

# *L'amore, le armi, le stelle*

Basinio da Parma and the Humanists  
at Sigismondo Malatesta's Court

*edited by*

Anna Gabriella Chisena, Federica Rossetti & Simon Smets



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## Introduction

The humanistic experience of the Rimini court under Sigismondo Malatesta was relatively brief. It began with Sigismondo's rise to power but was already in decline by the mid-1450s, as the Lord of Rimini – excluded from the Peace of Lodi and increasingly isolated – saw his influence gradually and progressively wane.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the fruits of Sigismondo's patronage were substantial and abundant, impacting every field of culture: literary, artistic, and architectural. Malatesta propaganda took on distinctive characteristics, embracing themes aimed at shielding Sigismondo from the bad reputation surrounding him and creating an alternative image of the condottiere, one that allowed him to rival his political adversaries.<sup>2</sup>

Like many leaders of his time, Sigismondo surrounded himself with intellectuals and artists to celebrate his glory and immortalize his memory. Artistically and architecturally, this cultural project is magnificently exemplified by Castel Sismondo and, above all, the Tempio Malatestiano, as well as the medals of Matteo de' Pasti, the bas-reliefs of Agostino di Duccio, and the paintings by Piero Della Francesca.

On the literary front, the figure of Basinio da Parma stands out. From 1449, the year of his relocation to Rimini, he led the creation of the idealized image of his patron, first with the *Liber Isottaes* and later the *Hesperis*. But alongside him, other writers also worked at court, both renowned and lesser-known, such as Roberto Valturio, Giusto de' Conti, Tobia del Borgo, Pietro e Giacomo Perleoni, Benedetto da Cesena, Tommaso Seneca da Camerino, and, for a short time, Porcelio de' Pandoni.

The manifestations of Humanism in Rimini, in all their variety and diversity, form a cohesive universe revolving around the ambiguous

<sup>1</sup> Economic challenges within Rimini began to impact its cultural life around 1458, as intellectuals started to depart from Sigismondo Malatesta's court. Basinio da Parma, the leading figure of the court's intellectual scene, had already passed away the previous year. However, echoes of Malatesta's cultural influence endured for some time; for example, Roberto Valturio's *De re militari* achieved peak success around 1462. For further discussion on the intellectual exodus from Rimini, see Piromalli 1980.

<sup>2</sup> About the reputation of Sigismondo among his contemporaries, see Gaeta 1978; Frioli 2008; Basinio, *Astronomica* (ed. Chisena).

figure of Sigismondo and that of Isotta degli Atti, his lover and later wife, who was transformed into the muse of his court. The romantic allure exerted by the Malatesta court on the collective imagination can also be measured by the literary works it inspired, even centuries later, from Ezra Pound's *Cantos* to the echoes of Basinio in D'Annunzio, and even contemporary novels that continue to celebrate the love of Sigismondo and Isotta. The grandeur of the cultural program and Sigismondo's controversial reputation helped spark attention and scandal, not least because of the alleged "paganism" of his court – a topic that remains open and debated among scholars to this day.<sup>3</sup>

Since the eighteenth century, numerous studies have examined the artistic and literary manifestations of Malatestian Humanism. Following the eighteenth-century studies on Basinio and the historical accounts of Rimini by Angelo and Francesco Gaetano Battaglini and Lorenzo Drudi,<sup>4</sup> the positivist period of the nineteenth century was marked by Yriarte's documentary work.<sup>5</sup> Yriarte helped to spread Sigismondo Malatesta's fame beyond the local context and paved the way for the twentieth-century studies by Massèra, Soranzo, and Ferri.<sup>6</sup>

Although the tradition of studies on Malatestian Humanism and its key figures has remained virtually unbroken, today research on this subject is experiencing a new prolific phase, marked by the publication of numerous philological and interpretive works that have renewed attention on the Malatesta court and its protagonists.

This new phase of scholarship, initiated by the numerous contributions of Donatella Coppini, Donatella Frioli, and Italo Pantani, has recently seen the publication of the first Italian translation of the *Liber Isottaëus* by Jacopo Pesaresi;<sup>7</sup> the critical edition, with translation and commentary, of the *Astronomicon libri duo*, edited by Anna Gabriella Chisena;<sup>8</sup> and the edition with a German translation of the *Hesperis*, edited by Christian Peters,<sup>9</sup> while the English translation of the work, undertaken by Simon Smets, is soon to be published.

<sup>3</sup> See D'Elia 2016; Muccioli & Cenerini 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Battaglini 1794; Basinio, *Opera praestantiora*.

