BY HER EXAMPLE: EXEMPLARY WOMANHOOD AND FEMALE HOMOSOCIALITY IN THE MATRONAGE OF ISABELLA D'ESTE AND ELEONORA DI TOLEDO

by

Bianca Rawlings
A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of George Mason University in Partial Fulfillment of The Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts Art History

Committee:

[Signatures]

Director

Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Bianca Rawlings
Bachelor of Fine Arts
Old Dominion University, 2013

Director: Angela Ho, Professor
Department of Art History

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mother, Viola Reid, after years of support and unconditional love.
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I would like to thank my partner, Sam Alarid, my father, Robert “Pop” Reid, and my uncles, Kiminey and Tony Reid for all of their support throughout my academic career and over the course of this project. I would also like to thank my thesis committee and the professors at George Mason University for all of their help and for providing me with such a nurturing and empowering environment. I am also grateful to Dr. Anne Muraoka, Abigail Johnson, and Lauran Henderson for their unwavering faith in me, without which I could never have gotten this far.
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ABSTRACT

BY HER EXAMPLE: EXEMPLARY WOMANHOOD AND FEMALE HOMOSOCIALITY IN THE MATRONAGE OF ISABELLA D'ESTE AND ELEONORA DI TOLEDO

Bianca Rawlings, M.A.

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Dr. Angela Ho

This thesis considers subjects of exemplary women and female homosociality in the sixteenth-century matronage and networks of Isabella d'Este, marchesa of Mantua, and Eleonora di Toledo, duchess of Florence. Themes of female kinship and agency in the commissions of both elite women allow for an expanded discussion of female matronage networks which have so far been overshadowed by discourse on networks of male patronage. Through Jonathan Nelson and Richard Zeckhauser’s economic model of “game theory” and the theory of “signaling,” this thesis examines the connections between the self-promotion of elite women and how themes of agency and homosociality fed into methods of signaling status and forming one’s public persona. Moreover, this thesis seeks to establish a working definition for the term “matronage” as part of an effort to effectively convey the complexities of female self-promotion and the homosociality present within the networks of elite women.
INTRODUCTION

Patronage in sixteenth century Renaissance Italy functioned, in part, as a demonstration of power and status. Michael Baxandall cites the importance of the patron’s role in art-making concisely in a single sentence – perhaps the most quoted by art historians when considering patronage: “In the fifteenth century, painting was still too important to be left to the painters.”¹ This rang true even in the sixteenth century. Many patrons were careful in specifying the figures and iconography present in the works they commissioned. They were equally careful when monitoring how such works could be read by an ambivalent and diverse audience. Recent scholarship has given a considerable amount of attention to women and their patronage – previously overlooked or ignored – and how women from different walks of life used patronage either alongside, or separately from, their male counterparts.

This thesis will explore how Isabella d’Este, marchesa of Mantua, and Eleonora di Toledo, duchess of Florence, utilized the image of the exemplary woman and referenced female homosocial networks in their patronage. The goal of this analysis is to draw connections between imagery referencing these themes, and the self-promotion of elite female patrons. Female patronage relied on themes of female agency, virtue, and kinship.

It was sustained by the support of female networks and in turn, those networks benefited greatly from matronage. Examining the commissions of Isabella and Eleonora through Jonathan K. Nelson and Richard J. Zeckhauser’s economic model of “game theory” and the theory of “signaling”, I will discuss how both women cultivated their personas and formed identities that both challenged and acknowledged the traditional gender roles defined within their society while also promoting female competence and homosociality. Moreover, I will establish a working definition for the term “matronage,” to encompass the differences between female patronage and male patronage and also to better contextualize female networks of matronage. Matronage relied on themes of female agency and kinship, as well as the support of female networks and in turn, those networks benefited greatly from matronage.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first, “Gendered Patronage”, will lay down the framework for this analysis, examining patronage and its role in defining a patron’s social or religious status, as well as the differences between male patronage and female patronage. This chapter comprises three sub-sections: the first focuses on how Nelson and Zeckhauser’s model of “game theory” and the concept of “signaling” can help elucidate the risks and benefits of patronage. The second will deal with patronage as a means of establishing networks and forming relationships, as well how elite female patrons followed and at times deviated from similar paradigms. The third will establish a

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After I have given the working definition for “matronage,” I will then apply the term throughout the thesis. The discrepancy between matronage and patronage will be addressed in the first chapter.
working definition for the word “matronage”, a loaded term adopted by numerous individuals, myself included, when discussing female patronage.

The second chapter, “Identity and Iconography”, begins my discussion of self-promotion through matronage and how it worked with imagery that promoted female kinship and women’s capabilities as a group. I will examine women as exempla and women’s shared influence with each other. Female exempla proved to be a driving force behind the primary iconography of matronage. Identifying oneself, or being identified as an exemplary woman worked in tandem with the thin line women had to walk along to guarantee a positive response from potential audiences. I will consider the archetype of the exemplary woman and how women used it to promote themselves. By relating herself to another woman of power and piety, a female patron drew associations between herself and her forerunner. The goal of this section is to suggest that, regardless of whether or not Isabella and Eleonora considered themselves as part of a community of powerful female patrons, they certainly acknowledged themselves as a community of exemplary woman, and used this community to further their political and social goals. This suggestion will lead into my final section.

The third chapter, “Building Bridges”, will address communities of women and the breaching of the boundaries between what had been considered “separate spheres”. This chapter is split into two sections: one discusses the notion of “separate spheres”.

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3 These “separate spheres” will be explored at length later. Until recently, there has been a general consensus among scholars that the lives and experiences of women of the court were distinctly separate from those of women in religious sororities, and further from those of semi-religious laywomen. I would contend that there was certainly a breach of these spheres, and necessarily so. See: Sally Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua Matrons, Mystics and Monasteries*, (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012)
through an analysis of Eleonora’s monastery. The second will consider Isabella and her religious networks to emphasize how female homosocial communities could play an important role in a female patron’s self-fashioning and defining her legacy. Isabella and her religious networks. I will discuss how the different spheres of women’s lives – secular and religious – were not entirely separate, but in fact very involved with each other. I will stress the importance of women working across these boundaries and highlight how they used their relationships to promote themselves. In this section, I seek to establish a connection between female patronage and women’s religious and secular networks, analyzing how some women identified themselves with these groups in their matronage. In this way, women acknowledged themselves as part of a larger whole – a group of women who made up the matronage network.

The relationships between these women were based on many things, whether friendship, blood, or marriage, but establishing themselves also played an enormous role in who they engaged with, what they commissioned, and how they did so, as well as vice versa. Female patrons, inadvertently or not, formed a community based on sex and “signals” and used their network to further their public images, demonstrate their status, and ensure that other women would be able to do the same.

The language of matronage was one bred from not only its male counterpart, but also from female exempla and influence. Iconography could be passed from mother to daughter. Women could commission works of art together and thus signal their piety or status together. They could exchange portraits, perceive each other as exemplum manifest, and engage each other with new forms of demonstrating their status through
fashion and aesthetics. This extends beyond communities of court ladies or nuns.

Matronage transcended the traditional notion of separate spheres of women and united them as a cohesive unit.
The act of patronage was, in and of itself, a sign of status and distinction. As Nelson and Zeckhauser explain, “Most Italian Renaissance patrons felt the need not merely to establish an elevated status but also to advertise it to contemporary and future audiences.” To commission a work of art was to demonstrate monetary and social status. Art was a visible and expensive sign of privilege that Renaissance elites used to cultivate a language and build networks of relationships and exchanges. It was thus not simply a product of artistic innovations or artistic expression. The two parties involved in the commissioning process, or the transaction, identified by Baxandall as artists and ‘clients’, both interacted and shaped the way that works of art were being produced, but Baxandall is clear in his assertion that clients were “active, determining, and not necessarily benevolent” agents in the transactions. Baxandall uses the term ‘clients’ instead of ‘patrons’ because of the overtones the word carries, varying from situation to situation. The term ‘patron’ is useful in this analysis, however, as it addresses not only the financial support provided by patrons, but the other forms of support as well – the relationships forged, the networks managed, and the ultimate goal of most patronage, the demonstration of status.

There has been a great amount of attention paid to male patronage, given the relative abundance of information and contractual documentation available to current

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5 Baxandall, 1.
scholars on the subject. The bulk of the art historical canon has been devoted to men for numerous reasons; the most obvious seeming to be that men were the ones commissioning works of art, and that the art historical canon has classified works commissioned and made by men as “high art”. Men were artists and men were patrons – art was used as a means of communication between men in many ways. As a result, female patrons were partially erased from the patronal rhetoric and the discussion thereof. Moreover, many works commissioned by women were typically attributed to male patrons instead; wives commissioning works were typically overshadowed by their husbands, or scholars attributed these commissions to their male partners. More recent scholarship has unearthed the prevalence of female patronage in Renaissance Italy, though is little in the way of how women may have been signaling to other women. However, there were occasions where female patrons commissioned works together, for spaces that would be inhabited primarily by women, and with the goal of demonstrating status and proper iconography to other women. Audiences were diverse and could take a variety of messages from a work and the works commissioned were often ambiguous in meaning. A man of the court could read a work very differently than a man in a confraternity might read it; similarly, the potential reading could be further changed if a woman was viewing the work, and could shift even more depending on the

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6 Patricia Simons, Nelson, and Zeckhauser all consider how patronage was used as a means of communicating a specific message to potential audiences; in this case, primarily male audiences. This will be addressed later in this chapter.

7 Eleonora di Toledo is a prime example of this. The formation of the visual program of her apartments has been attributed to Giorgio Vasari and her husband, Cosimo I de’ Medici, though we will discuss later how she was, in fact, quite involved in the commissioning process and was consulted at length on the commission by Vasari, independently of her husband.
woman’s background. There could be no stable reading, no ensured response. Male and female patrons thus had to take care to minimize the chance of a negative reaction from an audience to the works they commissioned. Given the differences in proper conduct and iconography between the sexes, they took different routes in cultivating the works they displayed and their public personas. Furthermore, they were often attempting to communicate to different demographics within their audience. The iconography and potential readings of men’s works were targeted to communicate primarily with men of a similar or higher status, and the same is certainly true for women, but women were also commissioning for women of similar and higher status as well.

Patronage was inherently gendered. It was a man’s game, designed to communicate with other men and to demonstrate a class division between men. However, the game was not sexually exclusive, despite its patriarchal nucleus. Women were players in the game as well, and their commissions, and support of other women whether financial or otherwise, were fueled by notably different experiences and slightly different goals. The aim of this chapter is to detail the uses and relevance of patronage in Renaissance Italy, the use of commissions to forge networks and women’s place in the realm of patronage, and finally, to establish a working definition of “matronage” to describe what women were doing when engaging with and building upon the patronage game.

The patronage game: foundation and models of analysis

As previously mentioned, art could be used as a means of demonstrating a division of the classes. Pierre Bourdieu addressed this process in his analysis of “taste”
and the judgment thereof. Economic power, he posited, is a power to keep “economic
necessity at arm’s length”. As Bourdieu contends, conspicuous consumption and
gratuitous luxury – *magnificence* – separates the bourgeoisie from the lower classes in the
twentieth century. Art is an effective means of showcasing culture and power. Moreover,
the cultivation of taste further widens the rift; it is not enough to merely have a work of
art on display in one’s home. The “taste” of the bourgeoisie, bound up in class and
iconography, allows the bourgeoisie to emphasize their superior intellect, their
understanding of complex themes, and ultimately, to justify their place in the upper
echelon of society while distinguishing themselves from the petite bourgeoisie. Though
Bourdieu’s critique of taste is meant to be applied to a different class and time period, it
remains relevant for this discussion. The Renaissance elite put their personal tastes on
display, emphasizing their rich knowledge of humanism and philosophy, of style and
taste.

