

EPISTOLARY NETWORKS: ELITE WOMEN AS CULTURAL AGENTS IN EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

GIULIA TORELLO-HILL 

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of elite women's networks in the early dissemination of the Spanish chivalric romances *Tirant lo Blanc* (1490) and *Amadís de Gaula* (1508) across the Italian peninsula in the early sixteenth century. My analysis is underpinned by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field and particularly his acknowledgement that cultural agents are guided by their appreciation for cultural artefacts, as well as by their collaborative but competitive endeavours to obtain them. Through analysis of epistolary correspondence between Isabella d'Este, Antonia del Balzo and their cultural mediators, it demonstrates how elite women wielded significant cultural agency through literary patronage and strategic networking and helped shape the development of the chivalric genre in Italy. This study advocates for a networked approach to literary studies that moves beyond nation-based frameworks to view literary texts as multilayered products of dynamic transnational exchanges.

Keywords: *Tirant lo Blanc*; *Amadís de Gaula*; Isabella d'Este; Antonia del Balzo; epistolary networks; Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital; literary canon formation

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE EARLY CIRCULATION of the Spanish chivalric romances *Tirant lo Blanc* (Valencia, 1490) and *Amadís de Gaula* (Zaragoza, 1508) across the Italian peninsula, focusing on the role of elite women in their dissemination. Written in Catalan by Joanot Martorell and published posthumously, *Tirant lo Blanc* describes the feats of the Breton knight Tirant the White who eventually saves Byzantium from the Ottoman Turks. Published less than two decades later, Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's *Amadís de Gaula* narrates the adventures of the knight Amadís, who is of noble lineage but has been abandoned at birth, in his quest to find his parents. Central to the plotline is also Amadís's love for Oriana, the daughter of King

Lisuarte of England.¹ Despite their eventual popularity, these works seem to have received a lukewarm reception in Spain, perhaps due to their unconventional portrayal of female characters, which must have raised concerns among conservative elites.² *Tirant lo Blanc* was published a second time in Barcelona in 1497, while a second edition of *Amadís de Gaula* at the press of Jacobo Cromberger appeared in Seville in 1511. Jorge Coci, the original publisher of the 1508 edition, reprinted it in 1521, by which time it had already been printed in Italy.³

In 1519 Antonio Salamanca, a Spanish-born printer based in Rome, published *Amadís de Gaula* after securing a ten-year papal privilege.⁴ In 1526, the publication of the sequel of the four-book saga in collaboration with Juan de Junta helped reignite interest in Spain, leading to thirty editions printed between 1521 and 1596. However, the dissemination of *Amadís de Gaula* and *Tirant lo Blanc* had begun two decades earlier facilitated by networks of elite women connected through dynastic marriages. Building on Bourdieu's theory of the cultural capital field, which highlights how artistic mediators are producers of the value and meaning of the work, this article argues that elite women in early modern Italy wielded cultural capital through their literary patronage and networks.⁵

In late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Italy, women's cultural networks operated largely through epistolary correspondence. Studies of women's epistolary communities in the early modern period, particularly in England, have discussed the sociability of this genre that helped forge 'female alliances'.⁶ More specific to the context of this article, extensive studies of the large volume of Isabella d'Este's letters have uncovered her cunning and strategic use of letter writing as a means to assert her social standing, authority and prestige.⁷ Notwithstanding the value of these studies, they have created a somewhat distorted perception of the uniqueness of her endeavours. This article situates the dissemination of *Tirant lo Blanc* and *Amadís de Gaula* within a broader network of female agency that contributed to the transnational development of the chivalric genre.

The circulation of 'Tirant lo Blanc' and 'Amadís de Gaula' in Italy

Tirant lo Blanc had already begun to circulate within the Aragonese court in Naples in 1500, if not earlier. Antonia del Balzo, a member of one of the most powerful families of the Neapolitan nobility, whose sister Isabella was the consort of the King of Aragon, obtained a copy of *Tirant* sometime in 1500 during a visit to Naples. In a letter of 7 December 1500, Antonia, who was married to Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, the Duke of Bozzolo and Sabbioneta, relented to the request of her sister-in-law Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, who insisted the chivalric romance be sent to her right away, although under strict recommendation that it be sent back as soon as possible. In the early months of 1501 Isabella had already commissioned the courtier Niccolò da Correggio to produce a translation of this work into Italian, which was never brought to completion following his death in 1508 and is now lost.

