Shaping How Others See Us:

Utilising Beauty Practices for Social Influence and Public Imaging in the 15th Century

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Submitted: June 30, 2023

ABSTRACT

15th-century ideas around female beauty and beauty culture were just as nuanced as today's. With strong cultural ideas around beauty and behaviour as a reflection of inner virtue, French and Italian women used cosmetics and idealised images to adhere to the beauty standard. This thesis asks to what extent elite women's application of these beauty practices could be used to facilitate social influence. This thesis addresses the gap between scholarly discussions of beauty as a concept and how cultural expectations changed how beauty practices could be applied throughout the different stages of elite women's lives. Through an analysis of selected texts and passages by 15th-century authors Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta, this thesis will examine how these female authors viewed beauty and women's application of beauty practices through three stages of life. This thesis will examine the three stages of unmarried youth, becoming a young married woman, and finally entering old age and widowhood. For each stage of life, the chapters will analyse textual and visual sources through the lens of self-fashioning as a tool for self-representation and female agency.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION **3**
Context and Research Question 3
0.1 Self-Fashioning 6
0.2 Primary Sources 9
0.3 Methodology 14
Overview 15

CHAPTER 1: Concepts in Context; Beauty, Social Mobility and Life Stages **16**
1.1 Beauty 17
1.2 Beauty Practices 21
1.3 Social Mobility 24
1.4 Applying Beauty and Social Mobility to the Life Stages of Elite Women 30
1.5 Conclusion 34

CHAPTER 2: Maidens and Brides **36**
2.1 Primary Source Authors: 37
Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta Perspectives
2.2 Marriage Portraiture: Bianca Maria Sforza & Isabella of Aragon 51
2.3 Conclusion 57

CHAPTER 3: Young Married Women **59**
3.1 Primary Source Authors: 61
Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta Perspectives
3.2 Married Women and Artistic Patronage: Anne of France & Anne of Brittany 79
3.3 Conclusion 86

CHAPTER 4: Older Women in Marriage and in Widowhood **88**
4.1 Primary Source Authors: 90
Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta Perspectives
4.2 Older Women in Portraiture: Isabella d'Este & Louise of Savoy 102
4.3 Conclusion 106

CONCLUSION **108**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **113**

APPENDIX **122**

INTRODUCTION

Ideals of female beauty are all around us, whether we consciously register them or not. Often made explicit through shampoo commercials, influencer pages, television shows, or photo filters, the message for women is clear—coming closer to the beauty standard 'makes life better'. However, scholarly exploration of beauty and pop culture has only recently exploded across a range of multimedia platforms. NPR and Youtube, for example, host several exceptional audio and video essayists who explore connections between beauty, race, class, social capital, and economic success.[1] Those connections featuring Instagram influencers, celebrities, and plastic surgery may appear far from the realm of medieval scholarship, but is contemporary society so different from its historical counterparts? Like today, medieval female beauty standards emphasised the idea that true or real beauty was natural and could not be counterfeited with cosmetics. In addition, it was believed that a truly beautiful woman was unconcerned with her appearance, suggesting that the ideal was to rise for the day effortlessly looking like a Grecian goddess—with no cosmetic aids needed. Anyone identifying as a woman will likely recognise this for the ridiculous notion it is. However, this idea is still prevalent today. Why else would 'natural' and 'no make-up' make-up be so popular?

Context and Research Question

It is known that elite aristocratic women in 15th and 16th century France and Italy utilised beauty practices to attain the beauty standard of their day.[2] What was the standard for those women, and why was conforming to it crucial for attaining social influence? This thesis explores the relationship between beauty and social mobility by looking at aristocratic women in the courts of 15th-century France and Italy through the writing of four secular late medieval female authors,

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[1] Leah Donnella, "Is Beauty in the Eyes of the Colonizer?," NPR (Code Switch, February 6, 2019), https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/06/685506578/is-beauty-in-the-eyes-of-the-colonizer; Alice Capelle, "French Girl Unpacks the French Girl Aesthetic," www.youtube.com, February 10, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=123Y2nUqOZA&t=330s.

[2] Rebekah Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 55-59.

Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan and Laura Cereta.[3] Beauty in the late medieval period was one of the primary indicators of a woman's value in her society. In addition to good behaviour and Christian piety, women were primarily judged by their appearance, although many nuances existed between factors such as age, marital status, and class. Like today, different standards and expectations were placed upon women contingent on their life stage, social class and communities. By looking at the work of these primary authors, this thesis will investigate to what extent beauty could be used as a tool towards women's social mobility within the aristocratic contexts of 15th-century France and Italy. What were these authors' relationships to beauty as a tool toward social mobility and the use of beauty practices like cosmetics? How did late medieval expectations of beauty and the application of beauty practices change as women aged out of their unmarried youth? Elite women's application of beauty practices and self-expression will be analysed through the lens of self-fashioning, as women utilised these practices to shape how their contemporaries viewed them and cultivate a public image that would last as an enduring tribute to their power and authority.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, an increased number of secular French and Italian female writers commented on cultural norms and ideas relating to women and feminine ideals. This rise in female authorship is perhaps due to the overall growth in secular literature published at the time and the elite status of the women who produced it.[4] French and Italian courts were centres for humanist ideas and increasingly secular literature and art.[5] While this period is famous for the new forms and styles in painting and sculpture, the creation of these 'Renaissance' masterpieces was funded by a growing number of wealthy and powerful patrician families who ran Italy's small yet well-connected city-states and kingdoms.[6]

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[3] Isabella D'Este, *Selected Letters*, ed. and trans. Deanna Shemek (Toronto, Ontario, CA: Iter Press , 2017); Sharon L. Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter (Library of Medieval Women)* (Cambridge, UK: DS Brewer, 2012); Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, ed. and trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (1405; repr., London, UK: Penguin Books, 1999); Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, trans. Diana Maury Robin (Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
[4] Janina Ramirez, *Femina* (London, UK: Penguin Random House, 2022), 11-14, 16-17.
[5] Nicholas Mann, "The Origins of Humanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5-8.
[6] Giovanna Benadusi, "Social Relations," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Micheal Wyatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 340-34.

The late Middle Ages (1400-early 1500) featured the emergence of humanism and a revival of interest in classical topics, along with continued interest in established religious ideas from earlier medieval periods.[7] Connections between the French and Italian courts' literary, artistic, and political elite facilitated the spread of these ideas.[8] For example, the primary sources used in this paper often reference each other and works by other humanist authors, particularly Boccaccio's *On Famous Women,* which used examples of women from Greek and Roman mythology to make a case for ideal womanhood outside of Christian theological traditions.[9] Moreover, Christian de Pizan used a similar tactic and referenced Boccaccio's work to support her arguments in *The City of the Ladies*.

This period also marks the start of an increase in conduct literature, defined by discussions on what makes for a good noble, which were starting to be popularised.[10] These texts marked a significant shift in conversations about self-representation, and social roles, which had previously only been explored through a religious lens rather than one of prescribed public image-making. These discussions included strategies for successful governance and social networking; for reference, around the same time Anne of France was writing her book *Lessons for My Daughter* - a guide intended for female readers - Niccolo Machiavelli was writing *The Prince* (1513), using Isabella d'Este's male contemporaries as examples for other male rulers.[11]

The French and Italian courts of this period were influenced by several famous women. In France, this is marked by a period of female regencies, beginning with Anne of France and ending with Catherine de Medici.[12] In Italy, prominent aristocratic women like Isabella d'Este, and Caterina Sforza, also took the reigns of government while their husbands and male family

[7] Mann, "The Origins of Humanism," 5, 8.
[8] Mann, "The Origins of Humanism," 5, 8.
[9] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 26; Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, 10.
[10] Herman Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body* (Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History, 2004), 9; Helena Sanson and Francesco Lucioli, *Conduct Literature for and about Women in Italy, 1470-1900* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016), 9-13, 14-19.
[11]Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 113-135. Jansen's translation provides an interpretive essay comparing Anne's *Lessons* to Machiavelli's *The Prince*.
[12] Susan Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563 (Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World)* (Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press (Bibliovault), 2018),16-17.

members engaged in wars against the French and other Italian city-states.[13] These powerful women influenced the governance and culture of their courts and the region. In addition, through strategic patronage, these elite women helped shape and idealise their and their families' images, portraying themselves as powerful, pious and deserving of authority.

In this introduction, I use section 0.1 to present the theoretical approach of self-fashioning and define how the theory will be used in this thesis and applied to the primary sources. Section 0.2 will then introduce the primary source authors and their texts, followed by section 0.3, which will discuss the methodology of this thesis related to the close readings and analysis of primary sources.

0.1 Self-Fashioning

This thesis will analyse primary sources through the theoretical approach of self-fashioning. Self-fashioning is a literary theory that historians may use to analyse primary source literature in context. Stephan Greenblatt (1980) writes,

> "Self-Fashioning is in effect the renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from the abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment. Literature … as a manifestation of the concrete behaviour of its particular author, as itself the expression of codes by which behaviour is shaped, and as a reflection upon these codes…understanding how literary and social identities were formed in this culture."[14]

In summary, Greenblatt explains that self-fashioning can be applied to the creation and expression of self-identity and character identity in literature and viewed within the author's cultural context. This is particularly important in analysing the primary texts used in this thesis,

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[13] Joyce de Vries, *Caterina Sforza and the Art of Appearances* (Routledge, 2010), 38-42; Sarah D. P. Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court* (Routledge, 2013), 1, 4-6.

[14] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, Illinois : University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3-4.

as each author establishes how they want their audience to view them and, when applicable, how they wish their audience to view the subject of their work. Self-fashioning can also be used to refer to the development of an individual's persona regarding how they fashion a public image for themselves through behaviour, dress, and artistic or literary patronage. Moreover, by portraying an idealised and cultivated image of their character and accomplishments, they may perpetuate the fashioned image into a more general cultivation of family and public memory.[15] The use of self-fashioning as an approach in medieval and renaissance studies enables scholars to look more closely at the motivation of authors and aristocratic patrons and how they wanted their contemporaries to view them. While Greenblatt focuses on a collection of male authors from Renaissance England, other scholars have expanded his theoretical approach to focus on female authors and prominent individuals who utilised means other than written work to fashion an idealised reputation for themselves.

In her 1999 article "Feminist Self-Fashioning: Christine De Pizan and the Treasure of the City of Ladies,"[16] Bella Mirabella argues that contrary to other scholars' views at the time, Christine de Pizan's writing in *The City of the Ladies* instructs women how to subvert their expected submission to the male authority of their husbands and fathers by working within the patriarchal system to avoid danger and retain a sense of self. She states that other scholars have seen this part of Pizan's work as a feminist failing.[17] Mirabella disagrees, claiming that within the context of the 15th-century French court, Pizan's advice to her fellow women was intended as a guide for her peers to use self-fashioning and utilize patriarchal views to their social advantage and well-being.[18] This thesis will take a similar approach to Pizan, Anne of France, and the letters of Isabella d'Esta and Laura Cereta, by analyzing their descriptions and opinions on women's participation in self-ornamentation and the importance of appearance in social influence.

In *The Eloquence of the Body: Perspectives on Gesture in the Dutch Republic* (2004), Herman Roodenburg looks beyond how characters in literature express themselves and brings

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[15] Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin, *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-5. This edited book of essays goes in depth on elite families' methods of cultivating family honor, memory and history.
[16] Bella Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning: Christine de Pizan and the Treasure of the City of Ladies," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 9–20.
[17] Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning: Christine de Pizan," 9.
[18] Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning: Christine de Pizan," 14-16.

self-fashioning into the 'real world' by using conduct literature to analyse how aristocrats cultivated respectable and idealised personas of themselves.[19] Roodenburg discusses self-fashioning within the context of Balthasar (or Baldassare) Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, a form of conduct literature examining the requirements and characteristics of nobility.[20] Roodenburg discusses the late medieval and early modern idea that nobility is an immaterial quality representing itself in both the physical and behavioural differences of aristocrats from their lower-class counterparts.[21] He argues that the Italian elite (specifically young men) often practised physical activities such as horseback riding and fencing to shape the male body into the standards of male beauty depicted in *The Book of the Courtier*.[22] He writes that these practices, and increased access to nutrition, contributed to the perception that nobility was better looking than their social inferiors. In addition to these physical characteristics, Roodenberg discusses the behavioural conventions of 'grace', which were believed to be part of the innate concept of nobility.[23] Roodenburg's expansion of self-fashioning to express and cultivate what is perceived as naturally occurring is particularly relevant when looking at the work of Anne of France, whose *Lessons for My Daughter* can also be considered conduct literature. In her book, Anne instructs her daughter how to express and embody her nobility through behaviour and dress and how to navigate difficult situations in court.[24] While Roodenburg's chapter focuses primarily on the male courtier as depicted by Castiglione, this thesis will apply self-fashioning to women through three stages of their lives—potential bride, young married woman, and older woman/widow.

Pulling from Greenbaltt's seminal work on the theory, and expanding on similar perspectives taken from Roodenburg and Mirabella, the edited book of essays *Self-Fashioning and Assumptions of Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* engages with self-fashioning in relation to the formation of the self while incorporating concepts of gender, power, and social mobility.[25] Within the context of Iberia, the book's editor Laura Delbrugge writes that their

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[19] Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body*.
[20] Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body*, 9-13; Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Courtier*, trans. George Bull (1528; repr., London, UK: Penguin Books, 1976).
[21] Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body*, 9-13.
[22] Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body*, 9-13.
[23] Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body*, 9-13.
[24] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 91.
[25] Laura Delbrugge, *Self-Fashioning and Assumptions of Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

contribution to the theory is to move away from the idea that individuals in the Middle Ages lacked subjectivity, personal preference and agency over others' perceptions of them. She states that the book “has relatively little to do with modernity and virtually everything to do with fundamental human nature because, regardless of time or place, humans have always tried to influence how they are viewed by others.”[26] In her introduction, Delbrugge suggests that to assume that all expressions of individual self-fashioning are due to social pressures ignores specific preferences and nuance. Delbrugge’s approach to self-fashioning in the late medieval period adds another layer to the theory by viewing self-expression from an individualized stance which coincides with sociological aspects of human nature.[27] Perhaps this is best exemplified in the differences between how the women mentioned in this thesis, including authors Isabella d’Este and Anne of France, sought to represent themselves and their appearance through portraiture and beauty practices.

This thesis will add to the theoretical approaches of these scholars by utilising self-fashioning to combine physical self-expression through beauty practices and analyse how beauty and the self-fashioned image played a part in female expressions of wealth and power. Applying this theoretical approach to the written primary sources and iconography in portraiture from the period, this thesis will (similar to Roodenburg) focus not only on the literary descriptions of the primary texts and their relationship to their authors but also analyse how the themes within the chosen texts may be representative of how women utilised beauty practices in their physical self-fashioning as well as artistic patronage. In addition, like Delbrugge’s approach, this thesis will incorporate the concept of social mobility and how women’s self-fashioning was influenced by contemporary ideas about women’s roles and their limitations.

0.2 Primary Sources

The primary sources analysed in this thesis are written works by 15th-century Italian and French aristocratic women dealing with beauty, virtue and self-representation. While their written works vary in category and opinion, all deal with questions of female beauty, its role in society, and a

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[26] Delbrugge, *Self-Fashioning and Assumptions of Identity*, 3.
[27] Delbrugge, *Self-Fashioning and Assumptions of Identity*, 2-4.

woman's public image. It is also important to note that these authors, excluding some earlier letters by Isabella d'Este, are writing from the perspective of an older woman already established within her contemporary communities and social networks. As such, the author's opinions reflect their older life stage and marital status as wealthy widows. However, there are considerable differences in the author's perspectives on beauty and influence, and the analysis of primary source materials is organised from practical to philosophical perspectives.

In Isabella d'Este's letters, we can see her practical approach to beauty, influence and patronage, and how her letters reflect the expression of her public image, her consideration for her appearance, and her opinion of other women's engagement in beauty practices.[28] Anne of France's *Lessons for My Daughter* is an example of conduct literature written for women by a female political player. Like d'Este, Anne also takes a practical approach to beauty but frames her conversation about nobility and reputation around virtue.[29] While Anne was highly influential in the French court, preceding her was Christine de Pizan's *The Treasure of the City of the Ladies*, one of the most studied works by a medieval female author. Pizan shaped ideas of the French court through her philosophical discussions around female power and the importance of virtue in self-expression.[30] Finally, Laura Cereta's published essays are perhaps the least practical and most idealistic in terms of a discussion around women and beauty practices. Cereta stridently advises women to discard beauty practices and only embrace virtue.[31]

This thesis uses the translated edition of *Isabella d'Este: Selected Letters* by Deanna Shemek.[32] Unfortunately, there is no accessible digitized view of the original letters or an edition in their original Italian. In this edition, Shemek writes that she only used a small selection of d'Este's correspondence. She has organized them by date and separated them by important moments in the d'Este's life, including her husband's death and her widowhood. Shemek also gives bibliographical details of d'Este's life, placing the letters in context and highlighting their relevance to aspects of d'Este's legacy, including her artistic patronage, political prowess, influence on fashion, and her regency.[33] In her letters, d'Este writes to other aristocrats and guild

[28] D'Este, *Selected Letters*.
[29] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter*.
[30] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*.
[31] Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters*.
[32] D'Este, *Selected Letters*.
[33] D'Este, *Selected Letters*.

people, these letters were not meant to be published, but it is important to know that the degree of privacy granted to private correspondence differs from how we would view it today. During d'Este's time, saving letters to be published and read by an elite audience was becoming a popular form of literature.[34] However, because her letters are 'private', readers get an in-depth view of how she managed the governance of Mantua and her interests and relationships within her social network.[35] D'Este's letters are evidence of her influence within her upper-class community, her opinions on topics of the day, and her educated and elite status.

