Northern Italian Courtly Banquets:
An Analysis of Identity, Power, and Dining Experiences
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I. Introduction

Scholars review biographies, diaries, and inventory records in order to gain a better understanding of the social customs of great historical figures, which in turn enable them to recreate the structure of a courtly household (Eiche 79). Studying the food, eating habits, and banqueting practices of a household makes an important contribution to understanding Italian culture in that such evidence can elucidate the quintessence of a family’s social identity, since gastronomic customs vary by geographical location. The purpose of this paper is to study the lives of upper-class citizens in Italian city states such as Milan, Mantua, and Florence during the Renaissance from the vantage points of powerful families while highlighting common models of identity and power that inform their dining experiences. By examining the grandiose celebrations of the Sforza, Gonzaga, and Medici families, connections can be drawn between the significance of these banquets and the families’ social identities, as well as with regard to the roles that these events played in establishing major political unions in northern Italy from the fifteenth through to the seventeenth century. It will be determined that, while Renaissance courtly banquets exhibited an excessive display of luxurious commodities and carefully-crafted foods, the purpose of these dining experiences went beyond mere indulgence and instead functioned as catalysts to build rapport amongst powerful families and construct sociopolitical alliances across northern Italy.

II. A Brief Overview of the Italian Renaissance and Courtly Banquets

Following the Middle Ages, a new era emerged that initiated a new cultural movement in Italy, which in turn produced new modes of thought that manifested themselves in art, science,
politics, literature, and culture. This period in Italian history is referred to as *il Rinascimento* and, as its name entails, the Renaissance is seen as a moment of cultural rebirth after the dark era that preceded it in its introduction of progressive and innovative ways of thinking, masterpiece works of art, and new cultural practices that broke with tradition. Such ideas are emphasized by Ronald Witt in his review of Guido Ruggiero’s *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento*, in which Witt claims that the Renaissance was a “pervasive shared culture reflected in every dimension of Italian life for much of a 350-year period” (446). The impact of the Renaissance in Italy was prevalent and dominated by a new philosophical and ethical stance called Humanism, which “fitted the needs of the new Europe . . . with its closed governing elites, hereditary offices and strenuous effort to close off debate on vital political and social questions, . . . offer[ing] everyone a model of true culture” (Kircher 437). Arising from moral dissonance and an investment in individual agency, Humanism provided a foundation for new artistic and intellectual movements in art, literature, and culture—including dining experiences.

The Italian Renaissance witnessed the rise of a larger urban-based wealth than previous centuries, which resulted in a great divide between the hereditary nobility and the rest of society. Because of this divide, social elites felt pronounced insecurities, anxieties, and pressures to gain social prestige, reputation, pleasure, and wealth; hence, to conceal their imperfections, the elites hid themselves behind masks and purported to tolerate one another (Kircher 443). Their thirst for power motivated them to exhibit a façade in the form of superfluous and grandeur celebrations in which they hosted food and entertainment for their upper-class acquaintances. Inspired by these new social protocols, the hereditary nobility experienced a shift in dining etiquette, gastronomy, table service, table preparation, and the presentation of food during this period (Taylor 622). A product of a diverse history of influences, then, these courtly banquets were emblems of status
and power that, on deeper analysis, provide a profound glimpse into the sociopolitical hierarchy and structures at play during the Italian Renaissance.

II. Sforza Court

In need of strong leadership, the city state of Milan sought to install a powerful monarchy in the mid-fifteenth century. The Sforza family were victorious in the ducal election of 1450 that followed the reign of the Visconti family, demanding public recognition of their absolute power and imperial investiture from their noble peers (Byrne 371). Since food and dining have always been important aspects of Italian culture, the upper class likewise held them in high regard. As an elite powerhouse, the Sforza could afford to have a variety of servants and cooks attend to the needs of the family, their guests, and the lord of the house (Eiche 84). Given that food was an important part of their lifestyle and that public dining was a physical display of their political power, the Sforza family tasked their head chef with a series of meticulous responsibilities that preserved their consummate image. It was the duty of the head chef to inspect the premises and ensure that the table linens and silverware were impeccably clean, as well as ensure that the lord was served according to his particular tastes (84). Everyone at court was expected to maintain the same high standard of cleanliness and hygiene, with the servants ensuring that the cloths used by the lord were always kept white and clean (85). By preserving such high standards in their dining practices and household, and by employing servants that presented themselves as connoisseurs to their guests, the Sforza family quickly became a focal point for envy and emulation among other families of the Italian upper class.

