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# Fabricating an Image: How Mary Stuart, Isabella d'Este, and Other Women of the Renaissance Used Dress to Assert Agency

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**Fabricating an Image: How Mary Stuart,  
Isabella d'Este, and Other Women of the  
Renaissance Used Dress to Assert Agency**

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Women are rarely accorded prominent roles in the grand narrative of history. More often than not, men are the principal characters, and the shadow they cast over the timeline of our past is so ubiquitous it eclipses the stories of most women. As figures caught in the shadows, women's individual personalities and actions have often been obscured by the personalities and actions of the men they have lived alongside. For this reason, historians are consistently faced with the challenge of extricating the lives of women from the events recorded by men in the written documents that typically constitute history. One way to meet this challenge is to move away from our principal reliance on written documents and records, and instead focus on the objects that women have left behind. Objects of dress are particularly fruitful areas of such inquiry, and few periods placed as much significance on dress as the Renaissance. This paper, then, is a study of female dress during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in both Northern and Southern Europe. Here, "dress" functions as an umbrella term that encapsulates any decorative object used to modify the body. This definition includes items that are not necessarily visible on the body, such as perfume, and items that are not always attached to the body but developed out of dress practices, such as embroidery. I will analyze these accessories and various types of clothing in an effort to understand how women asserted their identities in a society that sought to stultify them. The historian Yassana Croizat has noted, "a systematic study of how Renaissance women invented, circulated, and used fashions to consolidate their authority has yet to be made."<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to take the first steps towards such a study. In the following pages, I will evidence that women used dress as a weapon with which they could dismantle the barriers society confined

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<sup>1</sup> Yassana Croizat, "Living Dolls: Francois I Dresses His Women," *Renaissance Quarterly* 60 (2007): 14.

them within. Dress afforded women the unique opportunity to construct self-images of their own making that were not informed by the desires and needs of the men they lived along side. Furthermore, dress not only allowed women to construct their own self-images, but also gave them the opportunity to circulate those images within spaces that were otherwise inaccessible to them. Women like Isabella d'Este were limited in their ability to travel and Mary Stuart was imprisoned; yet during their lifetimes they retained astonishing amounts of power and continue to be relevant historical figures today.

In the Renaissance, objects of dress possessed a particular dynamism that can be difficult to comprehend today. In our contemporary world, the word “object” and its derivatives are often employed as terms of dismissal. To “objectify” anything, particularly a person, is to simplify and stagnate them or, to put it more bluntly, revoke them of individuality, agency, and life, to make them just a “thing.” These perceptions have their basis in the emergence of capitalism and Enlightenment philosophy. Peter Stallybrass and Rosalind Jones in particular have examined how the appearance of the commodity signaled a break from the Renaissance conception of “objecthood.” In the Renaissance, before the calcifying of commodity culture, articles of dress maintained an intimate link to the self. Dress possessed a “material memory” that lent it a unique character and significant function.<sup>2</sup> The period’s conception of a highly porous boundary between the physical and metaphysical self meant that the particular “material memory” of an item of dress inscribed itself onto a person’s corporeal and cognitive being. Every aspect of a person’s identity, both as it was publicly presented and internally understood, was informed by dress. People, then, “dressed deeply,” since the clothes they wore both

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

determined their outer physical appearances as well as their determined their inner, psychological selves.<sup>3</sup>

Will Fisher's conception of "prosthetic" gender further enriches Stallybrass and Jones's notion of "dressing deeply." Fisher argues that Galenic medicine and humoralism bred the belief that gender operated on a spectrum.<sup>4</sup> Humoralism was a fundamental theory of Renaissance medicine, which stated that men were "hot" and "dry" while women were "cold" and "wet."<sup>5</sup> The particular combination of these attributes determined a child's gender. Women were perceived as "undercooked" men, since it was the heat generated during gestation that caused the baby's testicles to descend. Thus, when a female was born it was assumed that the child's "coldness" resulted in the internalization of her male genitals. A woman's coldness lent itself to her wetness, which produced the various fluids, such as menstrual blood and breast milk, that emanated from her body.

Women's leaky and porous nature justified stereotypes that they were unpredictable, mercurial and, in short, unstable. Men were associated with the "distance" senses of vision and speech, while women were associated with the "proximity" senses of touch, taste and smell.<sup>6</sup> These associations dictated the activities deemed acceptable for members of the respective genders to take part in. Men were able to engage in activities

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<sup>3</sup> Stallybrass and Jones, "Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory," 2.

<sup>4</sup> Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Fisher, Cadden and Classen provide informative overviews of Galenic medicine and Renaissance conceptions of gender. Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Differences in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender, and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London: Routledge Publishing, 1998), 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> Classen, *Color of Angels*, 66.

“outside” of themselves. They could take part in dialogues, travel the world, and examine art. Their bodies not only allowed but in a sense implored them to engage with the world, to question, to examine, to travel, to learn. Women, on the other hand, were sequestered into a world of interiors, interior in the sense of the spaces they were allowed to occupy and interior in relation to themselves. They were relegated to the domestic sphere and restrictions were placed on their ability to engage with anyone outside a designated circle. Science, then, seemed to prove the intrinsic inferiority of women, since not only did their bodies lack the stability of men’s, but they evidenced a kind of incompetence in their inability to achieve manhood.

Understood in conjunction, the theories of Stallybrass, Jones and Fisher evidence the fluidity of identity in the Renaissance and the role of dress in dictating and reinforcing the outcome of those identities. Women’s imposed interiority was undoubtedly due in part to the intrinsic instability of identity and the significance of that identity once it was visually realized. This conceptual disjunction between masculine exteriority and feminine interiority was materialized in the appearance of the clothes themselves. Billowing sleeves, exaggerated collars, and protruding codpieces characterized male dress and allowed men to monopolize the physical space of the rooms they occupied.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, headdresses and tight bodices constantly constrained women and insured that they occupied a relatively small amount of space. The survival of the social hierarchy was ensured by its visual realization. By sequestering women and

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<sup>7</sup> James Laver, Amy de la Haye, and Andrew Tucker. *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 74.

dictating the extent of their visual agency, men were able to ensure that they maintained their own status as the most prominent figures in society.

A woman was generally confined to the domestic sphere but when she was presented publically she was expected to use her physical appearance to enhance her family's prestige. In her analysis of portraiture during the Renaissance, Patricia Simons discusses how women's images were manipulated to satisfy the demands of the era's "display culture."<sup>8</sup> Until the late fifteenth century, women were almost always depicted in full profile in Italian Renaissance portraiture. Whereas men were typically depicted in three-quarter or frontal view with their eyes directed towards the viewer, women rarely evidenced any engagement with the viewer outside the frame. Instead, the turned heads of female portraiture created an open plane upon which the gazes of the men who commissioned, painted, and viewed such paintings could freely roam. A profile view transformed a woman from an active subject that could confront viewers into a passive object that was completely subject to the gaze of others.<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Welch has similarly discussed how various aspects of a woman's appearance, particularly the sleeve of her dress, functioned as a space where she could display the status of her husband or father.<sup>10</sup> A woman's dress often featured her husband's insignia, which allowed him to brand and flaunt her as a demonstration of his own magnificence. In the following section, this paper explicitly examines such labeling on the clothing of Margaret of Austria and Margaret of York. These women serve as just two examples among many of how dress

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<sup>8</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: the Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," *History Workshop Journal* 25 (1988): 8.

<sup>9</sup> Simons, "Women in Frames," 7.

<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Welch, "New, Old, and Second-Hand Culture: The Case of the Renaissance Sleeve," in *Revaluing Renaissance Art*, ed. Gabriele Neher and Rupert Shepherd (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 102.

was typically used by men to shape the identities of their female relations. All the women in this paper demonstrate that they could never fully extricate their identities from the “display culture” of the era. In order to express agency these women had to maintain their symbolic function, but they could, and did, manipulate their symbolism in order to express their own meanings.

Renaissance women used dress to construct symbolic representations of themselves that challenged the identities society imposed on them. It is time historians recognize the role of dress in history and the remarkable ingenuity evidenced by the women who manipulated that dress for their own benefit. My analysis uses the dress of Margaret of Austria, Eleanor of Austria, and Beatrice d’Este to provide a foundational understanding of Renaissance dress practices. It then transitions into more extensive investigations of Mary Stuart’s embroidery and Isabella d’Este’s perfumed gloves. Together, these segments illustrate the various ways women used dress to construct their own public images and circulate those images within spaces otherwise controlled by men.

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Margaret of Austria’s turbulent life (1480-1530) called for various forms of dress, each of which demonstrated the complex ways dress could be used as both an instrument of submission and an instrument of agency. Since Margaret’s physical garments have been lost to time, this analysis uses three surviving portraits to examine the meaning behind her different sartorial phases. The two early portraits *The Portrait of Margaret* (Figure 1) and the *1495 Portrait of Margaret of Austria as Princess* (Figure 2) illustrate how dress branded the princess as the property of men. The *Portrait of Margaret of Austria as a Widow* (Figure 3), on the other hand, reveals how dress allowed Margaret to



construct her own brand. Margaret's widow weeds became her emblem and functioned as a symbol of both her personal agency and threat to those who sought to challenge her position. The juxtaposition of these three portraits thus evidences that the ruling men in Margaret's life used dress to assert their possession of her up until she became regent and manipulated her own dress in order to validate her new power.