Anne of France's *Lessons for My Daughter* advises noble women on fashioning an ideal public image and reputation in order to succeed at court.[36] While the text was written and dedicated to her daughter Suzanne, the book also served as a piece of conduct literature for other women in the French court. Anne's *Lessons* cover dress, manners, virtue, and beauty, instructing Suzanne on how best to behave. Through her text, Anne not only writes for the women of her court but also establishes her place amongst male authors who have written similar manuals for elite men.[37]

For analysis of the text, this thesis uses the English translation by Sharon L. Jansen.[38] Jansen's translation omits several of Anne's repetitions for readability. In her introduction, Jansen clarifies that when translating Anne of France's *Lessons*, she primarily used the edition of the *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France, duchesse de Bourbonnais et d'Auvergne, à sa fille Suzanne de Bourbon* by A. M. Chazaud in 1878.[39] Chazaud based his edition on the manuscript made for Suzanne of Bourbon, although it is important to note that this original manuscript has now been lost. This paper's footnotes include the selected quotations from Chazaud's edition in their original language. Little is known about when Anne wrote her *Lessons*; Chazuad theorized that the text was written between the death of Anne's husband, Peter II of Bourbon (1503) and 1505 when Suzanne (age 15) was married to Charles Montpensier.[40] However, Jansen argues that it is

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[34] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 14.
[35] D'Este, *Selected Letters*,14-15.
[36] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 33-35.
[37] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 28-29.
[38] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter*.
[39]Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 49; Anne de France*, Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud, 1878,* *https://ia804706.us.archive.org/23/items/lesenseignements00anneuoft/lesenseignements00anneuoft.pdf*.
[40] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 23.

more likely that the text was written between 1497-1498, when there are reports of Anne falling ill, citing the cause as the loss of a male child.[41] Jansen writes that this loss, the realization that Suzanne would be Anne's only heir, and the uncertainty of her own health would have driven Anne to write her *Lessons*.[42] She also argues that the text discusses Suzanne's marriage as an event yet to come but without specifics, which suggests the book was a kind of wedding gift. Instead, the book speaks of Suzanne's marriage as a future event that is yet to be determined.[43]

Christine de Pizan moved from her home in Venice to Paris in 1368 when her father was hired as Charles V's physician. Despite a culture which deterred women from taking up traditionally male pursuits in education and authorship, Pizan's father encouraged her to take up writing and learning. Pizan's family was well connected, and in 1380 she married royal secretary Etienne de Castel. However, after his death in 1387, Pizan (in her mid-twenties) was left to care for their three children and her widowed mother. In the years after, Pizan would compose poems and literature for the Valois court. While *The City of the Ladies* (1405) is not the only work in which Pizan argues against men's treatment of women, it is her most well-known and widely circulated work.

This paper's analysis of Pizan's work is based on the translation of *The Book of the City of the Ladies* by Rosalind Brown-Grant.[44] Brown-Grant writes that in doing her translation, she followed the example of the 1975 edition of *The Livre de la cité des dames of Christine de Pisan: a critical edition* by Maureen Cheney Curnow, and has used the manuscript from the Bibiothèque Nationale f. Fr. 607.[45] For the context of quotations used in this thesis, I will use the same edition by Curnow to provide the text's original language.

Pizan's *City of the Ladies* was written to refute male authors' misogynistic arguments about women's inferiority.[46] In it, Pizan argues for women's worth and value in society—arguing for

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[41] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 24-25.
[42] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 24-25.
[43] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 24-25.
[44] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*.
[45] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, XXIX; Christine de Pizan and Maureen Cheney Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Univ. Microfilms, 1990).
[46] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, XIX-XX.

women's inherent goddess and inclination towards virtue, as opposed to the assertion that women were naturally more corruptible than their male counterparts.[47] Pizan includes classical and biblical examples of famous women who made a difference in their communities through their devotion to learning and virtue, both of which were integral to their expressions of power. In *City of the Ladies*, she also implicitly instructs her female readers on how to emulate these examples.

The last author chosen for this thesis is Laura Cereta. Cereta, a member of Brescia's upper middle class, was the daughter of Silvestro Cereto and Veronica di Leno.[48] Her father, Silvestro, a magistrate and attorney, sent Cereta to a monastery at age seven to be educated.[49] This was a common practice for the upper class, as girls were often sent away to be educated in an environment that valued learning and promoted a culture of virtue, contributing to their reputations as learned and pious potential brides later.[50] While under instruction in the monastery, Cereta learned Latin until she was brought home at age eleven to help care for her siblings. Cereta was able to continue her studies under her parent's roof until she was married. In 1485 Cereta married Pietro Serina, a Venetian merchant, who died 18 months after their marriage. Widowed and childless, Cereta returned home. During this time, she created social networks with male scholars and potential elite patrons, attending meetings and maintaining friendships through her correspondence. Unfortunately, Cereta died in 1499 at age thirty, leaving behind her unpublished work.[51]

This thesis uses the transcribed, translated, and edited collection of essays and correspondence in the *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist* by Diana Robin to analyse Cereta's work.[52] In her translated edition, Robin writes that Cereta's *Epistolae familiares,* a collection of letters and essays, circulated as part of an unpublished manuscript between 1488-1492.[53] She explains that Cereta's writing was not well known during her contemporary period and was only officially published in 1640 when it was edited and printed by Jacopo Filippo Tomasini and Sebastiano Sardi in *Laurae Ceretae Brixiensis Feminae Clarissimae Epistolae iam primume MS in lucem*

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[47] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 6-7, 18-19.
[48] Cereta, *Collected Letters*.
[49] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 4-6.
[50] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 4-6.
[51] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 4-6.
[52] Cereta, *Collected Letters*.
[53] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 3.

productae.[54] It is this 17th-century Latin edition as well as the Vatican manuscript Vat lat. 3176 cart. 3. XVI, which forms the basis of her translation.[7] Where possible, the original Latin for the quotations from the 1640 printed text is included in the footnotes. Although these letters were written to and for an audience of aristocratic men and male scholars, Cereta does also write to a small group of women.[55] However, the letters included in this thesis are primarily written to male correspondents on behalf of women. In her work, Cereta argues for the value of education for women and instructs women on how they should model themselves after learned men, casting aside frivolities and exchanging them for a focus on learning and virtue.

0.3 Methodology

The methodology used in this thesis includes the close reading analysis of specific letters and chapters by primary source authors related to beauty standards and practices, connections between beauty and social mobility, and the representation of the self combined with iconographical research methods applied to the authors' portraits and the portraits of those within their social sphere. The primary source authors chosen for this thesis represent well-known, influential women from the 15th century whose work is available to us. In order to balance French and Italian perspectives, two French and two Italian authors are included. Each category has an author whose approach could be categorised as more practical, balanced with an author who had a more philosophical and idealised perspective on beauty culture and practices. These primary sources also have a wide range of scholarship associated with them and their work. However, the existing scholarship does not specifically analyse or use their work for a case study on beauty and social mobility. In addition, the primary sources referenced are relevant to the topic of this thesis because they were written by women commenting on women's self-representation, social issues and women's behaviour while working within the constraints of contemporary culture. Going beyond literary sources, the portraits used in this thesis are either of the primary source authors themselves, such as Anne of France and Isabella d'Este or depict

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[54] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 3-4; Laura Cereta and Giacomo Filippo aut Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae Brixiensis Feminae Clarissimae Epistolae Jam Primum È M S in Lucem Productae À Iacobo Philippo Tomasino, Qui Eius Vitam, & Notas Addidit ..*, *Internet Archive* (Patavij : typis Sebastiani Sardi (National Library of Naples), 1640), https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_IefuRFaN1z8C/page/n174/mode/1up.

[55] Cereta, *Collected Letters*,13.

women closely connected to the primary source authors who moved within the same social networks. The subsequent chapters will—through the lens of self-fashioning—investigate how the concept of beauty and its influence on elite women's social mobility is present in the primary sources and iconography of the era.

Overview

This thesis includes four chapters; the first will define concepts of beauty and social mobility within late medieval contexts and explain how these ideas can be applied to the primary sources. Subsequent chapters (two through four) are organised around the different life stages of elite women (potential bride, young married woman, and older woman/widow). Each chapter will include a close reading analysis and the application of the concepts of beauty and social mobility to iconographic depictions of self-fashioning through portraiture. Specifically, Chapter Two will focus on women's marriageability and becoming a bride, including an analysis of marriage portraiture. Chapter Three will examine the role of beauty in the social influence of young married women, with examples of how these women chose to be depicted in their portraits. Lastly, Chapter Four will focus on older women and widows, investigating the primary authors' critique of beauty culture and how age and marital status influenced these perceptions.

CHAPTER ONE: Concepts in Context; Beauty, Social Mobility and Life Stages

"It seems to be that good looks are more important to her than to a courtier, for much is lacking to a woman who lacks beauty"[56]

In the *Book of the Courtier,* popular Renaissance author Baldassare Castiglione establishes that a woman's primary value stems from her appearance.[57] While his characters also stress the importance of a woman's virtue and behaviour, much of the book's discussion of noble women focuses on their appearance, the morality of their adornment, what makes for ideal beauty, and how a woman's appearance reflects her husband's success.[58] In fact, many of the views his characters convey are not unfamiliar to us today. For example, the most beautiful women are those who appear to others as 'naturally beautiful' with little to no paint or cosmetic interference.

This chapter will discuss beauty ideals in the late medieval period and examine how aristocratic women utilised them to facilitate social mobility and social influence for themselves and their families. The chapter will also contextualise the terms used in this thesis' main research question and explain how these concepts will be applied to the different life stages of women covered in chapters two, three and four. In addition, the chapter will define the life stages (potential bride, young married woman, and older woman/widow) for the purpose of this investigation. Section 1.1 will discuss scholarship surrounding the study of female beauty, and the historical context of beauty during the late Middle Ages. While Section 1.2 will discuss common beauty practices of the period. To better understand what constitutes social mobility for elite women of the 15th century, Section 1.3 of this chapter will discuss current scholarship on concepts of social mobility and means of social influence for the period. Lastly, Section 1.4 will further clarify the methodology of this thesis by explaining how the following chapters will apply the concepts of beauty, beauty practices, and social mobility to elite women's different life stages.

Reference: [Comparative timeline for when the primary source authors wrote/lived]

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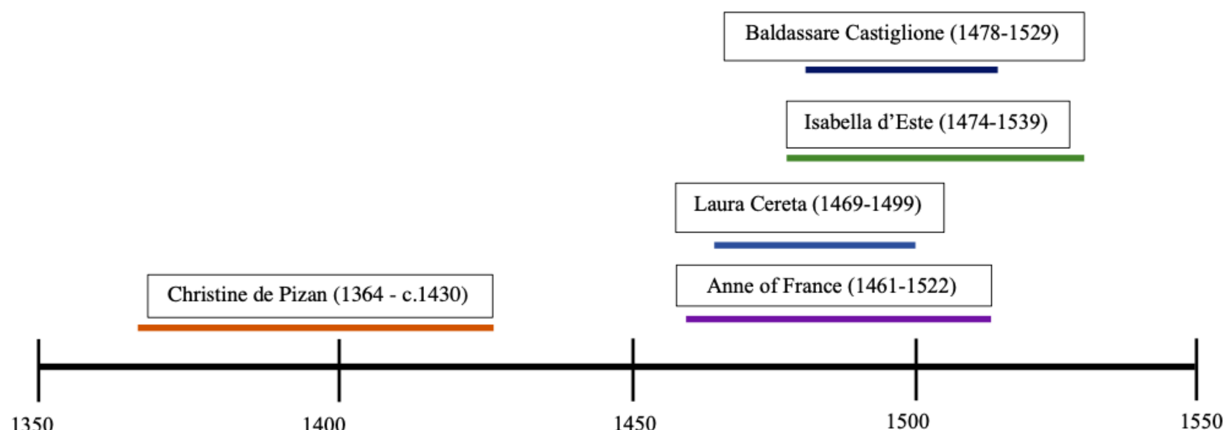
[56] Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Courtier*, trans. George Bull (1528; repr., London, UK: Penguin Books, 1976), 211.
[57] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 211.
[58] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 60-61.



1.1 Beauty

Ideas and ideals of beauty in the late medieval and Renaissance periods have been studied extensively by scholars in all its numerous facets. The topic of beauty has been approached through religious, artistic, literary, and medical lenses.[59] However, rather than focus on ephemeral, religious, or mathematical beauty discussions, this thesis will examine secular views and the practical utilisation of female beauty by French and Italian aristocratic women. For women of the 15th to 16th centuries, the standard of beauty to which they were held was based upon contemporary depictions of the classical standard of the goddess Venus.[60] By analysing artistic and literary depictions of Venus from this period, we can identify a general ideal of female physical beauty. The standard included golden or blonde hair, a high hairline, an oval face shape, thin eyebrows, a fair yet rosy complexion, a slim yet soft physique, small yet round breasts, a hairless body from the neck down, and long and graceful limbs and fingers.[61] In the

[59] Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, USA ; London, UK: Yale University Press, 2002); Umberto Eco, *On Beauty*, trans. Alastair McEwan (London, UK: MacLehose Press, 2010); Joanne M Ferraro, *A Cultural History of Marriage in the Renaissance and Early Modern Age* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021); Rebekah Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Sergio Di Benedetto, "From Earthly Venus to Heavenly Venus: On the Evolution of the Concept of Beauty in Girolamo Benivien," in *The Idea of Beauty in Italian Literature and Language: "Il Buono Amore È Di Bellezza Disio,"* ed. Claudio Di Felice, Harald Hendrix, and Philiep Bossier (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Mary Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the Representation of Women in Sixteenth-Century Painting," *Renaissance Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 1988): 47–88, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.1988.tb00137.x.
[60] Eco, *On Beauty*, 188,193-198; Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 54-56.
[61] Eco references the writings of Gilbert of Hoyt on female breasts: Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 11.

images listed below, the goddess remains the subject of the painting. This is important because her iconography is a reminder of the flawless female image and is visible not only in paintings but also in objects associated with love and femininity.[62]

Figure 1: Manuscript minature from Christine de Pizan's *City of the Ladies* Harley MS 4431 F100r

This illumination (*Figure 1*) in *L'Épitre d'Othéa,* which contains *The Book of The City of the Ladies* (f100rc. 1410-1414), was made by the Master of the Cité des Dames for the author Christine de Pizan.[63] Pizan was highly involved in the process of illuminating her manuscripts, as she wanted the images to be reflective of her writing.[64] The Venus in this depiction is shown to govern the hearts of both her male and female followers. However, Pizan's book warns against the worship of the goddess, as she believes that Venus will lead her followers astray and bring women to ruin.[65] While Pizan certainly was not the goddess's biggest fan, the image of Venus in *L'Épitre d'Othéa* aligns with the physical and dress ideals of the time. In addition to her physical illustration, she is represented in a form-fitting dress of green fabric, with long sleeves and an escoffion, which came into fashion in the early 1400s.[66]

It is important to note that while these paintings of Venus make clear the physical ideals at the time (usually with limited to no clothing), dress, cosmetics, and behaviour were beauty practices also utilised by women trying to mirror the beauty standards illustrated for them.[67] In the medieval period, beauty and a virtuous character were often equated, creating a distinction between the beauty standard's sensuous image and the Christian expectations of modesty and

[62] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 59-61.
[63] Christine de Pizan and Master of the Cité des Dames and workshop and to the Master of the Duke of Bedford, *The Book of the Queen: Harley MS 4431 f100r*, Illuminated manuscript minature, The British Library, accessed June 19, 2023, https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_4431_f100v.
[64] Laura Rinaldi Dufresne, *The Fifteenth-Century Illustrations of Christine de Pizan's 'the Book of the City of Ladies ; and "the Treasure of the City of Ladies": Analyzing the Relation of the Pictures to the Text* (Lewiston, Ny: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 1, 4-5.
[65] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 27-28.
[66] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 27-28.
[67] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 59-61.

virtuous behaviour which governed the ‘ideal’ woman.[68] One might view the humanistic fascination with Venus as being at odds with the entrenched Christian views of the time. However, artists and authors respond to this criticism by separating Venus’s iconography into two distinct versions of the goddess.[69] As a popular subject of humanist art and literature, Venus’s role as the goddess of love was divided. On the one hand, she is depicted as a symbol of love and lust, her image illustrated as an object of sexual desire and fantasy by authors and artists.[70] On the other hand, she is also shown as a helper to brides and maidens, inspiring images of her blessing and helping couples find love within the acceptable confines of Christian marriage.[71] Her iconography as a helper is more in line with late medieval ideals of female behaviour and allows women to use her as a model for love and beauty with regard to courtship and marriages. An example of this type of representation can be found in the illumination below.

