\textsuperscript{58} Nonetheless, despite this plethora of bastards
it was only the children of Stella da l’Assassino, a lady from a noble
Sienese family which had immigrated to Ferrara, who were legit-
imated and designated Niccolò’s heirs when his first two marriages
failed to produce boys.\textsuperscript{59} Stella’s primacy can be seen from the ex-
ample of another bastard, Meliaduse, born to a doctor’s daughter
(and perhaps a cousin?), Caterina di Taddeo Medico Albaresani,
only a year after Stella’s first son Ugo. Despite the fact that his
mother came from the same family as Niccolò’s mother, Meliaduse
was excluded from the succession even after Ugo’s execution in
1425. Both Meliaduse and two other sons, Alberto and Gurone,
born to Nicolò’s maid (variously referred to as Filippa or Camilla
della Tavola) were omitted from the knighting ceremony per-
formed by the Emperor Sigismund in 1432. Another bastard,
Folco, whose mother is unknown, was included, as were Leonello

\textsuperscript{56}Dean, 51.
\textsuperscript{57}Gardner, 565.
\textsuperscript{58}Gundersheimer, 16–17.
\textsuperscript{59}Dean, 56.
and Borso. Such deliberate selection would indicate strongly that the social standing of the mother, which of course came from her family, was a serious consideration in determining the bastard's rank. Although Niccolò's third marriage did produce a legitimate son, Ercole, Niccolò continued to favor Stella's second bastard Leonello for the succession. Despite a directive in his will stating that primogeniture should be strictly adhered to after Leonello's death, Niccolò's wishes were disregarded. Rather, Stella's third son and Leonello's brother Borso succeeded in favor of either Leonello's legitimate son (a minor) or Ercole.

In Rimini the struggle over the succession in 1468 points even more to the importance of the mother. Although Sigismondo Malatesta had over ten illegitimate children, the only ones considered contenders for the succession were Vanetta Toschi's son Roberto and Isotta's son Sallustio. Roberto had been legitimated by the papacy in 1450. We have no documentation to indicate that Sallustio was formally legitimated, but it is probable, since his brother Valerio was legitimated on 9 November 1452. What is noteworthy in this context is that despite Sigismondo's apparent certainty that Sallustio was their son, it was possible for Federigo da Montefeltro to start a rumor that Sallustio was not the son of Isotta. Such a strategy would have been pointless if Sallustio's claims to inheritance lay solely in his paternity, which remained unuestioned. By implying that Sallustio was not the son of the former prima favorita and now wife of Sigismondo, the Count of Urbino was attempting to undermine Sallustio's position and therefore his right to succeed.

Of course, not all the children from such princely liaisons were boys. The girls frequently served as valuable marriage pawns. Sigismondo Malatesta's second wife was the illegitimate daughter of his military partner Francesco Sforza and his prima favorita. Caterina Sforza, daughter of Duke Galeazzo Maria and Lucrezia

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61 Dean, 56.
62 Jones, 204.
63 Clementini, 478–79.
64 Cronaca Malatestiana, 65 and 84. Polissena Sforza's mother was Giovanna d'Acquapendente, for whose genealogy, see Parodi, 339 and 543.
Landriani (the wife of his “companion in pleasure”), achieved one of the most politically important matches of the later fifteenth century when she married Girolamo Riario, Lord of Imola and nephew of Pope Sixtus IV. Often these girls became the wives of condottieri, themselves frequently illegitimate in both birth and power. Bernabò Visconti married off a series of bastard daughters to such men, the most famous being Sir John Hawkwood. Not only did Regina della Scala, Bernabò’s redoubtable wife, attend the wedding, but all her daughters did so as well, and Regina presented the bride with a gift of 1,000 ducats. In some instances such marriages could be highly advantageous to the husband, as in the case of Francesco Sforza who claimed Milan through his wife Bianca Maria, the illegitimate daughter and sole heir of Francesco Maria Visconti. But again, no prince, however desperate, would have considered marrying a bastard whose mother had not been of sufficient rank. To do so would have lowered him socially and hurt the chances of their children to make good marriages with other nobility.