<sup>5</sup> Yriarte 1882.

<sup>6</sup> See among others Soranzo 1909; Soranzo 1915; Soranzo 1918; Massèra 1928; Basinio, *Liber Isottaëus* (ed. Ferri); Basinio, *Le poesie liriche*.

<sup>7</sup> Basinio, *Liber Isottaëus* (ed. Pesaresi).

<sup>8</sup> Basinio, *Astronomica* (ed. Chisena).

<sup>9</sup> Basinio, *Hesperis*.

This volume is part of the recent collective efforts to highlight the uniqueness of the Malatesta experience, bringing together contributions from scholars from various fields, who have come together to compare different research perspectives. The essays collected are the result of the authors' reworking of their presentations given at two separate events organized in 2022: a workshop on *Basinio da Parma* held on March, 29<sup>th</sup> at the Accademia delle Scienze dell'Istituto di Bologna, organized by Loredana Chines, Anna Gabriella Chisena, and Jacopo Pesaresi (University of Bologna, Dipartimento di Filologia Classica e Italianistica), and the conference held in Rimini on May, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, entitled *L'amore, le armi, le stelle: Basinio da Parma and the Humanists at Sigismondo Malatesta's Court*, organized as part of the activities of the project *Basinio da Parma. Hesperis*, funded by the FWF (Austrian Academy of Sciences) and conducted from 2018 to 2022 at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Neo-Latin Studies in Innsbruck.

The diverse nature of the contributions reflects the many facets of Rimini's cultural environment in the fifteenth century, offering an in-depth exploration of its various aspects.

The volume opens with an essay by **Gian Mario Anselmi**, which frames the experience of the Malatesta court within the broader context of Romagna Humanism, itself influenced by the cultural realities of the Po Valley, the Adriatic region, and central Italy. The scholar reviews the literary and mythical models of this land, highlighting the influence of the literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on later works: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio – not only the vernacular Boccaccio of the *Decameron*, but also the Latin Boccaccio of the *Genealogy* – are fundamental in defining the characteristics of fifteenth-century literature in Romagna. Anselmi extends his focus beyond Basinio's Rimini to also include other cultural centres of Romagna, such as Forlì, Cesena, and Bologna, recalling the cultural contributions of pivotal figures such as Biondo Flavio, Antonio Urceo Codro, and Francesco Uberti. He also touches on the material aspects of the Malatesta cultural project, highlighting the importance of the Biblioteca Malatestiana, the library founded by Malatesta Novello, Sigismondo's brother and ruler of Cesena.

Sigismondo's court is examined in relation to other cultural centres of Italian Humanism in the contribution by **John Monfasani**, who delves into one of the most debated topics in Malatesta studies: the

alleged Neoplatonism of the Lord of Rimini and his circle of intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> This issue was closely tied to the accusations of paganism levelled against Sigismondo, which grew more severe following his conflict with the papacy and his excommunication by Pius II. Beyond Sigismondo's interest in philosophy and the hidden symbolism in the iconographic elements and tropes adopted in his propaganda literature – aimed at 'deifying' the condottiere and his wife – a concrete argument in favour of the theory that Rimini was one of the Italian centres for the dissemination of Neoplatonic ideas was the material fact that Sigismondo recovered the remains of George Gemistus Pletho, brought them to Rimini as a 'trophy' in 1462, and preserved them in one of the tombs on the right side of the Tempio Malatestiano. Effectively, Monfasani's analysis of the objective facts surrounding this episode and the actual circulation of Neoplatonic texts and ideas in Rimini tends to debunk the myth of Neoplatonism in Romagna, a theory nonetheless strongly supported by other scholars.<sup>11</sup>

The largest portion of the volume's contributions revolves around Basinio da Parma, the writer who conceived the *topoi* of Malatesta propaganda and became, with Roberto Valturio, its greatest proponent. The *Liber Isottaëus*, the first epistolary novel in verse in European literature and the pinnacle of so-called 'Isottean' literature, naturally occupies a central place. The *Liber*, structured in three books, each containing ten epistles, presents a fictional exchange of letters between Isotta, Sigismondo, and the Poet (Basinio's *alter ego*), recounting the love of the two protagonists in a romanticized form, culminating in the literary death of Isotta, which foretells her divine apotheosis.