Bourdieu’s assertion that “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” can also
be aptly applied to the Renaissance mentality towards works of art. By placing an
importance on iconography, on meaning, and on the hired producer or artist (as I will
soon examine), patrons could ensure that the works they commissioned were more than
mere commodities. Works of art were beyond necessary purchases. They were, in fact,
examples of better taste, moral superiority, and social influence. These factors worked
together to form an elite “taste”, and that “taste” classified those within it as the elite.

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8 Bourdieu, 6.
Works of art legitimized social differences, as only those “in the know” and with this carefully cultivated sense of “taste” could understand and display it effectively. Simply put, taste was not inherent in the Renaissance elite as opposed to others – it was constructed by them.

This theory of “taste” is tied to the theory of magnificence. Renaissance elites did not simply commission works of art, architecture, and the like for their own desires. They were expected to do so as part of their class and positions. Louis Green examines the patronage of Azzone Visconti in his analysis of the lord of Milan and Galvano Fiamma’s lengthy description of the architectural project that he erected. The project was used “as means of more powerfully evoking the quality of princely greatness which the extravagance of the palace and chapel were intended to confer on their builder, Azzone Visconti.” Azzone’s architectural endeavors acted as a symbol of his authority, and allowed him to cultivate a new image for himself and his state. Moreover, they continued a dialogue of “princely benevolence and munificence that contributed to the common good.” Magnificence and euergetism were already existing means of demonstrating power and wealth, while also ensuring that the patron would reap the benefits of a positive response from their audience, dating back to ancient Aristotle. The Renaissance

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10 Ibid, 7.
12 Ibid, 111.
13 Ibid, 101. The mentality behind the theory of “magnificence” and “euergetism” was also prevalent in ancient Rome, driven by the assumption that the rich were not contributing to their city unless they were commissioning works for the public good. This remains true in some senses in the Renaissance practices of magnificence. Art furthered the cultural progression and sophistication of Renaissance Italy, while also benefiting the patron. See: Kathleen Coleman, “Euergetism in its Place: Where Was the Amphitheatre in
upper-class revived and used this model, molding it to serve the purpose of fashioning a popular public image for themselves, while also distinguishing between themselves and the lower-class through monetary display.

Establishing one’s public image and highlighting status through patronage was thus a given in Renaissance Italy. Patrons commissioned works for a variety of reasons, but the primary one was, arguably, self-promotion. Nelson and Zeckhauser examine this phenomenon through the lens of “cost-benefit analysis”, an economic model that allows us to consider patronage in terms of costs, benefits, and constraints. Additionally, the concept of “signaling” plays a role in how we can understand patronage and its ability to send a message of status, as well as negotiate and cultivate relationships and networks of patrons.

As I have briefly discussed, patrons had to be careful in how they fashioned and tailored the works they commissioned to ensure an appropriate reading from diverse and ambivalent audiences. Nelson and Zeckhauser consider the concept of “signaling” in their model as a means of communicating with other Renaissance elites. Nelson and Zeckhauser define the “signaling” as a means to convey difficult information to modern markets where “information is held asymmetrically” – that is, to audiences that are diverse and not equally informed or with distinguishing “taste”.14 As sellers know more about their projects than their potential buyers, informational imbalances require sellers


14 Nelson and Zeckhauser, 74.
to produce signs, or signals that “convey some essential qualities about their products.”

Thus, signals were used to ensure the appearance of quality and assure a potential buyer that the seller was worthy of their patronage. In the case of Renaissance architecture, for example, a large, magnificent building could function as a successful signal of personal magnificence, given its size and assumed monetary value, whereas a smaller building could not. To make sure that a commission demonstrated the “taste” and culture of a patron, signals were essential.

Conspicuous commissions demonstrated taste and culture, and art signaled a patron’s culture and taste, but the proper means of “signaling” were not universal. One patron may have been able to signal high status through a specific motif that was inappropriate for another, thus leading to a negative response and social disapproval. Moreover, money was not the only determining factor in what one patron could commission that another could not. A wealthy patron could certainly commission an extravagant or magnificent work or building, but if the audience felt as though the patron was not worthy or that the commission was inappropriate, the patron could face the same negative responses. Thus, patrons had to use signals to demonstrate that they were worthy of positive responses; they deserved their status, understood their status, and belonged among the ranks of Renaissance elite.

15 Ibid, 74.
16 Ibid, 74.
17 Ibid, 77.
18 Ibid, 77.
The costs, benefits, and constraints of patronage also extended beyond just monetary concerns and benefits. The cost of a commission could be expensive, monetarily, socially, and politically. In turn, the constraints faced by a patron could add to the costs they had to pay. However, the higher the cost, and the more constraints overcome, typically led to greater benefits. As an example, Isabella d’Este overcame constraints of space – both socially and physically – by having a studiolo, which was traditionally considered a male space.\(^{19}\) Moreover, she was unable to commission works that would have been appropriate for male patrons, such as works with numerous nudes hailing from antiquity.\(^{20}\) The cost of her commissioning works that broke these conventions was, understandably, very high. Even in the commissions she did secure, notably her *Parnassus*, she dealt with the costs of working with an artist who was slow on the painting process, and also potentially derailed the signals she attempted to set in place.\(^{21}\)

Every patron dealt with costs and constraints when commissioning a work, but the benefits could range from climbing the social ladder, to religious salvation, to monetary gain. Yet, signaling and these costs and constraints varied, especially in terms of gender. Women faced costs and constraints unlike those of their male counterparts, and often

\(^{20}\) San Juan, 73.
\(^{21}\) The nudity of Venus in *Parnassus* could potentially subvert Isabella’s intended reading of Venus, as a nude Venus symbolized carnal love instead of the divine love symbolized by a clothed Venus. There was at least one occasion where Isabella was compared to the nude Venus as well. See: Stephen Campbell, “Myth and the Articulation of Gender and Space” in *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p 125. (Letter from Battista Fiera to Isabella d’Este)
sought different benefits aside from self-promotion. Thus, the iconography and signals present in these works are, at times, very different, especially in the ways these works display the female form and the patrons themselves. However, there remains the constant of seeking to demonstrate one’s status and, as I will discuss, forging networks with other patrons in the patronage of both men and women.

**Sex and distinction: male and female networks of patronage**

Male patronage was an invaluable tool in the cultivation of homosocial relationships between men, allowing them to advance their own political, economic, or religious interests and attain privileges based on their relationships. Men formed intricate networks, displaying works for male audiences, exchanging portraiture, and engaging with each other to mold their individual images in the public sphere while also ensuring that they were making friends (or more) in all of the right places. This means of self-promotion and self-fashioning was fluid and the works commissioned and exchanged could be read in many different ways to appeal to a variety of viewers for more benefits. Patricia Simons has examined the fluidity, and often homoerotic nature, of Renaissance portraiture as a means of furthering homosocial connections, asserting that Renaissance portraits of men employed “a framework of multiple selves which are contextual, not universal, and suggest sexualities which are multi-layered, not self-evident.”

Though Simons focuses specifically on the erotic undertones of such portraiture, the many layers

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and potential readings of these works is imperative to my analysis, including those delving into the realm of eroticism.

Simons analyzes a portrait of Grand Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici as Orpheus (Fig. 1), executed by Bronzino. The painting stands in stark contrast to other portraits of the duke, such as ones of him in full armor, depicted as a man of action and power. The readings of the latter portraits are straightforward enough in meaning, presenting the viewer with Cosimo as an exemplum of masculinity and statehood. Yet the portrait of Cosimo as Orpheus is ambiguous in reading and meaning. Moreover, it is overtly sensual. Simons asserts that Cosimo seduces not only his wife with the portrait, but his fellow courtiers and Florence itself. His portraiture thus projects “multiple selves”, as Simons contends – on one hand, his portraiture advertises him as a man of principle and action, while on the other, with portraits such as *Cosimo as Orpheus*, the works function as a sort of proposition, charming Florence and his fellow man under the Mediciean will.

The many portraits of Cosimo, and indeed, the many works he commissioned, signaled his status. Furthermore, the multiplicity of selves presented in his various commissions, ensured that he was appealing to multiple demographics within an audience. Through the works he commissioned, he conveyed his understanding of, and right to, his class. With his “taste” evident in the works he displayed and exchanged, he demonstrated that he was worthy of praise, of power, and of potentially beneficial relationships.

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23 Simons, 32.
24 Ibid, 32.
25 Nelson and Zeckhauser, 77.
Cosimo I de’ Medici is only a single example of men using patronage to engage with primarily male audiences; in fact, there were countless examples.26 Yet men did not only use imagery of themselves to justify their status and display their power, or imagery of mythological subjects as further promotion of their humanist and intellectual endeavors, but also imagery of women. Portraits of women, and large-scale mythological paintings with female figures and nudes, were executed by male painters, for male patrons, to be viewed by male audiences. To be a woman in Renaissance Italy was to be an object under the male gaze, and thus women and their bodies played a significant role in both the forming of homosocial relationships between men, as well as in their signaling to one another.27

Female portraiture that was not commissioned directly by the woman herself (and oftentimes, even when it was) typically served the function of highlighting her relationships with the men in her life, normally her father or her husband. A man commissioning a portrait of his wife or daughter used the work, and the woman, as “a visible, displayable sign of his honor.”28 Images of women adorned with beautiful jewelry and dress nods towards the wealth of their male relations rather than their own personal wealth. Moreover, the careful control over the imagery of these women (their

28 Ibid, 10.
idealized forms, often rigid when depicted in profile, and the careful iconographic hints towards their piety) was used to bring further respect to their patriarchal relationships.

Imagery of women outside of the realm of portraiture had a similar function. Mythological paintings of women ensured a sense of patriarchal dominance, and images of rape and sexual conquest had strong associations with patriarchal control and statehood.\(^{29}\) The female nude strengthened patriarchal control over women’s bodies. While women had to be careful when displaying the nude form, out of concern that their chastity or integrity would be questioned, men had far more freedom to display and discuss such imagery. By claiming ownership over the female form, and categorizing women as “other”, male patrons were able to establish a more solid sense of solidarity and strengthen their networks. Thus, female portraiture could be considered another facet of male patronage and homosociality. It was used as a means to signal status of the men to whom these women belonged.

Most women were wholly complicit in the concept that they were extensions of their male family. Careful to protect their own positions in wealthy families and within the patriarchal system, women viewing such imagery – especially female portraits – adopted similar language when discussing them. Matrons viewing portraits of young women took on a “surrogate male position”, taking care to ensure and protect their own stake in the economy and continue the respectability of their family lines.\(^{30}\)


\(^{30}\) Ibid, 20.
As a result of women’s complicity in the system of patronage and the complex homosocial signals in works commissioned by men, the discussion of patronage has been male-centric. The assumption has been that women were entirely secondary players in the patronage game, and thus, the works commissioned of them and by them were meant primarily for male eyes, with the exception of such works setting an example for other young women to follow. This is partially true. Virtually all women were considering male viewers in the works they commissioned. However, female patronage evolved in a number of ways both to complement the patriarchal examples present in male patronage, and also to subvert them, while also signaling to female viewers. Moreover, female patronage could function within similar parameters of male patronage, cultivating networks of female homosociality and signaling status. Many women, as did Cosimo I and other men like him, also employed “multiple selves”, ranging from the exemplary woman to the homosocial contact in a broad network.