Again, this is very difficult to document, for illegitimate daughters of noble women usually appear in the records only when they are betrothed or married and illegitimate daughters of lesser women quite were simply of no importance. Our best example of this contrast comes again from Ferrara. Stella’s daughter Isotta was betrothed to the legitimate heir to Urbino, Oddantonio Montefeltro. After Oddantonio was assassinated, Isotta married Count Stephano Frangipani da Segna. Stella’s successor, Anna Roberti, bore Niccolò three daughters, all of whom married legitimate lesser nobility. On the other hand, Orsina, Niccolò’s daughter by a farmer’s wife, was married off to a gentleman of the bedchamber. Such snobbishness could work in reverse as well. In 1511 a natural
daughter of the Marquess of Mantua refused to marry Agostino Chigi, the richest man in Italy, because he was a banker.\textsuperscript{70}

The fact that these daughters were conceived outside the marriage bed did not entitle them to the same liberties as their mothers, however. Indeed, it is ironic that if they committed adultery, they could be put to death. Perhaps the most notable example was Bernarda, the high-spirited daughter of Bernabò Visconti’s mistress before Donninia, Giovannola di Montebretto. Caught \textit{in flagrans}, she was thrown into prison by her own father where she died of starvation.\textsuperscript{71} At the same time, Bernabò did not execute Giovannola for her well-known liaison with Pandolfo Malatesta. Instead, Pandolfo lost his \textit{condotta} as general for Milan and had to leave town quickly.\textsuperscript{72} Again, these examples highlight the need for a broader understanding of what was sexually permissible and for whom. It appears that a noble woman could commit transgressions with a prince, or even two, but a prince’s daughter, even if illegitimate, could not have sexual relations outside of wedlock with a non-noble.

Despite their personal dependence on the good-will of their lovers, these mistresses of Renaissance princes played significant roles in the political and social history of fifteenth-century Italy. Neither mistresses nor their children were considered to be social pariahs. Women were often encouraged to commit fornication or adultery with the prince with the open support of their families and even perhaps against their own will. None were condemned to death for so doing. Their bastards were openly accepted by society, church, and state. Often these children were the only offspring of the fathers. As a result, some boys became rulers of important states and/or powerful condottieri, while in general the girls contributed to the forging of important marriage alliances (see appendix). The consistency of such strategies would indicate that although these children were born out of wedlock, and therefore illegitimate in the technical sense, they were not excluded from achieving significant status in Renaissance society. Where they fitted into that society depended in large part on their mother’s social rank. These are

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{70}Gilbert, 97.
\item \textsuperscript{71}Cannetta, 10. A daughter of Sigismondo and Isotta was also executed for adultery in 1483. Zambotti, 131.
\item \textsuperscript{72}See above n. 8.
\end{itemize}
complex problems of social and family history that need to be investigated further. Clearly this study raises more questions than it answers. It is intended to provoke thought and further research. Although the Renaissance mistress may seem to us an invisible woman, she was an accepted, visible, and indeed necessary part of the hierarchical structure for the society of her age. To dismiss bastardy as the parading of male power and potency and a flaunting of the system is to miss the main point: it was the system, and it was a system that depended on the complicity of noble women and their families. Only by further study of the complex and multilayered relationships among these invisible women, their highly visible offspring, their families, their men, and their states during this volatile period can we achieve a fuller and more nuanced picture of society and politics in Renaissance Italy and indeed, in a broader context, in Europe as a whole.

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Appendix

MISTRESSES OF ITALIAN DESPOTS, 1350–1485

N.B. Because of the complexity of the information, this preliminary list is arranged alphabetically by despotic family and then chronologically by the men. Each woman is listed roughly chronologically, although in several cases they overlap. Because the existence of offspring testifies to the existence of a mistress even if her name is unknown, children and their subsequent careers are also given in order to encourage further research.