Figure 2: Epithalamium. Manuscript wedding book written and illuminated in Milan, Italy, ca. 1450-1466.

Figure 2. is an illumination from folio 1. of *The Epithalamium de nuptiis Petri Comitis et Helisabeth Vicomercatae* (ca.1450-1464) is a wedding book accredited to a master of Ippolita Sforza. While the giver of the wedding book is unknown, it was commissioned for Gaspere da Vimercate (d.1467), the bride's uncle.[72] The first folio includes a dedication and *Epithalamia*[73] (poem) by Bonino Mombrizio to Gaspere and the wedding couple (Gaspere's niece, Elisabeth da Vimercate and Pietro Conte), along with several illustrations. The most prominent of the folio’s

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[68] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 54.
[69] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 62-63.
[70] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 40-41.
[71] Maria DePrano, *Art Patronage, Family, and Gender in Renaissance Florence: The Tornabuoni* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 96.
[72] *Epithalamium de Nuptiis Petri Comitis et Helisabeth Vicomercatae, M.1148 Fol. 1r.*, n.d., *Index of Medieval Art*, n.d., Index of Medieval Art, https://theindex-princeton-edu.proxy.library.uu.nl/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=0B6C9B98-7630-4FAA-983D-4D3E285A1B1D.
[73] Anthony F. D’Elia, “Marriage, Sexual Pleasure, and Learned Brides in the Wedding Orations of Fifteenth-Century Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2002): 379–433, 380.

illuminations depict Venus presiding over the ceremony and a blindfolded Cupid joining the hands of a couple that we can safely assume represents Elizabeth and Pietro.

In her book *Venus and the Arts of Love*, Rebekah Compton notes that the iconography attached to the images of Venus is representative of her connections to love, fertility, prosperity, and beauty.[74] Venus is often painted in lush green gardens with golden colouring, seductively underdressed, and always visualised as representing the beauty ideals of the time. Compton also writes that the emergence of Venus coincided with the rise in courtly literature and an increase in romantic secular literature.[75] Images of Venus associated with marriages focus on her as a representation of love in marriage and ideal female beauty. This includes imbuing the values of courtly romance with the traditional values associated with marriage. Rather than depicting Venus as a seductress leading men into lechery, she is illustrated as an advocate of the couple's love and sanctioned lust. The image of Venus in *The Epithalamium* illumination coincides with all these aspects, including the revenant glow of gold. While still provocatively revealing her breast, the Venus in the illustration is not a seductress but a champion of marital love.

Maria DePrano, who also examines traditions of art patronage connected to weddings, states that images and wedding objects given and commissioned for 15th-century Florentine marriages were intended to complement the couple.[76] While DePrano focuses on Florence, her analysis carries over to a broader elite Italian culture during the late medieval and Renaissance periods. She argues that these objects express the importance of perceived love in marriage and are best displayed through a chaste portrayal of Venus as a goddess of love within marriage who provides virtuous assistance to the bride.[77] While the *Epithalamium's* version of Venus as the goddess of love is chastened to fit within the cultural expectations of marriage, these depictions still represent different aspects of Venus, including reconnecting her to nature and illustrating her blessing of fertility as flowers.[78] The illustration of the goddess's blessing and the physical similarities between the deity and the bride are also notable. Whether Elizabeth truly represented these aesthetic ideals is beside the point, as both the patron and the illuminator understood the

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[74] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*,1-2.
[75] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 27-28.
[76] DePrano, *Art Patronage, Family, and Gender in Renaissance Florence,* 82.
[77] DePrano, *Art Patronage, Family, and Gender in Renaissance Florence,* 96.
[78] DePrano, *Art Patronage, Family, and Gender in Renaissance Florence,* 98.

importance of bringing the bride's artistic representation closer to the ideal. Analysing this beauty standard and the reasoning behind it is critical to understanding the beauty practices attached to women's self-fashioning in the public sphere. While artistic representations and idealisations of an individual's beauty could be useful, on a day-to-day basis, cosmetics were often used to replicate the standard we see in visual and literary sources.

1.2 Beauty Practices

Critically, beauty in this period should not be discussed without acknowledging the relevance of class in specific beauty practices. *Beauty practices* can be defined as tools that women may employ to enhance their appearance based on the beauty standard, their social status and their stage of life. For instance, women's dress is often described or depicted as an element in their overall appearance.[79] In his book, Castiglione's character, Count Ludovico Canossa (1476-1532),[80] has much to say about what makes for a beautiful woman and how her dress and cosmetic enhancement could play an important role in her overall beauty. On one occasion, he asks the group to consider the sensuality of women's clothing, stating that:

> "Surely, too, you have noticed when a woman, passing along the street… happens, in play or for some other reason, to raise just enough of her skirts to reveal her foot and often a little of her leg as well… delightfully feminine, showing her velvet ribbons and pretty stockings… uncontrived and natural rather than carefully calculated, and that it cannot be intended to win admiration."[81]

In this passage, Castiglione instructs women to behave modestly and only naturally or by accident, in innocent jest, reveal what should be hidden. This section also illustrates to the reader aspects of women's clothing which were considered salacious to a late medieval audience. Shoes (probably fashionable ones), stockings, and ribbons are all listed as items that the Count finds attractive and seem to attribute to the wearer's femininity and good looks.

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[79] Joyce de Vries, *Caterina Sforza and the Art of Appearances* (Routledge, 2010), 151-154; Mary Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the Representation of Women in Sixteenth-Century Painting," *Renaissance Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 1988): 51.
[80] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 24.
[81] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 87.

During the same conversation, the Count also expresses his in-depth opinions on the topic of make-up. He complains that women who participate in beauty practices such as plucking eyebrows and foreheads, as well as applying paints and powders,

> "... rob you of your grace, seeing that they spring only from affectation, through which you make it clear to everyone that you are excessively anxious to be beautiful… how much more graceful… in comparison with one whose face is so encrusted that she seems to be wearing a mask… letting herself be seen only by torchlight, in the way a wily merchant shows his cloth in a dark corner…How much more attractive than all the others is a pretty woman who is quite clearly wearing no make-up on her face, which is neither too pallid nor too red, and whose own colouring is natural and somewhat pale… who lets her unadorned hair fall casually and unarranged, and whose gestures are simple and natural, betraying no effort or anxiety to be beautiful."[82]

Castiglione is not alone in his instructions for women to keep it natural. Like today, there seems to be a common consensus that women should do their best to replicate the Count's description of 'natural beauty' while hiding the reality that many women would still utilise cosmetics to fit this fresh and youthful standard. The Count also mentions behaviour in this section, which we see in many sources at the time. Natural, subdued, and modest physical movement is also attributed to a woman's beauty, as the grace of her gestures is considered a reflection of her character and outer appearance. In practice, the Count advises against excessive fidgeting, wild motion, or stiff countenance, which might indicate an over-preoccupation with one's appearance. This lack of affectation, or visible anxiety over one's appearance, is also stressed in Christine de Pizan and Anne of France's writings.[83] While Castiglione's Count deplores women's excessive application of make-up, cosmetics were a popular topic of discussion in the late medieval world.[84] But what were these exact cosmetic recipes which were intended to bring women closer to Venus?

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[82] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 86.
[83] Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, 188; Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter* , 61.
[84] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 86.

Writers in the Middle Ages believed physical beauty could come from a woman's internal virtue.[85] This is a common theme in saints' *Vitae,* as the subjects' physical appearance is often emblematic of their inner goodness.[86] So how does this 'inner beauty' show up on the face? Specific symbolic colours were associated with a woman's virtue and could be replicated through cosmetic assistance. A white or pale complexion was associated with an individual's purity, while the appearance of red on the face was representative of passion.[87] For example, Castiglione's Count describes the perfect female complexion as "neither too pallid nor too red."[88] Indicating that while a beautiful woman should be pale, she should blush when appropriate to show her passion and innocence. In contrast, a face that is too red is representative of someone who feels passion (and probably sins) in excess.[89] We can identify recipes in the *Trotula* that whiten the face and those which add rouge or blush.[90] An example from one of the recipes in Monica Green's translation of the *Trotula* includes instructions on how a woman may whiten and then redden her face.

> "[278] A cerotum [A wax-based ointment] with which the face can be anointed every day in order to whiten it is made thus. Let oil of violets or rose oil with hen's grease be placed in a clay vessel so that it boils. Let the very white wax be dissolved, then let egg white be added and let powder of well-powdered and sifted white lead be mixed in, and again let it be cooked a little. Then let it be strained through a cloth, and to this strained cold mixture let camphor, nutmeg, and three or four cloves be added. Wrap this whole thing in parchment. We do not apply this in any fashion until the cerotum smells good. From this let the woman anoint her face, and afterward let her redden it thus. Take shaving of brazilwood and let it be placed in an eggshell containing a little rose water, and let there be placed in the same place a little alum, and with this let her anoint some cotton and press it on her face and it should make her red."[91]

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[85] Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 9-10.
[86] Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 22-17.
[87] Annette Drew-Bear, *Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage: The Moral Significance of Face-Painting Conventions* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press ; London, 1994), 22-24.
[88] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 86.
[89] Drew-Bear, *Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage,*16, 23.
[90] Monica H. Green, *The Trotula an English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 117-122.
[91] Green, *The Trotula an English Translation,* 118.

The *Trotula's* insistence that a woman must redden a whitened face further illustrates a medieval understanding that a balance between the colours of the flesh is an important indicator of moral behaviour and a sign of beauty. However, as seen in *The Book of the Courtier,* criticism of make-up includes not just a revulsion of women who overindulge in its application but refers to the negative consequences of the 'sin'. White lead, an element of the recipe above, was common in face-whitening recipes. Its adverse health effects included the ageing and disfiguration of the skin, often resulting in the need for further cosmetic aid.[92] In addition to using cosmetics on the skin, it was common practice for women to lighten or dye their hair, coming closer to the lightened standard.[93] Unfortunately, the ingredients in these recipes would also damage the hair, perhaps another reason for the popularity of using false hair.[94] Other beauty and cosmetic practices included plucking eyebrows and hairline, using depilatory creams on the skin to remove body hair, and utilising other recipes to make changes to the breasts and physical body.[95] While interesting in themselves, beliefs about beauty, female beauty standards, and the practices employed to achieve them are not without important cultural contexts and social consequences. The following section will discuss the term *social mobility* and how it applies to the thesis topic.

1.3 Social Mobility

This thesis will look at beauty as a tool elite women could use for social mobility and social influence in the Middle Ages. Social mobility as a field of scholarly study was first introduced by the sociologist Pitirim Sorokin.[96] Simplified, social mobility is defined by the upward movement of an individual from a lower to a higher class or the reverse in a downward trend. In the past, scholarship on social mobility in the Middle Ages was often shaped by preconceived notions of a static social hierarchy, in which individuals were trapped within a repetitive and set economic and social structure.[97] In his 1962 article 'Social Mobility Among the French Noblesse

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[92] Drew-Bear, *Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage,* 17-18; Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence,* 60-61.
[93] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence,* 13, 109; Green, *The Trotula an English Translation,* 114-116.
[94] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 109.
[95] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence,* 60.
[96] Carocci, "Social Mobility and the Middle Ages," 369; Carocci references: Pitirim Aleksandrovich Sorokin, *Social Mobility*, *Google Books* (Harper, 1927), https://www.google.com/books/edition/Social_Mobility/9ZnZAAAAMAAJ?hl=en.
[97] Carocci, "Social Mobility and the Middle Ages," 368.

in the Later Middle Ages', Edouard Perroy conforms to this structure by focusing on how social mobility was severely limited in medieval France, based upon limited examples of lower-class individuals being granted elevated titles.[98] While he suggests very limited fluidity between the lower to higher social classes, Perroy acknowledges the inevitable social mingling between the bourgeois and the nobility.[99] Ideas like Perroy's might still be used in the context of a high school history course, where students are introduced to the medieval world through a pyramid structure of feudalism consisting primarily of elites ruling over a peasant class. However, through anthropological and sociological approaches, more modern concepts of social mobility have since been applied to the medieval period.[100] This has changed a previously more rigid outlook to one of more fluidity, which analyses the complexity of economic and social position in a period where increasing urbanisation led to a rising merchant class. In 'Social Mobility and the Middle Ages', Sandro Carocci states:

> "Rather than change from one clearly defined status to another, social mobility must be understood as any shift that not only brings individuals and groups, but also objects and values, to a new position within the hierarchy of wealth and professions, within the constellation of regard and prestige, of political participation and any other significant element within a given social space."[101]

In his article, Carocci assesses that scholarship on social mobility in the Middle Ages is far from extensive and suggests that contemporary scholarship remains restricted by concepts of individual income and status or title.

There is some debate over the term *elites* in general, as to be elite extends beyond basic structures of titles and land grants. In his article, Boris Bove points out that particularly when examining the 'elites' through the lens of social mobility, it is important to differentiate how individuals come or are able to come into their higher status.[102] Bove draws from the ideas of

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[98] Perroy, "Social Mobility among the French Noblesse in the Later Middle Ages," 29-27.
[99] Perroy, "Social Mobility among the French Noblesse in the Later Middle Ages," 32.
[100] Carocci, "Social Mobility and the Middle Ages," 369.
[101] Carocci, "Social Mobility and the Middle Ages," 369.
[102] Boris Bove, "Réflexions Sur Les Hommes Nouveaux et l'Ascension Sociale Au Moyen Âge, de Leudaste à Jacques Cœur, En Passant Par Pareto," in *Hommes Nouveaux et Femmes Nouvelles* (PU Rennes, 2015), 35–57, https://books.openedition.org/pur/90088.

sociologist Vilfredo Pareto, summarising that at the origin of the elite class, there are exceptional individuals who, through merit or ambition, have been able to rise to an unprecedented social position with their capacity to innovate. Bove then states that in a historical context, one could label their group as "hommes nouveaux."[103] Also, this term perhaps implies more 'mobility' than was possible— suggesting that these exceptional individuals rose from relative obscurity. In this thesis, the individuals discussed came from educated and considerably wealthy families, and I examine the differences between Christine de Pizan and her readers and Anne of France and her audience. While undoubtedly an elite, Pizan had the unique experience of increasing her influence and mobility through her authorship and connections to governing elites such as Isabeau of Bavaria and others who had gained their status through birth or marriage.[104] In contrast, Anne of France can be identified as part of the latter group, as she was born into her royal and landed elite status.[105] Both authors use their writing to increase their social influence but differ in their elite origins. Something similar can be said of Laura Cereta and Isabella d'Este in an Italian context. Like Pizan, Cereta could be classified as a part of Bove's "hommes nouveaux" and d'Este one of the governing elite.[106]

In addition, Carocci notes in his article that the conversation surrounding social mobility in the medieval period is also separated from other concepts of political and economic mobility, which he argues, in some ways, overlap during this period.[107] Apart from discussions of marriage, women also appear to be left out of discussions on social mobility. Possibly stemming from the idea that, as social dependents, women lacked the same agency and ability as their male counterparts to make pivotal changes to their circumstances and standard of living. When looking at women's social and political mobility, we should — as stated by Carocci — use a multifaceted approach.[108] One that extends not just from a purely class perspective but includes an analysis of how marriage, correspondence, and patronage can be included in the definition of patrician women's mobility or influence in creating and maintaining powerful social networks.

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[103] Bove, "Réflexions Sur Les Hommes Nouveaux et l'Ascension Sociale Au Moyen Âge,"; Bove cites Vilfredo Pareto, *Traite de Sociologie Generale*, ed. Raymoud Aron (1919; repr., Geneve 11 Rue Massot: Librairie Droz, 1968).
[104] Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, XXIV-XXV; Bove, "Réflexions Sur Les Hommes Nouveaux et l'Ascension Sociale Au Moyen Âge," 35-57.
[105] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 18.
[106] Bove, "Réflexions Sur Les Hommes Nouveaux et l'Ascension Sociale Au Moyen Âge," 35-57.
[107] Carocci, "Social Mobility and the Middle Ages," 380-385.
[108] Carocci, "Social Mobility and the Middle Ages," 380-385.