Until recently, there has been little attention paid to female patronage and the ways in which female patrons signaled not only to a variegated audience, but specifically to and for each other. Now, however, more scholarship has taken up the task of developing the discourse on female patronage and how we can conceive of it within a canon that has been primarily male-centric. The result has been the reclaiming of female patrons lost in the history of Renaissance art patronage, and a reconsideration of previously over-looked women. Women such as Eleonora di Toledo have since been incorporated into the discussion of female patronage, whereas before, the dialogue was centered almost entirely on her husband and Giorgio Vasari. Isabella d’Este is one of the
few female patrons openly discussed, and even she has had to be re-evaluated by recent scholarship, given the assumption by earlier scholars that she was simply a difficult patron to work with. In fact, Isabella was working with a specific set of costs and constraints which required her to be careful in what she commissioned and what sort of iconography she allowed.

Promoting herself to an audience primarily consisting of the opposite sex required a female patron to adopt elements of the already existing patronal language. In this way, she could successfully play a game in which her sex was typically not considered a player. Moreover, by incorporating the language of patronage, female patrons were able to signal their status effectively to men in their audience and demonstrate their understanding of that language. They could cater to the dominant patriarchal criteria, while representing themselves and form networks independent of their male counterparts. Just as men use patronage to form allegiances and advance their social, political, and religious desires, there are examples of women engaging with each other in a similar way. Eleonora di Toledo’s Room of the Sabines in her Quartiere degli Elementi would have been the room designated specifically for her ladies-in-waiting, meaning that the primary viewers of the scene on the ceiling would have been women.

Women, too, exchanged portraits. Isabella d’Este’s portrait was highly esteemed and loved by Margherita Cantelma, duchess of Sora, who considered the portrait an

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31 San Juan, 68.
32 We will explore this point at length in Chapter 2. In this section, we are simply laying out the foundations for the analysis.
extension of the marchesa, and was comforted by it in the marchesa’s absence. In this way, Isabella strengthened her relationship with Margherita, with whom she would later commission a work, and facilitated an extension of her network. By exchanging portraits, women cultivated a network akin to that of their male counterparts, forming relationships that could benefit them, encouraging discourse and interaction, appropriating iconography to better signal their statuses. Thus, their portraits were more than mere signals for their male family to use to demonstrate status; they were also used by female patrons to demonstrate their own status and to form similar relationships.

So it was for most female patrons in sixteenth-century Italy. Social art historians have begun to form a new language when discussing female patrons, given the divergent set of rules and regulations that they had to deal with compared to their male contemporaries. As a result, I would contend that a study of matronage, specifically, has been fashioned from the current discussion – its relevance, prevalence, and uses. However, the term “matronage”, as Baxandall found with the term “patron”, has certain overtones that vary from situation to situation, making it a loaded term with a variety of meanings. From here, I will examine the term “matronage” and how it can be used when analyzing female patronage.

**Matronage: uses and a working definition**

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Renaissance scholars using the word “matronage” typically fit into two categories: those who use the term as a female alternative to the word “patronage” without offering a more precise or situation-specific definition\(^\text{34}\), and those who reject the word except in cases where it is directly relevant to the dictionary definition. Others have opted for different terms, such as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock’s “Old Mistresses,” referencing the “Old Masters,” although they also acknowledge the problematic and often sexual implications of the term “mistresses.”\(^\text{35}\) Not unlike “mistress”, the term “matronage”, in common usage, has virtually nothing to do with the act of patronage. While patronage suggests financial or other support from a client, or an exchange between a client and other parties, “matronage” typically suggests a role of guardianship and supervision. A “matron” is simply defined as a married, typically older, woman, usually within a high social position, or a woman overseeing children or a women’s organization.\(^\text{36}\) Thus, it is understandable why some scholars are hesitant to use the word when describing female patronage outside of married, upper class women who were, in fact, matrons. To lump all women’s commissions under a single heading of “matronage”, regardless of their statuses and positions in life, is to suggest an innate sense of “woman-ness” that, frankly, dilutes the realities of female patronage as a whole.\(^\text{37}\)


\(^{37}\) G. Lerner and Patricia Simons have both warned against generalizations that ignore differences in class and the use of the term “matronage”. Simons has asserted that “matronage blankets the disparity between
Though Renaissance scholars have been hesitant to use the term universally, or to assign a relevant definition to the word, other concentrations in art history have re-fashioned the word to relate it to female patrons commissioning works from female artists, or women offering financial or social support to other women. Some historians of nineteenth-century art have adopted the term to describe female support systems, oftentimes manifested in female patrons commissioning works from female artists.\(^\text{38}\) Deborah Cherry has made considerable advances in reviving the term to mean “the support system that coexisted between women and assisted them in the advancement of their cultural aspirations.”\(^\text{39}\) This definition provides a useful insight into how the word can be applied to women who may not have actually been matrons themselves. Though Cherry’s definition relates primarily to women commissioning works by women, the association with homosocial support between women remains. By addressing the potential support system between women directly, as opposed to focusing solely on the individual commissions of these women, and by incorporating support that was not only financial (beyond women commissioning works from other women or financially supporting other women), I do not dismiss differences in class, age, race, or experiences. Instead, I suggest that these networks of support breached separate spheres of existence.

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\(^{38}\) Deborah Cherry is one scholar who takes the term and applies a working definition to it; Susan Butlin and Alison McQueen are two examples of scholars adopting her definition when describing patronage networks for female artists in the nineteenth-century.

The works displayed by female patrons were almost always seen by audiences in which women were present. Moreover, any woman attempting to signal her status or mold her public image had to be conscious of what example she was setting for other women. Thus, even commissions that were intended for a primarily male audience typically held signals specifically for female viewers or that were ambiguous in meaning.\(^{40}\) Furthermore, the networks of support between women could range from interactions between women in positions of power, to between those women and women in sororities, and occasionally between these women and religious lay-women.\(^{41}\)

Matronage was an essential part of these networks, tethering groups of women from different walks of life together.

For this analysis, I would suggest a working definition for the term “matronage”, drawing upon Deborah Cherry’s model and those inspired by it. I would define “matronage” as women engaging in shared networks with other women, offering support within those networks, and at times commissioning works of art that would be seen by, or engaged with, said networks. This definition covers virtually every woman commissioning works of art in the Renaissance, even ones who were commissioning works for male audiences, because there was no single, unified male audience. Moreover,

\(^{40}\) For example, the works displayed in Isabella d’Este’s studiolo appear primarily concerned with assuring Isabella’s piety and ability to reject the vices associated with her sex. This was certainly to appeal to male viewers, under whom her character would be questioned, but it was also to fashion Isabella as a female exemplum, and to set an example for other women, such as her ladies-in-waiting, who Isabella took great care to set a good example for.

\(^{41}\) We will address this point further in Chapter 2. See: Sally Anne Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua: Matrons, Mystics and Monasteries*, (Burlington, V.T.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012) for Hickson’s in-depth analysis of women of “separate spheres” interacting with one another.
the prevalence of “female exempla” in artistic and social dialogue made works that
promoted a female patron’s self-image carry an undercurrent of setting an example for
other women, or building upon examples set by other women (whether in reality, or
mythological). This definition also incorporates women not necessarily commissioning
works, but still offering support, financial or otherwise, to other women in those
networks. Furthermore, the overtones of the word “matron” are not lost in this reading of
the term. That the word “matron” suggests guardianship and supervision is essential to
my definition; all women were active in creating and shaping potential and existing
networks, inadvertently or not. Women guided and instructed other women in these
networks, oversaw proper iconography, and offered support.

Using the term “matronage” with this definition instead of “female patronage”
allows me to differentiate between the costs, constraints, and benefits female patrons
dealt with and sought as opposed to their male counterparts. Not all female patrons had
the same financial or social status, but they all had to work with an already established
patriarchal dialogue when it came to patronage and reading works of art. The ways in
which female patrons appropriated this dialogue and tweaked it to suit their own purposes
varied, but the distinction of women as “other” to men required them to explore different
means of self-promotion. Female patrons dealt with considerably different constraints
placed on their sex, and their signals had to be different from that of their male
counterparts. “Female patronage” does not properly convey the complexities of women
commissioning works of art and supporting each other, nor does it address the
homosociality present within their networks.
Matronage, like patronage, allowed female patrons to cultivate their public personas to potential audiences and worked through intricate networks of female homosociality. It worked from dialogue that was born from male patronage, but the signals they sent with their works were molded by specific examples that were set by other women. These signals placed the women who sent them within a canon of female example, tradition, and influence. From here, the analysis will focus on Isabella d’Este, Eleonora di Toledo, and their individual uses of matronage to signal an elevated status. Their public personas were multi-faceted and worked from a variety of examples and signals. Yet almost all of the examples women drew from were formed and cultivated by their female predecessors, or from a language of homosociality and kinship. In the next chapter, I will consider some of the avenues Isabella and Eleonora took when molding their identities and how these identities related them to other exemplary women.
IDENTITY AND ICONOGRAPHY

Female patrons who used their commissions to mold their image engaged directly with these different routes of identity formation, oftentimes working from already established examples of female virtue and piety and thus associating themselves with a long line of female influence and agency. Just as men like Cosimo I had “multiple selves” in their patronage and portraiture, referencing various male archetypes, a female patron could also have multiple selves. She could be the exemplary woman, the matron, the surrogate male in her husband’s absence, or a beacon of female competence. These roles, and the women who took them on, fed into the broader theme of female identity, akin to how male patronage and identity functioned.

An acceptable elite male “identity” could be composed of multiple elements. The Renaissance “male” was not an established, singular identity, but was instead fashioned from a variety of roles and personas that men donned to signal their status and manhood. Men took on roles ranging from the “hyper-masculine rogue to [the] celibate saint.” 42 Simons has demonstrated this, and I have noted it briefly, in the case of Cosimo I de’ Medici, but it also manifested itself in portraits and works depicting men interacting with each other. Men act as teachers to other men, as mentors, and as students, each role suggesting another level of the male experience and identity, demonstrating the existence and relevance of male networks of patronage. 43 Such works signaled the patron’s (and at

43 Ibid, 45-46. Simons discusses the duality of meaning in Raphael’s Portrait of the Artist with a Friend, alluding to the artist’s power and the constraints placed on him. The work suggests that the artist’s “own
times the artist’s) presence within these networks, and revealed his own identity as a man of power. Moreover, in circumstances of men taking on the roles of other men, such as Cosimo I as Orpheus, or when they commissioned works referencing men of antiquity and intellect, they also signaled their place in another network of male exceptionality. Famous men cycles, busts of philosophers in studioli, and portraits of men disguised as men from antiquity all reflected back on the broader network of male excellence, of which said patrons could take part.\(^{44}\)

Male identity could be articulated in a variety of ways, as fluid as the concept itself – through “masculine” portraiture or iconographic programs such as “famous men cycles”, images of devotion, or large scale commissions that demonstrated a male patron’s humanist learning. Female identity was equally complex, and conveyed through works typically either designating the woman as an extension of her male family, or as a female exemplum, embodying acceptable notions of femininity and piety that would inspire other women to do the same. Women could be presented “as pious imitators of saints”, or they could appropriate attributes of other female exempla to establish their own identity as women of similar paradigms.\(^{45}\)

Women as exempla were an essential part of matronage and iconography. By becoming inspirational examples of their sex, women could elevate their status, and also strengthen bonds within their networks. Moreover, the archetype, and imagery that

\(^{44}\) It was relatively common for men to commission or display works of philosophers, or famous men cycles. A notable example of a famous men cycle in a studiolo is the studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro, which also included effigies and portraits of emperors and noble men.

