Hamlet's Ghost

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Vespasiano Gonzaga and his Ideal City

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7830-8
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7830-2

Our entire linear and accumulative culture would collapse if we could not stockpile the past in plain view. To this end the Pharaohs must be brought out of their tombs, and the mummies out of their silence.

—Jean Baudrillard

It's good to have undeclared, unrecognized pathologies and mental illnesses in your stories. The countryside is full of undeclared pathologies. Unlike in the urban setting, there, mental affliction goes unrecognized.

—W. G. Sebald

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PREFACE

During the sixteenth century, Italy found itself heaving a collective sigh of relief after years of unending conflict. On the one hand, the century before had delivered unprecedented gains in terms of its reborn artistic and cultural life; on the other, the old political disjuncture and division remained ever present. The Papacy, the Spanish Crown, and the ambitions of France continued to war over the body politic of Italy's city states to the detriment of stability and common cause. No other country in Europe was so divided; and men of good intent, whether they were podesta, duke or pope, found it difficult to manage provincial conceits, wilful ambition or soldierly braggadocio, and so engage in developing a reasonably settled civic life. It is no wonder that the *condottiere*, or soldier of fortune, became a symbol of money and power in those years. The sword, it seems, had become the arbiter of law and fortune.

It is a tribute, therefore, that a man such as Vespasiano Gonzaga, Duke of Sabbioneta, Fondi and Traetto, was able to find a way to negotiate these shoals and so fashion himself into a true *uomo universale*, or "universal man," as we shall see. That he did so as a minor duke of the Renaissance while contending with king, emperor and the designs of his own family politically suggests that he possessed both diplomatic skills of no mean order, as well as an essentially good and balanced character. He was no courtier in the mould of Baldassare Castiglione's creation, but rather the prefigurement of a new type of man, more suited to our time than to his own. Unlike most men of his age, Vespasiano Gonzaga allowed his cultural and artistic interests as much as his diplomatic ability to determine the kind of life he wished to live. He wanted, it is true, to make of himself a Promethean figure, even if his age and his personal limitations precluded the realization of such an endeavour.

I became interested in the Duke after a visit to his miniature city of Sabbioneta, near Mantua, in the spring of 2002. I had gone there to investigate the city as the representation of a so-called *Citta ideale*, or ideal city, as depicted in a remarkable painting popularly attributed to Piero della Francesca that I had viewed in the Ducal Palace in Urbino. Men of the Renaissance, I soon learnt, became fascinated with the concept of reinventing urban space in a more considered way, free from the disorder, the gloom and the agglomeration of the medieval town, where people often lived in poverty and squalor. Their vision was to create a more ordered environment of streets and avenues, elegant houses and public squares, where men might begin to build enduring civic institutions for the future. Vespasiano Gonzaga was just such a man.

His city, which was often referred to as his "Piccola Athene," became an embodiment not only of his desire to recreate the idea of Roman order in public space, but also of himself. Vespasiano Gonzaga became the first man in history to want to oversee the construction of a city as a whole, designed and realized through a deliberate act of his own imagination, as the home to a body of institutions and edicts that were personally initiated by himself. Sabbioneta thus became a reflection of himself—a successful soldier, a knowledgeable fortifications expert, a minor poet, philosopher and aesthete, a bibliophile and an advisor to kings throughout Europe, as well as a man who suffered from an incurable disease for most of his life.

If I were to do justice to Vespasiano Gonzaga's life, then I would have to go beyond his more obvious traits as a celebrated man of his time or his achievements as a loyal servant to King Philip of Spain. To do so, it would be necessary to delve into his troubled relationships with certain members of his family, and his obsessive regard for his class and public persona, if ever I was to uncover the man who lay beneath the surface of history. It became evident as I walked the streets of his remarkable city, read his letters, and studied his dealings with those whom he knew, that I was in the presence of a man burdened with more than his fair share of guilt and regret. Weighing up the expectations that others had of him against the limitations of his character became the balancing act that Vespasiano Gonzaga performed throughout his life. It bestowed upon him significant honours and admiration as well his fair share of tragedy.

Indeed, Shakespeare knew of the Duke, we shall discover, through Stefano Guazzo's book of courtly manners, *The Civil Conversation*, published in 1574 in Italian, and translated a few years later into English. The words and aphorisms contained in this book would find their way into more than one of the Bard's plays, in particular that of *Hamlet*. Vespasiano

Gonzaga, it will be argued, unknowingly helped Shakespeare to fashion aspects of Hamlet's character by way of a dinner that he attended in Casale Monferrato in 1567, shortly after the death of his second wife. The Duke of Denmark, and possibly even Othello, as well as the Duke of Sabbioneta, found themselves sharing many traits in common, as we shall see. By a strange twist of fate, Vespasiano Gonzaga became, in part, the ghost of Hamlet, the words he uttered one evening in Casale entering English literature by the back door. In so doing, the Duke and his life experience help us to understand the transition to a more modern sensibility among late Renaissance men that occurred around this time.

During the years of research and field study I undertook in pursuit of learning more about the man, I grew to recognize the extent of my task. The historical details of Vespasiano's life were not hard to uncover, given that Italian historians have written a number of biographies since the time of his death. All of them paint a portrait of a remarkable man who moved easily through his world. His travels, his service to the Spanish Crown, his interests in art and architecture—these were readily in evidence. What were less evident in these portrayals of Vespasiano Gonzaga, however, were the more unsavoury aspects of his life. These, of course, were alluded to in passing by historians, but always with the sense that they constituted fairly normal behaviour in the context of a some-one of his position and class. He was never condemned, nor was he excused—his life was of a piece, and therefore seamless in its intent.

