

UC Santa Barbara

Volume 2, Issue 2 (Fall 2022)

Title

The Original Power Suit: Fashion as a Tool of Political Agency in the Early Modern Period

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3437d2v4>

Journal

The UC Santa Barbara Undergraduate Journal of History, 2(2)

Author

Josa, Madeline

Publication Date

2022-10-01

Peer reviewed

FALL 2022

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF HISTORY

Vol. 2 | No. 2



© *The UCSB Undergraduate Journal of History*

The Department of History, Division of Humanities and Fine Arts
4329 Humanities and Social Sciences Building
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California
93106-9410

Website

<https://undergradjournal.history.ucsb.edu/>

Submissions

Papers can be submitted for publication anytime through our submission portal on our website. Manuscripts must be between 3000 and 7500 words in length and completed as part of a student's undergraduate coursework at an accredited degree-granting institution. Recent graduates may submit their work so long as it is within 12 months of receiving their degree. The *Journal* is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall. See the *Journal* website for more information.

Cover Image

UAW Strike, West Campus Picket, day one, UC Santa Barbara.
Credit: Jarett Henderson

Editorial Board

Madison Barton
Michael Broman
Serena Dominguez
Madeline Josa
Victoria Korotchenko
Zoë Lo

Albert Lopez
Sarah Margaron
Sujitha Polimera
Gagan Singh
Ava Thompson
Philip Tian
Keren Zou

Faculty Director

Jarett Henderson

**The Original Power Suit:
Fashion as a Tool of Political Agency in the Early Modern Period**

Madeline Josa¹

In 1689, Madame de Maintenon, the secret wife of the French king Louis XIV, had a portrait commissioned of herself wearing royal blue robes trimmed in ermine.² By doing so, she followed a historical precedent of women in positions of prominence using fashion as a tool of their political agency to craft a politically-charged public image in the early modern period. The robe Madame de Maintenon was depicted wearing was in a color intended for royalty in the French court. As it was a secret that she was married to King Louis XIV, this use of fashion made an inherently political statement to the court audience of this portrait.³ Madame de Maintenon was not the first woman to make full use of the tools available to her as a woman with considerable political status and influence. Before her came Isabella d'Este of Italy, Queen Mary I of England, and Queen Elizabeth I of England, to name a few. These well-known women of the early modern period of European history were in positions that required skillful strategy in creating a public image, and fashion was a tenet of this strategy. By utilizing fashion choices as a form of political agency that crafted a public image, these women's fashion choices were tied to European imperial and commercial relationships. Through fashion, we can see how economic factors play a role in creating a public image. There is a strong connection between political image-making and sartorial influence for women in positions of prominence in the early modern period of Europe. Therefore, women in positions of power during the early modern period used fashion as a tool of political agency by crafting a public image and making choices connected to European political machinations.

The early modern period of European history covers four centuries, moving from the fifteenth century through the eighteenth, with significant shifts in European politics and empire. Starting in the fifteenth century, Italy was deep into the Italian Renaissance, which had many causes, one of which being Italy's prime location in the Mediterranean to foster trade along the silk road and across the Mediterranean Sea.⁴ This lucrative trade along the silk road allowed new material goods like silk fabric to pour into Italy, causing such an uproar that sumptuary laws were created to control these new fabrics.⁵ This trade empire that Italy managed caused more wealth to accumulate in Italy and, coupled with these new material goods, established Italy as the place of cultural hegemony

¹ Madeline is a senior majoring in History and Dance. She is especially interested in historical dress and how it reflects evolving gender roles and women's history and culture.

² Justine De Young, "1690-1699" FIT Fashion History Timeline, last updated August 18, 2020, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1690-1699/>.

³ De Young, "1690-1699."

⁴ Brad Bouley, "History 121A Lecture," (Lecture, University of California, Santa Barbara, October 2020).

⁵ Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello, "East & West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Social History* 41, No. 4 (Summer, 2008): p. 892.

within Europe at the start of the early modern period. Other European courts looked to Italian influence in terms of cultural influence, which included Italian fashion.

As the fifteenth century gave way to the sixteenth, Italy's place as the cultural arbiter of Europe began to weaken. Spain had just started its imperialistic campaign in the Americas, so new material goods and precious metals like silver were now pouring into Spain. This new European imperialism overtook the wealth and material goods flowing into Italy. Consequently, European courts started to look to Spain for cultural and sartorial influence over Italy. Spain was the first to undertake colonial aims in the Americas. This head start over the rest of Europe led Spain to assert its cultural hegemony over Europe for much of the sixteenth century. There is some overlap during the shift from Italian to Spanish influence, as evidenced by the slower adaptation of Spanish styles to Italian fashion.⁶

As the sixteenth century came to a close, Spain's cultural influence started to wane in Europe and began to give way to French influence. Other European countries started to undertake colonial campaigns beyond the borders of Europe, so Spain no longer had the advantage of being first. France became the dominating cultural force in terms of fashion over Spain for many reasons. These included internal commercial success, a distinctly French style fostered by King Louis XIV, and military prowess.⁷ A host of political maneuvers enabled France to overtake Spain in terms of European cultural hegemony. By the seventeenth century, Europe looked to France for fashion styles instead of Spain. As seen at the end of the fifteenth century with Italy, during the cultural transition from Spanish to French dominance, Spain slowly switched from distinctly Spanish styles to French-influenced fashion.⁸