The dress of Margaret in her earliest portrait exemplifies how clothing and accessories were commonly used to declare a woman the property of one man and advertise her as a valuable commodity for a potential new owner. *The Portrait of Margaret* (1490) by Jean Hey depicts the princess at the age of ten as she stands in three-quarter profile before a lush landscape. As the daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, Margaret already possessed a level of individual significance. Yet, in this portrait Margaret is depicted as little more than valuable new property for her fiancé Charles VIII. In the portrait Margaret wears a headdress decorated with scallop shells that likely refer to Charles's heraldic order, the Order of Saint Michael.<sup>11</sup> She also wears a black velvet collar that is both modest in its relative austerity and appropriately sumptuous for a young woman of her rank. Along this collar are embroidered in alternating red and white the initials 'M' and 'C' for Margaret and Charles. As noted in the introduction, the art historian Evelyn Welch has examined how it was typical for a nobleman to mark a woman's clothes with his insignia in order to evidence his ownership of her.<sup>12</sup> The 'M' and 'C' embroidery was no doubt intended to label Margaret as the

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Matthews, "Apparel, Status, Fashion. Woman's Clothing and Jewelry", in *Women of Distinction* ((Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005): 142.

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Welch, "New, Old and Second-hand Culture: the Case of the Renaissance Sleeve", in *Revaluing Renaissance Art*, edited by Gabriele Neher and Rupert Shepard (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 148.

future property of the young prince, much in the same way the letter ‘C’ and rose symbolism designated Margaret of York the property of Charles the Bold in *Portrait of Margaret of York* (Figure 4).<sup>13</sup> In the image, the Duchess wears a collar decorated with the letter ‘C’ for her husband Charles the Bold and the rose imagery of her own household. The portraits of Margaret of Austria and Margaret of York are thus two examples of how dress was commonly used to label women the propriety of both their birth and marital families.

Margaret’s dress in the Hey portrait presents her as a faithful fiancé who possesses all of the modesty and devotion necessary for a good wife. This dress also conveys her monetary worth, since around her neck is a large ruby and gold necklace that would no doubt be included in her dowry.<sup>14</sup> Margaret’s dress defines her as an object of monetary and diplomatic worth, as opposed to an individual who should be valued for her own personal merit. Dress in this portrait, then, functions as an instrument of subjection deployed by Maximilian and Charles so as to mold Margaret into a symbol of their own power.

The veil and necklace of Margaret in the *Portrait of Margaret of Austria as Princess* portray the unmarried woman as valuable commodity on offer to any eligible new owner. By 1495 Charles VIII had revoked his promise to marry Margaret and forced the young princess to reenter the marriage market. From among Margaret’s manifold suitors her father recognized Juan of Aragon-Castile as a favorable match and quickly

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret of York’s elaborate collar in *Portrait of Margaret of York* is one of the best-known examples of a husband using dress to claim ownership of his wife. In the image, the Duchess wears a collar decorated with the letter ‘C’ for her husband Charles the Bold and the rose imagery of her own household. For a more in-depth analysis of the image see Dagmar Eichberger’s entry on pg. 68 of *Women of Distinction*.

<sup>14</sup> Matthews, “Apparel, Status, Fashion,” 150.

began negotiations with the Spanish prince. Maximilian likely commissioned the *1495 Portrait of Margaret* during this negotiation period in an effort to aid his marriage campaign. Margaret's dress in this portrait is strikingly similar to that in the *1495 Portrait of Margaret*, however, the 'M' and 'C' initials that once decorated her collar are notably absent and the scallop shells on her veil are gone. Without a man to definitively label it, Margaret's dress is stripped of any recognizable insignia and transformed into a blank slate ready to be pressed with the seal of a new owner. The dress in *Portrait of Margaret of Austria* still, however, conveys numerous messages to its viewers. Margaret again wears a black and gold veil that covers most of her head and evidences her modesty. Her virtue is further emphasized by her large sapphire and pearl necklace, which illustrates the wealth of Margaret's dowry much the necklace in her previous portrait. Margaret's pearl was almost undoubtedly intended to symbolize her virginity and readiness to bear children, since pearls were closely associated with both chastity and fertility.<sup>15</sup> In this portrait, then, Margaret's dress constructs her as an ideal bride who is prepared to serve her husband and provide him with heirs.

The *Portrait of Margaret of Austria as a Widow* (1518) by Bernard van Orley illustrates the drastic change in Margaret's dress after she transformed from a political pawn into *de facto* queen. The painting was made fourteen years after the death of Margaret's second husband, Philibert II. Despite the fact that her husband died long before, it is not at all surprising that Margaret choose to wear widow's weeds for her official portrait. In fact, Margaret continued to wear widow's dress for every one of her

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<sup>15</sup> Karen Raber, "Chains of Pearls: Gender, Property, and Identity", *Ornamentalism: The Art of Renaissance Accessories* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 174.

public appearances until her own death in 1530. Margaret's dress could initially seem like the sentimental impulse of a woman who was deeply in love with her husband. In reality, however, Margaret's widow dress was a carefully calculated political strategy. In 1507, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I declared Margaret the regent of the Netherlands on behalf of her young nephew, the future Charles V. Margaret relished her new position of power, despite the fact that it made her the subject of ridicule and skepticism. Much like Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I, Margaret's unusual political position was constantly threatened simply because she was a woman. The doubts surrounding Margaret's ability to effectively rule compelled her to construct an appealing public image that would allow her to maintain her role as regent. Widow's weeds proved to be a highly effective means of meeting this need. As a widow, Margaret could simultaneously present herself as a sympathetic feminine figure and an experienced political player. Widows occupied a unique position in Renaissance society, since they were both devout preservers of their husband's memory and liberated sexual beings that were no longer male property.<sup>16</sup> Widows were therefore figures that elicited fear and admiration in equal measure. Margaret utilized this perception of widows to present herself as a virtuous woman and simultaneously subverted traditional gender roles by asserting her capabilities as a ruler.

Like her relative Margaret, Eleanor of Austria (1498-1558) used dress to affirm her individual agency and exert influence over political affairs. Throughout her life, Eleanor took great pride in her Spanish heritage and retained a deep devotion towards her Spanish relatives. She visually realized this loyalty by wearing Spanish dress for many of

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<sup>16</sup> Sharon T Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 173.

her official portraits and public *entrées* throughout her early life.<sup>17</sup> Eleanor continued to wear Spanish dress after her marriage to François I of France, yet by that time the choice to wear dress *alla spagnola* was an overt act of rebellion. Eleanor flouted convention and visually expressed disdain for her marital family by refusing to wear French dress. Eleanor, then, used Spanish dress to assert her allegiances and ensure that her identity was not unwilling subsumed by the image of her family's rivals.

Eleanor's decision to wear Spanish dress after her marriage must be understood within the context of Spanish and French relations at the time. As Archduchess of Austria and Infanta of Castile, Eleanor occupied a predominant place among European royalty from the moment of her birth. Her own political clout was, however, enhanced even further by the extraordinary diplomatic power of her brother, Charles V. Charles V, or Charles I of Spain, was the Holy Roman Emperor, King of Spain, and archduke of Austria, who and maintained dominion over lands as far reaching as Naples and Spanish America. Eleanor, then, was closely associated with the most eminent political powers in Europe, yet she always maintained an allegiance to Spain above all other nations. From 1494 to 1559, Spain and France were embroiled in a series of battles that have come to be known as the Italian Wars. By 1530, the Spanish had brutally defeated the French forces and held François and his sons hostage. As a result, the two nations signed the Peace of Cambrai, which stipulated that Eleanor marry the French king. Eleanor's marriage was, thus, tense with political rivalry and resentment from the outset. Her Spanish dress was a direct response to her new position as her enemy's wife. By wearing clothes that overtly

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<sup>17</sup> Janet Cox-Rearick, "Power-Dressing at the Courts of Cosimo de' Medici and François I: The 'moda alla spagnola' of Spanish Consorts Eleonore d'Autriche and Elenora di Toledo", *Artibus et Historiae* 60 (2009): 43.

marked her as “other,” Eleanor proclaimed her opposition to the French cause and her unwavering loyalty to her familial house.

Joos van Cleve’s portrait of Eleanor clearly evidences how she implemented dress *alla spagnola* (Figure 5). The painting displays Eleanor in three-quarter profile as she sits against a green background. The solid background enhances the grandeur of her dress, almost all of which is in the Spanish style. Her hair is in the Portuguese *papos* fashion that called for concaves of crimped hair to be constructed over the ears.<sup>18</sup> The look is accessorized with a jeweled headdress that features an extremely large teardrop pearl. The lavishness of Eleanor’s jewels is complemented by the equally sumptuous design of her clothes. Her golden colored bodice is decorated with a jeweled edge and stitched pomegranate motif; the latter was commonly associated with Isabella I of Castile and so it is likely that Eleanor is alluding to the famous Spanish queen by wearing the design.<sup>19</sup> Eleanor's blue velvet sleeves slashed to reveal white chemise are also typical of the Spanish style. It is also important to note that Eleanor wore Spanish dress for all of her *entrées* through France as a new Queen. In both public and domestic settings, then, Eleanor used dress indicate to both the royal court and the larger French public that she was on the side of the Spanish court.

