Historians of Italian culture in the second half of the fifteenth century are perfectly conscious of the fact that it is virtually impossible to over-generalise: Carlo Dionisotti insisted, however, on the ‘distinction’ between forms and genres, but also between generations and geographical areas, given that every single phase and every court represents an ‘individualised’ and in some way ‘specialised’ entity, distinct from all the others. Therefore it is not appropriate to speak of ‘court culture’ as a whole, but rather of ‘culture of the courts’, and so to underline the pluricentric and highly differentiated feature of the phenomenon.

Geography, history and marriage policies

However, when taking into consideration the Po Valley, or even a part of that area, the observer cannot fail to notice a series of discernible facts that invite greater nuance. In fact, from the beginning of the fifteenth century, the regions of Lombardy, Emilia and eastern Piedmont tended to form a homogeneous area constituted by cities that were becoming more and more mutually dependent, both politically and economically. Cities such as Milan, Mantua and Ferrara (Bologna and Casale should also be included) were bonded in a close network of relations and exchanges, in a kind of equilibrium that was to become even more stable in the second half of the century.

1 Dionisotti, Geografia e storia, pp. 179-199.
2 On the Po Valley courts see Tenenti, ‘Aspetti’ and Cattini and Romani, ‘Le corti parallele’.
3 For Bologna see contributions in ‘Bentivolorum magnificentia’. For Casale see Manacorda, ‘Galeotto del Carretto’ and Turba, ‘Galeotto del Carretto’.
4 The dynasties referred to in the text during the period concerned are listed below: the years indicated in brackets refer to the actual years of their reign. In Ferrara the d’Este: Niccolò III (1393-1441), Leonello (1441-1450), Borso (1450-1471), Ercole I (1471-1505), Alfonso I (1505-1534). In Mantua the Gonzagas: Gianfrancesco (1407-1444, under the tutelage of Carlo Malatesta until 1413), Ludovico (1444-1478), Federico (1478-1484), Francesco (1484-1519), Federico (1519-1540, under the tutelage of Isabella d’Este for the first few years). In Milan the Sforzas: Frances-
The decisive event that visibly crystallises this sort of economic, diplomatic and cultural *koiné* is the dynastic shift in the duchy of Milan, the most powerful of all northern Italian states and the indisputable political fulcrum. We are obviously referring to the official rise to power of Francesco Sforza in March 1450, following the death of Filippo Maria Visconti and the brief interlude of the Ambrosian Republic. The new despot immediately sought to strengthen his dominion by means of a solid network of alliances in the area, turning to his favour the support of a few minor principalities.\(^5\)

First and foremost, let us consider the House of Gonzaga in Mantua. The Gonzagas had traditionally been in the pay of the Viscontis, commanding troops on their behalf, but from the year 1447 (under the Marquis Ludovico) they had placed themselves at the service of Venice: the same Venice that had formed an alliance with Florence to support the emerging Francesco Sforza against his elderly father-in-law, Filippo Maria. Once having gained possession of Milan, the new duke succeeded in taking Ludovico away from Venice, signing a treaty of alliance with him in November 1450 and confirming it again in 1454 and 1459.\(^6\)

The House of d’Este were in a similar position, in the sense that they were torn between the Milanese and Venetian spheres of power, although they were initially hostile to Sforza and obliged, *obtorto collo*, to seal a pact of alliance with him. Niccolò III was in fact on very friendly terms with Filippo Maria, whereas Leonello endeavoured to keep an equidistant position between the various powers at play. Borso d’Este, on the other hand, made no attempt to conceal his partiality towards Venice; however, the Peace of Lodi in 1454, bringing to an end the conflict that had flared up in 1452 between Milan and the Venetian Republic, compelled him to grant a few territorial concessions to Duke Francesco. This diplomatic agreement had the finishing touch put to it in 1455 by the marriage of Borso’s half-sister, Beatrice d’Este, to Tristano, the first of the Milanese lord’s illegitimate children.\(^7\)

Marriage policies constitute one of the fundamental strategies of Po Valley diplomacy in the second half of the fifteenth century. This was a custom of the times, but, in this particular case, matrimonial ties underlined the homogeneous nature of the area and the close unity of its towns and cities: this cohesion was founded on frequent and numerous exchanges of merchandise, alliances and people (people considered as items of exchange, of

---


\(^6\) Coniglio, *I Gonzaga*, p. 60.

\(^7\) Chiappini, *Gli Estensi*, pp. 135-126.