

Introduction

The Italian Wars, also known as the Habsburg–Valois Wars, were a series of fractured military clashes interspersed with moments of peace which began in 1494 and continued for some six decades. It was the most significant and defining conflict in Europe during the late medieval to early modern period. While the fighting was mostly concentrated geographically in Italy, the ramifications of the Wars were felt across Europe. By the signing of the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in April 1559, much of the continent had been drawn into the Wars’ organised violence, since not only France, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and many Italian states had become embroiled in the conflagration, so too had England, Scotland, and the Ottoman Empire.

When the French king Charles VIII set off over the Alps with a large army to claim the kingdom of Naples in 1494, the far-reaching consequences of his actions were little imaginable. Charles insisted that the southern Italian realm belonged to him through inheritance from the Angevin dynasty, which had ruled the kingdom until 1442, when it had fallen to the crown of Aragon. The French occupation of Naples in early 1495 following the abject failure of the Aragonese monarch to defend his regime took Italian and European rulers by surprise. Indeed, Charles VIII’s dramatic success sparked widespread alarm and was the catalyst for a series of relatives and interested parties, including Ferdinand (Ferdinand II of Aragon, Ferdinand V of Castile) and Maximilian I of Austria, to respond by helping to restore the Aragonese to power and to chase the French from the Italian peninsula. Charles’ death in 1498 seemed to close this chapter of European conflict. Milan, however, soon emerged as a new flashpoint. Charles’ successor, Louis XII, claimed title to the wealthy duchy by right of descent from his grandmother Valentina Visconti. Once again, competing claims entangled rulers of state and church in military engagements reflecting complex alliances and rivalries, positions that were inherited and violently pursued by successive generations of the conflict’s leading dynasties.¹ The Wars may have started over territorial control of Naples, but they spiralled out to encompass the engagement of lands and people in wider Europe, the Near East, and North Africa, and as far away as the Spanish colonies in central and south America, where some veterans of the conflict turned conquistadors. The resources of the Americas supplied considerable economic firepower that sustained Habsburg involvement in the Wars.²

¹ On the harrowing social and political consequences within Milan of the nine changes of government in just thirty years during the Wars, see J. Gagné, *Milan Undone: Contested Sovereignities in the Italian Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

² On the significance of the riches coming from the Americas, see G. Parker, *Emperor: A New Life of Charles V* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 342–75. On the fiscal operations and precariousness of the Habsburg position, see also J. D. Tracy, *Emperor Charles V, Impresario*

The cultural impact of the encounters between the inhabitants of Italy's wealthy city states and the armies from beyond the Alps was a central feature of the epic histories of Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt, who emphasised the role of the Wars in spreading the influence of Italian innovations in art, literature, and culture across Europe.³ Their nineteenth-century visions of the gestation and export of the Renaissance from Italy to the rest of the continent are now mostly debunked, but there is still much to admire in these scholars' emphasis on social and cultural as well as political change, something often lacking in studies of the Italian Wars ever since. Even in quite recent literature, the conflicts are almost entirely discussed and presented from a politico-military perspective as a series of events in which statecraft, battle strategies, and new styles of combat combined to determine victory or defeat, and as political and diplomatic scenarios in which only men figure as protagonists.⁴

While there has been some consideration of how changing hierarchies of power within early modern Europe challenged traditional versions of masculinity and femininity, only a few studies have focused on the Italian Wars from this perspective.⁵ A world in which a small number of remarkable women ruled, and in which many men were courtiers with negligible personal autonomy, created at least temporary instability in allocations of authority and work along strictly gendered lines. We investigate this phenomenon by examining the still little understood cultural behaviours and political contributions of the female members of the dynasties involved in the Wars. We examine too the significance of inter-dynastic family networks in determining or undermining alliances. By taking account of the insights provided by fifty years of gender research about the early modern period, which have stimulated new questions, theories, methods, and

of War: Campaign Strategy, International Finance, and Domestic Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au seizième siècle* (Paris: Chamerot, 1855); J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (Vienna: Phaidon, 1860).