Isabella's correspondence with Jacopo d'Atri, the Mantuan ambassador at the French court, indicates that in 1510, ten years after borrowing Antonia del Balzo's

copy of *Tirant lo Blanc*, Isabella was still attempting to acquire her own, this time through the mediation of Jeronimo de Cabanilles, the Spanish ambassador at the French court. Instead, d'Atri sent Isabella a copy of the newly published romance *Amadis de Gaula* that de Cabanilles had gifted her while he was still attempting to retrieve *Tirant lo Blanc*.⁸

Isabella's perseverance was ultimately rewarded; in the inventory of her voluminous library are listed two copies of *Tirant lo Blanc*, one in the original Catalan and one translated into Italian. The Italian translation is presumably that of Lelio Manfredi, written between 1514 and 1519, but only published in Venice in 1538, and dedicated to Isabella's son, Federico Gonzaga, the Marquis of Mantua.⁹ The library inventory also records a copy of *Amadis de Gaula* 'scritto a mano' [handwritten], which might be the manuscript copy that was transcribed in Paris from Cabanilles's personal copy and sent to Isabella in 1510.¹⁰

Women's cultural networks

The epistolary exchange between Isabella d'Este and Antonia del Balzo provides a glimpse into the cultural agency of elite women in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Related through dynastic marriages, the consorts of the rulers of Mantua (Isabella d'Este), nearby Bozzolo and Sabbioneta (Antonia del Balzo), Ferrara (Isabella d'Aragona [1472–93], Lucrezia Borgia [1502–19]), Milan (Beatrice d'Este [1491–97]), Bologna (Lucrezia d'Este), Urbino (Elisabetta Gonzaga) and the Aragonese court in Naples established cultural networks that facilitated the exchange of commodities and artists – poets, versifiers, translators and musicians – fostering the circulation and popularization of literary genres. In their role as artistic mediators, they became producers of the value and meaning of the work.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural agents are guided by their 'cultural capital', their appreciation for 'cultural artefacts', as well as by their collaborative but competitive endeavour to obtain them.¹¹ An example of this dichotomy of collaboration and competition is the epistolary correspondence between Isabella d'Este and Antonia del Balzo surrounding the acquisition and exchange of Spanish romances. This exchange of commodities, artists and news relied heavily on complex networks of diplomats and court intellectuals who functioned as mediators, negotiating and outsourcing literary outputs. By acquiring these texts and commissioning translations, these elite women asserted their place in elite intellectual circles, aligning with Bourdieu's argument that cultural capital operates as a form of social distinction.

The courts of Ferrara, Mantua, Milan and nearby Bozzolo were particularly interested in, and enjoyed access to, the literary novelties from Spain. Ferrara had a direct connection with the Aragonese court following the wedding of Eleonora of Aragon, the daughter of King Ferrante, with Ercole I, the Duke of Ferrara, who had spent his youth in Naples and was well versed in Spanish.¹² His heir, Alfonso I, who ruled Ferrara from 1505, was married to Lucrezia Borgia, the offspring of a Spanish noble family. Moreover, in 1508 Isabella del Balzo, the widow of the King of Naples, moved to the Este court in Ferrara, taking with her part of the royal library.¹³

The patronage of these elite women is partly known through individual studies that have focused mostly on Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, whose large correspondence has survived nearly intact, but the dynamics of these cultural exchanges is yet to be fully acknowledged and studied as a network. As Randal Johnson posits in his discussion of Bourdieu's theory of fields, 'agents do not act in a vacuum, but rather in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations'.¹⁴ To analyse the cultural agency of these elite women as a network that is both transnational and multilingual invites a more nuanced interpretation of the development of the chivalric genre in Italy between the last quarter of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, when, in Ferrara, Matteo Maria Boiardo was composing his *Orlando Innamorato*, which remained incomplete after his death in 1494, Francesco Cieco da Ferrara was writing his *Mambriano* and Ludovico Ariosto his *Orlando Furioso*.

The influence of Spanish romance, and particularly *Tirant lo Blanc*, on the development of this genre in Italy has already been acknowledged by critics.¹⁵ There is, however, the need for a more generative approach that goes beyond the determination of the debt of Italian chivalric romance to these earlier Spanish works and considers the literary canon as a network that encompasses the layering and intertextuality of different traditions. In this respect, Caroline Levine's approach to Victorian literature that shifts from the nation to the network is a productive way of examining literary texts. The first step, as Levine argues, is to move away from the 'mystifying and troubling category of autochthony – the notion that writers and texts are linked to the land of their birth'.¹⁶ This is particularly relevant to the genre of chivalric romance that typically originates from transnational oral traditions that span centuries and therefore are quintessentially multi-authored and multilayered.

While the concept of nation per se may not seem to be a fitting one due to the political fragmentation of early modern Italy, the traditional approach to literary texts produced in this period has been mostly based on the (relative) homogeneity of the Italian language. The fact that this approach still needs debunking is demonstrated by the transnational focus that informs several contributions in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Italian Literature*.¹⁷ By way of example, the introductory essay by Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi 'calls into question assumptions of geographic, cultural, or linguistic homogeneity and their historical role in defining an Italian literary canon [...] arguing instead in favor of a more fluid and inclusive notion of "Italian literature"',¹⁸

Burdett and Polezzi's remarks are supported by examples largely taken from post-colonial and diasporic literature. Less commonly discussed by the critics is the role played in the early sixteenth century by a new cosmopolitan aristocracy, a multilingual readership that is interested in outsourcing and exchanging novel literary products. Although this readership is fundamentally elitist, it deserves scholarly attention since these networks reached every corner of the peninsula and involved not only the ruling families but also their very large entourages.