This was not the man that I came to know. My initial reserve about his behaviour in regard to the death of certain members of his family was soon tempered by my understanding of his troubled state of mind, and of the forces of convention to which he ascribed. Here was a person who lived through the political discord of his age, managed its effects, and put together a vision of his city that would stand the test of time, even as he struggled with the symptoms of continuing ill health. Sabbioneta became a reflection of his own private, often painful world spread across a larger canvas made up of the ever-shifting currents of international politics, the changing nature of post-medieval society, the enormous growth in knowledge among Italy's philosophers and Europe's scientists and thinkers, as well as the recent discovery of the New World of the Americas by Christopher Columbus. Europe, and so its inhabitants, was no longer a continent looking towards the Levant and the East as it had done ever since the time of the Roman Empire; now it was turning its gaze towards the west. Gold, slaves, tobacco, and potatoes were the new currency of mercantile European cities from Antwerp to Cadiz; and Vespasiano

Gonzaga found himself having to deal with the changing strategic alignments that came as a result.

Vespasiano Gonzaga may not have contributed greatly to the curve of historical events, but he did find himself participating in them as a knowledgeable and often astute observer. He paved the way for a new vision of how men might live in the future. Under his influence, the architecturally designed city became a reality, not a theoretical construct. He, not Alexander the Great or Emperor Hadrian—both city builders in their own ways—made it possible for town planners of the future to fashion civic space as a habitable unit that would allow for growth and cultural enhancement, as well as successful mercantile and manufacturing activity on a broader scale.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the city was to become more than merely a fortified retreat for its residents as it had been in the past; now it was to be a place where men began to live to their full potential as urban dwellers, bankers, artisans and creative individuals. As small as it was, Sabbioneta became the prototype for the future of city living. It was not a metropolis as such, but it did possess the seed of all the modern cities of the world.

Vespasiano Gonzaga's life teaches us to be wary of the heroic postures of many late Renaissance figures. Modern scholarship suggests that we should no longer accept how people saw themselves in the past; rather, that we try to reconstruct them as real people as far as it is possible. The argument that such men lived and thought differently five hundred years is only partly true. Vespasiano himself wrote many letters that indicate a tough bureaucratic mind, a respect for friendship and learning, and an understanding of politics that was modern in its tenor. They also reflect a man who enjoyed art for its own sake, who was cognizant with the emerging challenges that the new science had to offer, and who read widely. As a model humanist, a so-called *uomo universale*, he would have felt comfortable in the company of humanists of our own time, men such as Aldous Huxley or Harold Bloom. He saw the world as his stage, even if he acknowledged that he was no more than one of its lesser-known actors.

Vespasiano Gonzaga lived on the cusp of the modern; he looked back to the values of his medieval past even as he began to explore the emerging world of science and the secular humanities. He found himself oscillating between these two worlds throughout his life-time, unable to make up his mind to which one he belonged. His life perfectly reflects the changing expectations that late-Renaissance men found themselves engaged in, whether they liked it or not. The time-honoured value systems

based upon the relationship between church and state that had held medieval society together until the early part of the fifteenth century were no longer appropriate to the new outwardness and curiosity of men who had begun to live their lives as successful merchants and bankers, as well as humanists and scientists, rather than as Vatican aspirants and clerics.

This is the story of one man who lived through these changing times, while at the same time dreaming of building a perfect city that reflected who he saw himself to be and how he stood in the wider world. It is also the story of how he dealt with his personal circumstances against the backdrop of personal tragedy. Accompanying the author on this journey, the reader will be able to enter a remarkable city, enjoy its palaces, its palazzos and its theatre, and experience what it is like to create such a perfect urban space as Sabbioneta. The planners of Brasilia, Canberra, Versailles, New York and Washington all owe the Duke a great debt. He believed that urban man needed to take control of his living environment and so build civic spaces that would enhance the quality of our lives. Vespasiano foresaw the future of the city as being more than a place of fortified security; it was to be the centre of a new way of thinking for all men, rather than the few.

PART 1

THE IDEAL CITY

1

A Body of Evidence

In the provincial city of Sabbioneta in central Italy, under the careful eye of Dr Domenico Pirotti, a team of workmen finally excavated a passage under the floor of the Church of the Incoronata. They had been working for some days in an attempt to uncover the tomb of Vespasiano Gonzaga, a minor hereditary duke of the sixteenth century. No one knew what they might find down there. An elaborate catafalque, perhaps? The warm days of that summer in 1988 had sapped the workmen's energy, and progress was slow. Nonetheless, in the presence of the usual group of officials that gather on such occasions, an opening was made into the tomb. The moment had arrived to disturb the Duke's centuries-old repose. His remains were about to reveal new information about the death of one of Italy's most unlikely adventurers, a ducal dreamer who had set out to build his own miniature kingdom in the middle of Italy.