⁴ C. Shaw and M. Mallet, *The Italian Wars 1494–1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2014); M. Pellegrini, *Le guerre d'Italia 1494–1530* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2009); C. Shaw (ed.), *Italy and the European Powers: The Impact of War* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); A. Konstam, *Pavia 1525: The Climax of the Italian Wars* (Oxford: Osprey, 1996); D. Abulafia, *The French Descent into Italy, 1494–5: Antecedents and Effects* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995); F. L. Taylor, *The Art of War in Italy, 1494–1529* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921).

⁵ J. Najemy, 'Arms and letters: The crisis of courtly culture in the wars of Italy', in Shaw (ed.), *Italy and the European Powers*, pp. 207–38; J. Tylus, and G. Milligan (eds.), *The Poetics of Masculinity in Early Modern Italy and Spain* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010); K. Long (ed.), *High Anxiety: Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France* (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002); L. Mansfield, *Representations of Renaissance Monarchy: Francis I and the Image-Makers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); and L. Mansfield, 'The art of conjugal discord: A satirical double portrait of Francis I and Eleanor of Austria, c. 1530–1535', in P. Sherlock and M. Cassidy-Welch (eds.), *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 117–35.

sources for analysis, our goal is to investigate how dynastic, patrimonial, and familial structures of power, combined with the political, military, and social crises associated with the Italian Wars, required elite women's involvement in managing power during this time.

Gender Ideologies and the Italian Wars

Women as well as men were critical to the practice of war and both sexes were subject to contemporary gender ideologies that shaped military conduct and communication. Ideas about appropriate roles and distinct behaviours of women and men were asserted and reinforced, not only in prescriptive texts, but also in real life through overt performances of dominance and submission. Victory and defeat were proclaimed and understood in sexualised terms that spoke to assumptions about normative masculinities and femininities performed in heterosexual relations. Few people in Italy escaped the impact of decades of war in which opposing armies battled each other with new, more lethal weapons and innovative tactics, but still relied on terror to subdue towns and cities in their path.⁶ Citizen diaries and chronicles document the ritual humiliations and sometimes vicious reprisals imposed on civilian populations by battle-hardened soldiers. The atrocities of the twenty-two-day Sack of Prato in 1512, for example, shocked the sensibilities even of those accustomed to the brutality of war. Prato, a small subject city within the Tuscan territorial state, was overrun by Spanish troops, under the command of Ramón Folc de Cardona, on their way to restore the Medici to a ruling position within nearby Florence. Eyewitness Jacopo Modesti recorded in his account of the sack that neither age, sex, nor status of any kind offered protection from the worst depredations of Spanish soldiers, which included unbridled sexual violence:

[I]n sum, the sack was a universal despoliation of all things, people, and places, both sacred and profane. The rapes and incidences of incest and adultery, I do not want to mention out of shame: it is enough [to say] that they did not spare anyone, imprisoning noble women and girls who they happened upon and sparing neither the male or female sex, nor holy nuns, sodomizing them all brutally.⁷

Here we see an example of how the bodies of women and children, as well as those of conquered men, were used and perceived as sites on which other men's

⁶ On the novel aspects of the Italian Wars, see M. Mallett, 'The transformation of war, 1494–1530', in Shaw (ed.), *Italy and the European Powers*, pp. 3–21.

⁷ I. Modesti, 'Il miserando sacco dato alla terra di Prato dagli Spagnoli l'anno 1512', *Archivio storico italiano*, 1 (1842), 233–51 (242). For other contemporary accounts, see C. Guasti, *Scritti storici* (Prato: Stefano-Belli, 1894). All translations are our own unless otherwise stated. On complexities in contemporary responses to atrocities like the sack of Prato, see S. D. Bowd, *Renaissance Mass Murder: Civilians and Soldiers during the Italian Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 173–92.

military control and conquest played out as deliberate acts of war, entrenching ideas about subordination as the behaviour of women or of men who had been rendered like women.