ESTE:
   Alda, 1333–1381, m. Lodovico II Gonzaga
   Aldobrandino, 1335–1361, succeeded in 1352
   Niccolò, 1338–1388, succeeded 1361
   Ugo, 1344–1370
   Alberto, 1347–1393, succeeded 1388

Alberto: Isotta Albaresani
   Niccolò, 1383–1441, succeeded 1393

Niccolò III: Stella da l’Assassino (+1419)
   Ugo, 1405–1425
Leonello, 1407–1450, succeeded 1441
m. (1) Margherita Gonzaga
   (2) Maria d’Aragna
Borso, 1413–1471, succeeded 1450
Isotta, betrothed to Oddantonio Montefeltro;
   m. Count Stephano Frangipani da Segna
Caterina di Taddeo Medico Albaresani
   Meliaduse 1406–1452, Abbot of Pomposa
      had 3 illegitimate sons (part of Pius II’s entourage, 1459)
Anna Roberti, d. 1483
   Rinaldo, Abbot of Pomposa, renounces to give to sons,
      1469; 1472 m. Lucretia, daughter of Guglielmo IV,
      Marchese of Monferrato
   Bianca Maria, b. 1440, m. 1468 Galeotto Pico della Mirandola
      “Una Roberti” (Anna?)
Beatrice, m. 1448 (1) Nicolò, Lord of Coreggio;
   (2) Tristano Sforza
   Camilla, m. 1448 Rodolfo Varano, Lord of Camerino
Filippa (Camilla) della Tavola
   Alberto, b. 1415, counsellor to Borso
   Gurone, abbot of Nonatola & protonotary
Unknown mothers:
   Folco, knighted 1433
   Margherite #1
   Margherite #2 m. Galeotto Roberto Malatesta 1429, enters convent after his death.
   Baldassare, painter and medalist
   Wife of farrier, Messer Antonio Rampino
   Orsina, m. (age 27?) 1469 gentleman of chamber,
      Andrea Gualengo (he has had 2 other wives)

Leonello: Unknown
   Francesco, b. before 1430, sent to Burgundy
      (sent away to please Maria d’Aragna?)

Ercole: Lodovica Condolmieri
   Lucrezia, b. 1471–2, betrothed at age 6–7 to Annibale Bentivoglio
      whom she marries in 1487
   Lady-in-waiting of Eleonora d’Aragna
   Giulio, 1478–1561, becomes cleric

GONZAGA:
   Francesco: Unknown
      Bastard daughter m. one of his favorites,
      whom he knighted in 1497
MALATESTA:
Pandolfo: Allegra Mori of Brescia
    mother of Galeotto Roberto (?) b. 1411
    and/or Sigismondo (?) b. 1417
Caterina del Castellano of Brescia
    mother of Galeotto Roberto (?) and/or Domenico (?) b. 1418
Antonia da Barignano or Castellani (?)
    mother of Sigismondo (?) and/or Domenico (?)
(Also an affair with Bernabò Visconti’s mistress, Giovannola di Montebretto)

Sigismondo: Vanetta Toschi
    Roberto, b. 1441, legitimated 31 Aug. 1450,
    later ruler of Rimini, m. Isabetta da Montefeltro
    Contessina, b. 1445, m. 1475 Cristofero Nardelli da Forli,
    nephew of Cardinal Ascanio Sforza
Isotta degli Atti
    Giovanni #1, died at birth, 1447
    Malatesta, legitimated 31 Aug. 1450
    Giovanni #2, died 1459
    Sallustio, murdered 1471
    Valerio Galeotto, legitimated 9 Nov 1452,
    murdered 1471
    Anna [Antonia], b. 1463, m. 1481 to Rodolfo Gonzaga, executed for adultery, 1483
Gentile del fu ser Giovanni da Bologna
    Lucrezia, betrothed 1447, to Cecco Ordelaffi,
    legitimated by Nicholas V, 1453, marriage annulled, 1455
Unknown:
    Pandolfo
    Margherita, legitimated 14 Nov 1452, m. Carlo Fortebraccio,
    Count of Montone

