

VIRTUS

29 | 2022



Sara van Dijk

Courtly splendour

Fashioning men and women

216

Erin Griffey (ed.), *Sartorial politics in early modern Europe. Fashioning women* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019, 336 p., ill., index)

Timothy McCall, *Brilliant bodies. Fashioning courtly men in early Renaissance Italy* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022, 221 p., ill., index)

In 1496 Francesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, asked his wife Isabella d'Este to pawn her jewellery because he was in need of money. Isabella replied in a letter that she had only four jewels left because most of her jewellery had already been pledged. If she were to lose these too, she explained, she would have to wear black, because it would be ridiculous to wear coloured and brocaded silks without gems. Isabella was known throughout Europe as a fashion lover and a trendsetter, but the concerns voiced in this letter reach far beyond frivolities and vanity. The decision would greatly affect her honour and that of her husband, she stressed. In early modern court society, noble status had to be expressed through magnificent dress and accessories.

Late twentieth and early twenty-first century scholarship on Renaissance portraiture has tended to regard the female body much more than the male as a vehicle for sartorial display. For instance, the eminent Leonardo specialist Carlo Pedretti characterized the portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza as a mere doll enveloped in riches (Fig. 1), and Patricia Simons regarded similar profile portraits of women as disempowerment of the female gaze, reducing her body and apparel to an emblem of patriarchal lineage, honour, and virtue. Over the past two decades the field of early modern dress studies burgeoned and historians and art histo-

Fig. 1. Portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza (oil on poplar panel, Ambrogio de Predis, circa 1493; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Widener Collection, inv.no. 1942.9.53)



217

rians alike increasingly acknowledge clothing and apparel as powerful tools for identity construction for both men and women. The two titles under discussion both testify to the crucial role of fashion in shaping court life and challenge the view of passive female adornment intended for male spectatorship. The edited volume *Sartorial politics in early modern Europe* presents twelve case studies on court women, from the aforementioned Isabella d'Este to Queen Henrietta Maria, using their finery to political ends, whereas Timothy McCall in his monograph *Brilliant bodies* focuses on men at the early Renaissance courts of Northern Italy.

McCall takes the reader on a dazzling journey along the bodily splendour of Renaissance lords such as Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Borso d'Este, and Federico da Montefeltro, to mention just a few. With lively descriptions, both his own and derived from contemporary sources, he creates awareness of the visual, tactile, and acoustic qualities of these princes' appearance. Dressed in shimmering brocades and silks embroidered with metal threads, pearls and



Fig. 2. Borso d'Este and his court (fresco, Francesco del Cossa, late 1460s, detail of April, east wall, Salone dei Mesi, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara)

sequins, bedecked with jewels, their (preferably blond) hair shining like gold, and further adorned with pieces of armour and spurs, they made a marvellous spectacle – not only the lords themselves, but their entire entourages as well (Fig. 2). This focus not only serves to show that men were as much – or perhaps even more – on display than women, but more importantly to analyse how these princes used dress and adornment to impress and seduce their audience and underline their signorial power.

Erin Griffey too in the introduction to *Sartorial politics* underlines the agency of women's dress as 'a silent form of speech', of which the essays provide plenty examples. In the same vein as McCall describes, queens were splendidly attired to symbolize dynasty and power. For instance, when the Queen of France Catherine de' Medici in 1550 made a royal entry in Rouen, a chronicler compared her to a 'sky sparkling with stars'. In early modern Europe dress styles differed from place to place. For women who married into a foreign court, this meant they either adhered to their native style or adopted the style of their marital country, showing their loyalty. Maria Hayward describes how after marrying Charles II

of England, Catherine de Braganza quickly adopted English dress. The English disliked her Portuguese dress, not only because it looked unfamiliar, but also because it resembled Spanish court dress. Foreign styles could also be adopted without these personal ties. In a period of political tension between France and Mantua, Isabella d'Este wrote to the French ambassador that he would find her 'dressed as a good *Francese*' with lilies all over if he would come to visit her. Through dress women conveyed courtly splendour, laid claims to dynasty, and engaged in diplomacy.