Chivalric romance enjoyed an enduring popularity among female readerships ever since the Middle Ages despite warnings against the dangers of exposing women to feminine paradigms that could divert them away from societal norms and

expectations.¹⁹ What sets *Tirant* and *Amadís* apart from other chivalric romances is their incorporation of epistolary exchanges that confer depth to the representation of characters and often prove functional to plot development. Studies on the imagery and rhetorical devices used in these fictional letters have revealed how Martorell and Rodríguez de Montalvo wove into their texts rhetorical tropes mostly extrapolated from Ovid's *Heroides*.²⁰

'Heroides' as letter writing models and female readerships

The *Heroides* consist of fifteen letters in verse written by fictional women from classical mythology and addressed to their lovers. This catalogue of women includes Penelope, the embodiment of the loyal wife; Dido, torn by unrequited love for Aeneas; and the sorceress Medea, the victim of Jason's betrayal. These letters are complemented by six responses written by the addressed heroes, which are believed to have been composed by Ovid at a later date, but were considered by humanists to be coeval to the heroines' letters.²¹

The *Heroides* entered the school curriculum in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance their popularity surpassed even that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. They were considered a valuable pedagogical text for rhetorical training, as well as for their moral content. Each letter provided a reasonably short text containing a goldmine of aphorisms and was considered particularly suited to teaching young students to write persuasive declamations known as *suasoriae*.²² The rise of a mercantile class in Italy and the development of chanceries within city-states made training in letter writing an essential element to the conduct of day-to-day business and so epistles from classical antiquity, like the *Heroides*, became texts of great interest.

Despite moral concerns, the *Heroides* were popular among female readerships, particularly in translations in vernacular languages, which appeared in Italy, Spain and France between the late thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries and had a wider circulation in print from the last quarter of the fifteenth century.²³ In Italy, six translations were printed between 1474 and 1490 in Naples (1474, 1475, 1480), Brescia (1489, 1491) and Rome (1490). The translator's prefatory note to these editions addresses both young male and female readers ('*li giouani huomini e le giouani pulzelle*', and '*gioveni e donne*' in the verse translation published in Brescia) and emphasizes the moral value of the work that offers exempla of honest love to be pursued and dishonest love to be shunned.

Love letters were also included in letter writing manuals that began to be published in print from the late fifteenth century. Instructional manuals were complemented by classical exempla and, from the early sixteenth century, they were often published in the portable and inexpensive octavo format. Francesco Negri's *Opusculum ad epistolas scribendas* [*Manual for Letter Writing*], first published in Venice in 1488, included guidelines on how to compose an *epistola amatoria* [love letter], differentiating between the letter *honesta* [chaste], which conveyed friendly affection, and the letter *turpis* [licentious], written to young women by their lovers.²⁴

Negri's manual was printed thirty-eight times between 1487 and 1500, across Italy, Germany, France, Spain and Flanders.²⁵

From the second quarter of the sixteenth century, letter writing manuals began to be published in vernacular languages as well. These include the *Opera amorosa che insegna a componer lettere e a rispondere a persone d'amor ferite* [*An Amorous Work That Teaches to Write Letters and Reply to People Wounded by Love*], also known as *Il rifugio degli amanti* [*The Lovers' Refuge*] by Giovanni Tagliente, first published in 1527.²⁶ This collection of letters that draws on tropes from classical literature, particularly Ovid and elegiac poetry, as well as from Petrarchist poetry and the formulaic language of courtly love, postdates the exchange between Isabella d'Este and Antonia del Balzo. Nevertheless, it deserves a mention since, although it is advertised as a letter writing manual, it does not contain instructions on how to compose letters and is a collection solely of love letters. The fictional letters are unique in presenting many different relationships, including extramarital affairs, that involve characters of diverse social standing. The absence of categorization within the parameters of rhetoric and the content of the letters that portray women as unchaste or even adulterous indicate that this was not an instructional manual after all, but rather leisure reading.

Like in Ovid's *Heroides*, the writers and the addressees of these letters are fictional characters, but the specificity of their names, origins and situations confers on them a degree of verisimilitude that was likely to engage the reader, providing what Roseen Giles calls an 'over the shoulder perspective' in which a readership or audience can view themselves as the recipient of these letters.²⁷ Giles dates the development of the *lettera amorosa*, a fictional love letter set to music, back to the early sixteenth century within the intellectual milieu inhabited by the women of the elites discussed in this article. The sensory experience of the *lettera amorosa* was certain to heighten the affective response of the audience.²⁸ The genre is typically associated with seventeenth-century composers such as Claudio Monteverdi, but the earliest known example is the text in *terza rima* composed by Antonio Tebaldeo in Ferrara before 1502, which circulated widely in the early sixteenth century. It is preserved as a three-voice frottola by an anonymous composer in a manuscript copied in Mantua for Isabella d'Este. The second extant example of a *lettera amorosa*, performed around 1512 in Ferrara, drew upon *Heroides* VII, the letter penned by Dido, and was set to music by Bartolomeo Tromboncino while he was in the service of Lucrezia Borgia.²⁹ The *lettera amorosa* testifies to the impact of the cultural agency of elite networks that facilitated the cross-fertilization of genres.