The very nature of the work emphasizes its verisimilitude, almost as if to convince the reader that its protagonists were the real authors of the letters. Perhaps this is one reason why the work is transmitted anonymously in most manuscript witnesses. This characteristic adds complexity to the manuscript tradition, which, after the pioneering studies made by Ferri, is extensive and well-represented. **Rita Bennardello** addresses this aspect, following in the footsteps of Italo Pantani's studies, and provides an extensive study of the *Isottaëus* witnesses, adding new ones to the previous census.

<sup>10</sup> The studies by Centanni (2017; 2018; 2019), Pantani 2006a, D'Elia 2016, and Ronchey 2018, emphasize this aspect of Rimini's culture.

<sup>11</sup> Pantani 2006a.

Formally, the *Liber* is heavily inspired by Latin elegy, particularly Ovid. **Loredana Chines** focuses on the relationship with classical sources, noting how Basinio's compositional technique is based on the blending of various models, both Latin and vernacular, which echo throughout the poet's verses. **Jacopo Pesaresi** analyses the work's dense dialogue with classical mythology, noting how the character of Isotta is constructed through her assimilation, either by analogy or contrast, to the heroines of myth. The protagonist, like a new heroine, writes to Sigismondo, invoking his return, lamenting his betrayals, and asserting her honour as a woman and faithful companion.

While Basinio is certainly the most famous exponent of Isottean poetry, this literary tradition is not limited to the *Liber Isottaëus* alone. The work soon inspired Sigismondo himself and other poets, the most striking example being Porcelio de' Pandoni, who during his brief stay in Rimini composed the *De amore Iovis in Isottam*, a collection of twelve elegies in epistolary form.<sup>12</sup> These tell the story of Jupiter's love for Isotta, who is granted to the deity after her death. Much of Isottean literature remains unexplored or little studied, and **Sara Ferrilli's** research helps to fill this gap by examining Benedetto da Cesena's *De honore mulierum*, a poem in the vernacular dedicated to the son of Sigismondo and Isotta. The poem features a debate between a Lover and his Lady, in which their dialogue alternates with a long series of examples of female virtues. Ferrilli analyses the points of contact between this work and Basinio's *Isottaëus*, highlighting certain passages that shed new light on the internal dynamics of Sigismondo's court and its literary figures.

Beyond elegiac poetry, the volume also explores epic literature through a series of studies dedicated to the *Hesperis* and its tradition. Basinio's grand epic poem, spanning thirteen books, recounts the battles of Sigismondo against Alfonso and Ferrante of Aragon, covering the historical events between 1447 and 1453. However, Basinio's narrative weaves between the reconstruction of real events and mythological episodes of pure invention, where Sigismondo, like a new Odysseus, sails through uncharted waters, retracing the journeys of Greek heroes and reaching the Isles of the Blessed. There, he encounters the alter ego of Isotta, the nymph Psycheia, daughter of Zephyrus and visits the

<sup>12</sup> Porcelio, *De amore Iovis*. For a recent bio-bibliographical overview of Porcelio de' Pandoni, see Iacono 2017 and Iacono 2023.

Garden of the Hesperides, the Temple of Fame, the Elysian Fields, and Tartarus before resuming his voyage back to Italy with Zephyrus' help.

It is to this long mythological interlude, occupying the central books of the epic, that **Christian Peters** turns his attention. Peters interprets books 7-10 of the *Hesperis* as a sort of time capsule, meant to bridge the historical narrative of events between 1449 and 1452, during which Sigismondo struggled to defend his domain from attacks by the neighbouring Duchy of Urbino. According to Peters, this narrative device not only serves to mask the military failures of those years but also to define the role and self-representation of the poet, who during that same period arrived at Sigismondo's court to become its most illustrious representative.

During Sigismondo's mythical journey, the condottiere is invited by Psycheia to visit the Temple of Fame, where he can meet famous figures from the past. This same episode had already appeared in the *Diosymposis*, an epyllion that describes a banquet hosted by Oceanus for the Olympian gods.<sup>13</sup> The motif of the Temple of Fame and the *katabasis* into the Underworld allowed Basinio to present a gallery of epic heroes, historical figures, and – most notably – authors and poets from classical antiquity. **Florian Schaffenrath** focuses on the innovations introduced in this catalogue of illustrious authors, particularly comparing the representation of Cicero in the epyllion and in the *Hesperis*. Despite Basinio's preference for Greek language and literature, in his epic poem, the humanist assigns a priority role to Cicero over Demosthenes, his Greek counterpart as the exemplary orator. Schaffenrath situates this praise of the Latin author within the broader context of Cicero's exaltation during the humanist era, suggesting the influence of Leonardo Bruni's *Cicero novus* on Basinio.