On December 6, 1517, in celebration of her triumphant political alliance by marriage and new title as queen of Poland, Bona Sforza held an exhibitionistic luncheon banquet (Taylor 627). Renaissance author Luigi Strada explains that one could see at Bona’s banquet “a comfortable
table surrounded by polite and gallant servers, who with their silver plates await the dainty and
delicate meat carved by a dextrous and attentive master carver” (qtd. in Taylor 627). A powerful
patron family responsible for proliferating the significance of art during the Renaissance, the
Sforza displayed their wealth and power by employing master chefs who exhibited complexity,
creativity, and skill in their craft, all of which were reflected in the artistic dishes that they
served. The Sforza’s talented meat carvers are said to have “cut the meat in the air so that it fell
on the plate in decorative slices providing both entertainment and service for the guests” (627).
Through courtly banquets, then, social elites such as the Sforza were able to become trendsetters
in public dining and highlight parallels between gastronomy and art, given that the ability to cut
meat into decorative slices in midair—much like erecting a statue—demands artful mastery over
the craft. Bona Sforza’s wedding banquet, as one example, epitomizes how celebratory events
that revel in the successful formation of sociopolitical alliances can also hone new forms of art
through their elaborate dining experiences.

III. Gonzaga Court

In the province of Mantua, between Milan and Ferrara, the Gonzaga family ruled during
the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and imitated their neighbours in their veneration of rituals
and public events (Cashman III 356). While not the most dominant of Italian city states, Mantua
thrived during the sixteenth century and the Gonzaga family is today regarded as among the most
prestigious and successful of Italian dynasties (Black 192). Francesco II of the Gonzaga family,
alongside his wife Isabella d’Este, are known for having transformed civic events into events that
were elitist in nature, helping to attract and establish relationships with the ruling class (Cashman
III 356). Embracing the propagation of Renaissance art, the Gonzaga dukes utilized performance
to exhibit their magnificence throughout their land, arranging for elaborate music to be played at
services and events—sometimes even on their own carefully crafted and fully furnished chamber organ (Bowers 331). The Gonzaga family also hosted expensive chivalric tournaments, elegant processions, commemorations of saints, and other events that captured the interests of civilians while instilling messages of power into their subjects and neighbouring states (Cashman III 355). While the Gonzaga were not as rich, powerful, or renown as other Renaissance powerhouses, they were neither reserved in their spendings nor in public illustrations of their wealth and power; as a result, the Gonzaga were successful in earning the respect of their noble countrymen.

The Gonzaga family transformed dining experiences into visible measures of their power, wealth, and leadership in Italy by putting on display exquisite wall hangings as well as expensive silverware and table adornments that elevated the beauty of their banquets (Ruggiero 296). The Gonzaga’s careful planning of these banquets was matched only by the family’s strategic eye for forging new political alliances. Using these banquets as a means of attracting aristocratic visitors, eminent guests, and potential new allies, the elite Mantuan family—especially Francesco II and Isabella d’Este—impressed their guests with artistically crafted dining plates and commissioned numerous artists to make hundreds of illustrations for their costly table furnishings (Taylor 622). In particular, Francesco II commissioned artist Giulio Romano to create drawings on gold and silver vessels that were used for formal dining, accentuating both Romano’s artistic talent and the Gonzaga family’s wealth while matching the elevated perceptions of gastronomy, dining etiquette, and table service during the Renaissance (622). Combining both art and gastronomy, the Gonzaga court was able to mask its strategic political maneuvers through these conspicuous portrayals of wealth and cultural capital. Mesmerizing artwork on silverware and vessels served to distract guests from the Gonzaga family’s more devious intentions as they took advantage of these banquets to forge new political alliances with other powerful Italian families.
IV. Medici Court

Following the arrival of Hans Baron’s civic humanism in Italy, the Medici family rose to power in fourteenth-century Florence by amalgamating Florentine politics with intellectual life (Jurdjevic 994). Having come to power at a moment that witnessed the birth of a more oligarchic government in Florence, the Medici enjoyed a sense of supremacy above the populace that was never experienced by any of the other ruling families (Clarke 1). One contributing factor to the Medici’s success was their unique ability to foster political connections and gain foreign support. Several major foreign figures attended the inauguration of Cosimo de’ Medici in 1434, such as John VIII Palaeologus, the emperor of Greece; Joseph II, the patriarch of Constantinople and one of the most important leaders of the Eastern Orthodox; as well as Pope Eugenius (Ruggiero 268). Themselves art aficionados, the Medici family were responsible for commissioning many great works such as Donatello’s bronze David and Judith and Holofernes, which adorned the outdoor courts of their palace (McHam 32). Furthermore, in Raphael’s Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de’ Medici and Luigi de’ Rossi, Cardinal Giulio of the Medici is himself represented as “a powerful ruler and devout priest” that urged the Florentines “to regard [him] with reverence for the sake of their own salvation” (Minnich 1007). In an effort to sustain their power and garner public favour and recognition, the Medici commissioned artworks from famous artists that contributed not only to a proliferation of the arts but also to their own indestructible image as powerful leaders.