However, it is important to clarify that in this thesis, when analysing the role of beauty in social mobility, the term *social influence* is used because the women discussed were expanding their cultural and political capital from the vantage point of a privileged patrician position. Therefore, the term *social mobility* in this thesis will be constrained to women gaining political, social, and economic benefits for themselves and their families. Furthermore, these elements of mobility are restricted by the research subjects' constraints and are specific to Italy and France in the 15th and 16th centuries. Aristocratic women that fall into this category could gain mobility and influence by marrying well and utilising their limited agency by managing their husbands' households, maintaining social connections through correspondence, hosting social events, patronage, and exerting influence by advising their family members.

When assessing social mobility, or expressions of influence by elite women, scholars have looked at the social structure of families' lineage and female patronage.[109] Marriage between powerful and wealthy families was a critical part of this social mobility, especially when paired with the expectation of a woman's fertility and her advocacy and fealty for her blood relatives, even within the parameters of her marriage and husband's household.[110] These elite arranged marriages could lead not only to the family's benefit but to the bride's as well. Once married, young women could use their newfound positions to exert their agency and become political figures in their own right. The best examples of this come from the primary source authors Isabella d'Este and Anne of France, both of whom controlled not only their households but used their high position to become influential political and cultural figures in their region.[111] As Marchioness of Mantua, d'Este, in particular, was a renowned patron of art and music, as well as a shrewd politician and regent whose influence expanded over more than artistic and local politics.[112] While admittedly born into positions that facilitated privilege, these two women were able to use their agency as elite married women to cultivate a persona of respect and credibility by strengthening their social networks and working within the bounds of what roles were

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[109] Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin, *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67–86; Sally Anne Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua* (Routledge, 2016); Ciappelli and Rubin, *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence*, 1-4.
[110] Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G Cochrane, 17th ed. (1985; repr., Chicago Etc.: University Of Chicago Press, 1987), 2-4, 213-216.
[111] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter;* Isabella D'Este, *Selected Letters*, .
[112] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 1-10.

considered socially acceptable to women at that time. In the case of Anne of France, her work *Lessons for My Daughter* falls into the same category of conduct literature of Castiglione and even falls within discussions of political theory, placing her among authors like Machiavelli and Louis IX, who wrote two books of *enseignements* or lessons for his son and daughter.[113] Anne's book is written under the guise of motherly instruction while primarily performing the task of instructing elite women how to behave and advising princesses on becoming successful in the French court.

In addition to marriage, social influence through patronage could be a powerful way to engage within political, social, and artistic spheres. For their wider community, wealthy families and individuals could commission public works of art, religious architecture, charitable organisation, and infrastructure. However, seemingly more private commissions could also send important messages about a family or individual's status and ambitions. For example, in the illumination from *The Epithalamium de Nuptiis Petri Comitis et Helisabeth Vicomercatae* (*Figure 2*), we see not only important messages about the bride's beauty and fertility but also illustrations depicting the status and wealth of the Vimercante family, and their close connection to the Sforza family.

The Epithalamium is not unique as an object — and its messages of love, family wealth and honour fit within a long tradition of objects commissioned during the late medieval period to commemorate family events and promote idealised narratives within families. In his article, 'Family, Memory, and History', Nicolai Rubinstein discusses how objects with and without imagery in Renaissance Italy were used as memorials to family history. [114] He writes that gifts and specifically commissioned works of art or objects were used to record, shape and promote family memory. This included objects and portraits that marked specific occasions such as weddings and could effectively be used as a marriage record while also presenting an idealised version of certain individuals or a newly formed union for the benefit of extended and future family members. The wedding book in *Figure 2* and its illuminations are also a manifestation of the bride, Elizabeth's continued obligation to her blood relatives, as well as an overarching

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[113] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 113-135. Jansen's translation provides an interpretive essay comparing Anne's *Lessons* to Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

[114] Nicolai Rubinstein, "Family, Memory, and History," in *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence,* ed. Giovanni Ciappelli, and Patricia Lee Rubin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 39-47.

reminder of Milan's patron family, the Sforzas. Objects like the welding book and other commissioned works were important pieces intended to be displayed to the family's social network to influence and idealise perceptions of their honour, wealth, and social or cultural capital.

Personal and marriage portraiture can also be analysed through this lens of families' social influence, as marriage portraits were intended to formalise political alliances with families who had never seen the potential bride.[115] In addition, personal portraiture, as seen in d'Este's letters, could be a valuable tool in solidifying social networks with 'friends' or acquaintances that had never met in person.[116] In some cases, d'Este asked her correspondence to send her portraits of themselves or sent portraits of herself to others so that they may better visualise one another. Apart from the curiosity of seeing a pen pal's visage, we can presume that Isabella desired to share an idealised image of herself to enhance her reputation but also receive messages about her epistolary contacts style, appearance, taste, and wealth that she may not have been able to discern from reports or letters.

In her article 'Art and the Imagery of Memory', Patricia Lee Rubin further investigates how objects and art were used to shape family history, honour, and pride.[117] She argues that object imagery, commissioned works of art, and objects without imagery are vehicles for formalised memory. Focusing on imagery, Rubin articulates that these images aided in the creation of an ideal memory through their use of conventions in beauty, piety, and prosperity.[118] Rubin gives the example of wedding chests adorned with images of heraldry that accompanied brides to their new homes. She writes that the images on these chests served multiple purposes: the first, to remind brides to act appropriately and protect their family's honour, and the second, to remind her new family of their connection and obligation to the union. Looking at how women could achieve social mobility by expressing their agency within their social positions, we can also see

[115] Elisabetta Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture in the Fifteenth Century* (Visual and Material Culture, 2022), 18, 28-29, 69-75.
[116] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 54.
[117] Patricia Lee Rubin, "Art and the Imagery of Memory," in *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence,* ed. Giovanni Ciappelli, and Patricia Lee Rubin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67- 85.
[118] Rubin, "Art and the Imagery of Memory," 68- 69.

how beauty and self-representation could prove useful in gaining social influence and heightening cultural capital in and outside of their social networks.

Having explained how the concepts of beauty and social mobility are used in this thesis, the next section will discuss how these concepts can be applied to the life stages of elite women to investigate how beauty was used to facilitate social mobility. This portion of the chapter will contextualise the primary authors within a late medieval secular discussion on female beauty and the practicalities of beauty within the aristocratic social sphere. In addition, three life stages or social stages, of aristocratic women's lives are identified, along with the rationale for structuring this thesis' argumentation around them.

1.4 Applying Beauty and Social Mobility to the Life Stages of Elite Women

Baldassare Castiligone's work presents us with a good base for late medieval secular thought on the power of female beauty in the socialisation of noble women and its role in social mobility. *The Book of the Courtier* provides a basic framework for 15th-century views by male authors on women's appearance and behaviour within an aristocratic context.[119] While this thesis centres on opinions about beauty and its utilisation by female authors, the dialogue between Castiligone's characters falls within the accepted and widely held view in which our female writers lived and wrote.[120] *Book of the Courtier* is useful as it provides a reference for the commentary our primary authors either build from or reject through their work. While Castiglione wrote much later than Christine de Pizan, his work still references cultural ideas which Pizan refutes through her book.

Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529) was a member of the Italian aristocracy and spent his life moving between the courts of Mantua, Urbino, and Rome until he died in Spain.[121] *The Book of the Courtier* was published a year before his death and falls into historical fiction and conduct literature categories. The book utilises characters from Castiglione's time in the Palace of Urbino (1507) and spans the course of four evenings. The premise is a question game between

[119] Castiglione, *The Courtier*.
[120] Herman Roodenburg, *The Eloquence of the Body* (Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History, 2004), 10.
[121] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 10-13.

several aristocrats and their charming hostess Elisabetta Gonzago (1471–1526).[122] Elisabetta, her niece Margherita Gonzaga, and Constanza Fregoso are the only women present during these games and play the roles of organisers, patrons, and objects of adoration during the party.[123] Elisabetta Gonzago was married to Castiglione's employer and patron, the Duke of Urbino Guidobaldo da Monteltro, in 1488.[124] The duke is hardly mentioned in this book, if only in passing reference, perhaps because it was Elisabetta and not her husband, to whom the author attributes the court's success.[125] Elisabetta's role as a young married woman at age 36 in 1507 gives us an idea of the importance of beauty as a tool of social influence during this portion of a woman's life.

Having defined the terms and constraints used in this thesis, we will now focus on how French and Italian women may have utilised beauty and beauty practices during their lives to gain and maintain social influence within their social circles and aristocratic communities. Although the primary sources quoted in this paper are written from a stage of life where adherence to the beauty standard was no longer expected, Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta still recognised physical beauty as a critical part of a woman's value during the earlier stages of her life. The life stages in which beauty plays the most significant role in a woman's social influence and social mobility are dictated by youth, fertility, and marriageability.

For this thesis, three life stages are outlined: the maiden/potential bride, the young married woman, and the older married woman or widow. The maiden life stage generally refers to the equivalent of modern adolescence, a time when families would have been preparing their daughters for prospective marriages. The maidhood stage and that of becoming a bride can be somewhat conflated, as the maidenhood stage was influenced by the family's desire for a politically or economically advantageous match.[126] In the following section, when discussing the

[122] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 42-45.
[123] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 26. On a side note, Castiglione describes Elisabetta as a great beauty. However, the translator George Bull imposes his own opinion of female beauty upon her portrait, commenting that Castiglione's description is exaggerated.
[124] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 26.
[125] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 10,11.
[126] Ferraro, *A Cultural History of Marriage in the Renaissance*, 7; Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 213-221.

expectations and requirements of future brides, I also refer to the period of maidenhood when prospective unions are being considered.

The attention to female beauty was also rooted in concerns about the bride's health and reproductive capabilities. Compton cites an example from 1463 where the Sforza family not only asked for a description of Dorotea Gonzaga's body and face but even asked to examine her naked themselves in case she proved a hunchback or possessed any other hidden 'deformities.'[127] Fortunately, her family refused and thus ended any further negotiations of marriage between the families.[128] Such cases further illustrate that for elite families, choosing beautiful potential spouses was not only about the aesthetic representation of their families but about issues of health, fertility, and the genetic well-being of lineage.

Regarding representation, in *The Book of the Courtier,* the unmarried Magnifico Giuliano de' Medici (1479–1516), when speaking of his 'Lady,' asks the hostess Eliziabetta to instruct him on how to adorn her. After she asks Magnifico why the party has yet to see her, he replies:

> "'If I had thought her beautiful, I would show her unadorned … but if these ladies who well know [to adorn her] how, do not assist me to attire her, I fear that… all these other gentlemen will be fully entitled to speak ill of her. Therefore while she still has some reputation for beauty, perhaps it would be better to keep her hidden and see what more Frederico has to say about the courtier, who without doubt is far more attractive than my lady can be.'"[129]

It is after this comment that (like Pygmalion) Magnifico and his male companions continue to shape the image, dress, and behaviour of their ideal woman.[130] Notably, during these discussions of female beauty, the women of the party do not participate in the same way. Instead, the women present are acknowledged and praised in passing as the men describe ideal female behaviour. The women merely contribute small disclaimers to the discussion, proclaiming their male friends

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[127] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 59.; Compton cites Luca Beltrami, "L'annullamento del contratto di matrimonio fra Galeazzo M. Sforza e Dorotea Gonzaga (1463)," Archivio Storico Lombardo 6 (1889): 129–31.
[128] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 59.
[129] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 208.
[130] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 211.

as too harsh on women's preoccupation with beauty, which is ironic, considering the steep requirements the men are placing upon their fictional women. Similarly, this portion of the text is intriguing when paired with the opinions of our female authors, particularly that of the pragmatic Isabella d'Este, which will be explored in later chapters.

Perhaps most importantly, Castiglione's Elizabetta exemplifies how young married women could gain and assert social influence within their circles through the role of hostess, patron, and household manager. Here too, beauty could be used as a tool for social gain. While married women had already made their matches, they could now—hypothetically—gain agency within their roles as wealthy wives. In the case of Elizabetta Gonzaga, Castiglione leads us to believe that it was she, and not her husband, who guided the Urbino court.[131] Castiglione reveres Elizabetta, his former patroness, as the personification of grace and beauty, which is perhaps more reflective of the culture of flattery and courtly love than true fact. However, this, too, proves an important part of a noblewoman's influence.

As described briefly at the beginning of this chapter, courtly love had a connection to 'Venus worship' or an artistic and literary culture around idealising female beauty and unattainable romance. While Pizan pushes against this in her *City of the Ladies,* it is reasonable to believe that women could also utilise these courtly behaviours in their favour, as facilitators of strategic networking, on behalf of themselves, their families, and their husbands.[132] As hostesses, noble women were expected to provide their guests with entertainment, which included shrewd displays of wit, charm, and piety.[133] These women would have also been expected to maintain their appearance by following and influencing the latest fashions and continuing to cultivate themselves as representatives of their families. From secondary and primary source literature, it is clear that beauty was not the only tool women could use to facilitate social influence. Utilising beauty, in addition to their dowry and the qualities of charm, virtue, and education, was incredibly helpful in ensuring an advantageous marriage and developing a social network.

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[131] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 42-43.
[132] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 188, 190.
[133] D'Elia, "Marriage, Sexual Pleasure, and Learned Brides in the Wedding Orations of Fifteenth-Century Italy," 418-421.

Finally, the stage of life in which beauty was no longer expected or as crucial for a woman was when she reached the status of an older married woman or widow. It is important to note that the primary source authors in this thesis were all writing from the privileged position of wealthy widowhood. We can use them as examples of women who, with their age, success, and luck, could look at the previous life stages with a full understanding of beauty's role but also freedom from the necessity to adhere to its standards as it was no longer necessary for their continued success as authors or women of influence.

Even so, beauty still plays a role in Pizan, d'Este, Cereta, and Anne of France's writing and gives us an insight into how women, even at an older stage of life, could benefit from the networks of influence they had built as young women. Isabella d'Este is a prime example of this as she continued to play the role of advisor to her husband, a regent of Mantua, a patron, and a matchmaker to her children and various wards.[134] Indicating that while elite women like d'Este would lose their youth, they retained and even gained agency within their social position by utilising the influence of their wider network, and shifting their influence to that of a respected mother and political player, in charge of making political decisions and matches for her children. In addition, patronage was yet another symbol of a family or individual's wealth and power. Certainly, beauty and beauty practices were not the 'end all be all' of a woman's influence. However, its presence helped create a foothold on which women could build up their reputations and power within their social circles and wider communities through the patronage of the arts and ecclesiastical institutions.

1.5 Conclusion

Venus, an emblem of ideal beauty, ruled over the early life stages of women in the 15th century. The stages of maidenhood, becoming a bride, and eventually, a wife were periods in which beauty was a facilitator for women's social mobility and a powerful tool of social influence. During elite women's youth, beauty was seen as one of the most important qualities for success. As women aged, they were able to maintain respect and influence by increasing their roles as

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[134] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 141, 419; Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing*, 87-111.

patrons and advisors. However, the role of beauty was still present in this later stage of life as the social networks women had built in their youth were critical to their continued political and social influence.

Chapters two through four will use the theoretical approach of self-fashioning to expand on how beauty could aid in women's social mobility throughout different stages of life. The arguments in each chapter are based on the writings of primary source authors: Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta. Chapter Two will focus on the early life stage of maidenhood and marriageability, Chapter Three will centre on young married women from their wedding to their thirties, and Chapter Four will explore older women who are either married or widowed.

CHAPTER TWO: Maidens and Brides

"…the most noble and pleasing treasure in this world is a woman of noble rank who is beautiful, young, chaste, and well-mannered."[135]

Marriage in 15th-century France and Italy was rife with potential hangups. As powerful Italian families waged war both with and against the French, building relationships between relatively small city-states and creating social bonds between the ruling classes became essential for building alliances. In this period, a wealthy and well-connected merchant class also arose, further fueling competition for those coveted social connections.[136] As a result, it is no surprise that a competitive marriage market emerged, with families offering larger dowries for their daughters.[137] During this time, we also see a rise in the interest and production of conduct literature, advising men on how to get ahead and women on how to behave and look.[138] As seen in the previous chapter, male authors like Baldassare Castiglione detailed how the ideal noblewoman should appear and conduct herself.[139] Potential brides of this period were expected to be not only virtuous and wealthy but also beautiful, educated, and socially competent.[140] Through and within marriage, women were expected to create and maintain social networks that could benefit their new husbands and both their families. In addition to providing a bride with opportunities for social mobility, marriages facilitated powerful alliances between wealthy families, solidified relationships with neighbouring states, and even formed connections with the most powerful kingdoms in Europe.[141]

This chapter will identify primary factors in determining a young aristocratic woman's marriageability and investigate how beauty standards were applied to women in this stage of life. The three main requirements for making a successful marriage match in 15th-century France and

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[135] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter*, 61.
[136] Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 1-4, 68-69.
[137] Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 220.
[138] Sanson and Lucioli, *Conduct Literature for and about Women in Italy,* 10-11, 14-16.
[139] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 86-87, 215.
[140] D'Elia, "Marriage, Sexual Pleasure, and Learned Brides in the Wedding Orations of Fifteenth-Century Italy," 379–433.
[141] Ferraro, *A Cultural History of Marriage in the Renaissance and Early Modern Age*, 72; Tracy Adams, "Anne de France and Gift-Giving: The Exercise of Female Power," in *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563*, ed. Susan Broomhall (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 74.