Letter writing in 'Tirant lo Blanch' and 'Amadís de Gaula'

Love letters form a conspicuous part of the epistolary exchanges that feature in both *Tirant lo Blanc* and *Amadís de Gaula*. According to the taxonomy established by Maria Carmen Marín Pina, in *Amadís de Gaula* love letters can be classified into two categories: *cartas de reproche y ruptura* [letters of reproach and serving to break up relationships], comparable to those penned by the abandoned Ovidian heroines,

and *cartas de declaración de amor y conciliación* [letters declaring love and prompting reconciliation].³⁰

Tirant lo Blanc features ten love letters, eight of which are exchanged between two couples – Princess Estefania and Diafebus; Tirant and Princess Carmesina – who are secretly married.³¹ Those penned by the women are mostly letters of reproach or serve to break up the relationships, like those of the Ovidian heroines, while those written by the men are letters of declaring love and prompting reconciliation. One exception to this is the letter written by the Queen of Macedonia to her husband from which transpires her preoccupation for his safety and the bond of deep affection they share. The reply, although written by Tirant while the king is recovering after being freed from captivity, reassures her about his welfare and conveys the same sentiment and longing to be reunited.

Although, judging by the exchange between the young couples, the male correspondents seem to be the voice of reason against the sometimes capricious female responses, Tirant is also presented as a victim of his love for Carmesina, as shown in his *lamentació d'amor que fa Tirant* [*Tirant's Love Lamentation*] in Chapter 120, couched in classical and Petrarchist tropes. His words resemble the passionate speech of the mythological heroines from the *Heroides* who, despite suffering from jealousy, neglect or betrayal, are all overpowered by love. The representation of the vulnerability of the valiant knight invites reflection on 'la força igualadora de l'amor' [the equalizing power of love] that would have struck a chord with readers from the Italian elites who were often forced into loveless arranged marriages.³²

On balance, letter writing in *Tirant lo Blanc* is an activity shared by both male and female characters. By contrast, in *Amadís de Gaula* letter writing is gender-polarized; male characters write brief war letters while female characters 'do much of the writing'.³³ *Amadís de Gaula* features thirty-eight named female characters against male counterparts of over two hundred. Yet, most of the thirty-four letters mentioned in the text, fifteen of which are quoted, are written by female characters, while male characters usually pen only short diplomatic letters.³⁴ Letter writing becomes a means through which women can assert their agency and authority. The sorceress Urganda, who is endowed with the gift of foresight, writes prophetic letters; Queen Brisena writes to Amadís following the disappearance of her husband Lisuarte, the King of England, to remind him of his obligation to find the king.³⁵

These letters showcase women's mastery of rhetorical skills.³⁶ For instance, in her fiery letter to Amadís, Oriana equates her faith to that of Medea, betrayed by Jason, establishing an explicit intertextuality with the twelfth letter of the *Heroides*.³⁷ Like Medea, she rebukes Amadís for his disloyalty and ends her speech with a curse. Oriana's letter has a profound effect on Amadís who is struck by grief and withdraws from battle, choosing instead to live like a hermit and changing his name to Beltenebros. Oriana's rejection has deprived him not only of his status, but also of his very identity. Oriana's pretended victimhood is played out through her mastery of language that ultimately overpowers Amadís.³⁸

Conclusion

The epistolary exchanges between Isabella d'Este, Antonia del Balzo and mediators such as ambassadors, poets and translators illuminate the cultural agency of elite women in early sixteenth-century Italy. Letter writing, along with the circulation of novel texts – in this case Spanish chivalric romances – operated as cultural mediation, as well as social positioning. Within these networks, elite women exerted their cultural agency through collaboration and competition. They accumulated their social capital through literary patronage, while also establishing their position in what Bourdieu has termed a 'field'. Their strategic use of literary networks validates Bourdieu's claims according to which cultural capital acts through social structures that help foster cultural trends.

Among other cultural artefacts, *Tirant lo Blanc* and *Amadís de Gaula* found an engaged and receptive audience in these elites due to the prominent role accorded to female letter writing in these texts. The romances' representation of agency through letter writing mirrored the elite women's frequent correspondence both in domestic settings, as they managed the day-to-day administration of their household, and in business and diplomatic negotiations, as state regents in the absence of their spouses. Although their epistolary exchanges sometimes featured elements of affective domesticity, in the highly bureaucratized systems of the chanceries they were far from private or intimate. However, like the fictional letters woven into the narrative of *Tirant lo Blanc* and *Amadís de Gaula* that often mask strategic purposes in their overtly emotional responses, the correspondence of elite women, in domestic settings as well as in the public sphere, tempered affective language with diplomatic calculation. The fictional letters of Spanish chivalric romances provided a validation of the empowering force of rhetorical skills when it came to navigating social and cultural networks.