What they discovered, instead of the expected skeleton of the Duke robed in vestments, complete with his symbols of office, were the remains of not one but five bodies. These had suffered some disturbance due to water seeping into the tomb over the centuries from outlying floods, and they now lay in disarray on the floor of the tomb as little more than a mingled familial presence, as if they had been washed up on some remote beach. Here was Vespasiano Gonzaga, the first Duke of Sabbioneta, Count of Fondi and of Rodrigo, Guastalla, and Sabbioneta, some of his various fiefdoms located on the Lombardy plain. He lay there among the litter of centuries, his bones testifying to a life lived in the afterglow of an age when men sought to exceed themselves in battle, in learning, and in the pursuit of that most prized of all attributes—the cultivated personality. To the investigators gazing into the tomb that day the irony of his predicament was not lost. As a representative of the so-called *uomo universale* so much admired by men of the Renaissance, Vespasiano Gonzaga's bid to resuscitate the classical spirit of Greece and Rome had not gained him the immortality he had desired. The finger of the deity that gave life to the dead had passed him by.

Four skulls were exhumed and carefully placed in a wooden box that day, and on them were bestowed the scientific designations of T1, T2, T3 and T4. Anonymity was not at issue. In time, the skulls would reveal their identities in the laboratories of Parma and Pisa where further tests were conducted. But it was T1 that staked its claim to notoriety. Lying in the earth beside the skull was a gold broach depicting a sheepskin suspended from a collar of alternate fire-steels and flint, each emitting flames. As a heraldic image, it was arresting. The curved horns of the ram, its feet protruding from the folds of a shaggy fleece, depicted the insignia of that most ancient Order of the Golden Fleece awarded to Vespasiano Gonzaga by King Philip II of Spain in 1585. The Duke had chosen to be buried with this sacred artefact around his neck, knowing full well that the order should have been relinquished at his death in accordance with the imperial edict. Even after death, it seems, the Duke had insisted on remaining his own man.

Tests subsequently confirmed that the skull belonged to a person aged between 55 and 60. Since Vespasiano Gonzaga was born in 1531 and passed away in 1591, there was evident correlation. Furthermore, a hole in the cranium indicated that a crude form of trepanning had been performed at some time—the Duke underwent such a trepanning operation in 1571 in an attempt to relieve intolerable headaches caused by syphilis. T1 possessed an identity after all. The Duke of Sabbioneta had lain in his tomb for nearly four hundred years, along with his beloved Order of the Golden Fleece, forever burdened with an incurable malady contracted in his youth.

There were also three other skulls to identify, along with the headless skeleton of a fifth body likely to be that of his grandfather, Ludovico Gonzaga. These turned out to belong to other members of the Duke's family, all of whom had pre-deceased him. One of them belonged to his second wife, Anna of Aragon, the daughter of Alfonso of Aragon, Duke of Segovia, and cousin to King Philip II. She had died a few years after their marriage in 1564 from an illness said to be tuberculosis.[1] Another skull belonged to Luigi Gonzaga, Vespasiano's only son by Anna, who had died at the age of fourteen. The third skull belonged to an infant, probably that of Giulia, a twin daughter born to Anna in 1565 who had passed away shortly after birth. It appears the Duke had been buried beside members of

[1] *Gli scienziati ridanno il volto a Vespasiano Gonzaga* (Sabbioneta: Teatro ll'Antoica, 2011).

his immediate family, each, in one way or another, blighted by tragedy and the inescapable afflictions of their age.[2]

This was not unusual. The sixteenth century had been crowded with despots eager to carve out a name, just as their predecessors such as the Medicis, Sforzas, and Malatestas, had done during the Quattrocento. It was an age often stained by dynastic illegitimacy as ambitious men sought to impose themselves upon their subjects along with all the rights and privileges of a self-made aristocracy. To achieve their aims these men eliminated the remnants of the old feudal families, using every means at their disposal. Assassination, murder, poisoning, imprisonment, exile, and war were the usual methods by which they exercised their authority. They were men on a mission to bring to fruition the reign of a more enlivened aristocracy based upon ability, duplicity, and vision. They wanted to celebrate the idea of what Aeneas Sylvius, later Pope Pius II, called "the man of fortune." "In our change-loving Italy," he remarked, "where nothing stands firm, and where no dynasty exists, a servant can easily become a king." The *condottiere*, not the saint, had become the new hero of the age.

What was it that made Vespasiano Gonzaga any different from his contemporaries, we might ask? He neither possessed a large kingdom, nor was he more than any one of many self-proclaimed nobles competing with one another for supremacy in Italy. He came from a long line of established families, it is true. The Gonzaga dynasty traced its origins back to the fourteenth century when, after a fierce struggle, Luigi I (1271–1360) supplanted his brother-in-law Rinaldo Bonacolsi as lord of Mantua in 1328. On his mother's side he was linked to the Colonna family, a baronial dynasty of the tenth century whose name figured prominently in the annals of Rome as the so-called black nobles and dukes of the church. The family owned estates in and around Fondi near Naples, as well as outside Rome. But he was no more than the offspring of a cadet branch of either family, and so a minor luminary in the skies of Neapolitan and Lombard politics. In reality, Vespasiano Gonzaga was the stuff that courtiers were made of—those well-to-do young men that congregated in provincial courts throughout Italy at the behest of their lord, often with a copy of Castiglione's influential little book on palace manners, *The Book of the Courtier*,

[2] F. Mallegni, E. Bedini & G. Fornaciare, *Analisi dei reperti umani, in La tomba di Vespasiano Gonzaga* (Sabbioneta: Passo d'Uomo, 1991).