Italy were generally based on an elite family's lineage and wealth, the bride's physical appearance, and the bride's reputation for virtue and chastity. In addition to these factors, we will examine how beauty in this life stage was critical in advancing the families' political and economic influence. Section 2.1 will outline the essential qualities of a potential bride as described by Isabella d'Este, and use her and the other primary authors' work to determine the importance of beauty in marriageability. Also examined are how behaviour and beauty practices could be utilised in this life stage. Lastly, Section 2.2 will analyse how the examples of self-fashioning and beauty discussed in Chapter One are displayed in artistic representations of marriage and brides.

2.1 Primary Source Authors

This section examines what primary source authors Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta have written about young unmarried women and brides to outline the essential qualities of a potential bride and establish how the authors viewed the importance of beauty in marriageability. In addition, their opinions on applying beauty practices and their social implications are examined to understand how those practices were utilised during this stage of a young woman's life.

Isabella d'Este

A prolific letter writer and portrait commissioner, Isabella d'Este expressed in-depth opinions on the marriageability of the young women in her court. As Marchioness, she arranged marriages for her children as well as the girls in her service. Elite married women often took young women into their service, adopting a guardianship-like role over the patrician girls and serving as a matchmaker, advocating for marriages while simultaneously working on expanding personal social networks through their involvement.[142] Through her letters, we can see that Isabella d'Este was highly influential in the marital lives of the people in the Mantuan court, not only arranging marriages but voicing her opinions on matrimonial disputes. For example, on June 8th, 1529,

[142] Adams, "Anne de France and Gift-Giving: The Exercise of Female Power," 73-74.

Isabella wrote to Matteo Casella. In this letter, she states that Messer Francesco Saraceno's sister Diana, who came to live with her at court in 1517, has proven difficult to find a match for. Concerning her charge's lack of marriage options, d'Este writes:

> "Diana is not the prettiest girl in the world, and is not likely to find a suitable match. As virtuous and well-mannered as the girl is, you know that in these times, of the three great qualities one seeks in marrying a woman, virtue is valued the least; so if she is not better supported by Messer Francesco and his brothers, we very much fear that the sweet young lady may grow old in our house."[143]

In this passage, d'Este lists a potential bride's three essential qualities: beauty, money, and virtue. She expressed concern that without money and beauty, the unfortunate Diana will be unable to compete with girls who have larger dowries and adhere more closely to the beauty standard of the day. This passage not only gives us a context for the competitive marriage market of the time but also shows that d'Este was a pragmatist.[144] This portion of the letter displays her wit around the difficult reality that beauty was an important part of women marrying well, particularly if they lacked the funds to entice suitors with a substantial dowry. Isabella's focus on beauty and money over virtue also stands out in comparison to Christine de Pizan's work which instructs women to utilise virtue in a society that constantly criticises and devalues women for their lack of it.[145] This is perhaps due to the different nature of the texts. Where Pizan envisions an ideal society of women, d'Este remains firmly grounded in the realities of how women gain agency and social influence within the roles deemed acceptable for them as daughters, wives, and mothers. Beauty, virtue, and money, the values d'Este attributes to a potential bride's marriageability, were often depicted in marriage portraits—an expression of self-fashioning covered in Section 2.2. Importantly, d'Este's focus on these three qualities is consistent, even when considering her sons' future brides.

As the primary political player in the Gonzaga court, Isabella used her children's marriages to create valuable social and political connections between her and other elite Italian families. In

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143 D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 524 (AG 3000 libro 49 cc.27v29r).
144 Isabella d'Este's personal motto *Nec spe, nec metu* [with neither hope nor fear] is a prime example of this; D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 267.
145 Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 237-239.

1527, d'Este wrote to her son, Ferdinando Gonzaga (1507–1557), proposing a marriage option. She gives him the potential union's pros and cons, describing the bride, her family, and their political relevance. In the end, Isabella advises against the match and recommends that her son reach higher. She writes:

> "A new marriage proposal has appeared, offering you as wife a young Pallavicino heiress who has an estate in the territories of Parma with a revenue of five thousand ducats…According to the information we have, the girl is about thirteen years old, more pleasant than she is beautiful. We have been given to understand that the mother will not hesitate to pledge her assets to her, though she will maintain privileges of use. For this reason, we did not want to delay in writing our own opinion to Your Lordship, which is that you ought to consider a higher match. Given who you are, and the fact that the Pallavicino house, while noble, has also. seen its reputation decline in recent years for lack of men, we think you are more apt, with the help of the emperor, to find a more honourable match of higher rank in the Kingdom of Naples or in another of His Majesty's lands. Having said this, however, we would not deny you the liberty to consider what you would like, and we will carry it out ever willingly, as one who delights in satisfying all your wishes."[146]

In this passage, d'Este discusses the bride's family and the assets she will inherit. However, it seems the bride's mother will not relinquish rights to the property until after her death. The most striking thing in this letter is the lack of description regarding the girl herself. Instead, discussion of the bride's political connections takes precedence. The potential bride is merely classified as "more pleasant than beautiful," showcasing once again that beauty could be a deciding factor, even in marriages contrived primarily for political and economic influence. This recurring theme in d'Este's letters—valuing a potential spouse for her beauty--indicates a culture in which a young woman's appearance could sway matrimonial decisions, even in cases where political relevance was valued higher than that of attraction in a potential match.

In 1532 d'Este wrote a letter to the Marchesa of Monferrato praising her daughter Guilia d'Aragona, who was betrothed to Isabella's son Frederico Gonzaga (1500-1540). While the

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[146] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 517 (AG 2999 libro 47 cc. 48v-49r).

betrothal would eventually be broken, this letter once again gives insight into the qualities valued in a potential bride:

> "On the first day after the arrival here in Mantua of the most illustrious Madama lady duchess our shared daughter, I did not feel I could write to Your Ladyship of my pleasure and happiness, because I wanted at first to take constant pleasure in her company. Now that the first, second, and third days have passed, I do not want to delay any longer in letting you know that I find I have acquired a daughter who, for beauty, virtue, and manners, is exactly what I wanted and wished for. And since I recognize that this precious gift comes from Our Lord God and from Your Most Illustrious Ladyship, I consider myself most obliged to praise His Divine Majesty and to thank Your Ladyship for her. You may be most certain that the lady our daughter will be loved no less and with no less tenderness than she would by you yourself. And if in the past, between you and me there was the love befitting two good sisters, it seems to me now that this new knot binds us in such a way that our love could not be strengthened more. I offer myself to you always, from the heart."[147]

This passage exhibits the importance of marriage in not just the social influence of the family but the critical role a bride might play in creating and upholding social connections through networks between elite families. As part of a shared familial connection, Guilia acts as a type of ambassador, and her presence in the Gonzaga court strengthens the emotional bonds between the families. In addition to the bride's value in securing a political ally, d'Este's praise of Guilia d'Aragona also highlights the essential qualities of a potential spouse. Isabella writes that the potential bride meets all her hopes and expectations for a daughter-in-law's behaviour, virtue, and beauty. If the betrothal had been maintained by the Gonzagas, this bond would have been further strengthened. However, the fulfilment of d'Este's requirements was not enough for her son Frederico, who decided to marry Margaret Paleologa instead.[148] The insecurity of the betrothed's position, in this case, Guilia d'Aragona, is perhaps another example of how personal preference and beauty could still play a critical role in securing a marriage and the subsequent social

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[147] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 553 (AG 3000 libro 50 c. 152v).
[148] Sally Anne Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua* (Routledge, 2016), 104-105.

benefits for both the bride and her family. Perhaps it was because the stakes were so high that Anne of France wrote a conduct guide for her daughter Suzanne. In *Lessons for My Daughter,* she advises Suzanne on how to succeed in court. She pays particular attention to how her daughter should use beauty practices to craft her public image before and during her marriage and even in her old age.

Anne of France

In addition to d'Este's letters, Anne of France's *Lessons for My Daughter* provides a wealth of information on how young unmarried women were expected to look, behave and dress. Her book is dedicated to her daughter Suzanne Duchess of Bourbon (1491–1521), who was unmarried at the time of her mother's writing. While Anne's lessons are intended to apply to all of her daughter's life stages, the majority of her advice focuses on how her daughter should conduct herself as a young unmarried woman and bride. From her lessons, we can see that beauty is once again a strong theme in the marriageability of young women. Unlike d'Este, Anne is careful to instruct her daughter on her appearance and cautions against valuing beauty over virtue. In addition, she presents Suzanne with strict guidelines regarding the beauty practices of dress, as well as its relationship to social class and the need to respect the conventions of appropriate dress for the region and life stage a woman may find herself in.

The following passage is a striking example of how, through storytelling, Anne conveys the importance of physical beauty in attracting elite suitors. However, she cautions that this is only sustainable if an individual combines the attractive qualities of their physical appearance with good behaviour. In this cautionary tale, Anne writes that there were once three princes who heard rumours of three beautiful daughters from a noble family:

> "These young women were so exceptionally beautiful that they were renowned throughout the world, and they were, therefore, sought by many in marriage, in particular by three noble and powerful princes from the region of Germany who, because of the reputation and fame of the three young ladies, were very much in love with them….It so happened that the oldest was very tightly laced and so constrained by her clothing that

> her heart had been weakened, as she revealed to the first prince when he questioned her. He was very unhappy at the sight of her in such danger and wanted to know the reason; after he was told why, he knew that this had happened because of her arrogance and foolishness."[149]

Anne goes on to relay that each of the daughters, while beautiful, possessed a grievous flaw. The oldest harms her health for vanity, and the other two speak lewdly and lack intelligence. She argues that while the women's beauty initially drew these valuable suitors to them, beauty alone was not enough to hold their admiration or attention. Like d'Este, Anne approaches the topic of marriageability and the cultivation of reputation with a level of practicality that Pizan and Cereta lack. Both d'Este and Anne were members of the political elite, even acting as regents during their lifetime. The passage above reflects not only Anne of France's guidance to her daughter to achieve a good reputation and exert influence through her public image but also takes part in the general hypocrisy of the period. A hypocrisy that expected women to uphold and adhere to the beauty standard while criticising those women who visibly attempted to emulate a standard that based itself on 'naturalness'. This passage also reveals the lengths some women might go to to look beautiful (possibly even risking their health) because of their awareness of the social benefits. Anne's story can be interpreted as acknowledging those benefits while also keeping in mind that her criticism of vanity was contextualised in a period that instructed women to aspire to natural beauty.

Anne reiterates this point in multiple passages throughout her book, warning her daughter against being 'one of those girls' who risk their health in order to appear fashionable or beautiful. In a more explicit passage, she outlines the health risks of falling into this category and the damage

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[149] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 64-65; "Et ne resemblez pas à trois demoiselles, jadis filles au seigneur de Poitiers, qui lors estoit très noble et très puissant, lesquelles demoiselles estoient de si excellente beaulté, que par tout le monde estoit renommée d'elles, et, à ceste cause, furent demandées de plusieurs en mariage, par espécial de trois nobles et puissans princes du pais d'Alemaigne et mar- ches d'environ qui pour le bruit et renommée d'elles, en estoient fort amoureux.…Advint que l'aisnée s'estoit tant serrée et estrainte de ses habitz que le cueur luy faillit, ainsi qu'elle devisoit à celuy mesme qui la demandoit, dont il fut moult desplaisant de la veoir en ce danger, et voulut sçavoir la cause ; de quoy, depuis, il fut adverty, et sceut que, par l'oultrecuidance et folie d'elle, ce luy estoit advenu. Si pensea qu'elle estoit en advanture de non jamais porter enfant, et conclud en son couraige de ne la point espouser." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XIII, 39-41.

that could occur to a young woman's reputation lest she is perceived as trying too hard. Anne states:

> "I counsel you not to wear anything outrageous, either too tight or too trailing, nor should you resemble those women who think they are very fashionable when their clothing is low-cut and very tight and they attract attention; they think their dress is admired, for which they are mocked and rightly reproved by those who hear the talk. Nor, my daughter, should you be like those who, to seem more fashionable, dress themselves so scantily in winter that they are freezing with cold, their complexions often sallow and without colour, until, either because of the cold they suffer in private or from being too tightly laced, they endure many grievous illnesses, and many even die—never doubt that this is a great sin because they have killed themselves."[150]

In this warning, Anne stresses that the use of beauty practices in excess, or their application being too obvious, is not only bad for a woman's public image but also for her physical well-being. Again we can infer that her mention of these follies was based on a reality she might have witnessed. The consequences of affectation, as stated by Anne, are ridicule, illness, and death. This may seem exaggerated, but if we look at Castiglione's writings, we can see that ridicule of women who displayed affectation over their appearance was real. They were devalued and considered vain and unvirtuous, while women who appeared naturally beautiful were praised for their appearance and their virtuous behaviour. Lastly, while Anne's warnings of illness and death relate more to fashion choices than cosmetics, this worry was also rooted in reality, as ingredients like white lead in make-up could lead to illness.

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[150] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 60-61; "Mais, pour abréger, et revenir à nostre propoz, touchant habillemens je vous conseille que ne les, portez pas les plus oultrageux , trop estroitz, ne fort chéans, et ne ressemblez pas aucunes , à qui il semble qu'elles sont fort gentes, quant elles sont fort ouvertes , et just chaucées et vestues tant que, par force de tirer, sont souvent leurs vestemens désirez, sont elles sont mocquées , et au doy monstrées de ceulx qui le sçavent, et en oyent parler. Ma fille, ne soiez pas aussi de celles qui, pour sembler plus gentes et menues, se vestent en yver si ligèrement qu'elles en gellent de froit , et en sont souvent jaulnes et descoulorées, et tant que, par les secrètes froidures qu'elles y prennent, ou pour estre trop serrées, en engendrent plusieurs griefves maladies, et plusieurs sont qui en ont encouru la mort ; et ne fault point doubter que ce ne soit ung merveilleux péché, car on est homicide de soy mesmes." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XI, 27.

However, despite her harsh criticism of these women, Anne still recognizes the value of using beauty practices to enhance one's appearance. She instructs her daughter and other young unmarried women to take a more moderate approach, incorporating beauty practices and fashion while keeping in mind her previous criticisms and the dangers of placing all social success on beauty alone. Anne writes:

> "The nature of noblewomen must be to increase their reputation for good, the better to make known their virtue, so they will be remembered for it. For this reason, my daughter, be careful and, as I have said, take the middle way and recommend it to your young women, making sure they are appropriately clothed because it is unbecoming to see young, unmarried women foolishly dressed."[151]

In this passage, Anne stresses that as an unmarried woman, it is Suzanne's responsibility to cultivate a reputation for herself as a valuable potential partner. She notes that virtue is the most important quality but that the appropriate enhancement of one's appearance and dressing well are connected to reputation. Despite her warnings, it is clear that Anne sees beauty as an essential part of a young woman's value in marriageability. However, she also understands and attempts to define the lines between what is viewed as acceptable and what beauty practices stray into vanity and result in negative consequences.