Much like Margaret and Eleanor, Beatrice d’Este (1475-1497) recognized that dress could be an effective means of asserting agency. Beatrice, the younger sister of Isabella d’Este, married Duke Ludovico Sforza of Milan in 1491. The marriage was highly advantageous for Beatrice, since Milan maintained one of the most fiscally and culturally rich courts in Europe. Yet, Beatrice’s time in Milan was also punctuated by

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<sup>18</sup> Cox-Rearick, “Power-Dressing at the Courts of Cosimo de’ Medici and Francois I,” 40.

<sup>19</sup> Cox-Rearick, “Power-Dressing at the Courts,” 47.

moments of diplomatic and marital discord. Beatrice used dress, specifically headdresses, to assert agency in the face of Ludovico's precarious position of power and his very public relationship with his mistress. Beatrice encouraged almost all of the most prominent noblewomen in Milan to adopt her signature *coazzone* hairstyle.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, visual markers of Beatrice dominated the entire visual composition of the Milanese court.

The political climate of the Milanese court compelled Beatrice to assert agency through dress. Perpetual scheming and precarious positions of power characterized the court of Ludovico Sforza. Yet, the court was also recognized as a center of humanist innovation and a manifestation of exceptional aesthetic splendor. For this reason, Ludovico was renowned throughout Europe for both his ability to cultivate cultural excellence and proclivity for diplomatic duplicity. In the early years of his marriage to Beatrice, Ludovico used murder and money to depose the rightful heir to the Milanese throne, Gian Galeazzo, and the regent Bona of Savoy. When his illegitimate position was threatened, Ludovico sought support from the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I and King Charles VIII of France. Their aid eventually secured Ludovico's dukedom, but only at the cost of a series of bloody and expensive wars along the Italian peninsula.<sup>21</sup> Beatrice, then, occupied an environment rampant with dramatic and dangerous activity. Yet the young Duchess, unlike her sister Isabella, was only minimally involved in diplomatic relations outside of her own court. This did not mean she did not have enough to contend

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<sup>20</sup> Evelyn Welch, "Signs of Faith: the Political and Social Identity of Hair in Renaissance Italy" in *La Fiducia Secondo i Linguaggi del Potere*, ed. Paolo Prodi (Bologna: Società Editrice il Mulino, 2007): 391.

<sup>21</sup> Evelyn Welch, *Art and Authority in Renaissance Milan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 29.

with inside the court itself, which was as rife with intrigue as it was with cultural innovation.

Beatrice used her distinctive *coazzone* hairstyle to assert her prominence among the women of the Milanese court. Unlike many noble marriages of the period, Beatrice and Ludovico had, by all accounts, a relatively harmonious marriage. However, the figure of Ludovico's mistress, Cecilia Gallerani, loomed over the Duke and Duchess's union. This, coupled with Ludovico's delicate political standing, compelled Beatrice to assert her place at the forefront of the court. Dress, as we have already seen, was an ideal means by which to do this. It is no surprise, then, that Beatrice developed a signature headdress and used to assert her agency within the court.

Before Beatrice arrived in Milan she commonly wore an Iberian style braid that consisted of a center parting behind which was a long attachment of false hair. This braid of false hair, known as a *coazzone*, was then decorated with various elaborate accoutrements that further increased its already astounding weight.<sup>22</sup> The *Bust Portrait of Beatrice d'Este* by Gian Cristoforo (Figure 6) evidences the intricacy of this headdress. The bust was sculpted in 1490, and so confirms that Beatrice developed her signature hairstyle before relocating to Milan. This is significant because it means that Beatrice, like Eleanor of Austria, did not renounce the dress of her birthplace in favor of the dress of her adopted home, as would have been customary. Beatrice's retention of her signature dress inevitably evoked associations with her native Ferrara and d'Este lineage, and, therefore, can be understood as a highly calculated decision.

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<sup>22</sup>Welch, "Signs of Faith," 392.



By wearing the *coazzone* in the Milanese court, Beatrice asserted her individual identity and insisted that she was a figure of significant political clout independent from her husband. Soon after Beatrice's arrival, many women at the Milanese court began to adopt the *coazzone* style for themselves. The effect of this was that the court was populated with women wearing visible markers of their Duchess's identity. This paper has already discussed how a man often fashioned his emblem onto the dress of a wife or daughter to evidence his ownership of her. Beatrice's *coazzone* can be understood as a feminine response to the masculine emblem. Her headdress functioned as a sartorial insignia that she used to stamp herself onto the most important women in her state. It is important to note that among these women who wore the *coazzone* was Ludovico's mistress Cecilia Gallerani, as can even be seen in Leonardo da Vinci's famous portrait of her, *The Lady with the Ermine* (Figure 7). Cecilia bore Ludovico a son in 1491, and her evident ability to bear children, particularly sons, posed a threat to the newly married Beatrice. Cecilia's *coazzone*, however, evidences her subservience to the duchess.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Beatrice used the *coazzone* to establish an individual identity and assert her primacy within the court system.

Like Margaret of Austria and Eleanor of Austria, Beatrice d'Este used dress to construct a public identity that was not solely dictated by the men around her. The "display culture" of the period meant that these women were the constant focus of masculine gazes. Yet, instead of manifesting the docile image these gazes desired, Margaret, Eleanor and Beatrice used dress to visually assert their agency and air their political grievances.

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<sup>23</sup> Welch, "Signs of Faith," 398.

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Of all the women examined in this study, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots (1542-1587), and her cousin Elizabeth I (1533-1603) are by far the most recognizable historical figures. This is no doubt because Mary and Elizabeth were both queens and as such were thrust into more prominent, and problematic, political roles than their contemporaries. As women and as queens, Mary and Elizabeth faced the unprecedented challenge of reconciling the contradicting perceptions of their inferior female bodies and their divine political bodies. Both Mary and Elizabeth confronted this issue by using dress to abstract their bodies into symbols that no longer emphasized their physical womanhood, but rather accentuated their metaphysical divinity. Whereas there is extensive scholarship on Elizabeth's dress, there are relatively few investigations of Mary's public presentation.<sup>24</sup> This study will seek to, at least in part, fill that void by examining the embroideries she made while under house arrest in England. Embroidery has always been closely associated with dress since women often embellished various vestments from bodices to chemises with needlework of some kind. When that needlework was transferred from items of clothing to cloth panels it still retained the tactile nature and bodily connection necessary for it to be classified as dress. As an item of dress, embroidery was a powerful tool that had the potential to dismantle the barriers between the private female sphere and

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<sup>24</sup> Catherine Howey, "Fashioning Monarchy: Women, Dress, and Power at the Court of Elizabeth I, 1558-1603," *Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne Crux and Mihoko Suzuki (Urbana and Chicago: U. Illinois Pr., 2009), 142-56; Nanette Salomon, "Positioning Women in Visual Convention: The Case of Elizabeth I," in *Attending to Women in Early Modern England*, ed. B. Travitsky and A. Seeff (Newark: U. Delaware Pr., 1994): 64-95; and Catherine Howey, "Dressing a Virgin Queen: Court Women, Dress, and Fashioning the Image of England's Queen Elizabeth I," *Early Modern Women 4* (2009): 201-208 are just a few examples of the numerous articles and books that investigate the dress of Elizabeth I.

public masculine sphere. Mary designed and stitched her embroidery panels within the confines of the home she was imprisoned in. Yet, once these panels were completed they were disseminated throughout noble English households and often hung on the walls. Thus, embroidery functioned as an ideal means for Mary's sartorial self-construction, since it was an accessible means of self-expression that she could easily circulate publicly.

This segment of the paper examines how Mary used her embroideries to regain her agency and construct a new public image of herself. The image she constructs portrays her as a woman who by the grace of god will one day triumph over the unjust oppression she is subjected to. This message is most evidently fashioned in her *Las Pennas Pessan* (Figure 8) and *Virescit Vulnere Virtus* (Figure 9) panels. For this reason, these two panels are the central foci of the following analysis.

Mary Stuart's queenship made her self-image a subject of extreme importance and conflict. The sermons of the Scottish Presbyterian John Knox aptly illustrate the prejudices that made Mary's rule so problematic. Knox was one of Mary's fiercest opponents, and in his famous *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, he proclaimed, "God hath dejected women from rule, dominion, empire, and authority above man" so that for a "woman [to] reigneth above man, she hath obtained it by treason and conspiracy committed against God."<sup>25</sup> Knox's statement reflects the sentiments of most British subjects concerning female rule. This fear stemmed from the contradictions between the prevailing belief that women were inherently inferior and belief in the two bodies of rulership. The principle of dual ruling bodies dictated that the royal body comprised both a corporeal body and a political body. This meant that all

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<sup>25</sup> Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Mary Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 19.

royals were born with ephemeral physical bodies, which upon coronation were inhabited by the eternal metaphysical bodies of the nation they respectively ruled.<sup>26</sup> Thus, rulers were understood to be quasi-human entities that not only had control of the countries they ruled but actually were those countries. Women's bodies, on the other hand, have historically proven to be a source of endless social anxiety. Women were generally understood to be physically defective versions of men, "leaky" and, thus, naturally unpredictable and uncontainable.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, it was necessary that women be kept under the control of men, who were intrinsically more balanced and reasonable. A woman who was not under the control of any man was a dangerous anomaly whose very existence seemed to threaten the foundational principles of society.<sup>28</sup> Thus, vast tension was inevitably generated by a possible convergence of a body laden with complex social preconceptions and misgivings and one of the most powerful bodies in the European world.