The physical and psychological harm that was directed against non-combatants by mercenary armies during the Italian Wars was certainly nothing new in the history of European warfare.⁸ However, the printing revolution ensured that news of battles, sieges, and sacks of urban centres circulated widely, knowledge of the ubiquity of wartime rape provoking a painful awareness within Italy of the private and public dishonour associated with such attacks. The crisis of confidence in Italy's political systems and urban infrastructure provoked by the vulnerability of its towns and cities was expressed not only in sophisticated political critiques by intellectuals, but also in popularly consumed and mostly anonymous poems that explicitly characterised Italian cities assailed by war in feminised terms.⁹ In a lengthy and vivid poem, the Venetian writer and satirist Pietro Aretino depicted the 1527 Sack of Rome as a brutal rape on 'the Pillar and sole Mistress of this great world, violated, begging on her knees, covered in blood, pitiable and weeping for herself'.¹⁰

A lost painting attributed to the Venetian artist Giorgione and usually referred to as *The Assault* is a rare visual representation of the same preoccupation with wartime rape as a measure of Italian powerlessness against foreign invasion (Figure 1). Known only through later copies, including this etching by the Flemish printmaker Quirin (Coryl) Boel, it depicts a soldier in early sixteenth-century military dress pressing his knee firmly against a nearly naked woman and threatening her with a dagger while dragging off her remaining item of clothing. It likely held broader metaphorical significance than the representation of a particular incident of sexual assault. The severed tree stump, brooding dark sky, and abandoned townscape, bristling with phallic towers, form the background to the hapless woman, alone in the countryside, but within sight of the town walls which had proved futile to keep her safe.¹¹

Such explicitly sexualised representations of military valour as male dominance were a vital platform of political communication in the Wars. As Sarah A. Bendall has explored, the ceremonial armour of the military elite frequently visualised

⁸ P. Bokody, 'Images of wartime sexual violence in the chronicles of Giovanni Villani and Giovanni Sercambi', *Renaissance Studies*, 36.4 (2021), 565–89.

⁹ M. Beer, D. Diamanti, and C. Ivaldi (eds.), *Guerre in ottava rima*, 4 vols. (Modena: Edizioni Panini, 1989), vol. II: 'Guerre d'Italia (1483–1527)', pp. 857–64.

¹⁰ D. Romei (ed.), *Scritti di Pietro Aretino nel codice Marciano IT.XI 66 (=6730)* (Florence: F. Cesati, 1987).

¹¹ See P. H. D. Kaplan, 'Giorgione's assault: War and rape in Renaissance Venice', in C. Baskins and L. Rosenthal (eds.), *Early Modern Visual Allegory: Embodying Meaning* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 77–90.



Figure 1 Quirin Boel (printmaker), after Giorgione, *Woman and a Soldier in a Landscape*, 1660; engraving/etching on paper, 176 mm x 242 mm, David Teniers (II) (publisher). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-2014-60-25

classically inspired tropes and feminised allegories to convey messages about the wearer's political superiority and successful subordination of enemies.¹² For example, a 1537 portrait medal of François I of France depicts him in profile wearing the laurel wreath of a Roman emperor and holding a staff with a fleur-de-lis. The reverse of the medallion shows a male figure in armour on horseback, arm raised with sword in hand, trampling the naked female figure of Fortuna. The inscription reads 'DE VICIT FORTVNAM VIRTUTE' ('He has vanquished fortune through virtue') (Figure 2). The medallion was probably struck to celebrate the French victories in northern Italy the year before. Here the masculine *virtù* in warfare defeats the feminine Fortuna. Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written around 1513 in the aftermath of the defeat of the Florentine republic by a Spanish-backed Medicean regime, depicted Fortuna as a forceful and unruly woman who had to be beaten and coerced into submission by a virile man: 'being a woman, she favours young men, because they are less circumspect and more ardent, and because they command her with greater audacity'.¹³ Thus, according to this view of male

¹² S. A. Bendall, 'Female personifications and masculine forms: Gender, armour and allegory in the Habsburg–Valois conflicts of sixteenth-century Europe', *Gender & History*, 35.1 (2023), 42–67.