\(^{45}\) Ibid, 31.
reinforced it, associated women with a tradition of female excellence and added them to the expansive, and useful, network of exemplary woman. Thus, it was a role women often chose to don and many used their iconography to associate themselves with exemplary women of the past. At times, the imagery that a woman employed in her commissions could change over the course of her life depending on what sort of public image she wanted to cultivate for herself at specific points. Moreover, the iconography of one female patron could be appropriated by another to associate her with her predecessor, thus allowing the appropriator to signal in an effective manner that reaped similar benefits.

This chapter examines the exemplary woman in matronage and how alluding to oneself as such an exemplum manifested itself not only in works commissioned but also in networks of matronage. In the first section of this chapter, I assert that while the contemporaneous texts that shaped the archetype of the exemplary woman consistently attempted to strip her of her own agency, women like Isabella and Eleonora, both referred to by many of their contemporaries as examples of this archetype, employed visual languages that promoted female agency in the works they commissioned. This agency in turn emphasized a need for active chastity as opposed to passive feminine virtue.

The second section will explore how Isabella established herself as a woman worthy of praise and imitation. I will assert that her identification as an exemplary woman was essential to her matronage, and vice versa, and also address how her imagery enforced notions of female capability and activeness as opposed to passive and complacent chastity. I will also incorporate a cost-benefits analysis of her commissions to
demonstrate how such works helped her to comply with, yet at the same time subvert, patriarchal notions of what constituted a perfect lady of the court.

The third section will deal with the uses of iconography in and how Eleonora di Toledo used iconographic programs to re-enforce her identification as an exemplary woman. The section will analyze the efficacy of Eleonora’s iconographic program in her Quartiere di Elementi, and how she built on popular cycles such as portraits of famous men and women to ensure an understanding of her role in the Medici family and in politics but also to send a signal of competence from women in politics and the importance of female homsociality.

**Leading by example: female exempla and the power of inspiration**

The exemplary woman, and its prevalence in Renaissance rhetoric, threads through the majority of Renaissance matronage, allowing women to assume their status and signal it with less reproach than if she simply appropriated the male dialogue of patronage directly. Though the archetype of the exemplary woman was fraught with contradictions and often used to circumscribe women’s agency and influence, a female patron would do well to incorporate the role into her public persona, not only because of the signal of status it sent but also because it allowed her, and women like her, to stand as examples for other women. Texts that perpetuated ideas of what it meant to be an exemplary woman or perfect lady of the court were typically underlined by a desire to coerce women into upholding traditional notions of female domesticity, chastity, and passivity. Others, however, such as treatises in defense of women, while they at times used similar dialogue, offered a rare opportunity for exemplary women to define
themselves by commissioning a treatise. Moreover, such texts and the women commissioning them helped to form a group of contemporary women, unified under the identity of “exempla”.

Texts that referenced and discussed exemplary women reveal the inconsistencies in the role itself, and expose attitudes about exemplary women as a group. Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De Claris Mulierbus* is perhaps the first collection of biographies of famous women, and the text exists separately from Boccaccio’s other texts on famous men.\(^{46}\) It was originally intended to be dedicated to Joanna I of Naples, but the author feared she, “the greater would altogether eclipse the lesser light” of his “small and weak” book.\(^{47}\) He instead dedicated the book to Andrea Acciaioli, Countess of Altavilla, whom he implored to read through it, that it might spur her “noble spirit to emulation of the deeds of women in the past.”\(^{48}\) The text contains more than a hundred biographies of famous women, ranging from those of historical significance to biblical, and it includes women of ill repute as foils to those who were positive examples. It flows chronologically, beginning with Eve, and ending with the contemporary Joanna I.

The text, and others like it, though in many ways considered a defense of women (a point Boccaccio himself brings up in the text), is contradictory in its depiction of exemplary women. While it certainly intends to praise the capabilities of women, it

\(^{46}\) Though *De Claris Mulierbus* is exclusively about women and distinctly separate from his writings on male achievements, Boccaccio’s *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* includes female examples as well as male ones.


\(^{48}\) Ibid, 2.
equally reinforces the notion of them as the weaker sex.\textsuperscript{49} Moreover, though Boccaccio brings forward an extensive chronicle of famous women throughout history, and states that he should like to increase the fame of Acciaioli, he remains a member of a school of thought that deemed “glory-seeking women” as perilous to themselves and the men around them.\textsuperscript{50}

As Margaret Ann Franklin notes, Boccaccio’s dedication in itself was a demonstration of micro-aggression against women of impressive fame and example; though Boccaccio’s language when regarding Joanna highlights her magnificence, the dedication also demonstrates how politically powerful women are capable of rendering men who come into contact with them impotent.\textsuperscript{51} In contrast, Acciaioli was of a more modest social status and would not overshadow his text and efforts. Furthermore, he associates her “fame” with the Counts of Montedorisio and Altavilla, her first and second husband, thus connecting her glory with her male associates, alleviating any question of her own agency in her status.\textsuperscript{52} This potential agency is ultimately what Boccaccio warns against. The pagan women – the “bad examples” – of his book show what he admits is remarkable strength of character, though their goals were sought and reached with a “keen desire for the fleeting glory of this world,” a point he continuously addresses.\textsuperscript{53} Boccaccio’s ultimate goal was not to relay an extensive history of women and their

\textsuperscript{49} Boccaccio, in his introduction, details how much more women should be praised and extolled, as almost all of them are “endowed by nature with soft, frail bodies and sluggish minds” and it is in their enactment of a “manly spirit” that they show “remarkable intelligence and bravery.”


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 24.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 25.

\textsuperscript{53} Boccaccio, 6.
accomplishments as equal to men, but instead to persuade women to uphold regimented and traditional notions of female domesticity, obedience, and chastity. These notions made up a large portion of the archetype of the exemplary woman, arguably more than actions of agency, political influence, and social sway.

Balsedar Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*, published in the sixteenth-century, follows similar paradigms in its depiction of women in society. The text offers the reader a look into the court of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro di Urbino, detailing a lengthy, fictional conversation between courtiers and court ladies on topics ranging from what makes a perfect courtier, a perfect court lady, music, and the debate of superiority between painting and sculpture. Book One details at length the ideal qualities of a man of the court. Book Three, the final section, considers what attributes make up the perfect lady of the court. Giuliano de’ Medici describes the perfect court lady. She should also be “mannerly, clever, prudent, not arrogant, not envious, not slanderous, not vain, not contentious, not inept…” as well as beautiful, for “truly that woman lacks much who lacks beauty,” and she must to conduct herself in a respectable manner to ensure that she could not even be suspected of anything and “not give occasion for evil to be said of her.” Furthermore, she should be able to entertain any and every kind of man with agreeable conversation, with a vivaciousness of spirit but in no manner that would make her seem

55 Ibid, 151.
less chaste; she must observe a “certain mean”, which he acknowledges is “difficult to
achieve and, as it were, composed of contraries.”

The contradictions within the role of the ideal court woman, as with the role of the
exemplary female, are evident. Just as evident in Castiglione’s text is the issue of female
agency. As a debate unfolds over women’s competency, the final verdict is that it is
“love, rather than politics” that is the proper and primary profession of the gentlewoman
of the palace; her kingdom is, as Sharon Jansen states, “limited to the heart of her lover”
though a man should owe some obedience to his female sovereign. Throughout the
debate, Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga and Emilia Pia sit primarily in silence, occasionally
speaking on their behalf or to further the discussion, but it is the two other men in the
room that ultimately defend them. They tread the thin line of what is appropriate for
women of the court, and by having men come to their defense, Castiglione allows women
praise and potential, but renders them incapable of exercising their own agency.

Thus, the label of exemplum is unstable. On one hand, female agency and
potential are represented by exemplary women, yet on the other, demonstrations of such
power and control are subverted. The women of the houses of Montefeltro, Gonzaga, and
Este are cited in the debate as positive examples, and Isabella di Aragon, Eleonora di
Aragon, and Eleonora’s two daughters, Beatrice and Isabella d’Este are mentioned by
name. Castiglione cites several other women as well as prime examples of female
capability. Yet his focus is primarily on their ability to better their male counterparts.

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56 Ibid, 151.
57 Sharon L. Jansen, *Debating Women, Politics, and Power in Early Modern Europe*, (New York: Palgrave
Boccaccio and Castiglione’s texts both assume an exemplary woman’s best assets are how she benefits the men around her, thus denying women of power and example any agency in their own lives.

Treatises in defense of women relied heavily on the archetype of the exemplary woman, and often cited contemporary women to support their assertions. They were distinct from the previously mentioned texts, however, as some of them were commissioned by women, or were written by men on the payrolls of families with powerful female patrons, offering a rare opportunity for us to see women actively shaping their own group identity. 58 They typically pointed out celebrated virtues of women, such as chastity, charity, and piety. Giorgio Trissino’s I Ritratti was dedicated to Isabella d’Este, Niccolo da Correggio lauded her as a woman “unequaled in the world”, and Mario Equicola “referred to her as the tenth muse”. 59 She was the dedicatee of, and mentioned in, various works that celebrated her virtue, learning, patronage, and lineage, some of which were commissioned by women, such as Margherita Cantelma. 60 Eleonora di Toledo, too, was identified as an exemplary woman. Jacopo Filippo Foresti commemorated her posthumously in his De Plurimis Claris Selectisque Mulierbus and Bartolomeo Goggio dedicated his treatise De Laudibus Mulierium to her. 61

58 Margherita Cantelma commissioned at least two works in defense of women – one by Mario Equicola and one by Agostino Strozzi. Antonia Cornazzano was on the Estense payroll. See: Stephen Kolsky, Mario Equicola: The Real Courtier, (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1991), pp. 66-67 for more on treatises and Equicola’s role in the court.
60 Ibid, 51-52.
Treatises in defense of women continued the discourse begun by texts like Boccaccio’s, but the opportunities women had to commission such treatises made them a valuable asset to women forming their personas and forming a shared sense of identity. While they hailed women primarily through traditional notions of femininity and chastity and for their relationships with their husbands, they also fed into the possibility of female action. Women commissioning these works took on the task of identifying themselves, and by commissioning men to write for them, they avoided the risk of over-stepping their boundaries.

The issue of female agency, continuously cited throughout Renaissance texts as either a character flaw or as non-existent, is addressed consistently in the Isabella and Eleonora’s commissions. By commissioning works with a multitude of potential readings and iconography that acknowledged patriarchal control, Isabella and Eleonora avoided negative responses to their commissions. However, by displaying examples of female activity and self-control, they also challenged notions of female agency as a trait to be avoided. Instead it becomes an essential part of what makes an exemplary woman.