Mary Stuart responded to the issue of her dual bodies by crafting a public image that abstracted her physical body. For fourteen years Elizabeth had Mary placed under house arrest. Mary's public image during this period was almost entirely crafted by both her detractors and supporters, who used new innovations like the printing press to circulate their constructions of her. These representations portrayed her as either an immoral jezebel incapable of overcoming her baser sexual impulses or a pitiable victim

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<sup>26</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Fisher, *Materializing Gender*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Sharon Strocchia, "Women and the Sexual Politics of Mourning Clothes," in *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 174).

of unlucky circumstances.<sup>29</sup> Both identities stripped her of any agency and depicted her as the passive recipient of the events and forces that befell her. In response to this, Mary constructed a new identity for herself as a woman of faith who actively sought to change the circumstances of her life and overcome the multitude of hardships she had been forced to face. Her imprisonment, however, made it difficult to publicize this self-image. Embroidery proved to be a perfect remedy to this issue, since it could be inserted into public spaces under the misleading guise of innocent handiwork.

It was during the Renaissance that the discrepancy between “art” and “craft” developed, in which the more advanced, masculine form of creativity was considered “art” and lesser, more feminine forms of creativity were considered “craft.”<sup>30</sup> Needlework became women's work because it was conducted in a domestic setting and its value was measured in terms of sentiment. This was in contrast to “masculine” arts such as painting, which were exchanged in a commoditized market and valued in monetary terms. Even the very act of embroidering evoked a semblance of submissiveness and passivity, since a woman engaged in embroidery positioned her face downwards, hunched her shoulders, and seemed to sequester herself away from the rest of her environment.<sup>31</sup> Needlework was also a tactile medium, which automatically aligned it with the “baser” and more “feminine” of the five senses. Yet, needlework functioned as a rare means of feminine intellectual expression and assertion of public identity beneath its veneer of placid domesticity. Needlework’s subversive power stemmed from its ability to allow women to

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<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *Mary Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 5.

<sup>31</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 5.

recreate and remodel the world around them.<sup>32</sup> The iconography available for women's artistic expression was usually limited to the patterns in pattern books; however, they could combine or alter these pre-constructed patterns to create new images that expressed their individual sensibilities.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps most significantly, this seemingly frivolous pastime actually destabilized the boundaries between the public and private realms.<sup>34</sup> A woman could display her handicraft in the house so that various visitors would see it, or she could circulate those handicrafts outside the household by giving them away as gifts. Women, then, used needlework as a public forum through which they could record and comment upon contemporary political, cultural, and social events. Mary Stuart was no exception to this. Her signature designs accorded her a unique amount of agency over her own image. With a thread and needle, Mary could carefully craft a representation of herself that reworked the identity imposed on her by outside forces. It was a medium through which Mary could represent herself symbolically, and thus de-emphasize her feminine physicality. Yet, since needlework was also a medium inextricably associated with womanhood, she could simultaneously affirm the positive aspects of her feminine nature.

The *Las Pennas Pessan* embroidery (1570-1585) is the most evident realization of Mary Stuart's abstraction of her physical self into artistic symbols. The panel depicts an armillary sphere in the center of a highly stylized water background that is populated by ships, sea monsters, fishes and fallen feathers. Over this composition there hangs a scroll, which reads, "LAS PENNAS PASSAN Y QUEDA LA SPERANZA [Sorrows pass but

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<sup>32</sup> Stallybrass and Jones, *Renaissance Clothes and the Materials of Memory*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Stallybrass and Jones, *Renaissance Clothes and the Materials of Memory*, 148.

hope survives].” This juxtaposition of an image and a phrase characterizes the composition as an *impresa*. *Impresas* were a popular art form among the Renaissance elite, who would use the images they created to visually realize and publicly display their personal beliefs.<sup>35</sup> The typical *impresa* consisted of the artist’s own motto or one adopted from an ancient author, accompanied by a visible image that did not explicitly illustrate the phrase. This challenged the viewer to construct a cohesive message by reconciling the meanings of the words and the images.<sup>36</sup> A few scholars have already examined Mary’s embroideries and contributed valuable analyses symbolic meanings behind the images in the panels.<sup>37</sup> No scholarship, however, has yet recognized how Mary manipulated these meanings to craft a new public image for herself. For this reason, my analysis will argue that Mary drew upon the Renaissance’s rich history of symbolic self-expression in an effort to construct her own symbolic image.

Mary clearly meant to convey a very specific and significant message with the image of an armillary sphere over a dangerous sea. Unlike all the other emblems in her embroideries, the armillary sphere has no precedent in any embroidery books or the *impresa* of her relatives. Rather, the depiction of this navigational device is completely a construction of Mary’s own hand. The phrase she placed above the sphere is a play on “pennas” as referring to both “sorrows” and feathers,” hence, pains and pens.<sup>38</sup> This meaning coupled with the armillary sphere, could be meant to convey that there is hope

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Bath, *Emblems for a Queen: The Needlework of Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Archetype Publications, 2008), 23.

<sup>36</sup> Bath, *Emblems for a Queen*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Bath is particularly important in this regard and his scholarship will be referred to throughout the rest of the paper. It is important to note that my analysis relies on Bath’s scholarship for translations and the historical meanings behind the symbols Mary uses in her panels. However, the central argument of this paper is entirely my own.

<sup>38</sup> Bath, *Emblems for a Queen*, 28.

for a safe and successful ending despite the hardships faced in the course of the journey.<sup>39</sup> This message is further suggested by the inclusion of fallen feathers, which are likely those of a migrating bird who, even with the loss of its feathers, would manage to find its way home again.<sup>40</sup> I argue, then, that Mary abstracted her identity into these figures and words to convey that she would persevere through the hardships life had presented her. More importantly, this unwavering perseverance would allow her to return to the throne where she belonged. While this is a valid interpretation of the panel, the fact that Mary so carefully constructed the armillary sphere and the way it symbolically interacts with the border *impresa* suggests that there is a much more complex message present within the panel.

As a topographical instrument, the armillary sphere symbolized world dominion in the same way that globe and map imagery did within contemporary portraiture. Such imagery would famously appear a few years later in the *Ditchley Portrait* of Elizabeth I (Figure 10, Figure 11). In the image, Elizabeth's global dominion is visualized by her placement on top of, as opposed to within, an image of the world. Topological symbolism is also used in Elizabeth's equally famous *Armada Portrait*. In this particular portrait, however, Elizabeth illustrates her influence by placing her hand on a globe. Although the layout in each portrait is different the message in both is still essentially the same, specifically, that Elizabeth rules the world and no one should dare to challenge her power.

The image is clearly a meant to indicate Elizabeth's power since she stands above the world instead of within it. The armillary sphere in Mary's embroidery functions in a similar way. An armillary sphere is an astronomical device used to illustrate the locations

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 28.



of the equator, the polar circles, and the elliptic hoop.<sup>41</sup> It is, perhaps, inevitable that a discussion of a Renaissance queen and astronomical symbolism will evoke associations with Elizabeth I; one of her most successful self-construction programs was her symbolic union with the sun. Mary, however, suggested that she was even more significant figure by constructing herself as a device around which the sun orbits. Elizabeth's association with the sun was so potent in the minds of her the Renaissance public, it seems unlikely that a contemporary observer, knowing who crafted the panel, would not read an aggressive meaning into such symbolism.

The cartographic composition of the panel as a whole further emphasizes that Mary used her embroideries to assert her exalted position in the earthly and cosmic realms. The panel's square shape is reminiscent of medieval maps, often known as *mappae mundi* (Figure 12, Figure 13). *Mappae mundi* depicted the world as a square or rectangular space and intended to represent both a systematic measurement of the natural world and abstract philosophical concepts.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Mary likely sought to convey a conceptual meaning through her depiction of the natural world. In *mappae mundi*, the world is confined within four corners, and the same is true of Mary's panel, in which there are four heraldic emblems in the corners. Three of these emblems belong to France, Scotland, and England, which are all nations Mary had claim to rule. The fourth emblem belongs to Spain and, since Mary had no familial connection to Spain, its presence can only be explained as her attempt to visually align herself with the most notably Catholic

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<sup>41</sup> "Armillary Sphere," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/35363/armillary-sphere>.

<sup>42</sup> "Good News for Fans of Medieval Maps," last modified March 14, 2014, <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/magnificentmaps/2014/03/good-news-for-fans-of-medieval-maps.html>

nation in Europe. Thus, this panel functions as a map of Mary's own creation that illustrates the areas of her dominion. According to her own map, Mary is the rightful ruler of the three nations of France, Scotland, and England and a devout sovereign of the Catholic faith.