¹³ N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. G. Bull (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 108. See H. F. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1984), pp. 139–69.



Figure 2 Benvenuto Cellini, medallion of François I, reverse showing Virtue conquering Fortune, cast c.1537, electrotype medal replica. Heath Warwick (photographer), Museums Victoria, Number 2014243

agency, if a prince could take control of Fortuna's metaphorical rudder and turn the tide of a battle, the power of men was reinforced, not challenged, by her presence.

Gendered choreography and language also featured in intricately orchestrated military rituals such as the triumphal entry of victorious armies into defeated towns and cities. Noblewomen were expected to look on from balconies and windows at male martial performances that required affirmation through the female gaze, while women of lower status were ordered by authorities to line the streets as a symbol of their community's subordination and vulnerability.¹⁴ Elizabeth Reid's recent study of the entries of French armies into Genoa highlights the ways in which gendered performance and allegory were intrinsic to the negotiation and articulation of political relationships.¹⁵ Moreover, lower-status women were often perceived by the male protagonists of the Wars as sexual objects available for exchange in the making of male relationships and alliances, as John Gagné has shown.¹⁶

Ready access to a succession of women's bodies was rendered an essential aspect of everyday soldiering. Elite men such the military captain, Giovanni de'

¹⁴ A. Dialetti, 'Defending women, negotiating masculinity in early modern Italy', *Historical Journal*, 54.1 (2011), 1–23; G. Milligan, *Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), pp. 154–6.

¹⁵ E. Reid, 'Gendering political relationships in Genoese ceremonial entries', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 52.1 (2021), 79–110; see also E. Reid, 'Female representation and violence in the ceremonial entries of the Italian Wars', *Renaissance Studies*, 36.5 (2022), 750–68.

¹⁶ J. Gagné, 'Collecting women: Three French kings and manuscripts of empire in the Italian Wars', *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 20.1 (2017), 127–84.

Medici, known as Giovanni delle Bande Nere, included the provision of prostitutes in letters ordering essential war supplies from his treasurer and lieutenant, Francesco Albizi. Giovanni's correspondence mentions sex workers from all over the peninsula, including Flora from Padua, Angelica from Venice, Nicolosa 'the painted Jewess', and a Greek slave called Lorenzina.¹⁷ Other commanders, including Francesco Gonzaga, the marquis of Mantua, behaved in the same fashion. While encamped outside Bologna in the autumn of 1506, during Pope Julius II's siege of the city, Francesco accepted a young boy as his bedfellow after his courtiers failed to secure a prostitute for their master due to the high demand from other elite soldiers.¹⁸ Michael Rocke's scholarship on male sexuality has focused on Renaissance Florence, but his insights are applicable in other contemporary contexts. While Francesco's sexual encounter with a youth would have been technically sinful if it included sodomy, as the dominant and active partner, the marquis could display his sexual virility just as effectively with a boy as with a woman.¹⁹ That he associated his own sexual potency with military success is suggested by the fact that he closed up a letter to his secretary, which proclaimed the reclaiming of Genoa by the French king Louis XII, with a pornographic seal based on an ancient Roman brothel token.²⁰

Women's Activities during the Wars

The Italian Wars, we argue, were thus made in and through contemporary gender ideologies. However, this did not mean women only experienced the conflict as (real or symbolic) victims of male violence. Historians have long recognised that military conflicts sometimes provided new tools and opportunities for women across the social spectrum.²¹ The Italian Wars were no exception, even if we must work hard to glimpse the activities of non-elite women behind the political and military scenes. One of the most significant and lavish diplomatic events

¹⁷ A. Fornaciari, R. Gaeta, S. Minozzi, and V. Giuffra, 'Syphilis in Maria Salviati (1499–1543), wife of Giovanni de' Medici of the Black Bands', *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 26.6 (2020), 1274–82 (1280).