**Active examples: Isabella d’Este as the exemplary woman**

As the perfect lady of the court, Isabella took great pains to ensure that the works she commissioned sent signals that affirmed her embodiment of the archetype. Yet the works she commissioned and the space she displayed them in seem to challenge directly traditional ideals of femininity. Scholars have discussed Isabella’s commissions at length. The contradictory nature of some of her imagery and signals has posed promising questions to feminist and social art historians on subjects of self-promotion and the court,
as well as her appropriation of the traditionally male space of the *studiolo*.\(^{62}\) Certain aspects of her patronage thus left her vulnerable to reproach from male viewers and courtiers. Despite this, however, she was continuously referred to as the perfect lady of the court, and balanced her collecting and her role in politics in her husband’s absence effectively.

Beyond her *studiolo*, Isabella also collected fine ceramics, glassware, and fabrics, decorating the domestic sphere of her life, and kept up with the latest fashions.\(^{63}\) By doing so, she reinforced her place in the domestic sphere, appeasing patriarchal notions of what constituted proper femininity, even for a woman with political sway. All of the collecting that Isabella did, though the marchesa’s certain had a nearly insatiable appetite for beautiful things, also helped to further the perception of her as woman who was conscious of contemporary practices of cultural consumption, with a concern for the domestic and latest trends. In this way, Isabella demonstrated her refined taste as a Renaissance elite and established herself as a capable, intelligent, but still domesticated and feminine woman.\(^{64}\)

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\(^{63}\) Isabella was particular about the items that she purchased for the domestic parts of her life, such as glassware and silverware. See: Mary Rogers, and Paola Tinagli, *Women in the Italian Renaissance, 1350-1650: Ideals and Realities: A Sourcebook*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)

\(^{64}\) See: Rose Marie San Juan, “The Court Lady’s Dilemma: Isabella d’Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14 (1991) for San Juan’s analysis of Isabella’s subversion of and complicity to gender norms and the cultivation of her courtly persona.
Isabella’s commissions enforced a reading that related her to other exemplum: her active pursuit and retention of chastity, her agency over her vices, her attention to the arts, and her support of her husband. With these signals, she was able to assure viewers that, indeed, she was ultimately the supporter of her husband and his reign and not a threat to the gender norms in place. However, she could also enforce her own agency and will. The costs and constraints of her collecting practices are clear through the guidelines addressed in earlier sections of this analysis. Isabella could not commission works akin to those her brother, Alfonso, did – beautiful nudes and sensual imagery in a predominantly male space could risk a negative response. Moreover, she could not attain commissions from certain artists, either tied up with already established obligations to other patrons, or engaging with a network of male homosociality that she did not fit into.65

Yet the benefits of displaying works in her studiolo were worth it for the marchesa and, moreover, the potential readings of such works were varied and ambiguous enough that she could not only reference the power of female agency against patriarchal dominance, but also incorporate such contradictory themes in her conversations with visitors to her studiolo. Two works from the marchesa’s studiolo -- Combat of Love and Chastity (Fig. 2) and Parnassus (Fig. 3) – are both complex, with occasionally unstable signifiers, that could potentially stunt the benefits Isabella reaped from them. However, each work also further strengthens Isabella’s identification as an

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65 Isabella requested a commission from Titian, but never received one. Her brother, on the other hand, received several.
exemplary woman, reinforces the role that she actively works to maintain and deserves, and also promotes her humanist learning.

*Combat of Love and Chastity*, at face value, highlights the marchesa’s own chastity and knowledge of mythological subjects. The work depicts Diana and Venus engaged in combat, with other mythological figures filling the background, such as Jupiter’s abduction of Europa. Diana is to become the victor, with chastity triumphing over the carnal love that the clothed Venus should represent. The moment captured in the painting shows that the two are equally matched, suggesting that the vice that Venus represents is one not easily overcome, and that Diana’s active chastity and persistence are necessary. The painting thus reinforces Isabella’s own chastity as an exemplary woman, and her triumph over carnal love, while also presenting viewers with a scene teeming with mythological references, thus signaling Isabella’s own learnedness on such subjects.

The work was not, however, without its costs and constraints. Isabella gave extensive instructions in her letter to Perugino on what the painting should depict to the point where some scholars have criticized her as a difficult patron with outmoded taste. Isabella, like other elite female patrons, needed to be careful with the signals she sent especially when those signifiers were themselves unstable. Sending the wrong message could be damaging to Isabella’s public persona. Moreover, the process of the commission was stressful for the marchesa. Perugino took longer than the marchesa would have

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66 That Diana should be the victor is evident in Isabella’s correspondence with Perugino on the painting, though she states that the two should be “equal.”

preferred, even for an artist of Perugino’s repute; she acknowledged that she wanted the work “on account of his reputation”, but would seek the return of her money if there were anymore delays.68 Although having a work by Perugino would have functioned as a signal of status given his popularity, the costs were becoming greater than benefits for the marchesa. The iconography in the work was also not to her satisfaction when the artists finally sent it to her. When Perugino painted a nude Venus instead of a clothed one, the marchesa was understandably upset.69 The change disrupted the overall message of her studiolo, as the nude Venus represented divine love instead of carnal love, changing the meaning of the work entirely.

The painting sends other signals, however, that are simultaneously consistent and at odds with the suggested meaning of the work. It demonstrates an instance of aggression and “manly” force from personifications of female vice and virtue, contrasting the passitivity and complacency preferred in female exempla.70 Stephen Campbell notes the use of mythological rape scenes in the background as evidence for the need for active virtue instead of passive piety in response to abductions of women by men.71 I would contend that the social constraints faced by Isabella further enhance this reading; the rape scenes in the background also function as an example of masculine dominance through sexual conquest, while balancing the notion of active female virtue with the presence of chastity, also reinforces a tradition of adult male dominance through sexual conquest.72

68 Campbell, 174.
69 Campbell, 174. (Isabella's letter to Perugino, February 19, 1505.)
70 Campbell, 185-6.
71 Ibid, 185-6.
72 See: Lisa Rosenthal, Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Rubens, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Margaret Carroll, “The Erotics of Absolutism: Rubens and the Mystification of
The scenes of rape and abduction reinforce the necessity of active chastity as Campbell asserts – and thus of Isabella’s active rather than passive qualities – while also enforcing patriarchal ideals of adult male control and dominance.

The work’s conflicting notions of acceptable female action and masculine control add to the value of the painting as a conversational piece. Viewers of the work could engage the marchesa on the various figures, their actions, and the multitude of readings, allowing Isabella to further emphasize her own intellect and standing as a woman who overcame (and continues to overcome) her vices. Moreover, when juxtaposed with the other works in the studiolo, the signals sent by the work are amplified. Active chastity was certainly a theme that ran through Isabella’s studiolo, but so was the subject of the vices faced by all women. The battle between carnal love and chastity was one that every woman contended with. By embracing the vices of her sex, displaying them, and discussing them, the marchesa could avoid her own chastity being called into question.

Similarly, Parnassus embraces these same vices but displays them in a different way. The painting enforces a reading connected to Isabella’s role as Francesco’s wife and female sovereign. Beneath Venus and Mars, the Muses and the arts dance and flourish under the patronage of the connected Este and Gonzaga families, represented by the color scheme of red, blue, and white.73 Venus represents Isabella in her marriage to Francesco, acting as the concord to his discord, thus easing tensions over questions of her

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independence in agency. She is a complement to her husband, not his superior. Moreover, the nude Venus represents divine love, juxtaposing the clothed (and thus carnal), suggesting a transformation of carnal love to divine love and again alluding to Isabella’s familiarity with, and overcoming of, the vices of her sex.\textsuperscript{74} The image epitomizes Isabella’s relationship with her husband, their partnership, and Isabella’s proper place as this equalizer.

The presence of Vulcan, a reminder of Venus’ infidelity, also draws attention to those vices in a way that does not settle the issue of carnal desire, but allows visitors to the marchesa’s studiolo to dwell the potential meanings in the work. The work invites viewers to converse on it and to “subject the habit of allegorical interpretation to critical scrutiny”\textsuperscript{75} Moreover, those who could not see past the immorality of the work to view its beautiful meaning and significance could potentially face more embarrassment than the marchesa could by displaying it.\textsuperscript{76} The presence of Cupid also adds an aspect of humor to the image, which viewers could enjoy and also discuss. The painting thus blends themes of mythology and humor, giving Isabella an endless supply of topics to discuss and allowing her to control the conversation of allow others to lead as she needed to. The benefits of the commission as a conversational piece and as a demonstration of Isabella’s domestic and political competence are seemingly clear.

\textsuperscript{74} Isabella’s motto of \textit{nec spec; nec metu} is one associated with “liberating the mind from affliction through an acquaintance with the natural causes of affliction.” See: Campbell, 84.
\textsuperscript{75} Campbell, 121.
\textsuperscript{76} E.H. Gombrich, “An Interpretation of Mantegna's \textit{Parnassus},” \textit{Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes.} Vol. 26, No. ½ (1963), p. 196. Gombrich cites a contemporary text and which Isabella would have had access to, which “explicitly chides those who cannot see beyond the immoral surface of Homer's story and fail to grasp its beautiful significance.”
However, for all that *Parnassus* has consistently baffled scholars, it was likely just as confusing for viewers during Isabella’s own lifetime. While the ambiguity of the work’s meaning may have worked to Isabella’s advantage conversationally and alleviated some constraints she faced, it also potentially raised the costs she paid for it with its instability of the iconography and variegated potential readings. While Venus’ nudity symbolizes divine love, her association with the marchesa led to at least one occasion where Isabella was compared to Venus’ nude form; a comparison that, while meant as a complement, was inappropriate.\(^7\) Moreover, the humor of Vulcan’s presence does not wholly negate Venus’ infidelity, but also has the potential to draw more attention to it, potentially disrupting the reading of divine love and active virtue that Isabella meant for her *studiolo*. The constraints of her imagery – what she could show, what kinds of meanings she could suggest – ultimately render the “meaning” of *Parnassus* as unstable as the role of the exemplary woman.

The constant references to female action and active chastity, to virtue over vice, not only represent Isabella’s own ideologies, but also allude to the secular heroines of Boccaccio’s text. The imagery of her *studiolo* presents women like Diana and Pallas as active orchestrators of their own chastity despite their secular roots. Though it is these women’s agency that Boccaccio fears, Isabella’s *studiolo* embraces this agency, situating herself within a tradition of active femininity. As men would have perhaps displayed busts of philosophers, or famous men cycles in their *studioli* to signal their presence in

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\(^7\) Campbell, 125 and 337. (Battista Fiera’s *Melanysius*, 1515.)
networks of exemplary men, Isabella similarly signaled her place in a network of exemplary women.

Isabella’s identification as an exemplary woman worked alongside her identity as a perfect woman of the court, while her matronage signaled her competence as a learned woman actively pursuing virtue. All of these factors came together to portray Isabella as a living example to all other women. The benefits Isabella received from such self-promotion allowed her easier navigation through the world of patronage and matronage and allowed other women to do the same.

**Homosocial iconography: Eleonora di Toledo and female agency**

By identifying with and being identified as an exemplary woman, women like Isabella could build a persona that was more acceptable to the public. More than that, they could incorporate iconography and imagery that was at times contradictory to notions of proper feminine conduct. Eleonora di Toledo was also identified as an exemplar78 and it was an essential part of her self-fashioning. Unlike Isabella, Eleonora’s iconographic program worked primarily with imagery that promoted female homosociality, though her apartments also emphasized female agency as well. Her iconographic associations varied considerably over her lifetime, and shifted when the duchess needed to promote herself in a different light.