One author, though, doubts the extent to which women engaged in politics through their apparel. In her essay on wedding practices at German princely courts, Kirsten Frieling notices a gender difference. Whereas a man like Charles the Bold consciously used dress at the imperial court as power play through garments that signalled a higher status than he actually possessed, she found no similar evidence for German princesses. Frieling regards the arrival of women at their marital court with their own wardrobe as a moment of cultural exchange that was not perceived as politically charged. However, the decision to continue to wear one's own clothing from the trousseau or adopting the style of the new court, regardless of the choice that was made, intrinsically carried political meaning. Bianca Maria Sforza, one of the women discussed in her essay, is a case in point. When marrying Maximilian I, she brought Milanese style dresses and head coverings to Innsbruck in which she was portrayed by Ambrogio de Predis (fig. 1). Clothing from Bianca's trousseau was quickly replaced by German fashion. Only at the *Reichstag* in Malines in 1494 she appeared in Milanese dress to fortify Maximilian's territorial claim on Italy, as Daniela Unterholzner showed in her PhD thesis on Bianca Maria in 2015.

219

There is no doubt that court dress was highly political and *Sartorial politics* rightly draws attention to the role women played in this. Yet many questions remain to be answered. How common was it for women to remain loyal to their native style? Are women like Eleanora of Austria, who continued to wear Spanish dress in France, exceptions to the rule? Were women able to decide on their own, or did their husband have a say in these matters, as seems to have been case with Bianca Maria Sforza? Were there any changes over time? Without these matters addressed, *Sartorial politics* remains a collection of case studies that are highly interesting in their own right but fail to offer a broader and coherent view on early modern female politics of dress.

Although it is not stated explicitly, the focus on women may result in the impression that they communicated and participated in the political arena through dress more than men did, because they lacked other opportunities to express themselves. Griffey's remark that 'female clothing materialised both fashion and virtue, engagement with the court, and traditional female values' could tempt the reader to draw the conclusion this did not apply to men, even if this is not her intention. Beauty and dress have always been important subjects in the study of women's lives but are often neglected when it comes to men. McCall shows how the perception of fashion as frivolous business for women, dominant in the western world since the nineteenth century, has hampered a clear understanding of the importance of court dress for men. In fact, men spent more on dress than women. Both sexes fully exploited the communicative power of dress and the body.

There were of course gendered differences, and it is revealing (and fun) to compare some of them in both books. McCall shows how legs were at the core of male beauty. Clad in tight fitting *calze* (hose) tied to the doublet with ‘points’, legs were the base of a strong and slender silhouette (Fig. 2). Women’s legs, on the contrary, remained hidden under bulky layers of skirts, in Spain even more so than at other European courts because of the use of the *guardainfante*, a voluminous boned skirt that is well-known from Velazquez’ painting *Las Meninas* (Museo del Prado, Madrid). Legend has it that when Mariana of Austria travelled to Madrid to be married to Felipe IV of Spain in 1648, a hosier came by to offer her some stockings, whereupon the First Steward exclaimed: ‘You should know that Queens of Spain have no legs!’. For women, life events and subsequent changes of dress seem to be of greater importance than for men. Marriage meant adapting to a new court, whereas widowhood was an opportunity to gain independence and true power, this time materialized through sober widows’ garb rather than ostentatious dress.

220 An interesting exception is Christina of Sweden, who is discussed in an essay by Julia Holm. Being the sole heir to the throne, Christina was crowned ‘King of Sweden’ in 1650. Contrary to other queens, she was truly in charge of state affairs. The accounts of the Royal Wardrobe provide rich source material, although from a Swedish perspective this is probably limited. The Swedish court kept many items of clothing that are now in the Livrustkammaren in Stockholm, providing the unique opportunity to study extant examples of seventeenth-century court dress. Unfortunately, Christina’s wardrobe is completely lost because she took everything with her when she emigrated to Rome after her abdication in 1654. Only her coronation mantle survives and was used by several male monarchs who succeeded her. In this case, splendour expressing royal power transcended gender.

One might argue that the early modern fashion system put equal if not more weight to status than to gender. McCall points out that although sumptuary laws may have been targeted mostly at women, one of their main goals was ‘to reinforce class and status’. In this hierarchy commoners wore – or at least had to wear – plain, simple clothing. Nobility literally outshone them, not just because they wanted to, but because it was expected. They did so from cradle to grave. Just a toddler, Isabella d’Este received dresses made from gold brocade garments that had belonged to her uncle Borso. The same toddler attended the funeral of her nephew Niccolò d’Este in 1476, who had been decapitated after a failed revolt against Ercole I, Isabella’s father. Yet he was given a state funeral, his head and neck sewn back together, clad in gold brocades.

