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“Stefano Rossetti’s ‘Imitation’ of Isabella de’ Medici: *Il lamento di Olimpia et canzone* (1567)”

Stefano Rossetti dedicated his last madrigal collection, *Il lamento di Olimpia et canzone*, to Isabella de’ Medici in 1567. In his dedication he declares that he has striven to make the work as comparable to Isabella as possible. If nothing else, then, the work may be interpreted as a portrait, an imitation of Isabella.

The work starts with an eleven-stanza setting from Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* and concludes with a six-stanza canzona in praise of Isabella. The Ariosto setting, which narrates the betrayal and abandonment of Olimpia by her lover, is generally considered to reflect Isabella’s predicament. Her husband, Paolo Giordano Orsini, was often absent from Florence, and many historians portray him in a negative light, as a cruel and unfaithful man who eventually murdered her. Whatever the truth of these claims, a study of Rossetti’s work in its context suggests a more nuanced picture: the Ariosto setting is a portrait of her state of mind during an especially difficult period in her marriage (in 1566), and also plays on the fear of loss, whether of loved ones or, in the case of the Medici family, of supreme power, on which their status in Florence depended. The Olimpia setting may have had a cathartic function, composed to “purge” Isabella of her worst nightmares: solitude, betrayal and loss of power or status.

I conclude by suggesting that the whole work is a super-cycle, a sort of ladder of progress, starting out with naïve trustfulness, leading to trauma, and suffering, in which Isabella is portrayed as a weak victim, progressing to eventual acceptance of loss, and culminating in an apotheosis in which Isabella is presented as strong, chaste, triumphant, radiant and god-like.