As my argument progresses through the early modern period from Italy to Spain to France regarding fashion influence, I will examine women in powerful and influential positions involved in these historic changes. Specifically, I will discuss Isabella d'Este, her fashion influence within Italy and abroad, and historians Carolyn James and Sarah Cockram's interpretations of her influence. I then analyze the English sisters, Queens Mary and Elizabeth and their respective use of fashion in portraiture. Particular attention is given to how English queens made use of Spanish and later French fashion. I also discuss Abigail Gomulkiewicz and Susan Vincent's arguments about court participation in creating Elizabeth's public image. Moving from the English queens to France, Madame de Maintenon will be examined and historians Daniel Delis Hill and Millia Davenport's arguments about her style influence will be explored. Portraiture and surviving material artifacts will be the main sources of primary evidence investigated because it allows us to look at the visual significance of these women's fashion choices.

Isabella d'Este

As the Marchioness of Mantua during the Italian Wars, Isabella d'Este experienced a unique position of prominence within Italy and early modern Europe. At the start of the sixteenth century, the

⁶ Kathryn Hennessy, ed., "Elegant Formality" in *Fashion, The Definitive Visual Guide* (New York, New York: DK Penguin Random House, 2019), p. 94.

⁷ Hillary Bernstein, "History 121F Lecture," (Lecture, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 2021).

⁸ Kathryn Hennessy, ed., "Female Geometry" in *Fashion, The Definitive Visual Guide*, p. 99.

Italian Renaissance was in full swing partially due to the wealth that poured into Italy through trade on the silk road and across the Mediterranean Sea, making Italy the dominating cultural influence over Europe at this point in the early modern period. Isabella capitalized on this time of Italian cultural hegemony by carefully using and disseminating her fashion and sartorial choices to benefit herself politically. A prime example of Isabella's fashion influence is a portrait titled *Isabella d'Este in Black*, painted by Tiziano Vecellio between 1534 and 1536 (Fig. 1).⁹ In this portrait, Isabella is depicted wearing a *zazzara* headdress on her head, a fashion creation of her own making.¹⁰ The *zazzara* headdress was a rounded headdress that used rich fabrics and human hair and complimented the silhouette of the fashion Isabella wore by adding height and curves.¹¹ The headdress depicted in this portrait was known to be the invention of Isabella, and it became prevalent throughout Italy due to Isabella's influence and clever use of dissemination of the *zazzara*. Because of Isabella's powerful and influential position, many contemporary ladies and acquaintances asked her explicit permission to wear the *zazzara* headdress. Sometimes, Isabella granted permission to these ladies, like Eleonora Rusca da Correggio; other times, she did not give permission to wear her signature headdress, like her extended relative Susanna Gonzaga.¹² Isabella granted or declined requests to wear her signature style to control her influence and retain her authority over the headdress. By putting herself in this position, she made the other ladies of the social and economic circles she occupied subordinate to her since they had to ask her permission. While this particular subordination pertained to fashion, it also spread the subliminal message that Isabella occupied a position of power above others that carried over to other political aspects.

Isabella's dissemination of her fashion choices and creations worked to secure her influential status in Italy. However, she also maintained a fashion and, by extension, political influence over the rest of early modern Europe. In 1515, Isabella's son, Federico, stayed at the French court in Milan. The French had just captured Milan, and he was trying to establish friendly relations between the French and Mantua.¹³ The French king asked Federico to request that his mother send fashion dolls of her signature attire to the French court.¹⁴ Fashion dolls were a way of spreading the knowledge of what attire was most fashionable at that moment, as they were mini replicas of ladies' dress styles. Figure 2 is an example of what these fashion dolls generally looked like; this one, in particular, is an English fashion doll from 1680 (Fig. 2).¹⁵ This request can be interpreted in two different ways, as

⁹ "Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua," Kunsthistorisches Museum, Accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/1940/?offset=1&lv=list>.

¹⁰ Carolyn James, "Political Image Making in Portraits of Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua," *Gender and History* online only, not yet in print issue (22 October, 2021) <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/10.1111/1468-0424.12582>.

¹¹ Sarah Cockram, "Isabella d'Este's Sartorial Politics," in *Sartorial Politics of Early Modern Europe*, ed. Erin Griffey (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), p. 48.

¹² James, "Political Image Making."

¹³ James, "Political Image Making."

¹⁴ James, "Political Image Making."

