Abstract

By the second half of the fifteenth century marriage had become a fundamental part of the process by which political alliances were forged between the ruling families of the Italian peninsula. Such marriages were impersonal affairs in which the bride had little or no input and no thought was given to the compatibility of the couple or the possibility that they might be happy. Such a marriage was that to which Eleonora d’Aragona (1450–1493) was committed by her father, Ferrante I, king of Naples, in 1465, when she was married to Sforza Maria Sforza of Milan. In 1472, when that still unconsummated marriage ceased to be expedient, a divorce was negotiated and a new marriage arranged. This time her husband was to be the warrior-prince, Ercole d’Este (1431–1505), who had spent time in the Neapolitan court and who a year earlier, had succeeded his half-brother, Borso, as duke of Ferrara. The magnificence of the events which accompanied Eleonora’s proxy marriage to Ercole in Naples, her bridal journey to Ferrara and her triumphal entry into that city were an indication of the importance which both Ferrara and Naples had attached to the marriage as a symbol of the friendship between them.

Eleonora proved a remarkable bride. She bore Ercole five children, she acted as his regent during his absences on military campaigns, she endured separation from two of her children who remained with her father in Naples during the Pazzi War (1478–79). When her husband took a condotta with the League of Florence and Milan, to wage war against Pope Sixtus IV and Ferrante whose army was led by her brother the duke of Calabria, Eleonora juggled conjugal loyalty and filial duty to emerge unscathed, retrieve
her children, and lay the groundwork for peace negotiations.

In this dissertation, however, I look beyond court ceremonial and public display and attempt to put a more human face on the marriage of the duke and duchess of Ferrara by focussing on the lives that they shared in private, as lovers, friends, parents and colleagues in the great enterprise of governing their small state. Using both the letters that they wrote to each other and the observations of others, I construct a picture of their marriage as a happy and successful partnership, in which mutual affection, loyalty and respect had replaced political expediency as the main driving force. I believe that it was the intimacy and trust which the couple shared in their marriage that enabled them to support each through the terrible events of the Pazzi War.