under their arm. That the Duke chose the life of a condottiere instead of becoming a courtier is a tribute to his energy and his ambition.[3]

But this is to telegraph his story. I had become interested in the man principally because of his desire to build a *Città ideale*, an ideal city. My first encounter with such a concept came after a visit to Urbino in the Marche of Italy in 1996. There, in the Ducal Palace built by the greatest of all the condottieri, Duke Federico di Montefeltro, known to us through his portrait by Piero della Francesca in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, I discovered another painting, also attributed to Piero.[4] Whatever its origins, the painting made a powerful impression. The buildings, the colonnades, the elegantly constructed loggia and balconies—all these pointed to an idea of urban planning made popular during the sixteenth century. On closer inspection, however, the painting suggested more to me—it indicated the reconstitution of the mind, of thought itself, in a way that suggested a new understanding of humanity.

I left Urbino that day intent on exploring what had inspired men like Piero, or indeed architects such as Luciano Lausana and Leon Battista Alberti, to want to build such rigorous examples of urban life. Were they dissatisfied with the maze of streets that dominated medieval cities like Florence or Naples? Did they feel that living in the proximity of the straight line might be preferable to inhabiting the mystery and prescience of the curve? Such questions appeared to have been built into the very foundations and walls of Piero's ideal city. It seemed that Vespasiano

[3] Baldassare Castiglione was related to Vespasiano Gonzaga; his mother was a member of the Gonzaga family of Mantua.

[4] This has been contested. Certain authorities believe that Luciano Lausana (1420–79), the chief court architect in Urbino at the time of Federico, painted the picture as part of his attempt to re-create Urbino as an ideal city, one of the most ambitious and successful at that time. It remains true that Piero, though suffering from ill health towards the end of his life and not readily able to paint, was nonetheless deeply interested in the mathematical/perspectival theories that were ultimately translated into the visual concept of the *Citta ideale* we see in Urbino today. One of his treatises, *De Prospectiva pingindi,* contained a detailed analysis of the theoretical and scientific foundations of what he called "pictorial culture," as embodied in the painting. Recent x-ray and reflectograph work by Professor Maurizio Saracen now suggests that the painting is not by della Francesca or Lausana as assumed, but by Leon Battista Alberti, a well-known architect and theorist of the fifteenth century. It could be, however, that the drawing was coloured and enhanced by others (Corriere della Sera, *Last Secret Revealed*, February 18, 2015). It has also been attributed to Francesco di Giorgio Martini, who worked as an architect for Federico da Montefeltro.

Gonzaga, and Piero della Francesca himself, were linked by more than the exigencies of the ideal—they were men who wanted to fashion a model that was in stark contrast to an age embroiled in both political and spiritual unrest.

Piero della Francesca's painting revealed another side to the Renaissance artist, and his attempt to create the perfect city. It represented a desire to create an urban space where people appeared to no longer exist. Did the sight of ruined temples in the Palatine in Rome devoid of settlement inspire such a dream? For artists eager to recreate antiquity, as well as men like Vespasiano Gonzaga, the prospect of denuding townships of their inhabitants across the land, along with their age-old animosities, in order to repopulate them with a few chosen and enlightened people, all this must have seemed extremely attractive. The re-ordering of society was not confined to streets and buildings; rather, it was a desire on the part of humanists and philosophers living throughout Italy to deal with the worn-out feudal constraints of the day.

The political disorder, internecine warfare, the lack of civic honesty, and the flagrant disregard for law and equity—such were the hallmarks of contemporary life. No wonder men like Vespasiano Gonzaga chose to build an ideal city; it was their way of sending a message to the ruling powers of the pressing need to initiate a revolutionary political and social agenda. Though the future did indeed beckon during those brilliant days of the Quattrocento, it appears that most despots, feudal overlords and papal authorities, were incapable of understanding how it might be realized.

Vespasiano Gonzaga proved himself to be a lesser player in this drama. His ambition, however, accorded with the spirit of his age. Choosing to build his ideal city on the Po Plain in the vicinity of an ancient rocca (hunting lodge) a few miles from Mantua clearly indicated his desire to play at least some small part in the renovation of his age. All the talk of humanists, and all the elaborate plans drawn up by armchair architects, meant very little unless their insights were put into action. In spite of his obligation to conduct military campaigns on behalf of King Philip II of Spain throughout most of his life, Vespasiano was more than simply an itinerant warlord; many of his thoughts and much of his income derived from being a soldier of fortune in the pay of the King were put into the construction of his beloved Sabbioneta.

Why a man should want to build a city from scratch is difficult to imagine. The city might have been a venerable concept for habitation, given its long history going as far back as Nimrod and Ur. But why the so-called *Formus Urbis Romae* should become the central archetype of

Vespasiano Gonzaga's life suggests some half-conscious belief on his part in the magical power of the *urbis* as his protective talisman. Perhaps he envisaged Sabbioneta as an echo of Plato's Fifth Book of Laws, or an example of Aristotle's theory on social stratification as outlined in his *Politics.* It is evident that Vespasiano wanted to make Sabbioneta into a place where he could wander at will amid a geometry and precision of his own making.