¹⁵ "The Old Pretender Doll, 1680," Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 27, 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O101879/the-old-pretender-doll-doll-unknown/>.

can be seen in two recent works of scholarship examining Isabella d'Este's image and her fashion influence. In an article titled "Isabella d'Este's Sartorial Politics," author Sarah Cockram interprets this French king's request as a compliment to Isabella, acknowledging her power and influence over Italy.¹⁶ The French king determined Isabella to be superior fashion-wise to the French court, which had immense political implications in his regarding a foreigner to be superior in any way to those of his kingdom. This interpretation implies that the French king viewed Isabella and Italy as above his court sartorially. Historian Carolyn James offered a different interpretation of this request in her article, "Political Image Making in Portraits of Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua." James argues that this request *undermined* Isabella's political power by taking away her control over disseminating her fashion choices.¹⁷ The French king was likely aware that Federico was in the French court in Milan to establish friendly relations, so Isabella was not in a position to refuse his request for fashion dolls if she wished to cultivate friendly relations. By making this request that Isabella was obligated to accept, the French king took away Isabella's control over her fashion influence. He weakened her power and status as the Marchioness of Mantua. While these are two opposing views on what it meant politically to Isabella to have the French king request fashion dolls of her signature attire, both interpretations speak to her known influence over the courts of Europe sartorially. Whether this request was meant to acknowledge or undermine her position of power, it is still clear that her influence over women's fashion was known and used politically.

While Isabella is a specific example of Italian sartorial power and influence over early modern Europe, in a broader sense, Italy had cultural influence over early modern Europe in the sixteenth century due to the Italian Renaissance. Italy was considered the cultural pinnacle of Europe thanks to the wealth of trade through the silk road and across the Mediterranean Sea (which Italy's geography allowed it to monopolize). This trade brought wealth and new fabrics and material goods exclusively to Italy. Italy's monopolization of these trade routes and spheres of influence in Asia gave Italy immense commercial success in trading. In this way, Italy's cultural hegemony was due to its privileged commercial position.

Italy's fashion influence over Europe in the early part of the early modern period was directly tied to the politics and power of trading and commerce. Italian styles were copied and emulated throughout Europe as a consequence of this trading power Italy held. An example of this broader Italian influence is a pair of chopines currently located at the Victoria and Albert Museum from between 1580 to 1620 (Fig. 3).¹⁸ These particular chopines are Spanish-made. However, chopines are a distinctly Italian shoe style from Venice.¹⁹ These chopines were made after Isabella d'Este's time as the Marchioness of Mantua, but still, within the sixteenth century, Italy retained its cultural influence over Europe. This instance of Italian-style shoes created in Spain provides evidence of Italy's influence over women's fashion in the sixteenth century beyond the specific influence of Isabella d'Este.

¹⁶ Cockram, "Isabella d'Este's Sartorial Politics," pp. 47-48.

¹⁷ James, "Political Image Making."

¹⁸ "Pair of Chopines, 1580-1620," Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 21, 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74595/pair-of-chopines-unknown/>.

¹⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum, "Pair of Chopines, 1580-1620."

Queen Mary Tudor I

In 1554, artist Hans Eworth completed a painting of Queen Mary I of England simply titled *Portrait of Queen Mary I* (Fig. 4). The painting is of oil paint on oak wood, and the dimensions are 1040mm high by 780mm wide. Presently, the painting resides on display at the Burlington House of the Society of Antiquaries of London.²⁰ Royal portraiture was a means of propaganda before the invention of photography because it could be displayed for important political figures and guests to see, and it could convey a subliminal message to this targeted audience based on the royal depicted and their wishes. What do the fashion choices of Queen Mary in this portrait reveal about her political influence? What messages did these fashion choices convey to her targeted audience about her power, status, and wealth as the queen of England?

In this portrait of Queen Mary I of England, Mary is depicted standing upright with no surrounding objects around her, such as books, desks, chairs, or other inanimate objects that could convey a subliminal political message to the audience. Mary is not holding any objects; her hands are merely clasped in front of her in a demure pose, showcasing the jewelry on her fingers. The only external object in the painting is Mary's red velvet Cloth of Estate, which makes up the backdrop of the painting. The entire focus of the painting is on Mary herself and what she is wearing. This makes the painting perfect for understanding the political image Mary wished to project at this moment through her fashion choices alone.

To start, I will focus solely on Mary's fabric clothing choices in this painting, and then I will move on to her choice of jewelry and accessories. In this painting, Mary wears a dress requiring a Spanish farthingale. The Spanish farthingale was an undergarment worn under a lady's outer skirt that acted as a support to hold up the shape of the skirt. It was similar in design to what most people are familiar with, the hoop skirt of the 19th century, but instead of being bell-shaped, it was cone-shaped. The Spanish were the ones who first started wearing this type of dress support, so it is called the Spanish farthingale.²¹ The conical, stiff shape of Mary's bodice is also Spanish in style.²² It is so important that Mary is wearing this style and shape of dress because of the date of the painting and its connection to the broader political events of 1550s Europe.

The sixteenth century was the peak of Spanish power in the Americas because no other European countries had established imperial ties with the Americas. Due to this imperialistic prowess, Spain accumulated much wealth and status in Europe. This newfound wealth and status caused the eyes of Europe to look to Spain for influence in the hopes of emulating Spanish success.²³ This emulation of Spain also crossed over into women's fashion, as exemplified in this painting of Queen Mary of England. Mary was the queen of a different country, England, yet she is depicted in a royally commissioned portrait in a Spanish dress style. This depiction illustrates Spain's

²⁰ "Panel Painting Portrait of Queen Mary I," Collections, Society of Antiquaries of London, accessed on January 25, 2022, <https://collections.sal.org.uk/object-lds1336>.

²¹ Jazmin Montalvo, "Spanish Farthingale," FIT Fashion Timeline, last modified September 10, 2018, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/spanish-farthingale/>.