MONTEFELTRO:
Guidantonio: Unknown: Aura, m. Bernardino Ubaldini, condottiere
    Federigo, b. 1422: mother? Elisabetta degli Accomanducci;
    father?
    Bernardino Ubaldini; m. Battista Sforza
Federigo: Unknown: Buonconte, d. 1458
    Antonio, m. Emilia Pia da Carpi Bernardino, d. 1458
    Gentile, m. Agostino Fregoso da Sta Agata

ORDELAFFI:
Pino II: Unknown: Sinibaldo who becomes vicar of Forlì, 1473
ROSSI:
Piermaria: Blanchina Pellegrini Arluno has 2 children named Ottaviano and Francesca Arluno for whom Piermaria provides in will but never acknowledges as his own. They are, instead, designated as those of Blanchina’s husband, Melchior Pellegrini.

Unknown: Bertrando, documented as adult in 1482
Ugolino, documented as abbot of S. Giovanni Evangelista in Parma in 1477

DELLA SCALA: Cangrande:
Unknown: Antonio, adult, 1379–82
Bartolomeo d. 1329
Ziliberto
Frignano, bribed, 1355
Tebaldo
Guglielmo

SFORZA:
Jacopo: Lucia, b. 1399
Francesco, b. 1401
Alexander, b. 1409

Francesco: At least 17 illegitimate children
Giovanna da Acquapendente
Polisena I, 1427–1428
Polisena II, 1428–1449
n.n. 1429–1430
Sforza Secundus [Sforzina] 1435–1492, legit. 1448, condottiere for Venice with uncle Alessandro Sforza da Pesaro, 1467
Druisiana, 1437–1474, m. 1464 Jacopo Piccinino, returned to Milan after he was imprisoned & decapitated in Naples

Unknown
Isotta, b. 1428
Concubine of good friend Morelli de Parma
Tristanus, 1429–1477, legitimated 1448, condottiere, m. Beatrice d’Este, widow of Count of Correggio
“Lady of the Court”
Polidoro, 1442–1475, legitimated 1448
Elisa, sister? d. 1469, buried tog. with Polidoro (when she died, half-sister(?)) Frodelisa m. husband, Lord of Imola
Perpetua Crivella de Varitio
Bianca Maria, b. 1445

Unkown
Chiara m. 1480 Count Petrus de Verme
Hippolito
Guilio (made claims, never recognized)
N.B. Tristanus (mother: concubine of friend), Sforza Secundus
(mother: Giovanna da Acquapendente), and Polidoro (mother: “lady of court”)
all legitimized 1448.

Galeazzo Maria: Lucrezia Landriani (wife of friend)
  Carlo, b. 1461
  Caterina, 1462–1510, m. (1) Girolamo Riario,
     (2) Giacomo Feo, (3) Giovanni de’Medici
  2 more, last b. 1467
  Lucia Marliani (wife of courtier)
     2 children
  Several other unknown women & bastards
  Chiara m. Count Pietro dal Verme, 1480

Alessandro: Unknown: Ginevra (d. 1507), m. (1) Sante Bentivolgio,
     (2) Giovanni Bentivolgo

VISCONTI:
Galeazzo: Unknown: Beatrice m. 1359–widow 1396
Luchino: many “spurios” and women
Bernabò: Giovannola Montebretto
  Bernarda, m. Giovanni di Baldino Suardi di Bergamo;
     imprisoned for adultery
  Donnina dei Porri
    Regina m. condottiere Sir John Hawkwood
    Elisabetta m. condottiere Landi
    Riccarda m. Breton condottiere Bertrand de la Sale
    Catherine da Cremona
     n.n.
    (Corio lists 10 other bastards, plus 2 from Cannetta)

Giangaleazzo: Agnese Mantegazzo
    Gabriele, Lord of Pisa, 1403–1405

Filippo Maria: Agnese del Maino
    Bianca Maria, 1425–1467
    2nd daughter died soon after birth
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