The networked approach discussed in this article has highlighted the importance of moving beyond nation-based studies to gain a better understanding of how literary works circulate and gain cultural value through social networks. A networked approach to literature has the potential to uncover the multilayered intertextuality and interconnectedness of transnational literary traditions. This approach allows us to conceive of literary texts as dynamic products entrenched in a web of cultural encounters and exchanges that shaped literary canons.

The University of New England
Australia
 gtorello@une.edu.au
 ORCID 0000-0001-8601-2536

NOTES

¹ On *Tirant lo Blanc* see Martí de Riquer, *Aproximació al 'Tirant lo Blanc'* (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1990) and Rafael Beltrán, *'Tirant lo Blanc' de Joanot Martorell* (Madrid: Síntesis, 2006). For further references see Rafael Beltrán and Josep Izquierdo, 'Bibliografía d'estudis sobre *Tirant lo Blanc*',

Llengua i literatura, 7 (1996), 345–405; ‘Suplement bibliogràfic’, *Tirant*, 17 (2014), 291–94. On *Amadís de Gaula*, see James Donald Fogelquist, *El ‘Amadís’ y el género de la historia fingida* (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1982); Martí de Riquer, *Estudios sobre el ‘Amadís de Gaula’* (Barcelona: Sirmio, 1987); ‘*Amadís de Gaula*’, 1508: *Quinientos años de libros de caballerías*, ed. by José Manuel Lucía Megías (Madrid: Biblioteca Nacional de España, 2008); ‘*Amadís* y sus libros: 500 años’, ed. by Aurelio González and Axayácatl Campos García Rojas (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Lingüísticos y Literarios, 2009). On the reception of *Amadís* in the second half of the sixteenth century, for France see Marian Rothstein, *Reading in the Renaissance: ‘Amadis de Gaule’ and the Lessons of Memory* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999) and for England see Helen Moore, ‘*Amadís*’ in *English: A Study in the Reading of Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

² Jaume Torró and Albert Lloret, ‘Textual Bibliography for *Tirant lo Blanc*’, *Ecdotica*, 20 (2023), 37–61. Of the manuscript tradition of *Tirant lo Blanc*, only a single manuscript leaf survives, as discussed in Jaume J. Chiner, *El viure novel·lesc: biografia de Joanot Martorell (amb un fragment d’un manuscrit del ‘Tirant lo Blanch’)* (Alcoi: Marfil, 1993), pp. 169–75, 186–87.

³ *Tirant lo Blanc*’s first edition was published by Nicholas Spindeler for Johan Rix on 20 November 1490 (*Incunabula Short Title Catalogue* (ISTC) itoo380000); the second edition was printed in Barcelona by Peter Michael and Diego de Gumiel on 16 September 1497 (ISTC itoo381000). *Amadís de Gaula*’s first known edition printed in Zaragoza by Jorge Coci (*Universal Short Title Catalogue* (USTC) 342622) survives in a single copy, now at the British Library, reprinted in 1521 (USTC 348441). The 1511 edition by Jacobo Cromberger appears to be lost. Jacobo and Juan Cromberger published a second illustrated edition in 1526 (USTC 344299).

⁴ USTC 802205. On Antonio Salamanca see Valeria Pagani, ‘Documents on Antonio Salamanca’, in *Print Quarterly*, 17 (2000), 148–55; José Luis Gonzalo Sánchez-Molero, ‘Antonio de Salamanca y los libros españoles en la Roma del siglo XVI’, in *Roma y España: un crisol de la cultura europea en la Edad Moderna (actas del Congreso Internacional celebrado en la Real Academia de España en Roma del 8 al 12 de mayo de 2007)*, ed. by Carlos José Hernando Sánchez, 2 vols (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior, 2007), 1, 335–65.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁶ I have borrowed this term from Amanda E. Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁷ Sarah Cockram, ‘Epistolary Masks: Self-Presentation and Dissimulation in the Letters of Isabella d’Este’, *Italian Studies*, 64.1 (2009), 20–37; Deanna Shemek, ‘“Ci Ci” and “Pa Pa”: Script, Mimicry and Mediation in Isabella d’Este’s Letters’, *Rinascimento*, 43 (2003), 75–91; Deanna Shemek, ‘In Continuous Expectation: Isabella d’Este’s Epistolary Desire’, in *Phaethon’s Children: The Este Court and its Culture in Early Modern Ferrara*, ed. by Dennis Looney and Deanna Shemek (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), pp. 333–84; Deanna Shemek, ‘Isabella d’Este and the Properties of Persuasion’, in *Women’s Letters across Europe, 1400–1700: Form and Persuasion*, ed. by Jane Couchman and Ann M. Crabb (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 108–34; Carolyn James, ‘Marriage by Correspondence: Politics and Domesticity in the Letters of Isabella d’Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 65.2 (2012), 321–52; Carolyn James, *A Renaissance Marriage: The Political and Personal Alliance of Isabella d’Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁸ See the Appendix; Jacopo Gesiot, ‘Il *Tirant lo Blanch* tra i versi del Mambriano di Francesco Cieco da Ferrara’, *Historias Fingidas*, 3 (2015), 189–210 (pp. 190–91, nn. 2–3). On Jerónimo de Cabanilles see J. Martí Ferrando, ‘Jerónimo de Cabanilles Vilarrasa y Gallach’, *Real Academia de la Historia, Diccionario Biográfico Electrónico*, [n.d.] <<http://dbe.rah.es/biografias/39437/jeronimo-de-cabanilles-vilarrasa-y-gallach>> [accessed 12 December 2024].