²² Hennessy, "Female Geometry," p. 99.

²³ Hennessy, "Elegant Formality," p. 94.

influence throughout Europe due to Spanish power and status gained from imperialism. While this painting of Mary in a Spanish farthingale is evidence of Spain's cultural influence on Europe, it is also evidence of part of the image Mary wished to project to her political audience. Spanish styles were the height of fashion in Europe during the sixteenth century, and this can be viewed as Mary wishing to depict herself as keeping up with fashion. By extension, the politics of Europe since the two are directly connected, therefore bringing herself some legitimacy and political know-how as a monarch in defiance of any political figure who opposed her position of power. Any monarch needs to be viewed as keeping up with the intricacies of world politics and governance, but this was even more important for Mary, who was more likely to be doubted as a female monarch.

Another reason Mary aligned herself with Spanish fashion, in addition to keeping up with fashion and political "trends," is because of the cultural associations of the Spanish. Spanish fashion was known for being stiff, severe, and demure compared to the previous fashion trends that had come out of Italy in the previous century.²⁴ By wearing clothing associated with the ideas of stiff severity and demureness, Mary also crafted an image of herself as severe and demure. In this way, Spanish fashion served a dual purpose for Mary and was the ideal fashion choice to depict herself. From her clothes in this painting alone, Mary created an image of herself as a severe and demure monarch with enough political know-how to be a legitimate ruler.

Another important aspect of Mary's fashion choices in this painting is the jewels she wears and chooses to depict in this royal portrait. The brooch Mary is wearing on top of her sternum was originally a piece of jewelry listed by Katherine Parr, the last wife of her father, King Henry VIII, as one of the jewels in the coffer of the queen's jewels.²⁵ This is important because Mary chose to showcase herself in jewelry that rightfully was meant for the queen of England, again legitimizing her position. More important, though, is the pendant hanging from her waist, a piece of jewelry from her father, King Henry VIII's jewelry collection.²⁶ While the brooch worked to establish Mary as queen, this pendant owned by the former king worked to legitimize Mary's place in a position of power usually reserved for a man. By wearing the previous king's jewelry, Mary established herself in line with the power held by her father. Mary was unwed at the time of this painting, so she had to send a strong political message that she could rightfully hold the position of ruler of a country even though she was a woman.

Of equal importance to the jewelry, Mary depicts herself wearing is the jewelry she is explicitly not wearing. Notably absent from this painting is Mary's wedding ring because she had not yet married Philip of Spain; the wedding would take place in 1554. It is vital to consider Mary's impending nuptials because this may have impacted her fashion choices in this painting. Mary is dressed in a distinctly Spanish style, and while this dress served to establish herself as up with the political times, this style also might have served to ingratiate herself with Philip and the Spanish court. Since she had not yet married Philip, Mary may have chosen to wear clothing from the Spanish court to signal to her court and the Spanish court what was impeding between her and Philip.

²⁴ Hennessy, "Elegant Formality," p. 94.

²⁵ Society of Antiquaries of London, "Panel Painting Portrait of Queen Mary I."

²⁶ Society of Antiquaries of London, "Panel Painting Portrait of Queen Mary I."

Queen Mary fashioned a strong political image through her clothes and jewelry to convey legitimacy, power, and severity. Since this portrait lacks inanimate objects or superfluous background details, the painting focuses on Mary alone and what she chooses to adorn herself in. Her fashion choices were meant to convey a subliminal message to her political audience and guests. Therefore her fashion can be attributed as a facet of her political agency as a woman in a position of power. Though this is just one portrait of Queen Mary I, it works to establish the image of herself she wished to present, and her fashion choices play a crucial role in that image.

While this painting showcases the political agency Mary I expressed through her fashion, it also highlights the imperialistic connection women's court fashion had during the sixteenth century of the early modern period. Though Queen Mary ruled England, she depicted herself wearing Spanish fashion. She fashioned herself this way for multiple reasons, including her impending marriage, cultural associations of severity, and political relevance. However, at the core, it was because Spanish trends set the fashion for the rest of Europe. The reason Spanish court styles were so prominent in other European courts, as exemplified here by Mary, was Spain's wealth and cultural hegemony during the sixteenth century due to their imperialism in the Americas. We can see another example of Spanish fashion influencing European fashion in a part of a smock constructed between 1575 and 1585 (Fig. 5).²⁷ This is a few decades after Mary's reign. However, it is still within the sixteenth century of Spanish imperial dominance. In this English-made smock part, we see examples of a distinctly Spanish embroidery style: blackwork.²⁸ Blackwork embroidery was done with black silk thread and was a defining feature of Spanish court fashion. Spain was known for black clothing and embroidery, and this smock part displays this Spanish technique despite being sewn in England.²⁹ This smock part, coupled with Mary's portrait, is evidence of Spain's influence on women's fashion throughout Europe. Since Spain began to dominate in terms of economic and commercial success in Europe as the sixteenth century progressed, all other courts would try to emulate Spanish success in any way they could, including fashion. In this way, women's fashion choices were linked to European politics and economic success, as we see in the transfer of dominating cultural influence from Italy to Spain and the subsequent shift in fashion influence.