Christine de Pizan

If authors Anne of France and Isabella d'Este can be considered pragmatic in their approach to women's beauty and beauty practices, Christine de Pizan's work should be viewed as a more philosophical and idealised approach. Pizan's book *The City of the Ladies* was, in part, a rebuttal to misogynist works by male scholars. In it, she uses examples of famous women and mythological characters as case studies of women's worth. Pizan's work references

[151] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 88; "Car la nature des nobles doit estre d'acroistre leur renomméede bien en mieulx tant en vertus que en sçavoir, affin qu'il en soit mémoire. Pour ce, ma fille, prenez y garde, et comme j'ai dit, prenez le moien estât, et le baillez à voz filles, en les tenant honnestement de leurs habitz, car il siet mal veoir filles à marier nicement habillées, et doit avoir diférence des habitz de voz filles à ceulx des parentes de vostre mary, et, selon leur degré, et qu'elles sont de bon gouvernement, autrement non." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XVI, 112-113.

contemporary ideas of women, which proclaimed that women were essentially immoral and inferior to men while portraying men as virtuous unless otherwise tempted (usually by women). She argues against these ideas by flipping the narrative and presenting women as virtuous and essentially good while showcasing the many immoral actions of men.[152] *The City of the Ladies* case studies are voiced by the three virtues, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, who address each of Pizan's questions by telling stories about famous women. The women in these stories display exceptional virtue, exert influence and govern through their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. In some cases, the stories are familiar tales told from a different perspective—one that turns male criticism on its head in a way that benefits women. In the following passage, she refutes claims that all women are vain and use beauty practices to entice male suitors, married or not. In a conversation with the virtue Reason, Pizan states:

> "I said, 'but some writers make out that, in fact, women go to church all dressed and made up in order to show themselves off to men and find themselves lovers.'
> Her reply was: 'That might be true, my dear friend, if it was only pretty young girls who went to church. But, if you notice, for every young woman that you see, there are twenty or thirty old women attending services and dressed in plain, modest clothes.'"[153]

In this passage, Pizan questions contemporary male authors' teachings by presenting their arguments and following up with a rebuttal from the Virtues, who explain why the initial arguments are false and unfair. In this example, Reason's reply gives the audience some perspective on Pizan's opinion of women using beauty practices to attract male suitors. This excerpt illustrates the author's view that young girls are expected to enhance their appearance in an attempt to find a husband. Although not explicitly stated, perhaps because it was common knowledge among her contemporaries, Pizan understood that marriage was a critical part of both the bride and her family's political, economic, and social success. However, the distinction made

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[152] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*,18.
[153] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 25; "…dis je, "mais ces hommes dient qu'elles y vont cointes et jolyes pour monstrer leur biauté et attraire les homes a leur amour. Responce: "Ce seroit chose a croire, amie chiere, se on n'y veoit ne mes les jeunes et jolies. Mais se tu y prens garde, pour une jeune que tu y verras, vint ou trente vielles de simple habit et honneste en y voit on converser es lieux de devocion." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 655-656.

by Pizan between young girls and older women indicates that it was no longer viewed as acceptable by the author for older or married women to participate in these practices.

While Pizan does not write specifically about young unmarried women in *The City of the Ladies*, she does discuss beauty as it pertains to her characters' virtue. In her writing, beauty is often noted as a representation of the character's virtue and serves as a catalyst for the actions of male characters. The protagonist's beauty inspires men to act upon their emotions of desire, admiration, or jealousy. In several stories, a woman's attractiveness is the reason a male character wishes to marry her. In the following passage, we see an example of this.

In the story of Grisel, the Marquis Suzollo seeks a wife. During one of his hunting trips, he comes upon the house of Giannucolo, whose illness means he must be taken care of by his daughter Grisel. Pizan writes:

> "This fine man, who had been a good and honest person all his life, had a daughter by the name of Grisel, who was eighteen years of age. She served her father with great dignity and earned a living for the two of them by spinning wool. The marquis who usually passed by their house, had often noticed the girl's so behaviour and virtuous habits. Moreover, she was very lovely in appearance, all of which disposed him well towards her."[154]

After Suzollo sees Grisel, he decides that her qualities of virtue and beauty are enough to convince him to marry her, despite her low station. Pizan suggests he marries her because he admires how she takes care of her father. However, by including his acknowledgement of her beauty, Pizan also implies that Grisel's beauty ultimately convinces the Marquis to marry her. Grisel's marriage to Suzollo raises her status from a peasant to one of elite standing, a feat of social mobility which would not have been possible without the Marquis's desire for her

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[154] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*,156; "...et viel qui avoit nom Janicola: bon homme et preudons avoit est tout sa vie. Celluy preudons avoit une sienne fille de l'aage de dix huit ans, nomme Griselidis, qui le servoit par grant dilligence et le gouvernoit du labour de sa fillace. Le dit marquis qui souvent par la passoit, avoit bien avisé les bonnes meurs et l'onnesteté d'icelle pucelle, qui assez belle de corps et de viaire estoit, dont l'avoit moult [en grace]." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 901.

beautiful appearance. Unfortunately, after their marriage, the Marquis puts his wife through a series of cruel tests to determine her loyalty. While she passes them all, it seems her initial lack of status and wealth contributed to his suspicions of her. This story, amongst others in Pizan's text, suggests that female beauty is often the motivation for male characters to desire either marriage or some illicit involvement with the protagonist.

Pizan's version of the story of the Sabine women is also an example of men desiring to marry or take ownership of women. This story, taken from Roman mythology, tells about Romulus and his Romans abducting the Sabine women. Pizan uses this story to highlight the tragedy of men's actions against women. While this is ultimately a story depicting forced marriage and abduction, the passage also serves as another example of a man desiring to marry a woman because of her beauty. Pizan writes:

> "the daughter of the Sabine king, a charming and beautiful girl…[and during the games] Romulus snatched the king's daughter, with whom he was already smitten…Romulus married his lady with great ceremony, and all the other knights did likewise."[155]

The story of the Sabine women could be a whole investigation into itself. However, this thesis will focus on the role of beauty in Pizan's retelling of the story, specifically, Romulus's incentive to force the young woman into marriage. Romulus sees the King's daughter and desires to marry her because of her beauty. While he would have carried out his plan with or without desiring the princess, her beauty is described as the reason he chose her. We can also theorise that her elite social status, in addition to her appearance, is what made her so attractive to Romulus. Pizan uses the story to present the perspectives of the female protagonists. It was written as an ode to the Sabine women who survived and overcame a tragedy in which they were ultimately married to their captors for Romulus's political gain. Being married to the princess aids Romulus's social mobility and increases his political power by uniting himself in marriage to the Sabines and

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[155] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 135; "Entre les autres y ot admené le roy de Sabine une moult belle et gente fille que il avoit, et avec elle toutes les dames et pucelles de la contree qui suivie l'avoyent… Romulus prist la fille du roy, dont ja moult estoit ferus; et tous les autres semblablement prisdrent chascun la sienne…. Romulus a grant feste espousa la sienne; et pareillement le firent les autres." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 864- 865.

claiming leadership over the Roman and the Sabine people.

The previous passage describes the importance female beauty played in initiating a marital union—albeit a forced marriage that benefited the groom's political career and was tragic for the bride. This next story in Pizan's book illustrates how a lack of beauty could impede a woman's marriageability. Many of the examples given in *The City of the Ladies* illustrate the power and influence women gain by becoming queens. These women are often categorised as wives, widows, mothers, or Amazonians. In the story of Drypetina, Pizan intends to give an example of a dutiful daughter. However, in her description of Drypetina, it is clear that the character lacks the power and influence many of Pizan's other protagonists are able to gain through their heightened positions—often connected to their martial state. These powerful women are also often described as beautiful. In the Drypetina story, Pizan gives an example of a woman who does not fit the beauty standard:

> "Drypetina, Queen of Laodicea, was very loving towards her father. She was the daughter of the great King Mithradates and was so devoted to him that she followed him into all his battles. This girl was extremely ugly, for she had two sets of teeth, a very severe deformity. However, she loved her father so much that she never left his side, in good times or in bad."[156]

Drypetina is described as being a dutiful and ideal daughter, even following her father into battle. Pizan highlights Drypetina's lack of beauty and her devotion to her father, implying that her virtue is not affected by her appearance, an idea echoed in the writings of Laura Cereta. Drypetina, however, is unmarried, and her description does not hold the same agency and autonomy that other protagonists have been granted. While Pizan praises Drypetina's role as a dutiful daughter, the character's ugliness inevitably holds her back from attracting a politically advantageous match, suggesting that there were very real consequences for women who did not

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[156] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 103; "De grant amour a son pere fu Dripetrue, roine de Leodocie. Celle fu fille du grant roy Mitridates, et tant l'ama qu'en toutes ses batailles les suivoit. Elle estoit moult laide, car elle avoit double renc de dens, qui estoit chose moult diffourme; mais de tant grant amour estoit a son pere que oncques ne le laissa en prosperite ne en malle fortune." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 808-809.

adhere in some way to the beauty standard.

Laura Cereta

Like Christine de Pizan, the female scholar Laura Cereta often took an idealised view of beauty that focused on women's virtue. Cereta writes very little about women who are unmarried, often centring her criticism of female culture on women in general. While this would include women in the life stages of maidenhood, her criticism often references older women, whom she categorises as vain for attempting to retain their youth and beauty. Cereta argues that virtue and learning should be the qualities by which women are judged.[157] In her writing, she often ignores the social benefits of beauty and the exceptional privilege of her position as a wealthy widow whose interests and education were encouraged and valued by her family. It is also relevant to note that Cereta's letters and essays are usually written for potential male patrons, and her correspondence was intended to be made public. As such, we should consider that her attempts to distance herself from the traditionally feminine and highlight her virtue and intelligence might be part of her own self-fashioning. In her writing, she fashions a reputation that a male audience will respect, possibly to gain entry into contemporary humanist discourse. That said, Cereta also takes the opportunity to speak in favour of women's education and advocates for women's values to be determined outside cultural perceptions of beauty and appearance. In the next passage, Cereta writes to her cousin Barbara Allerti on the occasion of Barbara's marriage:

> "But you, who are adorned with the purest flowers of youth and whom a modest face and manners gently and innocently embellish, how greatly are you to be preferred to all other women and how much honour would the sure and stable tranquillity of a more ample mind lend to you, if only that which fortune has granted would always be ours. But there is no condition of men that is so firm and stable that it cannot be hard pressed and overturned by fate."[158]

[157] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 75.
[158] Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters*,134; "Tu, cestissimis juventae floribus ornata, qua verecundior ille vultus mores'q; sanctiffimi tamansuete innocenter'q; perpoliunt, quam nimium esses sola caeteris praeferenda, quam stabilis et certa plenioris animi te honestaret vna tranquillitas, si nostrum esset, quod Fortuna concessit; Sed nullus hominū status est, itam stabiliter omnio sirmatus, quem non Occurrunt oculis lactyine, et inquetani me habet dolor insignis, qoetiens prae me fero memoriam Viri desuneti:..." Laura Cereta and Giacomo Filippo aut Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae Brixiensis Feminae Clarissimae*

This letter is one of the rare occurrences in which Cerata writes to another woman. In her letter to the bride, she appears to conform to the values she criticises by complimenting her cousin on her youth and being chosen over other women by her husband. However, she also uses this opportunity to describe the bride as having a "modest face" and good manners, which supports the majority of her arguments about valuing women for virtue over appearance. It is not clear how or if Barbara Allerti responded to this letter or if she held the same view as her cousin. Cereta also highlights the virtues of marriage in her letter, a subject on which she refrains from expressing negative opinions, despite evidence that her own married life was anything but calm. She also presents marriage as a positive achievement of the bride, writing about how Barbara will benefit intellectually from her entrance into the matrimonial union— indicating that Cereta viewed marriage as an important factor in the 'intellectual mobility' of the bride, who would now benefit from her husband's education. In the last line, Cereta warms her cousin about the impermanence of marriage, which is perhaps a reference to her own situation and short married life.

<u>Perspectives</u>

The passages taken from the works of Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta cited in this chapter reflect contemporary attitudes toward beauty in the life stage of maidenhood. Because this stage of a young woman's life was characterised by her marriageability, the authors' descriptions of ideal potential brides and instructions on unmarried women's behaviour illustrate that beauty was a critical part of arranging potential matches. Section 2.2 of this chapter will analyse how these themes, present in the literary and epistolary culture of the time, were also present in marriage portraits. The following section will also address how the qualities of beauty, money and virtue were exhibited through the self-fashioning in these portraits and explain how these portraits could be influential in gaining and maintaining social connections through marriage and cultivating the reputations of elite families outside their local communities.

Epistolae Jam Primum È M S in Lucem Productae À Iacobo Philippo Tomasino, Qui Eius Vitam, & Notas Addidit .., *Internet Archive* (Patavij : typis Sebastiani Sardi (National Library of Naples), 1640), EpiftLX. pg 155.

2.2 Marriage Portraiture

Factors such as competitive dowries, abundant conduct literature, and the emergence of humanist ideas and classical education all shaped the Italian 15th-century marriage market. With so many wealthy families, increased competition and heightened standards further emphasised young women's personal attributes—focusing on their behaviour, appearance, adherence to beauty standards, and the desirability of a relationship with their families.[159] In cases where men could not meet their potential spouse, marriage portraits were often sent as a likeness of the bride. It is important to state that while these portraits highlighted the glory of the sitter's family, just as critically, they emphasised and idealised the subject's beauty and virtuous personal characteristics.[160]

In line with the social changes of the time, wedding portraits of female subjects in 15th-century Italy were often commissioned and sent abroad to create and solidify social networks between aristocratic families. The portraits provided a visual shorthand introducing the subject to potential husbands and cultivating political alliances between families. This section will investigate how Italian marriage portraiture during the 15th and early 16th centuries could be used as a tool of self-fashioning for social influence.

The following section briefly introduces Bianca Maria Sforza and Isabella of Aragon and how their marriage portraits illustrate the importance of beauty in a bride's ability to contribute to her family's social mobility and influence. Their portraits were chosen for this thesis's visual analysis because of the subject's familial and epistolary connections to Isabella d'Este.[161] Both women are featured as part of her social network through her letters and share a familial connection to d'Este through Ludivco Sfroza, the husband and widower of Beatrice d'Este, sister of Isabella.[162] Following an analysis of the two marriage portraits, this section will identify and discuss the

[159] Rubinstein, “Family, Memory, and History,” 91-94.
[160] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture*, 82-84.
[161] D’Este, *Selected Letters*,129, 161.
[162] Campbell, "Sforza, Ludovico, Il Moro," In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

intended messages of the commissioners and investigate how these fit within late mediaeval ideals of womanhood and femininity.

Both of the portraits analysed in this paper contain aspects of each of d'Este's qualifications for an ideal bride, as both women are illustrated to display their families' wealth, and each portrait contains symbolism of the brides' virtue. Most significant to the argumentation of this thesis, the young women depicted are idealised to fit the beauty standard of the day.

Analysing power through the lens of female portraiture is neither a new concept nor an understudied one.[163] However, this section will explore how marriage portraits could be used to solidify women's social networks and increase their (and their families) social influence. As stated in the existing scholarship, marriage portraits of a potential bride were often commissioned by the subject's family rather than the woman herself.[164] These portraits and written descriptions of the woman's appearance would have been sent to potential matches who likely had never seen the bride in person. Furthermore, the portraits were often more about displaying the subject through the lens of her family's wealth and power, essentially presenting the young woman from the perspective of the commissioner's self-fashioning.

Figure 1: Portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza (1476–1510)

Bianca Maria Sforza

The portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza in *Figure 1* was painted by the artist Ambrogio de Predis in 1493 and commissioned at the time of her marriage to Maximilian I (1459–1519).[165] Bianca Maria Sforza was the daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the Duke of Milan (1444–1476), whose life was ended unexpectedly

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[163] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture*; Ciappelli and Rubin, *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence*.
[164] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture*, 2-3.
[165] Ambrogio de Predis, *Bianca Maria Sforza*, Oil on poplar panel, *www.nga.gov* (National Gallery of Art, 1493), National Gallery of Art, https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1192.html.

by assassination, leaving behind both his young daughter Bianca Maria Sforza (1476–1510) and his son Gian Galeazzo (1469–1494) both of whom grew up under unfortunate circumstances.[166] After their father's death, the siblings became the wards of their uncle Ludovico Sforza (1452–1508). Ludovico became regent after his brother's death, and under his authority, Bianca would eventually be married to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519).[167] Unfortunately, her married life was not reported to have been a happy one.[168] The portrait of Bianca was commissioned by her uncle around the time of her marriage and gives insight into Ludovico's ambitions to ally himself with the Holy Roman Emperor and the messages he wanted to illustrate, not just about himself and his family but about the bride herself. By marrying his niece Bianca to the Holy Roman Emperor and later his nephew to the family of Naples through his marriage to Isabella of Aragorn, Ludovico Sforza sought alliances in the Wars of Italy (1494–1559). He later discarded these alliances and sided with Louis VIII of France when he invaded Naples in 1494.[169]

In her book *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture in the Fifteenth Century: Gender, Identity, and the Tradition of Power. Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700,* Elizabeth Toreno examines this and similar portraits to place them within the context of contemporary iconography and symbolism by deconstructing the sitters costuming. However, her primary takeaway is that the portrait contains many symbols of wealth.[170] While displays of wealth were undoubtedly part of the commissioner's intention, the sitter's clothing and jewellery can also be viewed from the perspective of beauty practices. The portrait is also intended to enhance the bride's beauty and includes symbolic conventions that tie her appearance to classical themes surrounding Venus, the ideal beauty, as well as signal her virtuous behaviour.