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Eleonora’s personal chapel and religious iconographic program functioned as a demonstration of her piety and devotion\textsuperscript{79}, while her portraiture provided the viewer with imagery of a woman aware of fashion and adorned with jewels as desirable as her status. Bronzino’s portrait of the duchess, \textit{Eleonora di Toledo with Son Giovanni} (Fig. 4) emphasizes the duchess’ taste, fashion, and fecundity through the presence of their son. The painting functions similarly to Cosimo’s princely portraiture, projecting an image of a regal and respectable woman of the Medici family. Eleonora was fashionably conscious, giving instructions on new clothes for herself and her family on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{80} Her portraiture thus depicted her as a fashionable Renaissance woman, and the inclusion of her sons in such portraiture emphasized her importance in continuing the Mediciean line.

Eleonora’s apartments in the Palazzo Vecchio were especially complex in their visual signals and they are an impressive achievement. The Quartiere di Elementi is decorated with a famous women cycle, stretching across several rooms.\textsuperscript{81} Each room was dedicated to a different famous woman, or group of women. There are no other known examples of such an extensive decorative program dedicated to famous women before Eleonora’s example, and the rooms are thus innovative in terms of female iconography and representation. The planning for the iconographic program of the rooms has been

\textsuperscript{79} I will discuss Eleonora’s chapel and its ties to female religious organizations in the third chapter.
\textsuperscript{80} Elizabeth Curry, "Fashion Networks: Consumer Demand and the Clothing Trade in Florence from the Mid-Sixteenth to Early Seventeenth Centuries," \textit{Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies} 39, no. 3 (2009), p. 493.
\textsuperscript{81} Famous women cycles followed after a tradition of famous men cycles, where men of great intellect or renown were portrayed either in sculpture or painting, suggesting the patron’s place among such prestigious men. Famous women cycles typically revolved around women of great piety and other positive feminine attributes.
attributed primarily to Giorgio Vasari and Cosimo I de’ Medici, as it was Vasari that first suggested famous women as the subject of Eleonora’s rooms. Cosimo’s approval of the concept has in turn led scholars to believe that Eleonora had little to do with the iconography of her apartments. Recent scholarship, however, has asserted that Eleonora was far more involved than previously thought; in fact, her approval and satisfaction were necessary to the process. The artist met with her for two hours, separate from her husband, to discuss the commission. Vasari also admitted the difficulties of having the duchess as a patron, stating that if he was able to satisfy her, “I will not have accomplished little.”

Eleonora and Cosimo were to have matching cycles – with Cosimo’s “famous men cycle” (devised, but now lost) projecting a dual meaning of princely and manly virtue, just as Eleonora’s was to demonstrate not only female virtues, but also female princely virtues that were supportive to her husband’s rule. Yet the iconography of Eleonora’s apartments expanded beyond these potential meanings and bled over into the realm of female homosociality and networking, while also portraying Eleonora as living exemplum virtutis and connecting her to the already established paradigm of female

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82 Vasari’s choice of iconography was detailed in a letter to Cosimo I on 28 January 1560/61. The artist proposed a program revolving around regal woman whose deeds had matched, or even surpassed, those of men.
84 Benson, 140. (Vasari’s letter to Borghini, 9 May 1562.)
exemplum. Such iconography was relatively new to the duchess, as before the birth of her and Cosimo’s first son, her iconography referenced to her fecundity, and identified her with goddesses like Juno. Her royal persona was fashioned around her virtue, her care for young women, and her fertility. It was not until after their second son was born and the continuation of Cosimo’s line was ensured that the focus on her fecundity lessened.

Ambiguous and shifting iconography allowed women like Eleonora to acknowledge both sides of their existence: the active, orchestrating woman sovereign, and the passive, supportive wife – similar to the imagery that Isabella employed in her studiolo. Once her fecundity had been assured, Eleonora employed imagery that emphasized both sides of her – her multiple selves – in the iconography for her apartments. The program for Eleonora’s rooms was as follows, with each room dedicated to a different woman (or group of women) of considerable repute and virtue: one for the Ersilia, the Sabine of Roman Antiquity (Fig. 5), the second for Esther (Fig. 6), the third for Penelope of Greek Antiquity (Fig. 7), and the fourth was dedicated to the virgin Gualdrada and the independence of Florence (Fig. 8). Each room demonstrates the necessity of active chastity and female agency, while also promoting kinship between women. Moreover, they connect her, as an exemplary woman, to a long line of other powerful, capable women. The women of Eleonora’s cycle are heroines: they are politically involved, employ other women, and work to maintain their chastity. Eleonora,

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86 Ibid, 113.
88 Hoppe, 109.
too, assumed the role of the active exemplum, and her cycle emphasizes the collective agency of women as a unit and what they are capable of.

The Sala di Penelope and Sala delle Sabine demonstrate the most direct references to the importance of female homosociality and potential, and also display the most unstable signifiers in Eleonora’s apartments. Pamela Benson notes the lack of effort in the Sala di Penelope to “present an image of the ancient Greek lady.”

She instead functions as the archetype of the capable female ruler, cultivating her homosocial networks by employing women while also attending to the state’s economy. By relating Eleonora to such an archetype, the iconographic and decorative program of the room signaled Eleonora’s own status, her capabilities, and her homosocial networks, as well as the potential of other women in her service.

The imagery, however, was ambiguous in meaning, with a multitude of potential readings. Men are absent from the scene, thus celebrating women in politics and their potential when independent, but their absence also nods to Eleonora’s duties as Cosimo’s wife. She takes care of the domestic and political spheres in his absence, as women do in the absence of male leadership, but she does not claim authority over male influence. Penelope controls a workshop of women, just as Eleonora oversees and guides other women, but they do not control or overshadow their male counterparts. These potential readings needed to be accounted for, and Eleonora’s rooms employ a similar tactic to

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89 Benson, 149.
90 Ibid, 149.
Isabella’s *studiolo*; multiple meanings that could acknowledge or subvert gender norms depending on the viewer, thus ensuring the benefit of positive reception.

The lack of male figures, while it may have placated some male viewers, also raises the question of male inferiority. Penelope’s workshop of women functions without the need for male influence, creating a potentially problematic reading that renders men invisible and unnecessary. As the role of the exemplary woman, and the iconography that came with it, were unstable, so too were the signals that were sent. Eleonora would have had to contend with these instabilities, and while the readings of the room may have varied, there was certainly potential for it to be read negatively as a blatant display of female autonomy. Eleonora’s role as an exemplary woman, and the stamp of approval from Vasari and Cosimo on the program, perhaps helped dissuade negative responses, but the instability of the signifiers remains.

The Sala di Sabine follows the same example. The room was originally intended for Eleonora’s ladies-in-waiting, but the duchess’ apartments were a somewhat public space, where she could guest, petitioners, and other prolific visitors – the audience would have varied.  

The room’s original function, however, remains relevant. It highlights the importance of female homosociality and independence while also allowing the normalization of sexual violence to go unchecked. The Sabine women, abducted by the Romans, would defend their abductors and new home, allowing prevailing notions of dominance through sexual conquest to continue and enforce a comfortable, patriarchal reading. Yet the fact remains that the Sabine women were not, in fact, simply complacent

91 Hoppe, 104-5.
with their abduction. They chose to stay because Romulus offered them rights they did not have in their original home. The Sabine women in turn choose to take the offer of more independence, siding with their conquerors and affirming the power of sexual conquest and patriarchal dominance, but also demonstrating the power of female homosociality and the desire on the part of the Sabine women for more rights. The duality of meaning seems to satisfy societal norms and hail the “masculine spirit” of exemplary women. The Sabine women are active, even as they propose peace. They rush to stand between the Roman and Sabine men, hands raised, present and alive instead of complacent and conquered as they were when abducted. As the Sabine women stand together, and as Penelope and her women work as a unit, so too does Eleonora stand with her ladies, and they are a force to be reckoned with.

Yet such imagery was not without its own instability. These images of female competence and homosociality, though balanced partially by other factors, remain unstable as signifiers. The aggressive display of female action, though subverted by the concept of women as peace makers to the discord of men at war, remains problematic within the archetype of the passive, exemplary woman. However such images were read, they ultimately challenged notions of proper femininity in the exemplary woman and offer us an example of women demonstrating action and their capabilities akin to their male relations.

The ambiguity of certain iconography, and the myriad of potential meanings, allowed women like Eleonora and Isabella to assert their statuses and power without the cost of

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negative reception. Themes of female autonomy, agency, and homosociality recur throughout the matronage of women like Isabella and Eleonora. Moreover, these themes bled over into their matronage that was focused not only on promoting themselves singularly, but also their personas as part of the expansive networks they could interact with. As individuals, women aligned themselves with canons of female excellence to strengthen their personas. As a group, however, women had even more opportunities to represent themselves. In the next chapter, I will discuss women breaching the spheres of the sacred and the secular to form connections with each other, which benefitted both Isabella and Eleonora not only in terms of promoting themselves, but also as means to continue their legacies even in death.
BUILDING BRIDGES

The separation of the sacred and secular has been a theme in much gender-centric Renaissance scholarship, despite the fact that the realms of the religious and the secular were far from separate over the course of the Renaissance. The discussion of religious culture, especially when focused on convents, has been conducted independently of discussions on court and secular culture. In turn, the term “secular” has been used to describe all spheres unaffiliated with institutional religion, and discussion of these spheres has often either lessened the importance of religious influence or dismissed it altogether.\[^{93}\] This is perhaps because convents were perceived as closed communities, shielded from the outside, secular world aside from the occasional donation from Renaissance elite or due to a lack of documentation about convent culture.

The entire concept of convent culture assumes a separation of the sacred and secular – that there was an entire culture within convents that was independent from the culture of the outside world. In fact, convent culture was shaped by the outside world. It was bound up in the culture of the Renaissance as a whole, responding to outside influences and norms. Though convents followed their own guidelines, those guidelines

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[^93]: This understanding of “sacred” and “secular” regards religious organizations and patronage as sacred/religious, whereas secular refers to court and princely activities and organizations. Though most scholars acknowledge the importance of piety and religion in Renaissance culture, the discourse on religion and secularity in terms of women is often polarized. There is thus little discussion of the importance of religion in the lives of women who did not build their public personas based on religious connections, such as Eleonora di Aragon. A good example of this is Isabella d’Este, whose religious connections and commissions have been consistently overshadowed by her secular patronage.
were formed in part by secular spheres and those organizations engaged the secular world for support and matronage.

Convents allowed women from various walks of life to engage with an expansive network of women through correspondence, gift-exchanges, and matronage. Moreover, depending on the convent, women could come from different classes and financial backgrounds, offering us a unique intersectionality not present in elite courts. In fact, most convents were key factors in the lives of widows and other lay-women with few marriage options. Other convents were more exclusive, dedicated to providing an elitist environment that enforced class barriers and demonstrated the status of both the convent itself and the women in it.94

Matronage and female religious institutions helped to strengthen female networks by offering women financial and emotional support, but they were also an invaluable source to women attempting to signal their status and demonstrate their power. Court and other elite women used their connections to convents to emphasize the religious aspects of their public personas. By identifying with convents, whether financially, spiritually, or artistically, women aligned themselves with a long-standing tradition of piety, chastity, and female kinship. They placed themselves within a powerful network that highlighted not only their best attributes, but also offered them a multitude of ways to signal their status and refine their public images.