Queen Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth I of England was one of the most powerful and influential women of the early modern period. Her fashion choices were pivotal to her public image of power as queen. What is unique about Elizabeth's attire, though, is the connection and interplay between her and her court regarding her fashion choices. Elizabeth did not spend a lavish amount of money on her wardrobe, despite it being key to her public image, because she received many items of clothing and jewelry as

²⁷ "Smock Part, 1575-1585," Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78732/smock-part-unknown/>.

²⁸ Victoria and Albert Museum, "Smock Part, 1575-1585."

²⁹ Gabriel Guarino, "'The Antipathy between French and Spaniards': Dress, Gender, and Identity in the Court Society of Early Modern Naples, 1501-1799," *European History Yearbook: Dress and Cultural Difference in Early Modern Europe* 20 (2019): pp. 13-32.

gifts from her courtiers instead.³⁰ A prime example of these sartorial gifts received by Elizabeth are the New Year's Gift Exchange records, called the Elizabethan New Year's Gift Rolls. These records kept track of all the gifts given to Queen Elizabeth I for New Year by her court and other important public figures, and these gifts were predominantly ones of clothing, jewels, and accessories.³¹ According to the lists of gifts received each year, a large majority of these gifts were from people of Elizabeth's court, like Earls, Dukes, and Ladies, rather than from foreign benefactors because it was a tradition in the English court to give the monarch gifts for New Years.³² Each gift was meticulously described so that Elizabeth could confidently identify which item came from whom. For example, in the record of the New Year's Gift Exchange from 1559, one of the recorded gifts from the Earl of Westmarlande is "59.11: By Thearle [the Earl] of Westmarlande in a purse of red silke and siluer [silver] knit in haulf Soueraignes."³³ Each gift needed to be so thoroughly detailed in its description because if Queen Elizabeth chose to wear a particular gift, she needed to know precisely what political implications came with each item, which could be discerned from who had given it. These New Year's Gift Rolls indicate that for all of Elizabeth's reign, she received around 200 gifts each year.³⁴ With most of these gifts being wearable fashion items, Elizabeth could allocate less of her budget to clothing and attire and instead wear what her courtiers had gifted her. This wearing of sartorial gifts came with strings attached, of course, as is discussed by Abigail Gomulkiewicz in an article titled "The Gender Dynamics of Dress Gifts from Elizabethan Men at the Court of Elizabeth I": "They [dress gifts] were not simply given altruistically, but were given with an expectation of a return, whether this be future political favour or ... an immediate tangible benefit of land."³⁵ While Elizabeth, as queen, maintained control over her fashion choices and how she chose to present herself, her courtiers also played a role by giving her these gifts described in the New Year's Gift Rolls. Wearing a gift from a courtier who held an unpopular political opinion or had recently been part of a scandal could insinuate that Elizabeth supported this person's unpopular political opinion or disregarded the scandal that the courtier had been a part of. That being said, she could choose which gifts to wear, but it was not a decision she could make to purely fit the image she wished; she also had to consider the political strings attached to each gifted garment.

Elizabeth had to be especially vigilant about these subversive political messages regarding gifts of jewelry she received. Many jewelry gifts were meant to display a visual meaning crafted in the symbolism of the components of the jewelry, so in addition to considering the political maneuvering inherent in the giving of the jewelry gift, Elizabeth also had to consider the symbolism in the jewelry item itself. Many of the jewelry items Elizabeth received from the New Year's Gift Exchange

³⁰ Susan Vincent, "Queen Elizabeth: Studded with Costly Jewels," in *Sartorial Politics of Early Modern Europe*, ed. Erin Griffey (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), p. 117.

³¹ Jane Lawson, ed., *The Elizabethan New Year's Gift Exchanges 1559-1603*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³² Lawson, *New Year's Gift Exchanges*; Vincent, "Queen Elizabeth: Studded with Costly Jewels," p. 124.

³³ Lawson, *New Year's Gift Exchanges*, p. 35.

³⁴ Lawson, *New Year's Gift Exchanges*.

³⁵ Abigail Gomulkiewicz, "The Gender Dynamics of Dress Gifts from Elizabethan Men at the Court of Elizabeth I" *Gender and History* 33, no. 2 (July 2021), p. 358.

contained visual symbolism that she had to consider in her image-making process. An example of the visual symbolism that Elizabeth had to contemplate is a gift from 1578 from the Earl of Ormonde: “78.21: By therle [the Earl] of Ormonde a fayer Juell of golde being a phenex [phoenix] / the winges fully garnessed with Rubyes and small Diamondes / and at the fete thre feyer Diamondes and two smaller in the top abranche garnessed with Six small Diamondes thre small Rubyes and iij very meane perle and in the bottome thre perles pendant.”³⁶ While the description of this piece of jewelry makes it out to be quite exquisite and worthy of a queen, Elizabeth had to decide if she wanted the symbolism of a phoenix associated with her before she could think about the political strings attached to the gift-giving itself and whether or not she decided to wear the jewelry. Sometimes, these courtiers giving symbolic jewelry knew of the symbols and ideals that Elizabeth wished to be associated with, and sometimes they referenced emblem books to create jewelry ripe with symbolism for Elizabeth in the hope that she would identify her public image with the symbols they had provided.³⁷ In an article titled “Queen Elizabeth: Studded with Costly Jewels,” Susan Vincent succinctly states, “jewellery declared loyalty and suggested policy. To give it curried favour; to wear it endorsed its claims.”³⁸ While a gift may have been valuable visually in depicting Elizabeth how she wished to be seen, there were more political implications Elizabeth had to consider than just her visual presentation regarding fashion. In the case of these court-gifted implements, Elizabeth expressed her political agency. She engaged in political machinations through her fashion choices while also displaying the connection between her fashion and court figures in England.