With the *Las Pennas Pessan* panel, Mary constructs an image of herself as a powerful world leader, yet, she also uses the numerous *impresas* in the panel's border to acknowledge that this power has been lost and must be regained. Each of these *impresas* has a distinct composition and specific meaning. Some are designed to generally reference Mary's virtue, while others evidence more complex political meanings. The texts and translations of all these *impresa* are derived from Michael Bath's *Emblems of a Queen* page 30. However, it is entirely my own analysis that explains how the each *impresa* is part of Mary's public image program.

A few of the *impresas* on the *Las Pennas Pessan* panel are clear allusions to Mary's intrinsic virtue and divine favor. One such *impresa* is that of a five-pointed star surmounted by a crown and accompanied by the phrase, "the stars show the way to kings" (Figure 14). As Bath has noted, this is the device of the French Knights of the Star, and was traditionally used to symbolize the unique bond that supposedly existed between French kings and the pious Magi. The French monarchy used this *impresa* to indicate that, like the Magi, god guided them to the path of salvation and righteousness.<sup>43</sup> Thus, I believe, Mary's inclusion of this emblem on the *Las Pennas Pessan* panel conveys her devotion to god and the constant aid he provided her. A compositionally similar emblem to that of the French Knights of the Star is the five-pointed star surrounded by arrows and

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<sup>43</sup> Bath, *Emblems for a Queen*, 30.

accompanied by the motto, “Show me your ways, O Lord” (Figure 15). This emblem is a symbol of divine counsel and reverence and was used by Charles V of Spain as a reminder to pray for guidance from God.<sup>44</sup> A similar message is conveyed by the *impresa* of a marigold turning towards the sun with the motto, “not having followed lower things” (Figure 16). This was an *impresa* Mary adopted in her youth to express her intention to supersede that which is beneath her.

The panel’s remaining *impresa* express overt political messages that praise Mary and disparage Elizabeth. The first of these emblems depicts two hands grasping a cornucopia filled with vegetation (Figure 17). As Bath notes, the accompanying motto reads, “loyalty makes one rich”, which could be a reference to a number of things.<sup>45</sup> I argue that this *impresa* is likely a reference to Mary’s loyalty to her Catholic faith and the spiritual richness she gained from that. It could also be a reference to Elizabeth’s lack of loyalty towards her cousin and fellow female queen, and the spiritual poverty her actions evidenced. Perhaps it is also a reference to Mary’s loyalty to her people and the richness of spirit she demonstrates in her quest to once again be their sovereign. Whichever interpretation Mary intended, the *impresa* still conveys her righteous character and the undeniably immoral characters of those who would imprison such a woman. Mary’s right to rule is further emphasized by the *impresa* of a hand and a snake. This *impresa* depicts a disembodied hand emerging from a cloud and being bitten by a snake that leaps from a fire, with the accompanying motto “who is against us?” (Figure 18). The *impresa* refers to a biblical story (Acts 28:3) in which God’s support of Paul is proven to unbelievers

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 30.

when Paul is bitten by a serpent and remains unharmed.<sup>46</sup> The hand is easily interpreted as Mary, who, by the will of god, is protected from the abuse incurred by the malevolent Elizabeth. In the next image, a disembodied hand emerging from a cloud is once again depicted, but this time it cuts a knotted rope (Figure 19). Running through the composition is a scroll, which reads, “by my strength/virtue I untie knots a reference to the story of Alexander the Great in which he cuts a knot and in doing so fulfills the prophecy that he will rule over Asia.”<sup>47</sup> Such a reference is almost undoubtedly an allusion to Mary’s inherent right to rule and what she understood to be her impending return to the throne. It can also be understood as Mary’s assertion that she can use her strength and virtue to overcome the obstacles presented to her.

The final *impresa* in the panel border is in many ways the most revealing, as it seems to be the most overt commentary on the nature of Mary and Elizabeth's relationship. The emblem depicts a stag’s skull surmounted by an eagle and accompanied by the phrase, “the strength of courage shatters higher things” (Figure 20). As Bath notes, the imagery for this *impresa* derives from an allegory by Pliny in which an eagle sits atop a stag’s head so that the stag cannot see and the latter throws itself off a cliff. I believe, then, that the emblem can easily be read as a warning to Elizabeth. Mary seems to suggest that her imprisonment could be Elizabeth’s undoing rather than her saving grace. Elizabeth kept Mary imprisoned because Mary’s claim to the throne and her large, mainly Catholic, group of supporters made her a danger. Yet, the very entrapment and threat of execution, which Elizabeth used to ensure her power, served to undermine Elizabeth’s own right to rule. The imprisonment and execution of one coroneted monarch by another

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 30.

had no precedent in European history. Elizabeth, as an excommunicated, bastard woman, was in a precarious position from the moment she was crowned. Thus, her actions against Mary, a fellow female monarch, increased the already present threat that she too could be eliminated.<sup>48</sup> Mary was physically completely under Elizabeth's control, yet her very existence and the concepts she encapsulated served as a constant danger to Elizabeth. Mary recognized this and manipulated her self-image to bolster the threats she already posed simply by living and reigning. The *Las Pennas Pessan* panel aptly encapsulates this, as its multitude of symbols present Mary as the righteous and unjustly imprisoned victim of the villainess Elizabeth.

Like the *Las Pennas Pessan* panel, the *Virescit Vulnere Virtus* embroidery panel (Figure 8) constructs an image of Mary as a downtrodden but resilient figure who can one day regain her place on the throne. The *Virescit Vulnere Virtus* panel depicts a disembodied hand emerging from a sky of stylized clouds that hang down between two trees. The hand holds a pruning blade that shears an overgrowth of unfruitful vines between two fruit trees. Mary's monogram is next to the left tree and the heraldic emblem of Scotland is on the right. Across this design hangs a scroll that reads, *VIRESCIT VULNERE VIRTUS* [VIRTUE FLOURISHES FROM ITS WOUNDS].<sup>49</sup> To understand the meaning behind the composition, the context behind its creation must first be understood.

During Mary Stuart's captivity under Elizabeth I, the Duke of Norfolk emerged as a potential spouse for the imprisoned queen. It was a seemingly well-suited match for

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<sup>48</sup> Helen Hackett, "Dreams or Designs, Cults or Constructions? The Study of Images of Monarchs," *The Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), 821.

<sup>49</sup> Bath, *Emblems for a Queen*, 58.

Mary, since a marriage with one of the most powerful men in England would certainly mean freedom from the bonds of her imprisonment. Likewise, the marriage would be extremely advantageous for Norfolk because it held the promise of a future on the English and Scottish thrones. Although the two never met, they exchanged gifts throughout their betrothal, including a number of affectionate letters and Mary's *Virescit Vulnere Virtus* panel. The engagement was swiftly ended, however, when the Duke was arrested and tried for his involvement in the Ridolfi plot, which was a disastrous attempt by a number of nobles to depose Queen Elizabeth and replace her with Mary. Although the extent of Mary's involvement in the plot is unclear, the panel was used in Norfolk's trial as proof of his treachery. John Leslie, Bishop of Ross, testified that a member of Mary's household presented the Duke with a panel of embroidery, "wrought with the Scotts Queen's own armes, and a devyse upon it, with this sentence, VIRESCIT VULNERE VIRTUS, and a hand with a knife cutting down the vines, as they use in the sprynge tyme; al which work was made by the Queen's own hand."<sup>50</sup> Clearly, those who saw the panel recognized it as an object of Mary's own design. Furthermore, they recognized that design as a treacherous message. Her gift was not simply an object of affection, but an instrument of political intrigue.

Renaissance viewers understood the panel to be a threat because they interpreted the hand as Norfolk and Mary pruning the barren vine of the Tudor house. I contend that the vine imagery played upon Elizabeth's lack of an heir, which was one of the most pressing issues of her reign. Mary, however, had already assured the continuation of the Stuart line with the birth of James and, as the panel indicates, was sure that she could

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<sup>50</sup> John Leslie, Bishop of Ross, as quoted in Bath, *Emblems for a Queen*, 59.

produce even more children. Such a message was clearly threatening to Elizabeth, and for this reason the panel was used as proof that Norfolk had long established designs to unseat her from the throne. Thus, the *Virescit Vulnere Virtus* panel is a testament to the power of Mary's embroideries and proof that the symbols she used to construct her self-image had far-reaching political implications. With a few stitches, Mary had taken agency over her own image and constructed herself as a powerful woman who actively dictated the course of her life.

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Isabella d'Este (1474-1539) was arguably the most notable maven of dress to emerge from the Renaissance period. She was renowned both in her time and succeeding periods for her dress, much of which she designed herself. For this reason, no study of Renaissance fashion can afford to overlook her impact. She illustrated to a remarkable degree the power of dress as an agent of political, social, and cultural agency. From her jewelry designs to her signature headdresses, Isabella evidenced extraordinary sartorial innovation in all forms of dress but this study will focus on a particular one of those unique conceptions: the perfumed glove. Perfumed gloves were a popular commodity throughout Europe, but Isabella's scrupulously selected gloves applied with her personally crafted perfumes were especially prized. Isabella gave these gloves to various queens and ladies-in-waiting, and in doing so she suffused courts with her scent. The import placed on scent in the Renaissance period meant that Isabella's olfactory concoctions were particularly charged with significance. Scent was an almost physical entity that was believed capable of actively affecting a person's physical and emotional

health.<sup>51</sup> By giving away scented gloves, then, Isabella established highly intimate relationships with other courtly women and was able to dominate spaces she could not otherwise physically occupy.

