The Clothes Make the Woman: Isabella d’Este’s Manipulation of Fashion and Power

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which appearance, specifically a woman’s dress, accessories, and personal styling, could affect the way she was interpreted by others in Renaissance Italy. Focusing on the Marchioness Isabella d’Este of Mantua, I seek to discover the ways a woman’s appearance was understood by herself and her peers, and how in turn this affected her role in the greater sphere of influence among the courts in Italy and abroad. I briefly investigate the political structure of Renaissance Italy and the male/female power dynamics, as well as expectations for a woman’s role and appearance in order to provide a greater cultural context for my study of Isabella. I consider letters, portraits, and writings from the Renaissance about Isabella to develop an understanding of her role as a marchioness, patroness, and a woman in her own right. Using evidence of Isabella’s sartorial splendor and devotion to maintaining the highest standards in her appearance, I demonstrate how she was able to manipulate her personal appearance to portray a woman of status who was not completely submissive to the patriarchal ideals of Renaissance Italy while simultaneously maintaining a persona subtle enough to still be considered within the confines of what was expects of a noble woman of her status.