The Duke is of interest to us today not only because of the elegance of his self-creation, but because we can detect something in his demeanour that resists being contained solely by bricks and mortar. Gazing at his bronze statue, sculpted by Leone Leoni Aretino above his tomb in the Church of the Incoronata, we are able to see the figure of a self-styled Roman pro-consul dressed in full armour. Such a pose was derived from the Capitoline figure of Marcus Aurelius, and was popular with many sculptors, including Michelangelo. We observe in his statue a man ill-at-ease with himself and his age, drawn to and yet uncertain of the future. We also see a man reluctant to abandon the time-honoured securities of the past.

Leone Leoni Aretino had obviously thought long and hard before fashioning his statue of Vespasiano. He portrayed a man in the prime of life, muscled by war and the burden of authority. His neck and head are refined, not at all exaggerated in their suggestion of strength. His short-cropped, curly hair is modern in appearance; his beard and moustache cover his chin with a hint of ascetical fervour. A hooked nose and high forehead indicate his imperious nature. Only his eyes gaze out into the emptiness of the church, not cold but inward looking, suggesting the memory of some hidden anguish. In his statue, Vespasiano Gonzaga wanted to acknowledge to all that he was more than simply a man of action. In spite of his praetorial appearance, one senses a loneliness in his demeanour that intimates a failure in life, whether personal or otherwise. This is no ordinary portrait of a man who had ruled over his city as a condottiere bolstered by military successes in Italy, Spain, and Africa; it is of a man imprisoned by events of a more tragic nature, and of his own sense of retrospectivity as he looks back at an idealized past.

What had begun in my interest stimulated by Piero della Francesco's painting of the ideal city in Urbino now urged me to extend my inquiry. That empty ideal city of the Marche as depicted in his painting, with its careful geometry and presumption of classical order, suggested a longing for exactitude. It was a convenient camouflage for an age increasingly divorced from honest sentiment. Piero's painting depicts an urban

landscape that is entirely *emotionless.* Its careful attention to perspective has eaten up every ounce of human vitality. Those empty streets and that half-open doorway at its centre are signs that something is missing. It is as if men such as Vespasiano were prepared to dismiss their personal lives in order to create an ideal city as a place absorbed unto itself. One suspects that the *Città ideale* had been designed to defy the imagination altogether.

It had been a long journey from Urbino to Sabbioneta for me. From those pinnacles of snow in the Marche, I had driven north along the Tiber Valley to Lombardy to confront Vespasiano's dream city on the Po Plain. Yet these two regions would remain forever linked in my mind. Not only did Federico di Montefeltro city grant us Piero della Francesca's vision of the perfect city, but it was also home to Baldassare Castiglione's image of the perfect man.[5]

The ideal city and the *uomo universale* appeared to have originated in a jumble of streets in one of the remotest and most inhospitable regions of Italy, and was to remain forever linked with it. Urbino, of course, has also given us Raphael (who had known and painted Castiglione), the purest of all exponents of the Renaissance ideal. Beauty, order, and grace—these became the apogee of the Quattrocento, and so of a whole way of life. No wonder Vespasiano Gonzaga sought to emulate his heroes. He planned Sabbioneta to be his contribution to the restoration of classicism at a time when political impotency was at its most virulent.

Studying the bronze statue in the Church of the Incoronata more closely, I noticed other forces at work. It became clear that Leoni had made Michelangelo's figure of God from *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel the inspiration for his prototype. The pose adopted by Vespasiano was almost the same. The Duke had been made into a latter-day god, his left hand outstretched, dispensing justice. Vespasiano would have accepted this image of himself since the statue had earlier graced the square in front of his Ducal Palace in the years before his death.

Perhaps he had seen himself in the role of a secular prophet and guardian of *concinnitas*, the so-called "harmonious arrangement," that quality much sought after by artists and philosophers alike. The architect Lion Battista Alberti, (1404–72) insisted on the presence of *concinnitas* in all that he did, as did many others: "In the ordering of life, in ideas, projects and wonders, know how to hold to that mean which the

[5] Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529) lived in Urbino for 12 years until 1516, serving principally at the court of Duke Guidobaldo. It was during this time that he formulated his ideas about the perfect courtier and his role within court society.

Peripatetic advocated, so that there will be nothing wanting and nothing in excess, nothing that is not fitting." Roles were being reversed; the invisible world of the sacred was being overshadowed by the patently visible world of the ideal man.

The remnants of the five skeletons discovered in the tomb that day were thus the bones of a story yet to be told. Three premature deaths and a man afflicted with an incurable disease lying buried under the austere image of himself portrayed as a Roman pro-consul, that perfect symbol of stoicism and order, invited further questions. Had some terrible memory of an event stalked this family to their graves? Like Yorick's skull, T1's cranium remained silent on the issue. The more I contemplated Vespasiano's statue, the more I felt that I had stumbled upon a real-life tragedy. Whatever had happened to this man during his life, and the personal anguish that he might have suffered as a result of his own actions, were always going to be inseparable from a land at the mercy of internecine warfare, civil strife, and the ambitions of individual men. In a very real way Vespasiano Gonzaga's life was to become a litmus test of his age. Could he rise above corruption and family intrigue? Could he maintain the ideal of concinnity rather than succumb to excess himself?

These were some of the questions that sprung to mind whenever I considered this remarkable man. Sabbioneta became the Duke's ducal dream, the crowning achievement of his life. Every penny he had earned as a condottiere had gone into constructing its walls and public buildings. Nothing had been spared in bringing together the best architects and craftsmen of the day in an attempt to create a city that was to be the envy of his contemporaries. The Duke had been obsessed. He had wanted to make the city into a municipality of the mind, and to be buried here was to be interred in the soil of his own alter ego. For Vespasiano, Sabbioneta became less a city than a way of eradicating painful memories from his past, and therefore re-arranging space to conform to an idealized version of his life. Architecture had become the tool by which he might pursue a vision of paradise in this world.