In order to understand the significance of Isabella's dress it is first necessary to understand the political climate out of which such dress emerged. If the Renaissance world was but a stage, then Italy was the site of the most dramatic productions and host to the most duplicitous players. Isabella d'Este of Ferrara was born in a region as rife with political tension as it was with cultural innovation, and she would spend the rest of her life expertly navigating that nation's hazardous terrain. Her political career began when she married Francesco Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua, in 1490. Four years after their marriage, King Charles VIII of France led his army into Italy upon the invitation of Ludovico Sforza of Milan. Soon after, Ludovico recognized the potentially disastrous effects of a French victory and allied himself with the anti-French league operating out of Venice. Francesco Gonzaga was an army captain in this Venetian league, and his display of military prowess on the battlefield eventually won him a Golden Rose from Pope Alexander VI. In the subsequent years, Isabella and Francesco's diplomatic relations with France and other Italian city-states entered a state of constant flux, with new alliances regularly being formed and old alliances diminishing. The rise of Pope Alexander's son Cesare Borgia at the start of the sixteenth century compelled Isabella and Francesco to align themselves with the Papal States. In 1509 the Venetians imprisoned Francesco because of his alliance with the League of Cambrai. By the following year, however, he

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<sup>51</sup> Evelyn Welch, "Scented Buttons and Perfumed Gloves: Smelling Things in Renaissance Italy," in *Ornamentalism*, ed. Bella Mirabella (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 19.



was once again fighting for the Venetian and papal armies. Diplomatic troubles with Pope Leo X in 1516 compelled Isabella to send her son Federico to France as an ambassador. Until her death in 1539, Isabella and her family continued to be embroiled in the complex political intrigues of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In this atmosphere rife with constant tension, it was imperative that Isabella and the members of her court exerted whatever means necessary to maintain power.<sup>52</sup>

The volatile political climate of the period compelled Isabella to assert the prestige of the comparatively insignificant Mantua. Renaissance era Italy was divided into various different nation states, the most politically significant of which were Naples, Milan, the Papal States, Venice and Florence. Mantua was relatively less wealthy and commanded a smaller army than the five major states. For this reason, cultural renown, as opposed to monetary or military success, became Isabella and Federico's primary means of affirming their relevance. Francesco achieved cultural merit through public processions, performances, and military operations.<sup>53</sup> Isabella, on the other hand, was limited in her ability to publicly parade the fruits of her cultural prowess. Like most noblewomen of the period, Isabella's displays were confined to the walls of her court. Within these walls she carefully crafted a self-image that proclaimed the grandeur of her realm while simultaneously recognizing the statutes of feminine propriety. She commissioned portraits, amassed an extensive collection of valuable artistic works,

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<sup>52</sup> The historical context relayed in this paragraph is mainly derived from Sarah Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 10-28.

<sup>53</sup> Anthony B. Cashman, "The Problem of Audience in Mantua: Understanding Ritual Efficacy in an Italian Renaissance Princely State," in *Renaissance Studies* 16 (2002): 355.

developed her *studiolo* and *grotta*, and created coveted dress styles.<sup>54</sup> Her dress was, as I will subsequently argue, her most effective tool of self-creation, since it allowed her to circulate her self-image outside of the court walls to an extent that other artistic mediums could not.

Like other Renaissance noblewoman, Isabella could only exert agency if she maintained a careful balancing act between her stimulating feminine physicality and her requisitely prudent nature. As Baldassare Castiglione wrote in 1507,

beauty is more necessary to her than to the Courtier, for truly that woman lacks much who lacks beauty... In a lady who lives at court a certain pleasing affability is becoming above all else, whereby she will be agreeable and comely conversation suited to the time and place... and to that comeliness that ought to inform all her actions, a quick vivacity of spirit whereby she will know herself a stranger to all boorishness; but with such a kind manner as to cause her to be thought no less chaste, prudent, and gentle than she is agreeable, witty, and discreet: thus, she must observe a certain mean (difficult to achieve and, as it were, composed of contraries) and must strictly observe certain limits and not exceed them.”<sup>55</sup>

Thus, a woman could not renounce her femininity entirely, but had to recognize the womanly aspects of her female body while simultaneously detaching herself from the troubling physicality of that body. In order to garner a positive public reception, a woman needed to execute this process with a systematic precision. For a woman to overly

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<sup>54</sup> Anthony B. Cashman, “The Problem of Audience in Mantua,” 356.

<sup>55</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *The Courtier*, trans. Thomas Hoby (New York, The National Alumni, 1907), 71-72.

emphasize her intellect would transgress societal restrictions on women's involvement in academia; her scholarly interests and rational thought would mark her as too “masculine.” On the other hand, to overly emphasize her female physicality would characterize her as depraved and malignant. Her base corporeality and lasciviousness would make her dangerously “feminine.” Isabella’s mastery of the necessary balancing act is evident in the *Portrait Medal of Isabella d’Este* (Figure 20). The medal’s monetary format, Latin inscription, and depiction of Isabella as a profile bust, all work to recall the coinage issued by classical rulers and so align her with them. However, the depiction of Isabella also evidences many characteristically feminine qualities, such as her exposed décolletage and her elaborate hairstyle. Francesco’s secretary Jacopo d’Atri wrote that when the medal was displayed to the Neapolitan court all the ladies there believed the object accurately conveyed Isabella’s wisdom and virtue.<sup>56</sup> They claimed it was a beautiful representation of her, yet, the portrait is striking for its representation of Isabella in a format that is typically reserved for men, and it is even more striking for its overt association with the visual repertoire of male *rulers*.

Analyses of Isabella’s portrait commissions have revealed that she preferred *al naturale* portraits. The historian Sally Hickson describes *al naturale* paintings as portraits in which “clients were willing to sacrifice absolute likeness and faithful physical verisimilitude in the interests of having an artist capture their individual essence, to represent qualities of mind, behavior, thought and speech that cannot really be painted

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<sup>56</sup> Sally Hickson, “‘To see ourselves as others see us’: Giovanni Francesco Zaninello of Ferrara and the Portrait of Isabella d’Este by Francesco Francia,” *Renaissance Studies* 23 (2009): 293.

but must be implied and successfully read by an audience of viewers.”<sup>57</sup> Understood in relation to the concept of “dressing deeply”, *al naturale* portraiture furthers the contradictory Renaissance notions that appearances can reveal inner truths and that appearances can be altered to convey false messages. Isabella’s request for such portraiture suggests that she understood the powerfully communicative nature of one’s appearance. It also indicates that she understood how appearances could be manipulated to display a particular identity.

Isabella’s *studiolo* commissions likewise evidence the importance she placed on her public image. Amongst its many artistic treasures, Isabella’s *studiolo* featured a series of elaborate allegorical paintings. She carefully monitored the execution of all the paintings in order to ensure that they each achieved what she called a “fine meaning.”<sup>58</sup> Isabella, thus, recognized that art could be used as an instructional tool and, as such, could be a useful way of influencing public opinions. Yet, portraiture was as problematic for Isabella as it was for all Renaissance woman in positions of power. Despite the “fine meanings” and *al naturale* quality of her portraits, they still placed her female body at the forefront. Furthermore, portraiture required primarily verbal and visual engagement, the two sensory qualities most closely linked to masculinity. Hickson has noted how the central purpose of Renaissance portraiture was to generate visual and oral communication between viewers.<sup>59</sup> The subject was actualized within the viewer’s time and space through the interplay of the verbal evocations of the subject, inspired by the portrait, and the visual aspects of the portrait itself. It was generally believed that men were naturally

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<sup>57</sup> Hickson, “ ‘ To see ourselves as others see us’,” 290.

<sup>58</sup> David Alan Brown, “Leonardo and the Ladies with the Ermine and the Book,” *Artibus et Historiae* 22 (1990): 56.

<sup>59</sup> Hickson, “ ‘ To see ourselves as others see us’;,” 291.

more inclined to engage with and comprehend visual and verbal phenomenon. It followed, then, that only men could truly engage with portraiture. Painting and other fine arts were the mediums of men because they facilitated the visual and verbal communication that epitomized masculine expression. Women, then, were left to find other means of expressing themselves, and dress provided an adequate solution to the dilemma for many reasons. One such reason is that it stimulated the visual senses of those who encountered it, while simultaneously activating tactile and olfactory senses.

