Francesco II Sforza's Forgotten Cantor: Evidence of Image Propaganda in Sixteenth-Century Milan

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Historians suggest that Alfonso d'Avalos, Marchese del Vasto, fostered a brilliant court of literary scholars, philosophers, and musicians during his Milanese governorship 1538-46. Chief among the proponents of this theory is musicologist Lewis Lockwood, who bases his assertion principally upon D'Avalos's acclaimed literary skill, the family's literary contacts, and a single letter written by Luca Contile praising the high cultural standards set by the Milanese court in 1541:

...[one finds here] a great number of gentlemen who are lovers of virtue, receptive to strangers, charming in conversation, affable, magnanimous, just, and liberal. And I dare to say without fear of offending any other nation, that in Milan one can learn the true manner of living nobly and handsomely, [sic] Here one can see the finest flower of chivalry, ideas expressed in marvelous conversation. ... here is dignity without arrogance, liberality without sham, pomp without superfluity, enjoyments without avarice, and all the arts wonderfully cultivated. ... 1

There does appear to be substantial sixteenth-century documentation that would support such a thesis. D'Avalos, who served as both commander of the imperial forces in Lombardy and governor of Milan 1538-46, authored several ottave rime and sonetti, the most famous of which include "Correte, o fiume" (Fiorentino 225) and "Anchor che col partire" (218). 2 The latter of these, which was dedicated to
D'Avalos' spouse Maria, has been immortalized in a setting by Cipriano de Rore. The revered Venetian poet and satirist Pietro Aretino praised D'Avalos' literary skill in several extant letters to various patrons and associates. In fact, Aretino's letter of 5 April 1542 to aspiring poet Captain Francesco Faloppia suggests that D'Avalos was one of the most admired poets of the era:

I have a right to be afraid, since the things they compose bring them as much esteem as the glory they win from arms. . . . Nor do I even mention Lord Luigi Gonzaga, but my silence about him bears witness to an excellence in this vein which almost equals that of the marvelous Marquis of Vasto. (Aretino, 175-76)

In a letter to Carlo V's Venetian ambassador Don Lope de Soria dated 1 February 1540, Aretino similarly extolled D'Avalos' generosity as a patron:

And because the glorious Alfonso does not bring anything but wellbeing to others, I am as much more satisfied with him than any other man as I have more enjoyed the friendship of so great a captain. Incidentally, the fact that in his profuse generosity, he wished to give me more than I would take makes it plain that my modesty is greater than either my poverty or my deserts. Because I refused the castle and the revenues which they offered me, Massiminiano Stampa should know this too as should the Marquis of Musso and Lord Castaldo, those most distinguished knights. . . . (Aretino 155-59)

Two paintings executed by Titian also record the historical association shared by the Aretino and the Milanese Governor. The first of these is the Allocution of the Marchese del Vasto (1541), which commemorates D'Avalos' famous oration to Carlo V's mutinous Italian troops stationed in Vienna during the winter of 1532. Aretino, intent on D'Avalos' oration, appears unobtrusively amidst the crowd (Panofsky 188-202). The second, Christ Before Pilate (1543), is an allegorical