

Peyronel Rambaldi, Susanna.

Una gentildonna irrequieta: Giulia Gonzaga fra reti familiari e relazioni eterodosse.

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“A lady feeling unsettled”: such is the title for this new book devoted to Giulia Gonzaga by Italian scholar Susanna Peyronel Rambaldi. It is not a biography in the usual sense—unlike other works on the same topic, both old and recent. Here, the exploration of Giulia’s life (Gazzuolo, near Mantova, 1513–Naples, 1566) becomes an opportunity to delve into the history of her family, friends, and more generally the Italian aristocracy in a stormy period. The struggle between Charles V and Francis I on the one hand, and the ever stricter Inquisition’s investigations on the other, had in fact produced a very heavy climate that was difficult to escape.

The book consists of five chapters: “Being born Gonzaga”; “The true golden age” (which is a quotation from a poem by Gandolfo Porrino, friend and secretary of Giulia, later dismissed by her); “The ‘very faithful’ Naples”; “Ruling from the monastery”; and “Female clienteles and heretical networks.” As the chapter titles already show, chronology intertwines with the most delicate questions related to Giulia’s life.

Following the same line as her previous essay (“I carteggi di Giulia Gonzaga,” in *Donne di potere nel Rinascimento*, ed. Letizia Arcangeli and Susanna Peyronel [Rome: Viella, 2008], pp. 709–42), Peyronel Rambaldi mines Giulia’s letters to great profit: among Giulia’s regular correspondents are her relatives, in particular Ferrante Gonzaga, governor of Milan on behalf of Emperor Charles V, and Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, but also one of the most controversial figures of the Italian heterodoxy, Pietro Carnesecchi (1508–67). From the letters received by and addressed to Carnesecchi we can follow what was happening in Europe from the perspective of a woman who, starting in 1535, chose to live in Naples—in the monastery of St. Francis of the Nuns (San Francesco delle Monache). Her life was austere, but Giulia could walk in and out of the monastery without any limitation; in fact, she visited her own palace several times.

Peyronel Rambaldi’s research expands the traditional image of Giulia, whose figure is normally associated with religious issues. She was a disciple of Juan de Valdés and actively supported the Valdesian circle in Naples. In 1535 they met once in Fondi, where Juan was sent by Ercole Gonzaga in order to support Giulia in her legal issues with her step-daughter Isabella. Afterwards, their relationship developed to the point where Valdés was directing her spiritual formation. As the dedication shows, he wrote his *Alfabeto christiano* (“Christian Alphabet”) for her—inspired by the sermons Bernardino Ochino gave in Naples during Lent, 1536.

Giulia’s personal religious quest emerges even from the portraits of her that have survived. We know that Sebastiano del Piombo and Tiziano portrayed her, but no one has yet identified which portraits exactly. We have some copies of the originals, in particular of the portrait by Sebastiano, which was commissioned in 1532 by Cardinal Ippolito de’ Medici, one of Giulia’s most famous admirers. Peyronel Rambaldi mentions a recent hypothesis by E. Hartley Ramsden (80–85) who identified the portrait of a lady now at Städelches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt (reproduced on the book cover) as being by Sebastiano.

The presence of Giulia in the Spanish court of Naples was not as invisible and discreet as her lifestyle might suggest. When Charles V formally entered the city in December 1535 after the battle of Tunis, Ercole Gonzaga asked her to greet Charles on behalf of her entire family. Nevertheless, she did not get along well with Pedro of Toledo, the viceroy of Naples, primarily on account of her connections with Maria d'Avalos of Aragon, marchioness del Vasto, whom Giulia affectionately nicknamed "the Dragon" (*la Draga*). When the Inquisition raised a repressive wave in Naples between 1552 and 1553, Giulia understood immediately with great political acuteness that the fury against her was stoked by the vice-royal court (172–73).

Dying before the Valdesian circle experienced the most intransigent side of the Inquisition, Giulia avoided being investigated and sentenced. Her friend Carnesecchi was not as fortunate. Giulia believed that any accusation could be defended with the help of her aristocratic connections, but she was merely deluding herself. Her naïveté shows in her use of very simple coded language in her correspondence and in the fact that she did not destroy Carnesecchi's letters. In 1567, only one year after her death, the Inquisition seized her letters and used them to prove Carnesecchi's guilt.

This new volume on Giulia Gonzaga examines the networks she created around herself; in so doing, it sheds new light on a chapter of Italian history when great intellectual and religious fervour was about to fall victim to the most severe orthodoxy.

JOHNNY L. BERTOLIO
University of Toronto