Conclusion

As Eleonora moved through the multiple identities of daughter, wife, and mother of princes that her royal birth had assigned her, she never escaped the conflicting demands made on her by the court of her birth.\(^1\) What my research has shown, however, is how skilfully she negotiated those conflicts. She was well prepared by her father’s court, and she was well supported in her husband’s court, but was unfailingly strong in her individual response to challenges. The traditional view of royal brides as unhappy pawns in loveless dynastic marriages does not apply to Eleanora. When she was at last given a husband, at the age of twenty-three, she made a good marriage of it. Affection and trust were indeed possible within a dynastic marriage.

From its earliest days, even before Eleonora arrived in Ferrara, her marriage to Ercole promised to be blessed with a warmth and affection that belied its origins in political expediency. Eleonora had had a happy life in Naples, clearly much loved by her father and brother, and worshipped by Diomede Carafa, her mentor and friend. The courtiers, who described the events of the wedding in Naples and the journey to Ferrara, were effusive in their admiration for Eleonora’s charm, dignity and grace, suggesting that her fine qualities augured well for the happiness and success of her marriage to Ercole. When Eleonora had arrived in Ferrara, Ercole, many years her senior and afflicted with an old war injury and a gloomy disposition, had been totally won over by her youthfulness and her enthusiasm for life. Eleonora was pregnant within three months of the marriage, and the regular arrival of babies suggested that their relationship retained the intimacy of its early days.

\(^1\) On the multiple identities of royal daughters, see again Downie, *She is but a Woman*, 198–99.
In 1477 Eleonora returned to Naples for her father’s marriage to a Spanish princess, taking their two little daughters with her, but leaving the infant heir at home with his father. The visit would be long, as Eleonora was already five months’ pregnant with the couple’s fourth child when she left Ferrara, and the letters which she and Ercole wrote to each other during her time away revealed the love that had blossomed between them in the first four years of their marriage and the sadness they felt at being apart for so long. Eleonora’s letters from Naples also suggested that she had become aware of how much she, and her loyalties, had changed since her marriage to Ercole. Her suspicions that her father was intent on manipulating Ercole in his relations with other states had been confirmed when the king refused to allow her new baby son and her little daughter to return with her to Ferrara.

The period of the war with Naples and Sixtus IV was a time of great anguish and uncertainty for Eleonora, who needed all her strength and resilience to endure her unhappiness about Ercole’s decision to defy her father by supporting the League and by actively seeking the position of commander-in-chief of its armed forces. Although she had shown no evidence of any disloyalty to Ercole or his state during the periods in which she had acted as his regent, it would be revealed at the end of the war that she had been under constant pressure from Ferrante to persuade her husband to abandon the League and his leadership of its army. The letters that both Ercole and his secretary wrote to Eleonora during her regencies expressed Ercole’s great affection for her and his belief in her abilities, despite his decision to oppose her father in the war. As the war drew to a close, Ercole’s letters also revealed how dependent on her he had become for his happiness with suggestions that she might not still love him. However, the instructions that Eleonora gave to Brandelise Trottì for his mission to her brother, the duke of Calabria, revealed that she was prepared to go to any lengths to salvage
her husband’s honour and to restore his reputation with her father, suggesting that her affection for him was undiminished and that she had no reservations about using her privileged relationship with Ferrante to ensure his future happiness and well-being.