Another asset of Elizabeth’s political image-making with fashion beyond the political strings associated with sartorial gifts is one we have already seen in use: royal portraiture. There were many portraits of Queen Elizabeth I painted during her reign, some more famous than others. However, we will be looking at one portrait from her younger days as a princess and one from the end of her reign as queen so we can distinguish the differences in the fashion that Elizabeth chose to wear. The first portrait was painted by William Scrots in 1546 and is titled *Elizabeth I when a Princess* (Fig. 6).³⁹ In this portrait, Elizabeth is wearing a pomegranate-patterned crimson silk dress with a skirt front and undersleeves made of a fabric called *cloth-of-silver* tissue with gold.⁴⁰ Sumptuary laws reserved this undersleeve and skirt front fabric for royals, so wearing this fabric in a portrait asserted Elizabeth’s status as royalty.⁴¹ However, Elizabeth’s dress shape is most relevant in this portrait, especially in

³⁶ Lawson, *New Year’s Gift Exchanges*, p. 226.

³⁷ Emblem books were illustrated books with explanations about the symbolic meaning behind certain design motifs and were used by embroiderers and jewelry makers to create pieces. Gomulkiewicz, “The Gender Dynamics of Dress Gifts from Elizabethan Men at the Court of Elizabeth I,” 351.; Vincent, “Queen Elizabeth: Studded with Costly Jewels,” p. 124.

³⁸ Vincent, “Queen Elizabeth: Studded with Costly Jewels,” p. 124.

³⁹ “Scrots, William. ‘Elizabeth I when a Princess,’” Collections, Royal Collection Trust, 1546, Accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/1/collection/404444/elizabeth-i-when-a-princess>

⁴⁰ Royal Collection Trust, “Scrots, William, ‘Elizabeth I when a Princess.’”

⁴¹ Royal Collection Trust, “Scrots, William, ‘Elizabeth I when a Princess.’”

comparison to later portraits. This portrait depicts Elizabeth in a dress supported by a Spanish farthingale, hence the gown's conical shape in the skirt. This style of skirt was already seen in the portrait of Mary discussed above, which makes sense since these two portraits were painted only a few years apart. Elizabeth is wearing a Spanish style of dress in this portrait of her in her younger years as a princess, illustrating the Spanish influence on other European courts due to their cultural hegemony.

This next portrait, titled *Queen Elizabeth I* but nicknamed “the Ditchley Portrait,” was painted in 1592 by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (Fig. 7).⁴² The shape of Elizabeth's dress is very different in this portrait compared to the earlier portrait. In this portrait, Elizabeth is wearing a dress supported by a French farthingale (also called a wheel farthingale) instead of a Spanish farthingale. The French farthingale was crafted by wearing boned hoops of whalebone or metal over a padded roll, which created its signature shape of a circle jutting out from the hips.⁴³ By the 1590s, forty-six years after *Elizabeth I, when a Princess* portrait was painted, Elizabeth had transitioned to wearing the French farthingale instead of the Spanish farthingale. This is a significant change because Elizabeth shifted from wearing Spanish-influenced styles to French-influenced ones, indicative of the Europe-wide transition from following Spanish styles to following French styles as the sixteenth century progressed. In addition to being a signifier of this Europe-wide transition, Elizabeth could have rejected the Spanish style because of English politics with Spain. By the late 1580s, the conflict between England and Spain was at a boiling point due to religious differences (Catholic Spain and Protestant England), English pirate attacks on Spanish ships, and the execution of Mary Queen of Scots.⁴⁴ Due to this intense conflict with Spain, it would not make sense for Elizabeth to continue embracing and honoring Spanish styles by wearing them. This transition to French styles can also be seen as a political image-making move. Both of these reasons for Elizabeth to shift styles are important to look at because not only do these portraits tell us that the cultural, and by extension sartorial, the hegemony of Spain began to wane as the sixteenth century came to a close, but they also give insight into another way Elizabeth utilized fashion as a political tool. In Spain's place, we see the rise of French influence and the start of France's cultural hegemony over Europe that dominated the seventeenth century.

Madame de Maintenon

Madame de Maintenon, or Françoise d'Aubigné, became the secret wife of the French King Louis XIV in 1683 following the death of Queen Marie-Thérèse.⁴⁵ Because the marriage was a secret,

⁴² “Queen Elizabeth I (‘The Ditchley portrait’),” People and Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, Accessed February 27, 2022,

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02079/Queen-Elizabeth-I-The-Ditchley-portrait> .

⁴³ Summer Lee, “1592 – Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, Elizabeth I (1533-1601), Queen of England” FIT Fashion History, Accessed February 27, 2022,

<https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1592-gheeraerts-ditchley/> .