⁹ USTC 841246. On Isabella d’Este’s library see Brian Richardson, ‘Isabella d’Este and the Social Uses of Books’, *La Bibliofilia*, 114.3 (2012), 293–325. On Lelio Manfredi’s translation see Chiara Concina, ‘Ancora sulla fortuna del “Tirant” in Italia (con alcune postille sulla traduzione di Lelio Manfredi)’, in *More about “Tirant lo Blanc”/Més sobre el “Tirant lo Blanc”: From the Sources to the Tradition/De les fonts a la tradició*, ed. by Anna Maria Babbi and Vicent Josep Escartí (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), pp. 119–38. On the presence of Spanish works in Isabella d’Este’s library, see Jacopo Gesiot, ‘Mezzogiorno aragonese e settentrione cortigiano: una direttrice per la diffusione

delle culture iberiche in Italia', *Historias fingidas*, 4 (2016), 205–32, (pp. 218–20); Daniela Ferrari, *Le collezioni Gonzaga. L'inventario dei beni del 1540–1542* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2003); Elisa Borsari, 'Los libros de caballerías en la corte de los Gonzaga, señores de Mantua: la biblioteca de Isabela de Este y Federico III', in *De Cavaleiros e Cavalarias. Por terras de Europa e Américas*, ed. by Lênia Márcia Mongelli (San Paolo: Humanitas, 2012), pp. 191–203.

¹⁰ See the [Appendix](#), n. iv. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

¹¹ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 79.

¹² Gesiot, 'Mezzogiorno aragonese e settentrione cortigiano', p. 212.

¹³ For an excellent overview of the increasing popularity of both Castilian and Catalan texts in late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Gesiot, 'Mezzogiorno aragonese e settentrione cortigiano', pp. 214–16. On the vast and multilingual Aragonese library, see Santiago López-Ríos Moreno, 'A New Inventory of the Royal Aragonese Library of Naples', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 65.1 (2002), 201–43; Gennaro Toscano, 'La biblioteca napoletana dei re d'Aragona da Tammaro De Marinis ad oggi. Studi e prospettive', in *Biblioteche nel Regno fra Tre e Cinquecento: Atti del Convegno di Studi (Bari, 6–7 febbraio 2008)*, ed. by Claudia Corfiati and Mauro de Nichilo (Lecce: Pensa MultiMedia, 2009), pp. 29–64.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 6.

¹⁵ Gesiot, 'Il *Tirant lo Blanch* tra i versi del *Mambriano*'; María de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz, 'Tracce del *Tirant lo Blanc* fra le righe dell' *Orlando Furioso*', in '*Qui fruit ne sap collir*'. *Homenatge a Lola Badia*, ed. by Anna Alberni, Lluís Cifuentes, Joan Santanach and Albert Soler, 2 vols (Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2021), 2, 27–38.

¹⁶ Caroline Levine, 'From Nation to Network', *Victorian Studies*, 55.4 (2013), 647–66 (p. 649).

¹⁷ *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Literature*, ed. by Stefano Jossa (online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 September 2024) <<https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/53209>> [accessed 14 March 2025].

¹⁸ Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi, 'Beyond the National Paradigm: Transnational and Translational Approaches to Italian Literature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Literature*, ed. by Jossa, para. 2–6.

¹⁹ For an extensive treatment of women's reading interests and their access to books, see Tiziana Plebani, 'Nascita e caratteristiche del pubblico di lettrici tra medioevo e prima età moderna', in *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo: studi e testi a stampa*, ed. by Gabriella Zarri (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1996), pp. 23–44 (pp. 39–40); Tiziana Plebani, *Il 'genere' dei libri: storie e rappresentazioni della lettura al femminile e al maschile tra Medioevo e età moderna* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001); Xenia von Tippelskirch, *Sotto controllo: letture femminili in Italia nella prima età moderna* (Rome: Viella, 2011); Marina Roggero, 'I libri di cavalleria', in *Libri per tutti: generi editoriali di larga circolazione tra antico regime e età contemporanea*, ed. by Lodovica Braidà and Mario Infelise (Turin: UTET, 2010), pp. 23–41 (pp. 23, 37); Brian Richardson, *Women and the Circulation of Texts in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); P. Renée Baernstein, '"In My Own Hand": Costanza Colonna and the Art of the Letter in Sixteenth-Century Italy', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 66.1 (2013), 130–168 (pp. 130–31).