Painted portraits typically offered women very limited control over how they were perceived. In her discussion of portraiture, Hickson stated, “the image of any absent sitter immediately brings to mind their actual physical absence, conjuring up the longing for their presence that activates the sense memory.”<sup>60</sup> Portrait gifts were intended both to evoke and bridge temporal and spatial orders of separation, to make the sitter present in the memory and in the mind of the viewer.”<sup>61</sup> Hickson’s quote evidences the significant role of objects in the formation and maintenance of political relationships. The objects that circulated through European courts were essential instruments of communication, since they served as physical evidence of otherwise immaterial statements of allegiance or dissonance. The practice of gift giving acts as the foundation upon which social hierarchies are formed. The gift of painted portraiture, as Hickson referred to in the above quote, allotted women a very limited means of personal expression. This paper has already discussed at length how dress offered women an alternative option for self-expression, as well as how the exchange of dress between women allowed them to exert a level of agency they were otherwise denied. Exchanging gifts, particularly gifts of dress,

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<sup>61</sup> Hickson, “‘To see ourselves as others see us’,” 294.

was a foundational means of communication amongst Renaissance women. Evelyn Welch in particular has discussed the significance of gift giving among women, since it functioned as a kind of feminine economic alternative to the male dominated market economy. For a woman to request an item of dress from another woman was a sign of admiration and an extension of friendship. By that same measure, for a woman to give an item of dress was to reciprocate that friendship and, more significantly, allowed her to bolster her reputation as a figure of influence. There was also a particular intimacy to giving gifts of dress, since they were objects that had been repeatedly touched by their previous owners and would then be touched by those who received them. When these gifts are understood in relation to Stallybrass and Jones's theory of "dressing deeply," it becomes clear that these women were not so much giving away objects as they were giving away a part of themselves. It must be noted, however, that while these items of dress were primarily exchanged between women, they were eventually circulated within the public sphere of the court where members of both sexes would be exposed to them. It is imperative, therefore, to recognize that items of dress possessed the unique ability to operate equally within the private sphere of the feminine world and the masculine public sphere. Isabella recognized that gift giving allowed her access an exceptionally large audience and she skillfully utilized that opportunity to establish her position as the ultimate sartorial sovereign and "first lady of the Renaissance."

Isabella's reputation as a fashion icon made her gifts particularly valuable to the Renaissance noblewomen that received them. As previously mentioned, Renaissance women were highly limited in their ability to travel freely. Isabella mastered the art of commanding a room with her physical presence, but she could only rarely occupy rooms

that were outside of Mantua. She bypassed this difficulty, however, by using gifts of dress to penetrate spaces she could not otherwise inhabit. Isabella's perfumed gloves were a particularly valued gift for those who received them. She carefully monitored the purchase and shipment of the finest leather gloves crafted by masters in Spain. She then used a self-designed method of glove softening to perfume the gloves with scents she handcrafted.<sup>62</sup> Isabella, then, did everything possible to ensure that her gloves were incomparably luxurious and unique. Her proliferation of these perfumed gloves was perhaps her most ingenious dress innovation since they allowed her to permeate a space with a reminder of her presence to an extent that other forms of dress could not. When the ladies of a court wore these gloves they filled the space with both visual and olfactory reminders of Isabella. Isabella's perfumes typically featured Indonesian musk, Indian aloe, Egyptian balsam, mint, and roses. These scents would have struck the Europeans who encountered them as alluringly bizarre and unique. These were quite strong scents that would no doubt pervade a room and, because of their rarity, would likely be smells that were associated exclusively with Isabella. That such scents were applied to gloves further increased the ubiquity of Isabella's presence, since a trace of the scent would linger on whatever the wearer touched.

The significance of Isabella's scented gloves is intensified once they are understood in relation to the symbolic weight of gloves in the Renaissance mind. Ann Rosalind Jones, Peter Stallybrass, and William Piez have all discussed how the glove was

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<sup>62</sup> Evelyn Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 270.

conceived of as a type of “external organ.”<sup>63</sup> This is because the glove, perhaps more than any other item of dress, was able to capture the essence of its wearer. The glove became an extension of the person it belonged to, so that to give a pair of worn gloves was equivalent to giving a piece of yourself.<sup>64</sup> Isabella did not wear the gloves prior to giving them as gifts. Nonetheless, the widely held interpretation of gloves as “external organs” evidences how personal the object was. To give a pair of gloves, worn or unworn, was to physically realize the symbolic gesture of extending a hand. It is no surprise that English noblemen occasionally included one of Elizabeth I’s gloves in their portraits as a way of evidencing her favor. They displayed the glove in an effort to signify the reciprocal love between them and their queen, since Elizabeth evidenced her favor with her gifts of gloves and the receivers honored the prestige of those gifts by including them in their portraits.<sup>65</sup>

In the same way, Isabella visibly evidenced her favor by giving away gloves. Her letters demonstrate the importance she placed on the type, make, and origin of the gloves she intended to give away. In a letter to Bernardino Prospero she wrote,

It has now been many days since his return, and since then he has sent us twelve dozen of the saddest gloves that had he searched all of Spain in order to find such poor quality I don’t believe he could have found as many. In Rome, Genoa and Florence there are better ones without comparison and using some diligence in Ferrara itself he could have found some that were as good and perhaps even better. Therefore we have decided to return them so that you do not think that we

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, “Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001).

<sup>64</sup> Stallybrass and Jones, “Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe,” 116.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 125.



have such little judgment in gloves that we would think that these were good enough to give to our ladies-in-waiting and to some of our friends. We would be ashamed to give them to people whom we love and they would never wear them.

Can you please send them back and tell him how badly we have been served.<sup>66</sup>

Isabella was deeply concerned that the gloves were of premium quality because the gift of a glove was such a highly intimate gesture. The giver was, in a sense, giving her skin to the receiver, and the receiver was, in turn, constantly being touched by the giver.

Isabella, therefore, conveyed a great deal of affection by offering such an intimate gift, and in return the women who wore the gift evidenced their deep allegiance to her.

The inherent intimacy of the gloves Isabella distributed was further enhanced by the fact that they were always scented. In the Renaissance, it was believed that smell was capable of affecting the wellbeing of a person's mind and body.<sup>67</sup> Wearing someone's scent, therefore, was a particularly profound act. Since scent is closely linked to memory, Isabella used perfume to occupy people's space by occupying their minds. When royal's smelled Isabella's scent they almost invariably thought of her. Based on the letters that survive between Isabella and her son Federico, Isabella's handcrafted perfumes were in such high demand that numerous European courts wafted with her scent. In one letter Federico told his mother that the French queen and her ladies-in-waiting wanted her perfume, and he asked if she would send, "perfumes in large quantities to give to these ladies... and enough gloves, and a jar of soap for the hand that is large enough to give to many women and again, oils, powders and waters."<sup>68</sup> Isabella responded,

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<sup>66</sup> Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*, 268.

<sup>67</sup> Welch, "Scented Buttons," 19.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 269.

We are sure that [these jars of ointment] will please her, because in our opinion we have never made any better. And we would be pleased if you would say to her majesty that we are delighted to be able to serve her Highness in something that pleases her and that we know we can do this as concerning odors we will not cede place to the best perfumer in the world. And we entreat Her Majesty not to change shop, but to give us enough time so that we can serve her... We are pleased to supply the said Queen and Madam with our recipe, but to tell the truth we do not wish to undertake this for the other women.<sup>69</sup>

Here Isabella clearly adopts the language of a shopkeeper. She conveys in her letter that she is thankful for the patronage of someone so esteemed and gently reminds her customer of the unmatched quality of her purchase. This letter, then, not only evidences the popularity of Isabella's gloves, but also the calculated approach she took towards the creation and distribution of these gifts.

It is a well-established fact that Renaissance noblemen expressed their power by constructing grand spaces that were filled with beautiful artwork, sumptuous feasts, and entertaining concerts and spectacles. By making herself a part of this setting through scent, Isabella enacted her own political program alongside that of whichever ruler owned the space. Perfumed gloves, then, functioned as a subversive instrument of power, since they were highly feminine objects that Isabella could use to infiltrate and dominate spaces that were otherwise inaccessible to her.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 270.

When we observe all the women of this study in conjunction it becomes clear that Renaissance noblewomen used dress to construct symbolic representations of themselves that challenged the identities society imposed on them. The historian Mihoko Suzuki has noted in her essay on Elizabeth I that “the contradiction of a woman on the throne in a strict patriarchy proved to be- at least in retrospect- an enabling condition for women who sought to overturn gender norms by asserting a woman’s right to inherit titles and estates, by contesting orthodox interpretations of the Bible that justified the subordination of women, and by intervening in the public sphere and participating in political discussion.”<sup>70</sup> This statement is true for Elizabeth, but I believe the same argument can also be applied to the other women I examine in this thesis. Although women like Isabella and Mary never had the opportunity to exert the same power as Elizabeth, they used the limited power they did have to rewrite their own place within history and, consequently, the place of all women. Dress, then, is anything but the frivolous indulgence it is so often claimed to be. Rather, it is a powerful instrument of change that has undoubtedly shaped our understanding of the past, and will continue to do so into the future.

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<sup>70</sup> Mihoko Suzuki, “Warning Elizabeth I with Catherine d’Medici’s Example,” in *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne Crux and Mihoko Suzuki (Urbana and Chicago: U. Illinois Pr., 2009), 234.



Figure 1: Hey, John. *The Portrait of Margaret*. 1490. Oil on oak panel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 2: Artist Unknown. *1495 Portrait of Margaret of Austria*. 1495. Private Collection.



Figure 3: van Orley, Bernard. *Portrait of Margaret as a Widow*. 1518. Oil on wood.



Figure 4: Artist Unknown. *Portrait of Margaret of York*. 1470. Oil on panel. Louvre Museum.