Unlike the other portraits, this image has no background, which places the focus of the portrait entirely on the subject herself. She wears an elaborate brocaded dress decorated in golden flowers with slashed and detached sleeves (as was the fashion) and a gold and jewelled belt with

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[166] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture,*17-19.
[167] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture,*18.
[168] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture,*18.
[169] Gordon Campbell, "Sforza, Ludovico, Il Moro." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Gordon Campbell, "Wars of Italy," In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
[170] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture,*17.

a red carnation placed beneath the bust. Bianca is also wearing two necklaces, the first looks like a topaz jewel with an attached pearl, and the second is a string of pearls with an azure-blue jewel.

Aside from the overt grandeur of her dress, the bride's headdress is laid over and attached to her brown hair, pulled back, and wrapped into a ponytail shape. The Sforza family motto, 'Merito et Tempore,' is attached to an elaborate broach on the headdress of beaded pearls and gems. As far as the indicators of the potential wealth that the bride would bring through her dowry (a dowry of 440,000 ducats)[171], we can see that her elaborate dress, dripping in her family's riches, provides the audience with a clear picture of their finances and the strength of their lineage. The motto ‘Merito et Tempore’ refers to the Sforza family's memory, suggesting to the viewer that they wish to legitimise their position as one gained through merit and a long and prosperous lineage. To have Bianca wear the motto further ties her image to that of a powerful and successful Italian family, encouraging the emperor to desire further connection with the Sforzas.

In more detail, several key aspects of this portrait indicate the sitter's beauty and virtue. As discussed in Chapter One, these symbols are often intermingled, as elements of the beauty standard were often considered physical manifestations of virtue. For example, the pearls she wears are important as they represent the wearer's virtue, chastity, and purity. Pearls evoke these characteristics in both Christian and classical traditions. In a classical and humanist context, pearls represent the moon and the goddess Diana, known for her virginity and purity.[172] In a Christian context, pearls evoke similar messages of sexual purity and the untarnished soul, although, in this religious context, they are often associated with the Virgin Mary.[173] While beauty and virtue are often intertwined, specific elements in the portrait coincide with the standard of beauty in the mediaeval period. Bianca is visibly a young woman with a slim body and a clear and pale complexion. Her physical body matches the period ideal, and this is enhanced by the painter's attention to her dress and the curve of her chest and waist against a dark background. In an examination of her facial features, the artist appears to have kept identifying aspects of her appearance visible to the viewer, such as her nose, leading the audience

[171] Campbell, "Sforza, Ludovico, Il Moro," In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
[172] Karen Raber, “Chains of Pearls: Gender, Property, Identity,” in *Ornamentalism: The Art of Renaissance Accessories*, ed. Bella Mirabella (University of Michigan Press, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*): 159-180.
[173] Raber, “Chains of Pearls: Gender, Property, Identity,” 159-180.

to the assumption that the image is relatively true to the subject. Her facial structure is also soft, which may have been natural, or another idealization bringing her visage closer to that of Venus. Other portraits of this period depict women with softer and rounder faces, giving further evidence that this was part of an ideal feminine appearance.[174] In addition to her facial feature, Bianca's hair is long, and a loose curl frames her face, indicating the naturalness of her beauty, how she is unarranged, and her personality lacks affectation. This emphasis on a bride's naturalness was critical to the conversation about women's ideal beauty and behaviour and illustrated the values of the ideal Lady, which both Anne of France and Castiglione outline in their writing. Elements of these idealizations can also be found in other marriage portraits, like that of Isabella of Aragon.

Isabella of Aragon

The Portrait in *Figure 2* is an illustration of Isabella of Aragon, Duchess of Milan (1470–1524).[175] It is attributed to either Ambrogio de Predis or Bernardino de' Conti (both artists working in the Sforza court). However, it is closest to Ambrogio de Predis's style—de Predis was also the painter of Bianca Maria Sforza's portrait (*Figure 1)*. The Sforza family hired de Predis to produce images of their court. Isabella's painting was commissioned around the time of her marriage, possibly to be sent to her potential spouse. Isabella of Aragon was the daughter of the patron Ippolita Maria Sforza and her husband Alfonso II of Naples.[176] Through her marriage, Isabella later became the sister-in-law to Bianca Maria Sforza. When she was eighteen, Isabella moved to Milian from Naples to marry Gian Galeazzo (1469–1494),[177] Bianca's brother.

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[174] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture*, Appendix. Toreno's book provides examples of female portraits from the 15th century.

[175] Circle of Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Isabella of Aragon, Duchess of Milan (1470-1524)*, *Onlineonly.christies.com*, Christie's, accessed April 25, 2023, https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/remastered-contemporary-art-old-masters/circle-leonardo-da-vinci-vinci-1452-1519-amboise-6/95155.

[176] Tessa Lord, *Portrait of Isabella of Aragon, Duchess of Milan (1470-1524):* Lot essay, accessed April 25, 2023, https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/remastered-contemporary-art-old-masters/circle-leonardo-da-vinci-vinci-1452-1519-amboise-6/95155.

[177] At one point Anne of France's daughter Suzzane was considered as a potential match for one of the Sforzas. Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter, 23.*

However, shortly after her husband's suspicious death, his uncle Ludovico took the role of Duke, and Isabella was sent off to Bari, leaving her son behind.[178]

Figure 2: Portrait of Isabella of Aragon (1470-1524)

This portrait contains many similarities to the previous example. Here too, Isabella is laden with jewellery and depictions of her family's splendour, indicating a wealthy dowry and influential familial connections. However, there are some differences that emphasise personal physical and behavioural characteristics. In the portrait, Isabella faces right toward a faded motto written on a plaque in the bottom right corner. On her sleeve is pinned a brooch with a swan wrapped around a red jewel, perhaps with a pearl dangling from its base. Her golden, flowered sleeve is tied onto a bright red bodice lined in gold trim over a white shift. On her dress is another brooch, with golden petals surrounding a dark jewel specked with rubies or topaz. Isabella also wears a necklace of red jewels, flowers, and pearls. Her headdress, similar to Bianca's, lays over her golden hair, and strings of pearls are wrapped around her ponytail. Isabella is painted with distinct personal features and an exaggerated colouring of extremely pale skin and vibrant red cheeks. As with Bianca, her physic is slim, her eyebrows thin, and her hair long. Also, like Bianca, her hairline is more natural than that of female portraits from previous centuries. The exaggerated colouring of Isabella is interesting when examined in the context of late mediaeval ideals, where a pale and blushed skin tone was seen as representative of virtue.[179]

Like Bianca's portrait, Isabella's portrait idealises her image to adhere to standards of virtue and beauty. She is laden with pearls to emphasise her chastity and virginity. Her swan brooch symbolises both beauty and fidelity. The iconography of the swan can be associated with

[178] Patrick Zutshi, "An Unpublished Letter of Isabella of Aragon, Duchess of Milan." *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 4 (2006): 494–501.
[179] Drew-Bear, *Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage*, 23.

classical mythology, including representations of Venus, the goddess of love and beauty.[180] It may also be a reference to the story of Leda and the Swan; however, this seems too erotic to be intended in the context of a marriage portrait, as this is an opportunity to showcase the bride's loyalty and chastity while also suggesting feelings of love or potential romantic attachment. Isabella's jewellery contains flowers, a symbol of fertility and rebirth, also associated with the qualities of the goddess Venus.[181]

2.3 Conclusion

By looking at the writings of Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan and Laura Cereta, we can determine and outline three basic qualities (beauty, money, and virtue) expected of 15th-century aristocratic brides. Their texts also provide information into how young unmarried elite women utilised beauty practices, to what extent these practices were accepted and used, and why young women might have applied them.

Marriage played an essential role in the social mobility of young women and their families—as marital unions provided important political and economic alliances that could increase elite families' influence and protect their interests. In an increasingly competitive marriage market, elite brides and their families perceived beauty as critical to marriageability. This meant that non-adherence to the beauty standard could have real consequences for young women and their families.

Self-fashioning through marriage portraiture was key in establishing a bride and her family's social mobility through marriage. Using portraiture, the bride and her family could self-fashion an identity that demonstrated their importance within their social community and highlighted the benefits of forging a relationship with them. Elements of the messages in Bianca and Isabella's portraits also represent Christian and classical symbols, further placing the women within the broader humanist movement and perhaps indicating their familiarity with humanist discourse and

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[180] *Epithalamium de Nuptiis Petri Comitis et Helisabeth Vicomercatae, M.1148 Fol. 1r.*, n.d., *Index of Medieval Art*, n.d., Index of Medieval Art, https://theindex-princeton-edu.proxy.library.uu.nl/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=0B6C9B98-7630-4FAA-983D-4D3E285A1B1D.

[181] Compton, *Venus and the Arts of Love in Renaissance Florence*, 129-130.

learning. As discussed earlier, marriage, and personal portraits, were used to create and solidify social connections and networks to display elite families' social influence and facilitate social mobility by creating political and economic alliances.

CHAPTER THREE: Young Married Women

"Do not trust in youth, strength, or beauty because we have not one certain hour, however young, strong, or beautiful we may be."[182]

Through their emotional and familial connections with their male counterparts, elite women in French and Italian courts could wield tremendous power by influencing the culture at court, contributing to intellectual debates and engaging in the politics of their regions.[183] Under the regency of Anne of France, the French court, in particular, offered a unique education for young elite women. The writings of Christian de Pizan and Anne of France greatly influenced women in the French court, something we see reflected in the high volume of politically active women educated there.[184] Famous and influential French women of this era include Anne of France, Louis of Savoy, Catherine d'Medici, and even their ill-fated English contemporaries Anne Boleyn and, later, Mary Queen of Scots.[185]

As discussed in the thesis introduction, French and Italian courts were intimately entwined during this period, not only through the conflicts of the Italian wars but through marriage and shared familial bonds. All of which aided in the influence and spread of literature and ideas. In Italy, too, elite married women often took on a central role as diplomates and advisors. Italian women such as Isabella d'Este, Elizabetta Gonzaga, and Caterina Sforza all played an essential role in the politics of the time.[186] These women gained power through 'supporting' the men in their immediate family, even when that influence appeared to subvert late medieval ideas about women's roles. In many cases, their influence was justified by their supporters as still falling within the realm of women's traditional roles as either wives or mothers. In her book *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563*, Susan Broomhall argues that these women achieved their position by using emotional strategies to gain control or influence over male spouses, lovers or family members.[187] However, women of this court also expressed power through their patronage and the cultivation of social networks and alliances outside of their immediate

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[182] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter*, 91.
[183] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 12-14.
[184] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 16.
[185] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 17.
[186] Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing*, 49, 87-90.
[187] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 11.

families. But how did beauty and the application of beauty practises continue to play a role in a young married woman's ability to gain social influence during this stage of life?

Social Mobility through elite women's marriageability and subsequent marriage did not end with the wedding. For noble women in the 15th century, marriage provided a new stage of life in which new qualities were required to gain and maintain social influence by creating networks. In this new stage of life, women were asked to serve as political actors, maintaining bonds between their families and advocating for them in court. While women were always expected to seek social influence and power for their male relatives, married women could also have power and agency for themselves.[188] For young married women, beauty and the application of certain beauty practices were still a critical part of cultivating social influence in and outside the home.

While Chapter Two focused on the importance of beauty in women's marriageability, this chapter will discuss how married women continued to use beauty practices and adhere to the beauty standard to fashion their public image and increase their social influence. However, the ideas of our primary authors related to married women using beauty practices are nuanced, as their writings either reference or discuss debates around the acceptability of married women using beauty practices when they were no longer seeking a husband. Section 3.1 of this chapter will examine these nuances through the writing of Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta. The section will show that as women aged and entered a new stage of life, the social expectations around their appearance and self-representation shifted from focusing on marriageability to creating social networks and legitimising their authority and social status. Section 3.2 will examine how these ideas and practises were utilised in two visual sources of the period and provide context for the portraits of Anne of France and Anne of Brittany.

3.1 Primary Source Authors

The primary source literature used in this chapter which discusses beauty and married women, is often more critical of women's use of beauty practices in this life stage than of unmarried

[188] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 21.

women.[189] However, while women in these texts were often depicted as being vain, there is still an emphasis on them keeping up appearances. In the excerpts from the female primary source authors below, we see that while there is more criticism of women using beauty practices, there is also a general consensus that women continued to utilise these methods because of the social benefits that could be gained outside of marriage. Notably, many of the male authors writing in this period suggest that women should maintain their looks for the pleasure of their spouses.[190] However, in the following excerpts by female authors, many describe women applying beauty practices or discuss how a woman's appearance contributes to her public image and social perceptions.

In the married stage of life, an elite woman's appearance remained a representation of her family and new husband. In addition, women in this stage of life were also expected to take on social responsibilities, including hosting, entertaining, patronage and diplomacy, all of which aided in cultivating the family's social network and reputation.[191] In relation to these responsibilities, beauty was still praised and regarded by these female authors as important for young married women.

Isabella d'Este

In 1490, Isabella d'Este was only a year into her marriage to Francesco Gonzaga II. Through their letters, we can see that later in their marriage, the two generally had a good rapport and worked well as political partners. However, at this point, Isabella and Francesco's marriage was far from smooth. In a letter to Lady Polissena, a young Isabella threatens her correspondent, whom she claims is seeking the attention of her new spouse. D'Este writes:

> "…We suspect that the most illustrious lord our consort is in love with you, since he always wears on his finger the ring that you gave him. We wanted to inform you of this

[189] D'Este, *Selected Letters*; Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter*; Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*; Cereta, *Collected Letters*.
[190] Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 11, 99.
[191] Thomas Kuehn, *Family and Gender in Renaissance Italy, 1300-1600* (Cambridge, UK ; New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 59-61,109.

> so that you would know how to behave from now on. Otherwise, we will see that you get a potion that will cost you your skin…."[192]

This letter should be viewed from the perspective of d'Este as a new bride. In addition to the emotional response to her husband's infidelity, her position in the Gonzaga court was far from stable. Fresh into her marriage and without a pregnancy, d'Este had yet to establish herself in her relationship or her new community. However, the threat to Polissena's skin is also telling, as Isabella's letter suggests that Polissena utilises her appearance to charm Francesco. The letter is amusing as an expression of adolescent envy, but it also illustrates d'Este's insecurity regarding her status and influence over her new husband. Whether or not d'Este would have gone as far as to attack Polissena, the letter also gives us another example of how highly d'Este placed beauty as a tool of social success. Isabella d'Este's letters give countless examples of her using beauty in her self-fashioning while being a younger married woman.[193] Through her letters, we can see that she was concerned with not only maintaining her appearance in real life but also idealising it and utilising her beauty in works of art.

Some key examples of Isabella utilising beauty practices illustrate her desire to adhere to a fashionable standard of beauty and stand out over other women in her court and even her family. In 1491 d'Este wrote to Girolamo Zigliolo. In this letter, Isabella sends Girolamo shopping, ordering beads and expensive cloth.[194] In her instructions about cloth, she tells him, "If it is such that there is anything else like it, we would rather you left it behind."[195]

This quote is just one example in which Isabella displays her desire to stand out and self-fashion her appearance through dress. In a later letter to Emilia Pia da Montefeltro in 1514, d'Este thanked her friend for two gourds of bear fat, often used for hairdressing.[196] Isabella and her friends often sent each other cosmetics as gifts, including perfumes, various oils, and sometimes clothing items. Sharing beauty products as gifts could also be a form of social bonding and networking between elite women.[197]

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[192] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 27-28 (AG 2904 libro 136 cc.4v-5r).
[193] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 40, 43, 54, 56, 122, 129, 161, 177, 184, 153, 257.
[194] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 40 (AG 2904 libro 136 cc.83r-v).
[195] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 40 (AG 2904 libro 136 cc.83r-v).
[196] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 372 (AG 2996 libro 30a c.81v).
[197] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 372 (AG 2996 libro 30a c.81v). Comment in citation 163.

In marriage, elite women still worked to maintain the beauty standard while also being careful to appear natural and avoid being criticised for affectation or vanity. On one occasion, Isabella seeks to differentiate herself from her newlywed sister-in-law Lucrzia Boriga. In 1502 she wrote to her husband, commenting on the lengthy process of Lucrezia Borgia's grooming routine:

> "Yesterday we all stayed in our rooms until the twenty-third hour [one hour before sunset], because the Lady Lucrezia takes such a long time to rise and dress in order to win eyes away from the duchess of Urbino and me… P.S: I don't want to leave out that, to my credit, I am always the first person up and dressed!"[198]

In this letter, d'Este implies that Lucrezia was competitive about her appearance and needed a longer time than was usual to fashion a look which would draw eyes away from Isabella and Elizabetta of Urbino. Thus, d'Este suggests that Lucrezia's beauty was unnatural and merely the product of applied beauty practices. D'Este also implies that her appearance, which takes very little time to accomplish, is natural, therefore comparing her lack of affectation and natural beauty to that of Lucrezia's.