⁴⁴ “The Spanish Armada: History, Causes and Timeline,” Royal Museums Greenwich, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/spanish-armada-history-causes-timeline>.

⁴⁵ De Young, “1690-1699.”

Madame de Maintenon could not overtly display her connection to the king. However, she still needed to emphasize her higher position in court and her relation to the king. Despite the marriage being a secret, Madame de Maintenon still had a significant influence on fashion in the court which she established through subtlety in displaying her position of prominence to the king. As evidenced above, fashion in portraiture was a key for women in prominent positions to craft their public image, and Madame de Maintenon was no different. In a portrait attributed to Claude-François Vignon from the last third of the seventeenth century, Madame de Maintenon is pictured in attire meant to subtly display her status and relation to the king (Fig. 8).⁴⁶ The ermine-trimmed robe wrapped around Madame de Maintenon in this portrait is a shade of blue called royal blue and was intended for royalty.⁴⁷ The connection here is apparent; through the color of her robes, Madame de Maintenon placed herself in a position of royalty without actually declaring herself so. The royal blue is not the main color she is wearing, so the symbolism is subtle. However, to anyone who viewed the portrait, it would be clear that Madame de Maintenon held an esteemed position in the eyes of the king since she could wear a color intended for royalty. This portrait worked to express Madame de Maintenon's prominent position, which resulted in sartorial influence over court, without outright stating her marriage to Louis XIV.

Because of the work Madame de Maintenon did to display her status in the eyes of the king, she influenced the fashion styles of the court because her status garnered respect. In the 1680s, gown bodices started to be cut in a less-revealing style, with the neckline being raised and narrowed to cover the shoulders.⁴⁸ Multiple historians believe this new bodice style resulted from Madame de Maintenon's influence. Daniel Delis Hill argues that it was because of Madame de Maintenon's "conservative religious views and also because of her mature years."⁴⁹ Historian Millia Davenport states that it was under the "insistently moral influence of Madame de Maintenon" that not only did bodice necklines become less revealing, but sleeves became elbow-length as well.⁵⁰ Madame de Maintenon was known for her piety and strict religious views, which crossed over into how she dressed. Because she influenced the court due to her subtly-expressed relation to the king, the rest of the ladies of the court began to dress in a less revealing way to emulate Madame de Maintenon's style. An example of this style can be seen in a portrait by Louis Elle le Père from 1688 of Madame de Maintenon (Fig. 9).⁵¹ This portrait depicts Madame de Maintenon in a black, conservative dress color, with a high neckline and elbow-length sleeves. This portrait displays both of the fashion changes that Hill and Davenport argue result from Madame de Maintenon, and here she is wearing them and supporting this argument.

While Madame de Maintenon affected the style of dress in the court with her more conservative fashion, the French court as a whole influenced the type of dress worn by the rest of European courts as the seventeenth century progressed. The French began wearing a type of dress

⁴⁶ De Young, "1690-1699."

⁴⁷ De Young, "1690-1699."

⁴⁸ Daniel Delis Hill, *History of World Costume and Fashion*(New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2011), p. 411.

⁴⁹ Hill, *History of World Costume and Fashion*,p. 411.

⁵⁰ Millia Davenport, *The Book of Costume*(New York: Crown Publishers, 1948), p. 519.

⁵¹ De Young, "1690-1699."

called a mantua, which consisted of an overdress split in the front part of the skirt to reveal an underskirt in the seventeenth century.⁵² This was the base type of dress that Madame de Maintenon affected by raising the neckline and lengthening the sleeves, but the dress itself remained the same. The Mantua was distinctly French (despite its Italian name), but it spread to other courts rapidly. We can see evidence of the widespread reach of the French mantua in an Italian fashion plate from 1689 captioned “Dama Francese vestita da Sultana con la ventarola,” which translates to “French lady dressed as a sultan with a ventarola” (Fig. 10).⁵³ In this fashion plate, a lady is depicted in a French mantua. However, this fashion plate was printed in Italy. Historian John Nevinsom describes a fashion plate as “a costume portrait indicating a suitable style of clothing that can be made or secured,” which means by this definition, this illustration was meant to advertise to Italian women the suitable style of dress for 1689, which was a French dress.⁵⁴ French mantuas were being touted as the fashionable style of dress in Italy, which indicates the shift in sartorial superiority towards France during the seventeenth century. As established above, Spain held a position of cultural hegemony for the sixteenth century due to their imperialistic machinations in the Americas. However, in the seventeenth century, this cultural hegemony switched to France. King Louis XIV of France fostered internal commercial success in France through manufacturing and industry, as well as consolidated power into an absolute monarchy, which resulted in France surpassing Spain as a cultural influence within Europe.⁵⁵ Following Spain, France retained cultural hegemony over Europe during the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth, as evidenced by this Italian-made fashion plate.

Conclusion

Italian cultural hegemony in the first part of the early modern period was heavily linked to Italy’s monopolization of trade along the silk road and across the Mediterranean Sea. Italian styles were the height of fashion during the fifteenth and start of the sixteenth century, and Isabella d’Este and her sartorial influence are prime examples of this. Isabella was once described as a “Machiavelli in skirts.” She used the tools of political agency available to her, fashion choices and dissemination, to craft a public image and maintain her status and influence in Italy and beyond.⁵⁶ Isabella used fashion to subordinate others to her, as with the *zazzara* headdress, which had international consequences, as seen with the fashion dolls the king of France requested and the request’s entanglement with sartorial control. Without Italian trade superiority, Isabella would have been

⁵² Joan Nunn, *Fashion in Costume* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), p. 69.