My task was to see whether there might be a link between the glory of Sabbioneta as a civic achievement and the tragedy occasioned by his personal life. Did one contribute to the other? Could a *Città ideale* represent a refuge from political chaos? I kept thinking of Vespasiano's remains laying in their tomb alongside the pendant of the Order of the Golden Fleece. He had wanted to be buried with at least *something* in his hands that might help him to transcend his personal circumstance. He had wanted to hold onto a vision of excellence in his dying days, if only to

justify his past achievements. In pursuit of the ideal man, Vespasiano Gonzaga had chosen to give expression to a dream. The Golden Fleece was no easy acquisition; rather, it was a metaphor for a more otherworldly perspective that he had failed to recognize during the course of his life.

The issues were becoming more obvious. Firstly, I needed to be circumspect with the formal nature of history, except where it might serve as mortar to his story. The Duke must be allowed to emerge from the shadows of his city. Moreover, in the words of Castiglione, that chronicler of a self-conscious and mannered age, I had to believe that Vespasiano Gonzaga "was no senile mind at odds with the pleasures of life." He had been a man who wished to give shape and order to his existence, even if this meant sacrificing his own happiness.

The Duke had set out to embody himself in his city. By creating a *Città ideale* he sought to create a representation of the ideal man. This kind of projection reflected a spirit of grandeur that was normally the preserve of kings and tyrants. But Vespasiano Gonzaga was neither. He was a minor feudal lord interested in demonstrating a Machiavellian premise—that to found a republic, one must always be alone. It says a good deal about the aspirations of the ideal man, the *uomo universale*, during the Renaissance. Men like the Duke, who in their retreat from the communities of God and men, ended up creating a solitary individual of themselves. Society and the spirit had failed him. A corrupt church and a way of life bedevilled by provincial conceits made it impossible for him to live more than a partial life in thrall to obsequiousness and public display. Even he could not give up his need of titles and princely rewards, in spite of the modernity of his outlook. The acceptance of the Order of the Golden Fleece from King Philip was part of his feudal obligation to support the system as it stood.

Such was the man I had journeyed to Sabbioneta to investigate. Vespasiano Gonzaga had extended an invitation out of the silence of his tomb. Shifting boundaries were about to be crossed. I sensed that a long-dead duke wanted someone to understand his motives and the deep, violent, and ineffable nature of his story. In a sense, he wanted me to reconstruct his life and his city in order that we might learn what motivated men of his time to aspire to the attribute of being a true *uomo universale.*

2

A FAMILY AFFAIR

On December 6, 1531 the future Duke of Sabbioneta was born to Donna Isabella Colonna, the countess of Fondi and wife of Luigi "Rodomonte" Gonzaga, count of Rodrigo near Naples, and lord of Sabbioneta. It was an auspicious birth not only because young Vespasiano was heir apparent to the Colonna family estates in southern Italy, but also that his arrival served to strengthen the hereditary links between his mother's family and the equally respected house of Gonzaga in Mantua. In him, two great families were joined. The feudal ideal of cementing economic, political and family relationships into one strategic alliance was more than confirmed. Like a thoroughbred horse, he was the product of careful planning in the business of co-mingling bloodlines. Vespasiano Gonzaga's birth was no accident, even if his mother did happen to adore the gallant but ill-fated Rodomonte, and he her, as his poetry affirms.

His father was a man of action, a condottiere like so many of the nobility of his day. Born in 1500, he was already dead at the age of 32, less than a year after the birth of his son. Luigi Gonzaga was reputed to have been a man of considerable strength and courage, a giant and a soldier who earned his nickname "Rodomonte" ["the boaster"] fighting in Spain.[3] He was regarded by many as an incarnation of the legendary warrior Ciclio, as immortalized by Bioardo and Ariosto in their poetry.[1] For others he was the New David, and a truly Herculean figure. His motto intimates his temperament: *Sive bonnum sive malum, fama est.* Loosely translated it means: "whether good or bad, it doesn't matter." A friend of both King Charles of Spain and Henry VIII of England, Luigi Gonzaga cared little for the consequences of his actions so long as they reflected well on him. He was, quite simply, a man of fortune.

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[3] Or it may be that he was named after a character from Matteo Boiardo's romantic epic *Orlando inamorato.*

[1] *Orlando Furioso,* Ariosto. XXXVII. His marriage to Isabella was celebrated along with his military exploits as a panagria.

His sister, Giulia Gonzaga, saw him as the perfect match for the young and beautiful Isabella Colonna, her niece and stepdaughter through her own marriage to Vespasiano Colonna, count of Fondi and Duke of nearby Traietto. Aside from its obvious feudal implications, such a marriage brought together all the ingredients that Renaissance society loved. Strength, beauty, braggadocio as well as pedigree—these qualities made it possible for their respective coats-of-arms to dazzle both friend and foe alike whenever they were conjoined.

Their marriage was performed in secret in 1528, the very year that Giulia Gonzaga's husband died from a battle wound after a marriage that lasted barely two years. Secret marriages were not uncommon in those days, and mostly they were performed for political advantage or to escape unwanted arrangements made by others. Divulgence at the appropriate moment was considered to be an effective tool of political expediency.