**Alessandro Giovanardi's** contribution also examines Basinio's Underworld, reading the *Hesperis's* katabasis through the lens of Russian philologist Vladimiro Zabughin's work. Revisiting Zabughin's major studies on the reception of Vergil and Dante during the Renaissance, Giovanardi explores the influence of classical literature and pre-humanistic Italian literature on the humanist from Rimini, extending his analysis to the iconographic and symbolic framework of Sigismondo's court.

<sup>13</sup> Coppini 2003.

The manuscript tradition of the *Hesperis* and its iconographic apparatus are the focus of the subsequent contributions in this volume. **Donatella Frioli** examines Basinio's working draft, the autograph manuscript Rimini, Biblioteca Civica Gambalunga, SC-MS 34. This codex, which contains the *Hesperis* and the unfinished *Argonautica*, reveals the provisional nature of Basinio's work, with deletions, rewrites, annotations, and authorial variant readings of his verses. The author's palaeographic analysis takes us into the humanist's workshop, offering new insights into his compositional technique.

The illuminated Malatesta manuscripts are examined in the contribution by **Simonetta Nicolini**, who presents a study of the illustrations of the *Hesperis* in the manuscripts Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canon. Class. Lat. 81, Paris, BnF, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, 630, and Città del Vaticano, BAV, Vat. lat. 6043. Drawing on recent historiography on the evolution of illumination in the second half of the fifteenth century, the scholar retraces the stages of the reception of *Hesperis* illustrations in the manuscript and printed book production of subsequent centuries.

**Fabrizio Lollini** also focuses on the material manuscript culture of Malatesta humanism, studying the depiction of constellations, particularly the zodiacal ones, in the miniature production of the fifteenth century, with a special focus on the exemplary case of the illustrations in the manuscripts of Basinio's *Astronomicon libri*.

The volume concludes with a contribution by **Elisa Tosi Brandi**, who offers an investigation into the material culture of Sigismondo's court in Rimini through a critical reading of Sigismondo's *post-mortem* inventory. Through this extraordinary document, the scholar paints an original portrait of Sigismondo, exploring the ways the condottiere and his court represented themselves and opening new perspectives on opaque aspects of his personality, such as his interest in Turkish culture following his conflicts with Pius II, which led him to seek a political alliance with Mehmed II.

The volume aims to provide readers with a contribution to the appreciation of the rich and complex panorama of Humanism in Rimini, which profoundly shaped the cultural history of fifteenth-century Italy well beyond the local context. With contributions from scholars in various disciplines – literary, art-historical, and philological – the volume offers a multidisciplinary overview that not only broadens the understanding of the cultural context of Sigismondo Malatesta's

court but also highlights how this experience fits within the broader framework of Italian Humanism.

The particular emphasis on the figure of Basinio da Parma contributes to the understanding of Malatesta propaganda and iconography, of which the humanist was the foremost promoter and one of the protagonists of the idealized image of Sigismondo and his court. The contributions collected here enrich the already vibrant field of recent studies witnessing the rediscovery of Basinio through new critical editions, translations, and analyses of his works, restoring centrality to a figure who has remained unjustly overshadowed compared to other humanists of his time. This volume underscores his relevance as one of the protagonists of the Italian Renaissance, capable of engaging with classical models and adapting them in an original manner to the context of the Rimini court.

Basinio's work, and more broadly the entire Malatesta cultural program, emerges in all its complexity and richness through the various contributions gathered here. Each essay, while addressing specific themes, engages in dialogue with the others in an intertwining of perspectives that does justice to the plurality of influences and cultural interactions that characterized Rimini in the fifteenth century. The investigation of literary sources, the analysis of the symbolic language of art and architecture, the study of manuscript traditions, as well as research on the posthumous reception of the Malatesta experience, testify to the breadth and depth of the cultural legacy left by Sigismondo and his intellectuals.

This broad view of the artistic and literary production of the Rimini court confirms that the phenomenon of Malatesta Humanism was not an isolated experience but a reality capable of influencing and interacting with other humanistic contexts of the time.

We hope that this volume will provide new tools for understanding the extraordinary intellectual vitality of Rimini during Sigismondo Malatesta's time and his intellectuals, paving the way for further studies on a cultural tradition that continues to captivate scholars and readers today.

Anna Gabriella Chisena  
Federica Rossetti  
Simon Smets

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*Index of Names*

This index omits the names of Basinio da Parma, Isotta degli Atti, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, Rimini, and the names of modern scholars. It does, however, include the names of Greco-Roman and biblical mythological figures.

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