Through a series of strategic and cunning political moves, the Medici blossomed from their humble origins as Florentine merchants and bankers into the most powerful dynasty on the Italian peninsula (Holian 148). By leveraging marriage as a political tool and using the wedding banquets themselves as opulent expressions of their wealth and power, the Medici propagated various forms of artistic and cultural expressions as they pursued their own military ambitions.
and proceeded to conquer allied states. Christine de Lorraine, French princess and niece of King Henry III, married Grand Duke Ferdinando I de’ Medici in 1589 and in celebration of the union held a series of banquets, performances, and allegorical chivalric parades (Saslow 1). As they waited for dinner to be served, professional sailors from Pisa entertained the wedding guests by hosting performances such as the comedy *La pazzia* amidst displays of fireworks and artillery bombardments (169). Similarly, the 1608 wedding of Cosimo II de’ Medici to Maria Magdalena de Austria included illustrious festivities between meals such as the performance of a naval battle upon the Arno river in which an artificial island, the temple of Mars, a dragon, and fire-breathing bulls all graced the stage (Domínguez 44). Ducal wedding banquets further had masquerade-like aesthetics that featured garments trimmed with silk and gold, celestial music, beautiful comedic performances, and artisan-crafted stages (Plaisance and Reid 189). Medici wedding banquets thus offered guests an enticing way to enjoy a meal while propagating the family’s image with distinct aristocratic characteristics. These lustrous celebratory festivities were unmatched by their noble peers and enabled the Medici to maintain their title as one of the most powerful families of the Italian Renaissance.

V. Discussion

As their courtly banquets illustrate, the Sforza, Gonzaga, and Medici families enjoyed upper-class privileges that far surpassed the experiences of the common people; however, there are discernable aspects in their social practices by which these families were able to distinguish themselves above the other Italian courts and embody their very identity within their banqueting customs. As leaders of Milan—an economic hub that has to this day maintained its title as Italy’s industrial and financial centre—the Sforza family used their authority to employ a head chef who maintained the premises and attended to the gastronomic needs of the family, its guests, and the
lord of the house. Banquets, for the Sforza family, were an opportunity to showcase to the public their gallant servers and master meat carvers. By employing obedient and meticulous servants, the Sforza family demonstrated their power and influence to the nobility of neighbouring states. Furthermore, though Mantua was not as rich and powerful as other city states, the Gonzaga court was able to compete with their wealthy neighbours by hosting chivalric tournaments and rituals. Their ornate wall decorations, artful silverware, and table adornments captivated the attention of aristocratic visitors at their banquets. By hosting festivities for their own inhabitants as well as their powerful neighbouring allies, the Gonzaga family were able to forge unions among both the upper and lower classes and optimize their political and military support. Finally, the Medici leveraged their vast social network to arrange intermarriages with other powerful families and used those weddings as an opportunity to commission art and provide extravagant banqueting experiences for their guests. Utilizing these grand celebratory banquets to disguise their political and military tactics, the Medici proliferated their political propaganda alongside the development of non-traditional forms of art.

While the city states of northern Italy have come a long way from operating as a niche for merchant bourgeoisies, it was the Renaissance period that enabled them to create socioeconomic dichotomies—unequal distributions of wealth between upper- and middle-class families—and confirm their power. Reigning dynasties employed diverse methods to preserve their nobility by unifying powerful families against the backdrop of art and gastronomy. In following the artistic and gastronomical trends of the Renaissance, the reigning dynasties purported to please others by means that would ultimately please themselves. These powerful courts resorted to great measures to preserve their wealth; by attending to the innate desires of their own civilians and igniting the curiosities and interests of their powerful neighbours, families such as the Sforza, Gonzaga, and
Medici were able to flourish both economically and politically. Prestigious banquets resulted in lavish sociocultural experiences that facilitated banter and produced important political contracts, maintaining respect among upper-class individuals while encouraging upscale emulation in their inferiors. For the reigning families of the Italian Renaissance, it would seem that art, gastronomy, and politics were virtually synonymous aspects of courtly life and each played an important role in the formation of a dynasty’s identity and power.

Work Cited


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