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In this chapter, I will consider female religious communities and their influence on the matronage of women like Isabella d’Este and Eleonora di Toledo, as well as the influence of these women on their preferred institutions. As networks of patronage were essential to the Renaissance man’s artistically depicted sense of self, so too were networks of matronage to the Renaissance woman’s. I will consider how Isabella and Eleonora used convents to better the personas they wanted to display for the public. Moreover, I will contend that women aligning themselves with these communities understood the importance of such networks, and while they may have considered themselves individuals first and foremost, they also acknowledged themselves as part of a greater network, comparable to that of their male counterparts. These connections were essential to the identity of an elite woman in Renaissance culture.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first deals with the notion of “separate spheres” and how women constantly interacted across the realms of the sacred and the secular. I will discuss Eleonora di Toledo’s founding of La Concezione monastery, as well as her personal chapel, and how both effectively demonstrate the bridging of the gap between the sacred and the secular. I will consider the constraints that they posed, before leading into the benefits that Eleonora would have reaped from such a commission. I will stress the importance of breaching these so-called separate spheres for women of power and how their matronage of these groups helped them.

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The second section addresses specific examples of women jointly commissioning works of art that reference female networks and religious organizations. In this section, I will apply cost-benefits analyses to the commissions of Isabella d’Este and Margherita Cantelma to demonstrate how these women used their connections with religious organizations to signal their own piety and relevance. Finally, I will consider how convents embodied a sense of female homosociality and how, though some were more exclusive than others, they offered support to a range of women. Those convents that were more exclusive furthered the political or social aspirations of women and their families by connecting them to a broader network of powerful women.

**Bridging the gap: separate spheres and La Concezione**

In the existing scholarship on Renaissance art, the activities and patronage of convents have typically been discussed separately from the activities of secular patrons, suggesting a separation of the two spheres. The notion that Renaissance women were typically confined to domestic spaces and the assumed closed nature of convent culture has perhaps strengthened this perception. The enclosing walls of the convent were more than mere architecture; they functioned as enclosures to maintain the chastity and safety of their female inhabitants. As Saundra Weddle contends, in Florence (though not limited

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to Florentine convents) women needed to remain in the private realm, away from the view of outsiders to diminish the risk of damaging their reputations and statuses.\textsuperscript{97} The separation present in scholarship can be considered a reflection of the separation that seems apparent between Renaissance convents and the outside world. While there should be a clear separation between the sacred and the secular in theory, there was no clear distinction in practice. To discuss the sacred and the secular as independent entities denies relevant interactions between the two spheres.

The desire to separate the sacred from the secular is a factor in a broader, more complex notion of Renaissance convents. While some certainly took care to limit the amount of contact nuns had with the outside world, the convent walls were often breached by family and patrons.\textsuperscript{98} Even the most elite of convents were typically funded by patrons who were not members of ecclesiastical institutions, and though they followed different guidelines from those of the court, their inner-workings were a reflection of outside influences and outside privilege. Moreover, though it had a certain level of independence from the secular sphere, the religious sphere of the convent was constantly interacting with the secular in ways that, while seemingly contradictory to the notion of separating women to protect them, were perfectly reasonable in the Renaissance mindset.\textsuperscript{99} Furthermore, convents and the ruling class worked alongside and through each other in a symbiotic relationship.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 69.  
\textsuperscript{99} Weddle considers Florentine convents and those that visited them, finding that though there was a certain degree of concern for women’s chastity and religious learning, patrons and family were understood exceptions. Cavalli’s research suggests that this understanding extended beyond Florentine convents; the
The founding of the Santissima Concezione effectively bridges the gap between notions of sacred and secular separation. The concept and finances for the monastery were part of Eleonora’s last will and testament in 1562, but she would not live to see it begun. Instead, Cosimo I and her son, Ferdinando, carried out the project. The monastery was located in the western section of the Santa Maria Novella and stood as an impressive institution, intended as a sanctuary for elite Florentine women, who “before entering were expected to demonstrate nobility in the same manner as the Cavalieri of the said Order.” The costs [for Eleonora?] of the commission were notably high in terms of the selected space. It was built around the Sale del Papa, of the prominent Dominican monastery of Santa Maria Novella, of which the original rooms had functioned as quarters for visiting popes. The reappropriation of the historically significant site signaled the importance of the convent and Mediciean magnificence. Moreover, Cosimo selected well-known designers and artists to plan the space, with materials taken from buildings like the Duomo. The entirety of the convent, from its materials to its location, was a signal to all of Florence of the Medici’s power and assistance of religious institutions.

Este were regular visitors of some convents in Ferrara and Isabella engaged with convents in Mantua as well. Such interaction would have been more than acceptable.

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100 Turner, 127.
101 Turner, 127. (Giuseppe Richa, Notizie istoriche delle chiese fiorentine, divise ne’ suoi quartieri, (Florence: Viviani, 1754-62), 110-20.)
102 Turner, 134.
103 Ibid, 134.
La Concezione was far more exclusive than its mother house, Le Murate. Five nuns were taken from Le Murate to found the new institution.\textsuperscript{104} Despite the inclusive nature of its mother house, La Concezione housed only twenty girls initially and between sixty and seventy by the late seventeenth-century.\textsuperscript{105} The exclusivity of the monastery appealed to powerful families seeking to protect their daughter’s chastity and also to signal their own piety, thus creating a community within the monastery of socio-economic peers. More than that, it broadened the networks of the Mediciean line, connecting them to the families of the girls who stayed within the convent walls.

Though Eleonora did not live to see the monastery completed, her founding of it ensured her a long-standing legacy. Moreover, the nature of the convent – not as an inclusive, thriving community but as an elite space of protected chastity – would add to her persona as a woman of power and exception. There were considerable efforts made to ensure that Eleonora’s, and the Mediciean, influence would not be forgotten within the convent as well. Artistic commissions for the convent included “a bust of Eleonora, and the coat of arms of the duke and duchess painted on the communion window between the sisters and the altar.”\textsuperscript{106} This continued association ensured that Eleonora’s presence would never truly leave the convent. Furthermore, all such efforts continued to enforce the notion that the monastery was closely affiliated with the court and the Medici, emphasizing the relationship between convents and the ruling family, between Eleonora’s

\textsuperscript{104} K. J. P. Lowe, \textit{Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy}, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 219-20.
\textsuperscript{105} Turner, 138.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 135.
political power and her religious networks. The two were intertwined, and Eleonora’s persona used this connection to strengthen the signal that female capability and homosociality relied on each other.

That the monastery was constructed after Eleonora’s death negated virtually any chance of a negative reception towards the work reflecting back on her. Though she founded it, ultimately, the money funneled into the project and its success or failure would reflect back onto Cosimo I and their son. At worst, a failing monastery would badly represent her memory, but it is likely that the convent was just as essential to Cosimo’s self-promotion as it was to Eleonora, and the success of the monastery was a priority for him. Consequently, little attention has been paid to benefits Eleonora would have reaped on such an act of matronage and the focus has instead been on Cosimo and how the monastery functioned as a signal for his own associations with religious communities. The convent belonged to the Medici and the Knights of S. Stefano, though it followed Benedictine rules, fitting in with Cosimo’s own plans of self-promotion.\textsuperscript{107} As Turner contends, the convent was a reminder to the average Florentine of “the social hierarchy in the new duchy” and the embodiment of “wealth, power, and Christian ethics” for the Medici – specifically for Cosimo.\textsuperscript{108} Moreover, self-promotion did not stop at appealing to the masses. Commissioning magnificent religious works also functioned as a signal to God for the devout Renaissance elite. Eleonora and Cosimo would benefit from their patronage even in death.

\textsuperscript{107} Lowe, 220.
\textsuperscript{108} Turner, 129
The connection between Eleonora and the convent was a secure one, despite the control of Cosimo and Ferdinando over the project. Eleonora’s already established relationship with other convents ensured that her founding of La Concezione was not seen as a passive effort to continue her legacy, but as the culmination of a lifetime of financial support to female religious institutions and several projects, including her own personal chapel. In fact, Eleonora had a strong relationship with the sisters of Le Murate, explaining why they were chosen to sacrifice women from their ranks to the new monastery. Eleonora had close ties with a variety of convents, though Le Murate was undoubtedly her favorite.109 The duchess offered them constant financial support and thought highly of them.110 When they needed to rebuild their refectory in 1560, Eleonora gave them the money to do so.111 When they petitioned for a grant to complete a new infirmary, Eleonora once again provided.112

This financial support was partially based on an assumed responsibility on Eleonora’s part, based on notions of mutual obligation between the convent and the ruling family. Convents functioned as symbols of purity in their surrounding area, while in turn the ruling family provided convents various forms of support, typically financial.113 The relationship between the convent and the court was symbiotic in nature. As a result, the financial issues of the convent were often issues of the ruling class. However, Eleonora’s matronage to Le Murate was also part of an agenda to highlight the

110 Lowe, 219.
111 Ibid, 132.
113 Cavalli, 9.
duchess’ piety and personal devotion. In return for her consistent matronage, Eleonora benefitted from the public perception that she was engaged in a healthy, homosocial network consisting of prestigious and pious women. Founding La Concezione only strengthened this perception, aligning the new monastery with an already exemplary example and acknowledging the duchess’ relationship with the original convent.

Eleonora’s relationship with female religious institutions was further demonstrated in her personal chapel. The chapel is small and intimate, located within Eleonora’s apartments, but the rich decoration and the fact that the duchess had her own personal chapel at all were signals of status. Frescoes cover every wall, marking Eleonora’s chapel as an anomaly among typical Medici chapels. Bronzino’s *Lamentation* (Fig. 9), the altarpiece for Eleonora’s chapel, depicts the Virgin holding the adult Christ in her arms. The Virgin and dead Christ are the center of the composition, marking an integral part of the chapel’s imagery. Janet Cox-Rearick asserts that the Virgin is dressed in a nun’s habit, and that depictions of the Virgin as a nun were “commonplace in altarpieces painted for convents”, and offers as an example *Dead Christ with the Virgin Mary and the Magdalene* (Fig. 10), another work by Bronzino for just that purpose. That the figure of the Virgin could be read as a nun signals Eleonora’s association with convents. The chapel was enough of a testament to her piety, but a reference to monasteries would have placed Eleonora directly within the complex

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115 Ibid, 263.
networks of religious women’s communities. Even if the Virgin did not read as a nun\textsuperscript{116},
the chapel and its imagery reinforced Eleonora’s personal piety, her devotion to the arts
and to the faith, and her connection to female religious institutions.

Eleonora lived on in La Concezione. The monastery was very successful and an active
part of civic life until its suppression in the nineteenth-century.\textsuperscript{117} The duchess effectively
signaled not only her own spiritual immortality through the monastery, but also that of
the Medici. By associating herself with the convent, Eleonora situated herself within a
homosocial network of female devotion, and helped to create an intimate community of
women. This act of matronage does not exist separately from the secular works in her
apartments. In fact, it adds depth to Eleonora’s persona, which was built primarily from
iconography that associated her with homosocial networks and from her interaction with
such networks. Just as her husband projected multiple selves to his male homosocial
community, and potentially would have sent similar signals had his famous men cycle
been executed in his apartments\textsuperscript{118}, Eleonora highlighted her presence in her own
networks to promote herself. Through this promotion, and through these references, she
acknowledged herself as a member of a community of capable, exemplary women.