Dress studies have often ignored jewellery, even though it was an integral part of courtly attire and crucial to convey splendour. Griffey rightly points out that jewels often were the domain of curators rather than academics. Most museums of applied arts classify objects on the basis of materials and techniques, resulting in separate curators for dress and textiles on the one hand and metals, including jewellery, on the other. While this serves a clear purpose from a conservational and design historical point of view, it hampers a better understanding of the use and meaning of these objects. Fortunately, both these books bridge the gap. Susan Vincent wrote an essay on the jewels gifted to Elizabeth I, that were not just very expensive, but more importantly had an iconography that was carefully thought out to underline her

power and please the queen. Two further essays by Lisa Mansfield and Jemma Field discuss the jewellery of Eleanor of Austria and Anna of Denmark respectively. Yet the book-length study by McCall takes it one step further and truly integrates the body, dress, gems and – very important for male courtiers – armour, combining extant objects, depictions in art, and written sources.

After a thorough discussion of the glitter and glamour of Renaissance lords, in his epilogue McCall turns to black clothing. We already encountered Isabella d'Este explaining to her husband she needed her jewellery, or else she would be obliged to wear black. It is a colour that could have a variety of connotations. Worn by pious or mourning people it signified modesty; Venetian city officials expressed their republican unity with their black togas. In the sixteenth century, black became ever more popular among the nobility throughout Europe. Following Baldassare Castiglione, who in his *Libro del Cortegiano* stated that 'the most graceful colour for clothing is black', this has often been regarded as a shift from superfluous splendour to princely dignity. McCall makes an important contribution by showing that the shift from colour to black in early sixteenth-century Italy was neither a sudden break in time – as splendid black attire was already present in fifteenth-century Italian courtly display – nor a break with the love for glitter. Black silks shone and shimmered, creating the perfect backdrop for gems and pearls. Again, *Sartorial politics* provides the examples for women. In the *Ermine Portrait* (attributed to William Segar, Hatfield House), Queen Elizabeth I flaunts golden clasps, chains of pearls, golden necklaces and a famous jewel called the Three Brethren, earlier in possession of Charles the Bold, all on a black dress.

221

Sadly, the images in *Sartorial politics* are few and of poor quality, no doubt the result of a tight budget. The book provides a worthwhile selection of studies on early modern court women that will mainly appeal to specialists in the field. *Brilliant bodies* uncovers the meaning of male bodily splendour, highlighting an aspect of Renaissance material culture that has not attracted much attention so far. Lavishly illustrated and written in an accessible style, it is a must-read for anyone interested in dress or the Renaissance court. Indulge in jewels, both real and imitation, silks and male beauty, read about Leonardo da Vinci's recipe for fake pearls or about Galeazzo Maria Sforza, a 'Renaissance fashion victim', who did not survive an attack on his life after willingly taking the risk of lethal injuries because he refused to wear a protective garment that made him look 'too fat'. Court dress still has the power to entice.

Artikelen

Ennoblement and the control of grants of arms in sixteenth-century Lorraine 9

Jean-Christophe Blanchard

Burgers op het kasteel. Elitedistinctie en representatie onder Hollandse heren buiten de ridderstand in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw 34

Rob van der Laarse

Dossier Adel en dieren

De anti-hond: poezen en edellieden 84

Hanneke Ronnes

Slapeloze nachten en onvermoede doodsoorzaken. Over ongedierte in middeleeuwse kastelen en paleizen 97

Elizabeth den Hartog

De politieke relevantie van de Spaanse schimmel van Prins Maurits ten tijde van de Republiek 110

Harry J. Kraaij

Het kind als valkenier: opvoeding, heerschappij en valkerij in de zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst 121

Yannis Hadjinicolaou

Exotische dieren op de buitenplaats: menagerieën in de achttiende eeuw 138

Carlo Valerio

De Groene Minnaar van Margaretha van Oostenrijk 150

Paul J. Smith