¹⁸ A. Luzio, 'Isabella d'Este di fronte a Giulio II negli ultimi tre anni del suo pontificato', *Archivio storico lombardo*, 17 (1912), 245–334, and 18 (1912), 55–144, and 393–456 (vol. 17, p. 254).

¹⁹ M. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships, Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁰ M. Bourne, 'Mail humour and male sociability: Sexual innuendo in the epistolary domain of Francesco II Gonzaga', in S. F. Matthews-Grieco (ed.), *Erotic Cultures of Renaissance Italy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 199–221 (p. 205).

²¹ See, for example, the analysis of the English Civil War on women's publication in P. Crawford, 'Women's published writings 1600–1700', in M. Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society, 1500–1800* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 211–31.

associated with the Wars involved a huge amount of expert female labour. The extant records for the Field of Cloth of Gold provide clues about the production by female craft workers of the highly refined artefacts that were on display during the magnificently staged meeting between Henry VIII and François I at Calais in 1520. More women than men were employed in making the tapestries for the estimated 300 to 400 richly decorated tents prepared for the occasion.²²

Women also operated in under-recognised roles as what has recently been termed ‘shadow agents of war’.²³ In a volume devoted to the labour that non-combatants performed to support and sustain armies, edited by Stephen Bowd, Sarah Cockram, and John Gagné, women and children are shown to be important members of the military community. They worked in camp laundries, scrounged for food, prepared meals, and even took part in sieges and sacks. At diplomatic meetings and military progresses, washerwomen travelled alongside the attendees and soldiers or provided their service to residents in nearby towns. The Swiss artist Niklaus Manuel Deutsch participated as a mercenary on French campaigns in the War of the League of Cambrai, serving as secretary to Albrecht von Stein, and later fought at Novara and in the Battle of Bicocca in 1522. He depicted female figures cooking and laundering within the camp.²⁴ Women and children who followed the troops moving across the continent also featured in contemporary prints, including in those produced by the Nuremberg printmaker Virgilius Solis, who depicted a female sutler, or canteen woman, in a series otherwise featuring male military figures (Figure 3).

While the work of ordinary women in supporting the everyday functioning of armies and of female artisans in supplying the magnificent accoutrements of warrior kings is beginning to emerge, building on such research is beyond the scope of this Element. Here we focus on how elite women engaged in the Wars and consider what agency might mean in this context. A woman’s high-born status might mean that she was more tightly observed and constrained than those lower down the social ladder. Yet it also gave some socially elevated individuals the capacity to manoeuvre and certainly provided them with more opportunities than ordinary women to have their activities and thoughts documented. Scholarship on the lives of elite women in early modern Europe has revealed just how important

²² Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS fr. 10,383, fols. 39r–132r, cited in G. Richardson, *The Field of Cloth of Gold* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 43.

²³ S. Bowd, S. Cockram, and J. Gagné (eds.), *Shadow Agents of Renaissance War: Suffering, Supporting, and Supplying Conflict in Italy and Beyond* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023).

²⁴ See also C. Andersson, ‘Harlots and camp followers: Swiss Renaissance drawings of young women circa 1520’, in E. S. Cohen and M. Reeves (eds.), *The Youth of Early Modern Women* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp. 117–34.