\textbf{Drawing connections: Isabella d’Este, Margherita Cantelma, and the sisterhood}

\textsuperscript{116} Some scholars, such as Bruce Edelstein, remain unconvinced with much of Cox-Rearick’s argument,
especially her assertion that the Virgin is not only depicted as a nun, but actually meant to be a portrait of
Cosimo I’s mother. At most, Edelstein contends that the Virgin was a general reference to Eleonora’s
relationship with various convents.

\textsuperscript{117} Turner, 128.

\textsuperscript{118} Cosimo was to have a famous men cycle in his apartments, emphasizing princely power and virtue to
complement Eleonora’s famous women cycle. It was never completed.
Convents were more than tools of self-promotion; they were community centers, offering different forms of support to the women that engaged with them. Beyond the relationship between convents and women of ruling families, within many convents were thriving homosocial communities. La Concezione was notably exclusive, but most convents were available to a variety of women, ranging from pious widows to unmarried young women. Moreover, they were intersectional in terms of class. Convents offered education for young women awaiting marriage or seeking safety during difficult times, or a place of refuge for older women and widows.\footnote{Cavalli, 36-7.} Le Murate, for example, offered Catherine de’ Medici education and protection throughout her youth, and she would continue to correspond with the abbesses there for the rest of her life.\footnote{Ibid, 36-7.}

Isabella d’Este would be known primarily for her secular commissions, but the marchesa had very close relationships with several convents, though she was especially close with the sisters of Corpus Christi and the monastery of S. Vincenzo. Isabella received roughly thirty letters from the nuns of S. Vincenzo and corresponded with them regularly, often referring to some sisters by name.\footnote{Ibid, 69-70.} Of her two youngest daughters, Ippolita and Livia, Ippolita would enter S. Vincenzo while Livia entered the monastery of Santa Paola. The choice of a monastic life for her daughters emphasized Isabella’s personal connection with female religious communities and also her devotion to the local saint Beata Osanna.\footnote{Hickson, 89.}
Originally displayed in the monastery of S. Vincenzo, The Veneration of the Beata Osanna Andreasi (Fig. 11), is a testament to Isabella’s place in the homosocial network of female religious communities and to her personal influence on the cult of the local saint. The work was commissioned jointly by Isabella and her lifelong friend, Margherita Cantelma, duchess of Sora, following the death of both of their husbands. The commission offers us the most explicit display of female homosociality in Isabella’s lifetime. At the center of the composition is the Beata Osanna Andreasi, a local saint whose healing powers Isabella personally experienced, and whose cult Isabella actively promoted. Her presence signifies not only the popularity of local, living female saints in Mantua, but also Isabella’s active engagement with the religious sphere. The work exists in a rich tradition and evolution of beata images, creating a visual culture for female Dominican communities during the time period.\textsuperscript{123}

To Osanna’s right kneel two figures, dressed as widows, hands pressed together and raised in veneration. The two figures have been identified as Isabella d’Este and Margherita Cantelma; Isabella kneels closest to the beata while Margherita kneels just behind Isabella. The two are portrayed together, separately from the other figures, isolating them as the patrons of the work. On Osanna’s left are three sisters of S. Vincenzo. One kneels as a parallel image to Isabella, while another kneels in the very back of the group, gazing upwards. The third figure, gazing upwards as well, is Isabella’s daughter, Ippolita, grouped with her Dominican sisters.

\textsuperscript{123} See: Hickson, 17-44 for more on beata images and the role of living, female saints in Mantua.
The kneeling women, though separated into different sections of the composition, are grouped together in their shared veneration of Osanna. She is the binding factor of their group, and undoubtedly functions not only as a reference to Isabella’s own activities in her cult, but also as a reference to female religious communities as a whole. She brings the women together – sisters, friends, mothers, and daughters. The presence of Ippolita reminds the viewer of Isabella’s choice of a monastic life for her daughter, the tether that holds Isabella to S. Vincenzo. The other sisters are extensions of her and Margherita’s religious network. Together, they convey the importance of the religious community and female homosociality in women’s lives. Young or old, widowed or awaiting to be married; they are all part of the network.

The work would have been displayed in S. Vincenzo to a primarily female audience, serving as a constant reminder of the community that the sisters of S. Vincenzo were part of. It signaled not only Isabella and Margherita’s places in the community, but the existence of the community as a whole. The work is, as Sally Hickson contends, “a city of women”, a “pictorial document of complex female relations.”\textsuperscript{124} The commission does more than attempt to convey the complexities and depth of female networks; it does so for other women to see, inviting them to engage with the same networks and continue to emulate the marchesa as other women had done throughout her youth and into her widowhood.

While the altarpiece demonstrates the importance of female community, it was also an excellent example of strategic propaganda. The commission can be seen as an

\textsuperscript{124} Hickson, 3.
effort on the marchesa’s part to redefine her public persona from the refined and knowledgeable lady of the court to the pious widow.¹²⁵ “It is,” Hickson succinctly argues, “a neatly synthesized piece of propaganda signaling Isabella d’Este’s transition to her new role… and reinforcing her ties to the neighborhood saint and to the local monastic communities for whom she sought solace and support.”¹²⁶ Though Isabella certainly reformulated her public image to one of the virtuous widow, she did not do away with her previous identification. She merely expanded it, using this “city of women” to strengthen her signal.

Isabella was not the only one sending signals in this work. Margherita Cantelma directly relates herself to Isabella and demonstrates her own place within the community of religious women as well. Cantelma would strengthen her own signal of personal piety and devotion by founding her own monastery, Santa Maria delle Presentazione. She began preparations in 1530, but would not live to see it completed. In her last will and testament, she left funds and instructions for the decoration of the chapel and provisions for all necessary ornaments for the monastery which was to be built in the monastery church of the Augustinian brothers of Sant’Agnese.¹²⁷ In Margherita’s passing, Isabella would take it upon herself to execute and complete the monastery.

Not unlike Eleonora, Margherita likely hoped to continue her legacy with the monastery. It did not reach the same level of success as La Concezione and there is virtually nothing left of the buildings. Regardless, Margherita’s wishes were ultimately

¹²⁵ Ibid, 43.
¹²⁶ Ibid, 43-4.
¹²⁷ Ibid, 70.
fulfilled by Isabella. By overseeing the construction and completion of the monastery, Isabella immortalized both Cantelma’s place in the network of religious women and their friendship. She spent her last few years ensuring that the monastery came to completion, until her death in 1539.\textsuperscript{128}

Though the monastery was founded by Margherita, Isabella’s oversight of the construction, and of the monastery as a whole, added to her own legacy. It seems likely that the opportunity to promote herself and her network even further was not lost on Isabella. However, it also seems likely that the monastery was equal parts a labor of love. Aside from helping to manage Margherita’s estate, she asked Battista Stabellino to compose a humanist epitaph for her as well, admitting that of everyone else, only Stabellino knew the depth of the love she felt for Margherita.\textsuperscript{129} Isabella supported her own legacy with her role in the construction of Santa Maria delle Presentazione, but by doing so, she also acknowledged the necessity of supporting one’s community, even in death. As long as Santa Maria delle Presentazione stood, it would remain a reminder of Isabella’s relationship with such communities, and of her love for Margherita.

Religious networks and female homosociality, though they were not the single source from which women could draw their public images, were an invaluable asset to many women of power. Themes of homosociality and devotion thread through the religious commissions of Isabella and Eleonora in tandem with themes of female independence, agency, and excellence. Though both women incorporated their

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 74
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 71-2. (Isabella’s letter to Stabellino, 12 March 1532)
relationships with these communities into their matronage later in life (and, at times, earlier, as in Eleonora’s case), their personas were multi-faceted, built from a variety of examples and signals. Religious communities were only part of them. Yet almost all of the examples women drew from when self-fashioning were bred from their female predecessors, or from a language of homosociality and kinship.
CONCLUSION

The messages of female agency and homosociality that underlie the matronage of Isabella d’Este and Eleonora di Toledo are only small examples of the expansive matronage network. Notions of exemplary womanhood and female homosocial communities shaped female identities in the works of powerful women seeking to signal their status. Matronage thus had its own language, distinct from that of male patronage, given the different constraints faced by female patrons and the different ways they interacted with their networks. However, matronage was also built from patronage, working from similar desires and signals, but worked over to send different signals.

If patronage was a sign of status and distinction, and if it thrived because of the intricate networks of male homosociality and multiple male selves, then matronage certainly did the same, if through notably different means. Women used male patronage as a paradigm for their own practices of matronage, and thus, it seems obvious that networks of matronage would sit parallel to many of their male counterparts. Despite a lack of scholarly attention to these networks and how they influenced matronage, they were equally complex and relevant to women’s self-promotion, just as the networks that men cultivated were essential to their own identity and signals.

The identifier of “exemplum” and ambiguous iconography were invaluable assets to a woman shaping or re-shaping her social persona, as both allowed her to acknowledge and placate patriarchal norms and control, while also subverting them. A multitude of potential readings, of potential signals, was useful to elite women; they could represent
themselves, their networks, and their status without reproach while also establishing their own competence and agency. Moreover, references to ones’ network – secular or religious – could strengthen those signals. The religious sphere of womanhood was tethered to the secular, and women working across the boundaries of the convent and the court reinforced their networks, expanding them, while using the connections they made to highlight not only their virtue but also their place in something bigger than themselves.

Female homosociality and themes of kinship, independence, and action were important avenues of matronage. By examining these aspects of female patronage, we open the discourse on the experiences and matronage of Renaissance women as a whole. We begin to ask more questions: How did other women signal to or with their networks? How did other women use them? How did women of different classes respond to, or use, imagery differently? What can we take from these interactions? Isabella and Eleonora are not isolated cases of matronage with homosocial undertones; they were inspired by women, inspired other women, and are only two examples in the vast network of matronage.
FIGURES

Figure 1: Agnolo Bronzino, *Cosimo I as Orpheus*, 1537-9. [Accessed through ArtStor.]
Figure 2: Perugino, *The Combat of Love and Chastity*, 1505. [Accessed through ArtStor.]

Figure 3: Andrea Mantegna, *Mars and Venus (Parnassus)*, 1497. [Accessed through ArtStor.]
Figure 4: Agnolo Bronzino, *Eleonora di Toledo and Son Giovanni*, 1544-5. [Accessed through ArtStor.]

Figure 5: Giorgio Vasari, *The Sabine Women Bring Peace Between the Romans and Sabines*, 1561-2. [Accessed through ArtStor.]
Figure 6: Giorgio Vasari and Stradanus, *Ester and Ahasuerus*, 1561-2. [Accessed through ArtStor.]
Figure 7: Stradanus, *Penelope Weaving*, 1561-2. [Accessed through ArtStor.]

Figure 8: Stradanus, *Gualdrada Refuses to Kiss Otto IV*, 1561-2. [Accessed through ArtStor.]
Figure 9: Agnolo Bronzino, *Lamentation*, 1543-5.
Figure 10: Agnolo Bronzino, *Dead Christ with the Virgin Mary and the Magdalene*, 1530.
Figure 11: Francesco Bonsignori, The Veneration of the Beata Osanna Andreasi, 1519. [From Sally Hickson, Sally Hickson, Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua Matrons, Mystics and Monasteries, (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), p. 3.]
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BIOGRAPHY

Bianca Rawlings graduated from Franklin High School, Franklin, Virginia, in 2008. She graduated from Old Dominion University in 2013 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Studio and Art History. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts from George Mason University in Art History. She is expected to graduate in Fall 2015.