²⁰ Albert Guillem Hauf i Valls, 'Tres cartes d'amor: contribució a l'estudi del gènere epistolar en el *Tirant lo Blanc*', in *Actes del Symposium Tirant lo Blanc* (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1993), pp. 379–409; Josep Pujol, 'Novedades sobre l'ús de la versió catalana de les *Heroides* al *Tirant lo Blanc*', *Llengua i literatura. Revista anual de la Societat Catalana de Llengua i Literatura*, 23 (2013), 195–206. The letters feature in chapters 158, 188, 243, 246, 247, 392, 461, 464. Pujol showed how Martorell also incorporated in the text some of the marginal glosses from the Catalan translation of Guillem Nicolau (1390). The glosses are preserved in a Spanish translation that survives in a single manuscript (Seville, Biblioteca Capitular y Colombina, MS. 5-5-16).

²¹ See the introduction to E. J. Kenney, *Ovid: Heroides, XVI–XXI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²² On the pedagogical value attributed to *Heroides* in the Middle Ages and Renaissance see Paul White, *Renaissance Postscripts: Responding to Ovid's 'Heroides' in Sixteenth-Century France* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 44–49.

²³ On moral concerns conveyed in the paratext, see Patricia B. Phillippy, ‘“Loytering in Love”: Ovid’s *Heroides*, Hospitality and Humanist Education in *The Taming of the Shrew*’, *Criticism*, 40 (1998), 27–54 (pp. 31–32, 37–38).

²⁴ Francesco Negro, *Opusculum scribendi epistolas*, Venice 1488, b1v. This bipartition (*epistola honesta/turpis*) is also echoed in Erasmus’s *de conscribendis epistolis* although he does not discuss at all what constitutes an *epistola turpis* (see White, *Renaissance Postscripts*, pp. 57–65).

²⁵ See Dante Pattini, ‘Francesco Negri’, *DBI*, 78 (2013) <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-negri_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-negri_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>) [accessed 2 February 2025] (Italy); White, *Renaissance Postscripts*, p. 65 (France).

²⁶ Ian F. Moulton, *Love in Print in the Sixteenth Century. The Popularization of Romance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 107–14. On Antonio Giovanni Tagliente see Luca Rivali, ‘Giovanni Antonio Tagliente’, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 94 (2019) <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-antonio-tagliente_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-antonio-tagliente_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>) [accessed 15 December 2024].

²⁷ Roseen Giles, *Lettera Amorosa: Musical Love-Letters in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), p. 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–30. The Mantuan manuscript is Paris, BnF, F-Pn Rés. Vm7 676. The date of Tromboncino’s *frottola* is uncertain; it was composed some time between 1512 and 1516. See William F. Prizer, *Courtly Pastimes: The Frottole of Marchetto Cara* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), p. 327 and Alfred Einstein, ‘La prima “lettera amorosa” in musica’, *La Rassegna Musicale*, 10.1 (1937): 45–52.

³⁰ María Carmen Marín Pina, *Páginas de sueños: estudios sobre los libros de caballerías castellanos* (Zaragoza: Instituto Fernando el Católico, CSIC, 2011), pp. 169–218. The remaining categories are information and prophetic letters and letters of request.

³¹ On the characterization of female characters in *Tirant lo Blanc*, including the lustful, adulterous Empress, see Rafael Beltrán, ‘Cinco mujeres activas en el *Tirant lo Blanc*: contra el estereotipo de la sumisión amorosa en el libro de caballerías’, in *‘Amadís’ y sus libros: 500 años*, ed. by Gonzáles and Campos García Rojas, pp. 241–76.

³² Hauf i Valls, ‘Tres cartes d’amor’, p. 387.

³³ Stacey Triplette, *Chivalry, Reading, and Women’s Culture in Early Modern Spain: From ‘Amadís de Gaula’ to ‘Don Quixote’* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), p. 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50; Rocío G. Sumillera, ‘The Rhetoric of Letter Writing: The *Amadís de Gaula* in Translation’, in *Iberian Chivalric Romance*, ed. by Leticia Álvarez-Recio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), pp. 115–36.

³⁵ Montalvo, *Amadís de Gaula*, 4.133; Almudena Izquierdo Andreu, ‘Las cartas en el *Amadís de Gaula* de Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo’, *Medievalia*, 26.2 (2023), 71–97 (p. 78).