⁵³ “Dama Francese vestita da Sultana con la ventarola, 1689,” Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 27, 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O577804/dama-francese-vestita-da-sultana-fashion-plate-van-westerhout-arnold/>.

⁵⁴ John Nevinsom, “Origin and Early History of the Fashion Plate,” *United States National Museum, Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology, Bulletin 250, Paper 60* (1967): p. 60.

⁵⁵ Hillary Bernstein, “History 121F Lecture,” (Lecture, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 2021).

⁵⁶ Cockram, “Isabella d’Este’s Sartorial Politics,” p. 34.

unable to use political agency to put herself in a position of sartorial influence and, as a result, would have had a much weaker political and cultural position and status.

Spanish imperialism of the Americas caused Italian cultural hegemony to dwindle as the sixteenth century continued, with Spain replacing Italy in terms of cultural influence. Italy no longer had the most lucrative way of obtaining material goods in Europe, so now European courts tried to emulate Spain over Italy. The English court exemplifies this emulation of Spain, with Queen Mary I using Spanish fashion in portraiture to manufacture a public image of herself that credited her with political relevance and established superiority. Mary understood fashion as a way of conveying a political message; a tool later carried on by her sister Elizabeth. In addition to utilizing Spanish fashion, she paid careful attention to her jewelry for symbolic meaning. Spanish imperialism was the cause of Spain's cultural hegemony in the sixteenth century, and because of this, Mary emulated and used Spanish fashion to further her political goals.

Queen Mary's sister, Queen Elizabeth, carried on in the same vein as Mary in using fashion to convey a political message. Elizabeth made great use of sartorial gifts in fabricating her public image and, in turn, pulled on attached political strings to these gifts. Elizabeth's fashion in her public image can be understood as an interplay between her and her court, as her New Year's Gift Exchange records illuminate. Through Elizabeth's public image in portraiture, we can also see the transition in cultural hegemony within Europe from Spain to France towards the end of the sixteenth century. Elizabeth switched to French fashion styles towards the end of her reign in the 1590s. This is evidence of the resulting shift in cultural influence due to the decline of Spanish imperialistic power and the vitality of France's internal commercial success. This switch also points out Elizabeth's political use of fashion, seeing as Spain and England were locked in conflict during this switch in fashion styles.

French cultural hegemony continued well into the seventeenth century thanks to King Louis XIV's political maneuvers within France and on the battlefields. France overtook Spain in terms of fashion influence as Spanish imperialistic success in the Americas continued to decline. The French mantua dress showed this continued French influence long into the seventeenth century, as we see Madame de Maintenon affecting the mantua's finer style points in the 1680s and 1690s. Madame de Maintenon continued in the steps of Isabella, Mary, and Elizabeth before her by using fashion to establish her public image and convey political meaning. She used portraiture to subtly send political messages and secure her influence in the court, which is observable in the changes to the mantua that occurred in the 1680s when she secretly married King Louis XIV.

These women used fashion to carry out their political goals and express their political agency. They each crafted a public image for themselves that carried political weight, and this public image was closely tied to European economic politics. The trend cycles of fashion that these women used to their advantage were the result of shifting European commerce endeavors, internal and external, throughout the early modern period and shifting cultural hegemony. External political factors like economics and trade affected the trend cycle of fashion in Europe. However, these women used these fashion trend cycles to support and enhance their public and political image, turning fashion into a political tool rather than simply reflecting politics.

Appendix

Figure 1: “Isabella d’Este, Marchioness of Mantua,” Kunsthistorisches Museum, Accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/1940/?offset=1&lv=list> .



Figure 2: “The Old Pretender Doll, 1680,” Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 27, 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk> .



Figure 3: “Pair of Chopines, 1580-1620,” Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 21, 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk> .



Figure 4: “Panel Painting Portrait of Queen Mary I,” Collections, Society of Antiquaries of London, accessed on January 25, 2022, <https://collections.sal.org.uk/object-lds1336> .



Figure 5: “Smock Part, 1575-1585,” Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78732/smock-part-unknown/> .



Figure 6: “Scrots, William. ‘Elizabeth I when a Princess’,” Collections, Royal Collection Trust, 1546, Accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.rct.uk/collection> .



Figure 7: “Queen Elizabeth I (‘The Ditchley portrait’),” People and Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, Accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections> .



Figure 8: “Portrait of Madame de Maintenon,” FIT Fashion History Timeline, last updated August 18, 2020, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1690-1699/> .



Figure 9: “Portrait of Françoise d’Aubigné (1635-1719), Marquise de Maintenon, with her niece Françoise d’Aubigné (1684-1739), the future Duchess of Noailles,” FIT Fashion History Timeline, last updated August 18, 2020, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1690-1699/> .



Figure 10: “Dama Francese vestita da Sultana con la ventarola, 1689,”
Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed February 27, 2022,
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk> .