Half way through that same year Luigi Gonzaga accompanied his army north, arriving at Sabbioneta in December in time to be by his mother's bedside at her death. Further family commitments were enacted with his uncle Pirro, who was in the throes of dying in nearby Gazzuolo, thus ensuring Luigi of the possession of his properties and inheritance. With these documents safely in hand, Luigi returned to Traetto near Fondi, where his marriage to Isabella was officially announced. Young Vespasiano was born soon after amid communal celebrations, but he was never to know his father. Ordered north by the pope to defend Rome from attack by the Orsini faction in 1532, Luigi suffered a mortal wound in an assault on Vicovaro and died as a result. His wife, the young Isabella, was heart-broken, even if their relationship was said to have been somewhat turbulent.[2]

Luigi's father, Ludovico Gonzaga, Vespasiano's grandfather, was deeply saddened by the loss of his brave but foolhardy son. He immediately requested that his grandson be brought to him and placed in the bosom of the family. In part, Isabella's visit north to Lombardy was precipitated by the fear of pirate raids along the southern coast near Fondi. In June 1533 little Vespasiano accompanied his mother to Gazzuolo where they were welcomed by the court during a lamp-lit procession through the streets. The joy, at least from Isabella's point of view, was short-lived. After a series of disagreements with her husband's cousins, Ercole and Ferrante Gonzaga, in part caused by her lavish lifestyle and desire to

[2] Not only was Luigi a fine soldier but also a passable poet. His relationship with Isabella found expression in some moving lines of love before he died.

overtax her poor subjects, she suddenly decided to quit the nearby town of Rivarolo Fuori where she had been living, and return south. Her flight may well have been precipitated by the fear that her son might be taken from her to ensure Gonzaga dynastic ambitions.

Back home once more, either in Traetto or Abruzzi where she owned two duchies, she sought refuge with her stepmother, Giulia, in nearby Fondi. It was a homecoming that would have far-reaching implications. Young Vespasiano soon found himself to be the child of two strong-willed guardians, his mother and his aunt. He was to be adored by two women—one famed for her beauty and intelligence, the other for her lavish lifestyle. Both, however, had one thing in common—the premature loss of their husbands under unhappy circumstances.

Finally it was his aunt Giulia Gonzaga, countess of Fondi, who would become his surrogate mother and confidant. Her claim was bolstered by a prenuptial agreement that insisted on the child remaining a Gonzaga if Isabella should ever remarry. In spite of Isabella's reluctance, she finally acquiesced and handed the child over to Giulia when he was little more than four years old, in the interest of her future marriage prospects.

It is important to understand the web of family relationships into which Vespasiano was born. He was no ordinary son of a soldier, but an unwitting pawn in the forging of feudal allegiances. The child was never going to grow up and take his place in the world based upon abilities alone. Other forces were at work that would determine the life he must lead. Even at his birth, his aunt Giulia had time to jot down a note to the duchess of Mantua announcing the importance of the event: "At this hour the Lord has blessed us with a male child born of the Lady Donna Isabella. And with the conviction that you will be well pleased. I hasten to inform you at once that you have gained another servant. Labour commenced at the tenth hour last night. On the Tuesday, continued into Wednesday, the sixth of the present month, and terminated at the fourteenth hour." With respect to this auspicious moment she appended some words by Juvenal: "Disfat enim quae sydera te excipient" ["It all depends upon which stars shall become you when you emerge all bloody from your mother's womb"]. Even at birth Vespasiano's future was accorded celestial significance. Or it may be that his aunt wished to make him her lucky star.[3]

[3] According to his biographer Luca Sarzi Amade, Vespasiano was born with a rare congenital disorder known as polychordism—that is, the possession of three testicles (*Il Duca di Sabbioneta*, 24). There are fewer than two hundred cases of

As sole heir to the Colonna fortune, there was little chance that young Vespasiano might be raised at the Gonzaga court in Gazzuolo. In any event, the Pope had intervened. He had no wish to see the Colonna family weakened, as this would play into the hands of the Orsini family with whom he had only recently been at war. Some years earlier Giulia requested the intercession of the Pope on her behalf to facilitate the marriage between her brother Luigi and her stepdaughter, Isabella. She did so with the intention of establishing a direct link between the Colonna and the Gonzaga families. Moreover, there were other issues among the Colonnas that needed her attention.

After Vespasiano's birth, Giulia asked Pope Clement to ensure that he be placed in her care so that the Colonna lands in the south might be protected from the threat of disinheritance. She also requested that she be allowed to educate him in accordance with her brother's wish. Her father-in-law, Fabrizio Colonna, the Grand Constable of Naples, was anxious not to lose their lands to the Gonzagas should Vespasiano throw in his lot with his northern relatives. In these matters, Giulia was nothing if not a consummate diplomat in the business of balancing the many feudal demands calling for her judgment. Vespasiano, it seems, had to be fashioned into a gem worthy of the crowns of both houses, the Gonzagas and the Colonnas.