Figure 3 Virgilius Solis (printmaker), *Female Sutler and Boy with a Dead Rooster*, from the series *Military Figures in Landscapes*, 1524–1562; engraving/etching on paper, 112 mm x 82 mm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-54.785

they were as participants in the politics of dynasties across the European continent.²⁵ Recent studies also rethink how power was distributed within ruling houses, with Theresa Earenfight, for example, calling for analyses of rulership

²⁵ H. Hill (ed.), *Architecture and the Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003); N. Akkerman and B. Houben (eds.), *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-Waiting across Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); A. Cruz and M. Galli Stampino (eds.), *Early Modern Habsburg Women: Transnational Contexts, Cultural Conflicts, Dynastic Continuities* (London: Routledge, 2013); G. Sluga and C. James (eds.), *Women, Diplomacy and Politics since 1500* (London: Routledge, 2016); S. Broomhall and J. Van Gent, *Dynastic Colonialism: Gender, Materiality and the Early Modern House of Orange-Nassau* (London: Routledge, 2016); S. Broomhall and J. Van Gent, *Gender, Power and Identity in the Early Modern House of Orange-Nassau* (London: Routledge, 2016); A. Pearson (ed.), *Women and Portraits in Early Modern Europe: Gender, Agency, Identity* (London: Routledge, 2016); J. Daybell and S. Norrhem (eds.), *Gender and Political Culture in Early Modern Europe, 1400–1800* (London: Routledge, 2017); S. Broomhall (ed.), *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483–1563* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

seen as ‘a multiplicity of power relations’.²⁶ This is an important framework for more clearly elucidating the kinds of authority and influence that individuals were able to enact within contemporary structures of power and governance, especially in the atmosphere of crisis spawned by war. The particular gender dynamics of dynastic, patrimonial, and familial structures meant that women who were physically and emotionally close to Europe’s male decision makers had the capacity to influence them, while others had more autonomous forms of authority. In exercising power, elite women usually worked *within* the contemporary gender ideologies that were repeatedly foregrounded in the Wars and theoretically restricted how they could contribute. In practice, however, the limitations (and the limited imagination that such assumptions about woman’s capacity suggested) did not necessarily preclude significant levels of agency.

This Element aims to consider gender, as identity, ideology, and relations, as a lens through which to analyse the Italian Wars anew. However, it cannot be a comprehensive analysis of all the kinds of activities in which elite women were involved. We apply this theoretical approach as a guiding structure to three political contexts: those of the two major dynasties who were fomenting the conflict – the Habsburgs and the Valois – and that of Italian princely dynasties whose hold on power was threatened by the Wars. The sections to follow thus explore how varied political structures, and the different challenges that specific states faced in engaging with the Wars, shaped opportunities for elite women to be involved (and documented) in the conflicts’ practices of power. Within these differing political contexts, we focus on individuals whose activities help us to demonstrate the range of roles open to elite women and to document the gendered constraints they faced, often eloquently articulated in their correspondence with male relatives. The lens of gender also guides the kinds of evidence we analyse. We pay particular attention to sources produced by women themselves and to the messages that they communicated, both directly and indirectly, in letters and literature, as well as through patronage of art and other cultural forms.

Sections 1 and 2 consider the political work of women in an empire and a kingdom, led by the dynastic houses of Habsburg and of Valois. In Section 1, we examine in particular the diverse activities of Mary of Hungary to support her brothers and her own diplomatic and financial initiatives in varied theatres of war. Section 2 analyses women of the French court, focusing on the diplomacy and intellectual outreach of Marguerite de Navarre, as well as her engagement with

²⁶ T. Earenfight, ‘Without the persona of the prince: Kings, queens, and the idea of monarchy in late medieval Europe’, *Gender & History* 19.1 (2007), 1–21 (esp. pp. 11–15); L. Geever and M. Marini (eds.), *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe: Rulers, Aristocrats and the Formation of Identities* (London: Routledge, 2016); E. Woodacre, L. H. S. Dean, C. Jones, Z. E. Rohr, and R. E. Martin (eds.), *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge, 2019).