Figure 5: van Cleve, Joos. *Portrait of Eleanor of Austria*. 1531-1534. Oil on panel. Royal Collection Trust, London.





Figure 6: Cristoforo, Gian. *Bust Portrait of Beatrice d'Este*. 1490. Marble. Louvre Museum, Paris.



Figure 7: da Vinci, Leonardo. *The Lady with the Ermine*. 1489-1490. Oil on wood panel. Czartoryski Museum, Krakow.

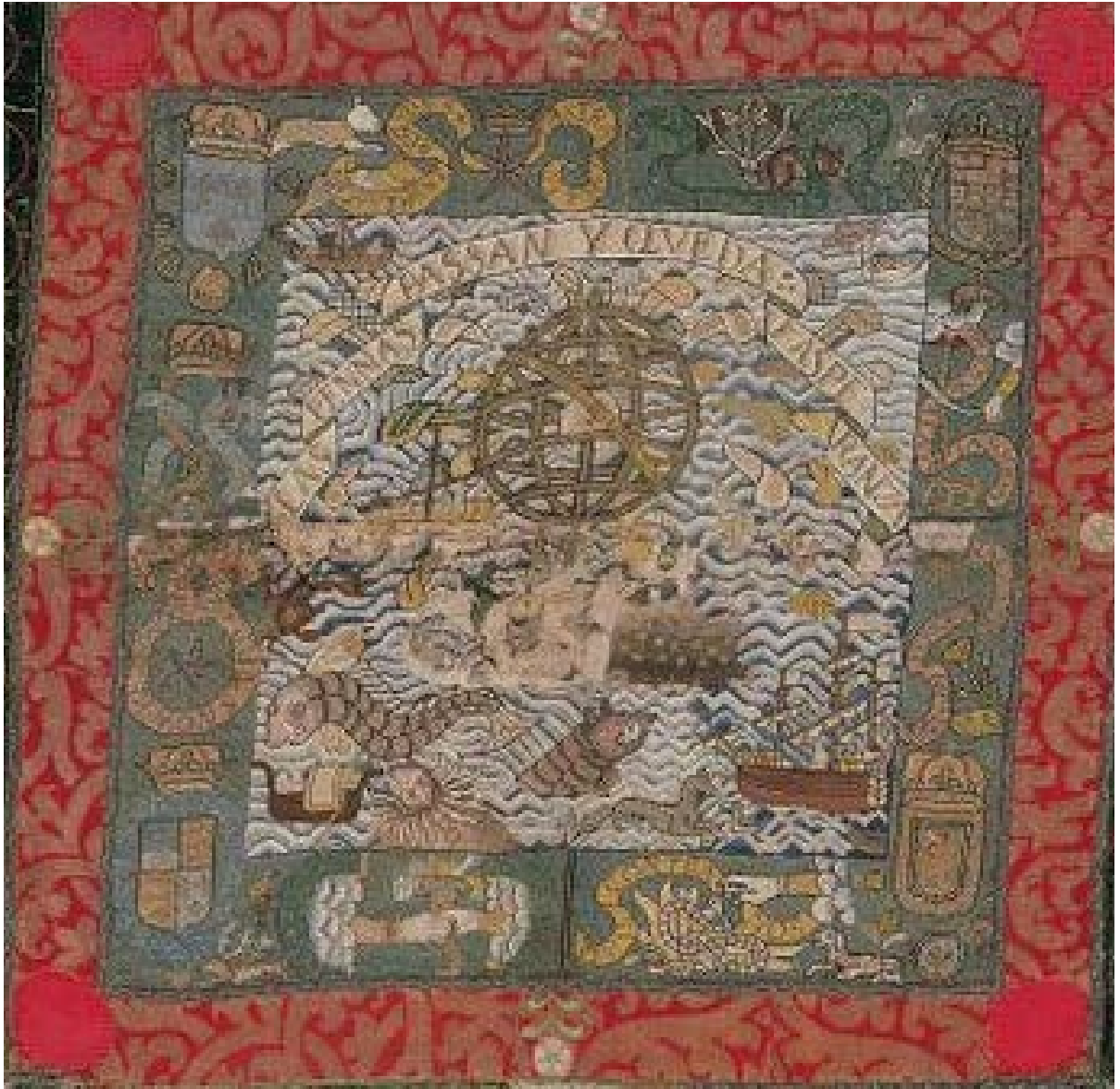


Figure 8: Stuart, Mary. *Las Pennas Pessan Panel*. 1570-1585. Embroidered silk velvet in silks and silver-gilt thread, applied canvaswork, lined with silk.



Figure 9: Stuart, Mary. *Virescit Vulnere Virtus Panel*. 1570-1585. Embroidered silk velvet in silks and silver-gilt thread, applied canvaswork, lined with silk. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 10: Artist Unknown. *The Armada Portrait*. 1588. Oil on panel. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Figure 11: Gheeraerts the Younger, Marcus. *The Ditchley Portrait*. 1592. Oil on canvas. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Figure 12: *Ramsey Abbey Higden World Map*. 1350. Ink and tempera on parchment.

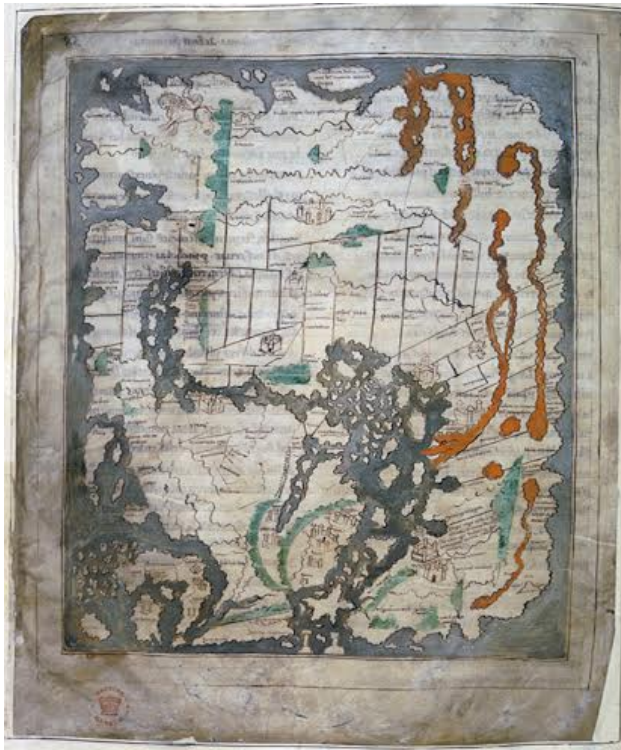


Figure 13: *The Anglo-Saxon World Map*. 1025-1050. Pigments on vellum.

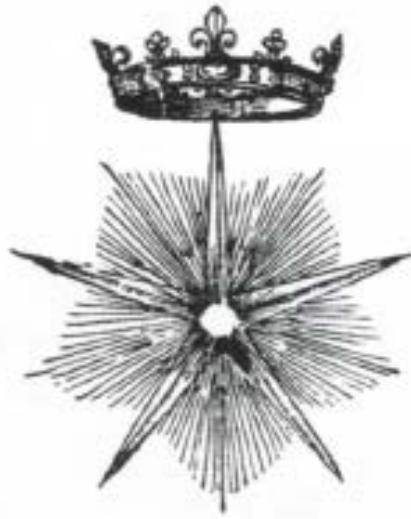


Figure 14: "The Stars Show the Way to Kings"

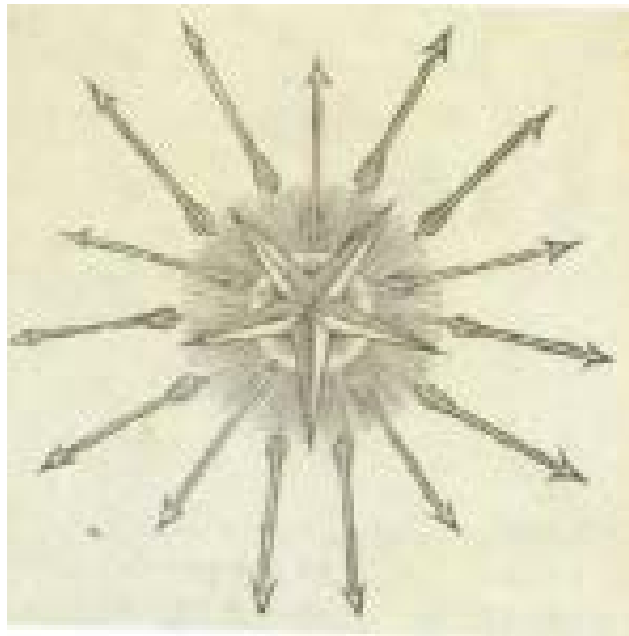


Figure 15: "Show Me Your Ways, O Lord"





Figure 16: "Not Having Followed Lower Things"



Figure 17: "Loyalty Makes One Rich"



Figure 18: "Who Is Against Us?"



Figure 19: "By My Strength / Virtue I Untie Knots"



Figure 20: “ The Strength of Courage Shatters Higher Things”



Figure 21: Romano Gian Cristoforo. *Portrait Medal of Isabella d'Este*. 1498. Gold cast metal inset with stones. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

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