³⁶ María Carmen Marín Pina, ‘Las cartas de amor caballerescas como modelos epistolares’, in *La recepción del texto literario: coloquio Casa de Velázquez-Departamento de Filología Española de la Universidad de Zaragoza, Jaca, abril de 1986*, ed. by Jean Pierre Etievre and Leonardo Romero Tobar (Jaca: Universidad de Zaragoza, 1988), pp. 11–24 (p. 19); Izquierdo Andreu, ‘Las cartas en el *Amadís de Gaula*’, p. 79.

³⁷ See María Carmen Marín Pina, ‘De los géneros y diferencias de las cartas caballerescas’, in *Páginas de sueños*, pp. 169–218 (p. 186); Izquierdo Andreu, ‘Las cartas en el *Amadís de Gaula*’, pp. 79–80; Juan Bautista Avalle-Arce, *Amadís de Gaula: el primitivo y el de Montalvo* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), p. 198.

³⁸ Mercedes García Palma, ‘The Freedom of Womanhood: Oriana’s Eroticism in *Amadís of Gaul*’, *Humanities Bulletin*, 2.2 (2019), 168–74 (p. 169).

Appendix: Documentary Sources

i) Letter sent to Isabella d'Este by the Priest of Correggio

12 March 1501

Mio patrone [Niccolò da Correggio] e servitore de la Signoria Vostra aveva dato principio a tradure *Tirante*, como vederà la signoria vostra, ma non ge basta l'animo, perché dice che questo che vederà la Signoria Vostra è una colona e mezo e che 'l venerà alto due volte como l'è, ma el promete a la Signoria Vostra, che 'l venirà e lo lezerà a la Signoria Vostra [...] e che 'l non averà lete due carte che la Signoria lo intenderà como lui.

[My Lord [Niccolò da Correggio] and servant of Your Ladyship had begun to translate the *Tirant*, as Your Ladyship will see, but he does not have the courage [to continue], since he says that what Your Ladyship will see is a column and a half and [the translation] will be twice as long, but he promises he will come and read it to Your Ladyship [...] and he will not have to read more than two pages for Your Ladyship to understand it as he does.]

ii) Letter sent by Antonia del Balzo to Isabella d'Este (ASMn, AG, SerieE XIV. 2.b. 1801, c. 139)

7 December 1500

Mando *Tirante* a Vostra Illustrissima Signoria la qual me ha richiesta, pregandola, come l'habia lecto, me lo voglia rimandare per non lo haver mai lecto se non un pocho del principio, a la quale mi racomando.

[I am sending *Tirant* to Your most Illustrious Ladyship who has requested it from me, beseeching you that once you have read it you will send it back to me, since I have not read it yet except for a small part of the opening. I commend myself to you.]

iii) Letter sent by Jacopo d'Atri to Isabella d'Este (ASMn, AG, Serie E.XV.3, b. 632, c. 31r-v)

6 February 1510

Remando alla Vostra Illustrissima Signoria Bartolomeo Cavallaro col libro de *Amadis* in lingua spagnola, quale ve dona il signor Cabaniglia, cum promissione de farve avere ancora *el Tirante* gli aveti rechiesto, secondo più diffusamente per l'inclusa sua intenderite. [...]. Blois, VI february M.D.X. El vostro unil servo Iacobo d'Atri.

[I am sending back to Your Most Illustrious Ladyship Bartolomeo Cavallaro with the book *Amadis* in the Spanish language, which is gifted to you by Lord Cabanilles, with the promise of sending you also the *Tirant* that you have also requested from him, as you will see more in detail in his letter here enclosed. Blois, 6 February 1510,

Your humble servant Jacopo d'Atri.]

iv) Extract from Isabella d'Este book inventory (Odoardo Stivini, *Inventario delli libri lasati per la quondam felice memoria della Illustrissima Signora Isabella d'Este, Marquesana di Mantova*, ASMn, AG, b.400, ff.184r-187v.)

[f. 184r]

(n. 4) Item *Amadis de Gaula* scritto a mano in foglio coperto di corame rosso.

(n. 5) Item uno libro de *Tirante lonblanch* [sic] in spagnolo in foglio coperto di corame rosso.

(n. 7) Item *Don Tristano* in spagnolo in foglio cop(er)to di capretto.

[f. 184v]

(n. 26) Item *Tirante il Blanco*, in foglio coperto di corame usato nero.

[(n. 4) *Amadis de Gaula*, handwritten, in folio, bound in red leather.

(n. 5) A book of *Tirant lo Blanc* in Spanish, in folio, bound in red leather.

(n. 7) *Don Tristan* in Spanish, in folio, bound in kid leather.

(n. 26) *Tirant lo Blanc*, in folio, bound in black used leather.]

© The Author(s) 2025. Published by Oxford University Press for the Court of the University of St Andrews. The University of St Andrews is a charity registered in Scotland: No. SC013532.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.

Forum for Modern Language Studies, 2025, 61, 104–116

<https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqaf031>

Talking Points