One wonders how Donna Isabella felt about all this. It is unlikely that she willingly relinquished her son in the interest of family obligations, but she did so nonetheless. One wonders, too, whether her stepmother Giulia Gonzaga desired to have a son of her own, and her nephew became the perfect substitute. One can sense powerful female emotions at work here that are not detailed in the annals of the period. Giulia's brief marriage to the ailing Vespasiano Colonna, Isabella's father by an earlier marriage, as well as the son of Fabrizio Colonna, had not yielded the heir for which they had so fervently hoped. In the end, it was Isabella's young son upon whom the future of the Colonna family rested. All effort was made to ensure that he remain at heart a Colonna, thereby protecting their inheritance. It appears that one false move might bring the family dynasty crashing down like a pack of cards. Such were the complications of matrimony in this most pragmatic and cynical age.

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this disorder recorded in medical literature. It can cause infertility, though in Vespasiano's case this seems not to have been the case. Nonetheless, it may well have caused him to feel different to other men and so contribute to his isolation emotionally. This observation has been contested by other authorities, however.

In 1535 Isabella decided to remarry, this time to the Duke of Sulmona, Filippo di Lannoy, thereby losing her right of succession to Fondi. Giulia had arranged this marriage as well, in part to ensure that her brother's will might be respected—namely, that on his wife's remarriage, the education of her son Vespasiano, which formally commenced in 1540, should become her sole responsibility. Initially, Isabella fought against the arrangement, but in the end family pressure and dowry commitments made her situation impossible. Reluctantly, as has already been noted, she formally gave up her son into Giulia's care when he was around five years old. Isabella later went on to have three more children, Vespasiano's two half-brothers and a sister, by Filippo di Lannoy, before his death in 1553.

Though she corresponded with Giulia with regard to her son's welfare over the years, there were few opportunities for Isabella to visit and hold him in her arms, as Giulia had already gone to live in Naples. There are suggestions that both women were constantly at loggerheads over the upbringing of Vespasiano. The boy would thus have tended to see his mother through his aunt's eyes, pressing her for information whenever a letter arrived from Sulmona or Traetto. One can almost picture Vespasiano running across the courtyard of the palace at Fondi, or later in Naples where he now lived in a house beside the monastery of San Francesco, calling to his aunt: "*Zia,* how is mamma? Does she send me kisses?" whenever a letter was held up to an open window by Giulia. This is conjecture; but one must try to envisage the mental state of a child who had all but lost both parents to the demands of war and family obligation.

He has lost a mother and gained an aunt in her stead. She had become only an occasional presence in his life from hereon, and he may well have mourned this loss for the rest of his life.[4] Isabella gave up her son, reluctantly one suspects, in order that she might remarry. The withdrawal of his mother's love may well have contributed to his incapacity to display real affection later in life, particularly in relation to Diana of Cardona.[5] Isabella's distance from him was both physical and emotional. Though he was not a lonely or unwanted child in his early years—far from it. With the doting Donna Giulia, herself childless, overseeing his education as

[4] See *The Dead Mother. The Work of Andre Green.* 'The Greening of Psychoanalysis', an interview with Andre Green. Andre Green: "I wouldn't say that … the dead mother is one situation in which it is not so much the absence which comes into play, but really the presence with an absent mother."

[5] Andre Green, *On Private Madness* (London: Karnac Classics, 1997), 155.

well as his every whim, the young man was well cared for, and indeed cosseted.

Giulia Gonzaga possessed many extraordinary attributes. Praised by poets throughout Italy for her beauty and intelligence, she was one of those rare women that impose themselves upon history without in any obvious way participating in it. One must try to see her as contemporary artists such as Titian or Sebastiano del Piombo portrayed her. She is graced with a clear gaze and elegant nose. Her lips are discreetly closed. She wears an ermine-braided cloak joined by a gold clasp and chain that partly conceals her figure. Her left hand is placed on a book, a symbol of her intellectual interests. Her carriage is upright yet feminine. One sees immediately that she is conscious of her reputation as a woman of beauty and discretion. It is easy to observe the master diplomat at work, given this high sense of self-possession radiating from her gaze.

Regal, perhaps? Not quite. There is a luminous intelligence at work rather than any display of excessive hauteur. She stands apart from any stain of unruly passion or the need to engage in clandestine liaisons. One marriage, one love; after the death of her husband, Vespasiano Colonna, her loving cup could never again be refilled, except for a few brief years by the brilliant Cardinal Ippolito d'Medici, a man of subtle intelligence, who died in 1535 at the age of twenty four, possibly by poison. It is known that he corresponded with Giulia, and visited her often in Fondi.

Clearly, theirs was a deep attachment. After his death, Giulia resolved to give up any intention of living a normal married life. Instead, she set her mind to cultivating various artistic and intellectual pursuits at her court in Fondi, and later in Naples at the monastery of San Francesco, where she retired to live in a private apartment. Giulia Gonzaga was a true Renaissance princess, a lady richly endowed, the most perfect act of self-actualization possible in this age of personal aggrandizement. No wonder she was considered to be a worthy catch for the Ottoman admiral Barbarossa. Her presence, should she have been captured, would have been as if to surrender to the Serai in Istanbul a munificent but untouchable work of art.

Her pedigree was impressive. Daughter of Ludovico Gonzaga and Francesca Fieschi, as well as a distant relative to King Charles V of Spain, she had been espoused to Vespasiano Colonna at an early age. This would account for her interest in the fortunes of the Gonzaga family and her desire to link theirs with the Colonnas. Her reputation as a beauty was more than confirmed by a brazen attempt on the part of Admiral Kair-el-Din Barbarossa to carry her off as a prize to Sultan Suleiman's harem in