For d'Este, patronage through personal portraiture and beauty were intertwined. In multiple letters, d'Este requests portraits of herself and comments upon the results. As briefly discussed in section 2.2, personal portraits were often sent to epistolary correspondents as a form of visual communication. These allowed elites to strengthen social networks and bonds by getting to know their pen pals and keep up with friends who lived further away. In her letters, d'Este receives several portraits from her correspondents and sends several in return. She also commissions personal portraiture for herself, presumably to be sent or kept and displayed at her court in Mantua.[199] For example, in 1491 d'Este wrote to Giorgio Brognolo, ordering unveined marble for a sculpture of herself.[200] A few years later, in 1493, she wrote to the countess of Acerra, thanking her for a Spanish-style blouse, the countess's portrait, and promises to send a portrait of her own.

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[198] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 184, 148 (AG 2993 libro 13 cc. 37r-38r). *Transcribed in D'Arco, Notizie di Isabella Estense.*
[199] Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua*, 55-60.
[200] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 43 (AG 2991 libro 1 cc.16v-17r).

She writes:

> "This desire [to show our feelings of love towards you] leads to our long-standing wish to have your ladyships portrait, so that in some way we might gratify our affection. Now that we have it both on paper and in wax, we treasure it and look at it often. We think it does not resemble you much; we know how difficult it is to find a painter who can perfectly counterfeit the natural face. But since the descriptions from Margherita, Jocopo, and others who have seen your ladyship compensate for the painter's shortcomings, we think we are not at all deceived in our conception of you. We thank you immensely for having granted our wish. Now we beg you not to fail in the promise Jocopo relayed to us that you will send another on canvas; and we will send your ladyship one of us, to grant your request. Not that you will see a pretty figure, but so that you will have in your home an image of one who loves you like a sister."[201]

In this letter, we not only see an example of how women would share portraits of themselves with their correspondents but also how important the idealization of one's appearance was in the process. Isabella's comments that the countess's portrait does not look as she has been described, while we are not sure if this was intended as a compliment, reveals how aware women like d'Este were of their visual depictions, and how important this self-fashioning could be in forming a reputation abroad. When promising to send a portrait of herself in return, d'Este warns her pen pal that she should not expect a pretty face. Perhaps this was the etiquette of the time—a conscious display of modesty or a lack of concern over her appearance. However, by reading her letters, we can see that d'Este was, in fact, very concerned with how she was portrayed to her fellow elites.

In her second reply to Countess Accera, Isabella complains about the quality of a portrait of herself, stating, "We are very sorry we can not send you our portrait at this time. The painter (Andrea Mantegna) did it so badly that it has no features like our own." [202] D'Este's concern over her appearance in portraiture is a continuing theme in her letters. For example, in 1499, Isabella

[201] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 54 (AG 2991 libro 3 cc.30r-31r).
[202] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 56 (AG 2991 libro 3 cc.39v-40r).

wrote to her brother-in-law, Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, asking his opinion of her most recent portrait. She writes:

> "The Most Illustrious Madame Duchess Isabella (Isabella of Aragon) has repeated her request that I send her one of my color portraits. And since I have this one, which is not very much like me because it is a little fatter than I am, If it pleases you, he (the messenger) shall present it to the aforementioned madame duchess on my behalf."[203]

This letter portrays d'Este's displeasure at a painting which does not idealise her image. She is reluctant to send around and display a portrait that she believes will portray her in an unflattering light. It is tempting to perceive d'Este as vain and overly concerned with looking beautiful, even as she ages. However, there was much to be gained by adhering to the beauty standard, and there were consequences for not being viewed as beautiful. As discussed in chapter one, there are several factors at play here. One is that beauty was equated with a woman's virtue and continued to be perceived as one of a woman's most valued qualities. Married women's appearance was also representative of their families.[204] Their portraits played an essential role in family memory and were visibly displayed to an audience of the family's current and future social network.

In a final example of how important beauty continued to be in the portraiture of married women, d'Este expresses her pleasure at an idealisation of her done by Francesco Francia in 1511. Isabella praises the artist, stating:

> "We received the portrait you sent us, and everyone who has seen it can well judge that it comes from your hand, because it is of the highest excellence, and we recognize that we are much in your debt since you have so pleased us. And since, through your art, you have made us much more beautiful than nature did, we thank you as much as is possible."[205]

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[203] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 129 (AG 2993 libro 10 cc. 7v-8r).
[204] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture in the Fifteenth Century*, 97-100.
[205] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 352 (AG 2996 libro 29 cc.72r-v).

In this excerpt, we see how an idealised portrait of which d'Este approved was shared among her friends and family. It is important to remember that acts of patronage through portraiture were essential elements of self-fashioning a reputation not just for one's contemporaries but for the future. As a powerful regent and political player, d'Este wanted to be remembered in an idealised light. While portraits portrayed iconographical symbols of the subjects' family and good qualities, elite women were still subject to harsher scrutiny regarding their appearance and what beauty represented.

Anne of France

Like d'Este, Anne of France played a formidable role in her court, utilizing her influence to secure the title and duchy of Bourban for her husband after his brother's death. In doing so, she enabled her own independence and consolidated power through her and her husband's subsequent regency over France. As stated in the previous chapter, her advice to her daughter served as a how-to guide for noble women, showing them how to present themselves in court in order to succeed and build their reputations. Anne's lessons were intended not only for young unmarried women but for aristocratic women throughout their life stages.

In addition to Anne's emphasis on virtue, dress was a central feature in her advice. Dress and clothing during this period were not only dictated by fashion and beauty practices, as discussed in Chapter Two but were also an important indicator of status. A woman's attire could be used to assert her influence and status over that of their peers. When it comes to establishing one's self within their own household, Anne instructs her reader to:

> "Show them that you are their mistress not only in your bearing, manner, and demeanor, but also in your headdress, robes, and other clothing. You must always have the best when it comes to your attire; it should be richer than that of any of your women. Their clothing should never resemble yours; it is badly done if you allow this, because such extravagant habits are not to be praised. … Dress in the fashion of your husband's land and at his pleasure, without any affectation or undue care, always conducting yourself

> honestly and maintaining in your women, according to their rank, obedience, diffidence, humility, and kindness, without suffering them to do anything that is not honest."[206]

In this passage, Anne illustrates the political aspects of dress, which transcended merely looking beautiful. She writes that as a married woman, particularly one just beginning to establish herself in her husband's house or at court, dress can be an essential tool in fashioning a public image. First, she tells her reader to make sure her clothes are finer than those of her ladies and not to tolerate those who dress above their rank. Perhaps this warning was intended to emphasise a culture of modesty within the household. However, it could also be interpreted as a warning to control the threat of attendants who might wish to assert their power over their lady. Secondly, Anne explains that clothing can be a means in which to align the newly married with their husband's region and family and solidify their place in the new court. Dressing in a fashion which pleases both a husband and his family was clearly beneficial as it could ingratiate a new wife with her new community. Lastly, Anne reemphasises the importance of keeping a moral household, which she explains later in her book, is also for the protection of her reader's reputation.[207] After all, it is easier to get ahead when one gives their rivals as little ammunition as possible.

The topic of enemies at court is an ongoing theme in Anne's writing. She warns her daughter that the only way to combat rumours and gossip is to give rivals nothing to gossip about. She often writes about men who seek to seduce women and discusses the double standards of the consequences of falling for men's charms.[208] Anne also writes that Suzanne should be cautious about inspiring jealousy in others. Her discussion of others' envy is interesting as it provides a

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[206] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 81-82; "Par quoy ne leur devez souffrir, ains gouvernez vous y saigement et secrètement, afin qu'ilz n'aient cause de rébellion, et de vous moins obéir, affin aussi de mieulx vous monstrer leur maistresse, tant en port, manières, semblans, que en atours, robbes, et autres habillemens, lesquelz habillemens vous devez tous jours avoir meilleurs, et plus riches que nulle de voz femmes, et en rien ne vous en doivent ressembler , et c'est mal fait à celles qui le seuffrent , car les superfluz habitz ne sont pas à louer, car en toutes choses, le moïen est vertueux pour ce je vous conseille ; le tenir, quelque habondance de biens ne d'honneurs que jamais vous aiez, affin que, par orgueil, vous ne courrouciez Dieu; et vous tenez à la coustume du pays, et au plaisir de vostre mary, sans grant mignotise ne curiosité, honnestenient tous jours, et vos femmes en point, selon leur estât, en subgection, crainéle, humilité et doulceur, sans leur souffrir faire chose qu'il ne soit honneste." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XXIV, 91-92.

[207] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 81.

[208] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 86.

nuisance to Anne's arguments about adhering to beauty standards while also appearing modest. She writes:

> "The more beautiful a woman is, or the more she knows, the greater is the evil in their minds and the more their hearts are inflamed. When someone honors and praises virtuous women, the envious, out of spite, speak ill of them."[209]

Here, Anne gives us a glimpse into her reasoning and clarifies the fine lines her reader must navigate in cultivating a reputation for beauty, virtue and learning. In regards to beauty and the use of dress as a beauty practice for married women, Anne is careful to explain the benefits and limitations of how women should dress in order to be praised for their appearance and how women can utilize praise of their appearance while avoiding criticism for vanity and an over-indulgence in the use of beauty practices.

In the following passages, Anne highlights the continued importance of clothes as a form of beauty practice. She references male scholars, using their opinions as the standard to which her daughter and other readers should try and emulate. First, giving her own opinion, Anne instructs her daughter to:

> "Always make sure that you dress as well and as neatly as you can because, in the eyes of the world, you must understand that it is unseemly and distasteful to see a young girl or a woman who is nicely dressed but untidy. No man or woman of rank can be too carefully dressed or too neat in my opinion, provided that their clothing is not too outlandish or so important to them that they forget to serve God."[210]

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[209] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 79; "…gardez vous principalement de ce mauldit péché d'envye, lequel plusieurs folles, par leurs mauvaix couraiges, ont sur chascun , et par espécial sur les plus parfaites, et femmes de façon, et ne peuvent ces envyeuses , tant sont oultrecuidées, oyr louer ne priser les bonnes et parfaictes et, de tant plus qu'elles ont beaulté ou sçavoir en elles , ces envyeuses en ont plus de mal en la cervelle, et le cueur plus fort enflé; et quant on loue et prise les femmes vertueuses, d'envye et despit quelles en ont publicquement en dient mal." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XXII, 84-85.

[210] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 59-60; "Aussi, ma fille, touchant ces habitz et atours, je suis assez contente, tant que serez jeune, et en estât pour les porter, que, selon la coustume du païs ou vous serez , et le plaisir de vostre maistresse, que vous les portez. Et faites tous jours tant que vous habillez le mieulx et plus nedlement que pourrez. Car, au regard du monde, croiez pour vray qu'il est mal séant et fort deshonneste de voir une fille ou femme noble nicement habillée et mal en point. Et ne

In this section, Anne stresses that dress is reflective not only of status but also of beauty. Her distinction about women of rank also ties in with another theme in her writing: that people of nobility should serve as moral examples to their society. This includes her opinion that married women should dress for their rank and moderately apply beauty practices in order to adhere to the standard while maintaining the appearance of naturalness.

As discussed previously, behaviour was also an important part of 'natural' beauty. According to authors like Castiglione, women who fidgeted too much were viewed as being too concerned with being considered beautiful.[211] In the following passage, Anne illustrates the moral and beauty standards set by male authorities. She explains how affectatious movement plays into this, that in order to appear modest and natural, women should not move:

> "...a single limb of their body without need…On this subject, one philosopher says that the most displeasing thing in the world, especially for men of rank, is to see a young woman from a good background who is unpredictable and unrestrained. And on the other hand, as another philosopher says, the most noble and pleasing treasure in this world is a woman of noble rank who is beautiful, young, chaste, and well-mannered."[212]

In this except, Anne once again acknowledges the nuance of women's public image. She states the importance of being seen as beautiful by male courtiers while recognising that these same men consider ideal women to be modest and refrain from trying to catch the attention of men. This passage also echoes the sentiments discussed in Chapter Two, illustrating that, married or unmarried, beauty was still an expectation placed upon young women regardless of their relationship status. Furthermore, this change in life stage also presented women with new ways

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peult homme ou femme de fasson estre trop gent ou trop net à mon gré ; mais que ce soit sans trop grant curiosité, et qu'on n'y mecle pas tant son cueur, qu'on en laisse à servir Dieu." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch X, 24-25.

[211] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, 86-87.

[212] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 61; "Et dit ung philosophe parlant à ce propoz que la plus deshonneste chose qui puisse estre au monde, en espécial aux hommes de façon, est de veoir une jeune femme yssue de bon lieu volage et effrénée. Et, au fait contraire , dit ung autre philosophe que le plus noble et plaisant trésor qui puisse estre en ce monde, est de veoir une femme de grand façon belle, jeune, chaste, et bien moriginée." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XI, 29-30.

in which beauty could be used to facilitate social influence. Here Anne also gives us an example of how elite women could utilise their appearance and behaviour to gain the admiration and support of their male peers.

In a final except, Anne gives her daughter advice which could serve her in any stage of life. In the final pages of her lessons, she writes:

> "Nobility is never found save in a humble, benign, and courteous heart, and every other perfection you might have—like beauty, youth, wealth, or power—is vile without the aforesaid virtues...do not trust in youth, strength, or beauty because we have not one certain hour, however young, strong, or beautiful we may be. And with regard to beauty, it is the most harmful and the poorest favor that God can give to one of his creatures, and the one soonest gone—with one fever it is lost."[213]

This section provides a conclusion to Anne's writing on beauty and nobility. Although, in her book, she connects nobility with keeping up appearances and a reputation, she concludes that her daughter should not rely on her success as a political player, her wealth, or beauty but only upon her born nobility and virtue. Once again, she stresses the importance of virtue, but this time Anne highlights the failings of beauty. She tells her daughter that beauty, which is useful, is ultimately an unstable tool and can be lost with age and illness. By writing this, Anne turns her readers' eyes to the future, forcing them to consider how they might build and maintain social influence once their youth has passed. In her lessons, Anne encourages her daughter to apply beauty practices and adhere to beauty standards while expressing their limitations. Thereby she advises her readers to use beauty as a tool while young to create social networks and build a strong base of social influence that will last throughout their life stages.

[213] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 91; "…car noblesse ne fut jamais trouvée , si non en cueur humble begnin et courtois, et est toute autre perfection réputée ville, sans les vertus susdiéles, quelque beaulté, jeunesse, richesse, ou puissance,... Au surplus, ne vous fiez en jeunesse, force, ne beaulté, car nous n'avons une seulle heure de seureté, quelque jeune fort ou beau que soions. Et au regard de beaulté, c'est la plus préjudiciable grâce et maindre, que Dieu puisse donner à la créature, et qui plus tost se passe , car pour une fiebvre, elle est perdue." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XXVIII, 119-121.

Christine de Pizan

Christine de Pizan provided the philosophical structure to Anne of France's *Lessons for My Daughter*.[214] Pizan's writing in *The City of the Ladies* consistently argues that women's value should come from their virtue and behaviour rather than their appearance or birth. However, her book includes examples of women who use beauty to influence or use beauty practices for their own pleasure. In these cases, Pizan argues that her characters use beauty as a tool of influence only for virtuous reasons or to benefit others.

In Pizan's telling of Queen Esther's story, she emphasises that Esther only used her beauty to stop King Ahasuerus from persecuting the Jews. Pizan writes:

> "On another occasion, God chose the wise and noble Queen Esther to rescue His people from the king, AhasVeros, who had placed them in captivity…Ahasuerus…He was a pagan and had enslaved the Jews. In each of his kingdoms, he sent out a search for the highest-born maidens who were also the loveliest and most accomplished, being determined to take the one he liked best for his wife. Amongst those brought before him was God's beloved Esther, a wise and noble Hebrew maiden who was as lovely as she was virtuous. Since she pleased the king more than any of the others, he chose her for his bride. He loved her so dearly that he couldn't refuse her anything she asked for."[215]

[Unbeknownst to Queen Esther, a courtier named Haman had convinced the King to arrest and kill any Jews in his kingdom. However, Esther learned of the plot from her uncle and, disturbed by this news, determined to change her husband's mind.]

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[214] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 6, 26.

[215] "Par la noble et saige royne Hester voust autresi Dieux delivrer son puepple de la servitude du roy Assuere. Celluy roy Assuere estoit de moult grant puissance sur tous rois et possedoit moult de royaumes; payen estoit et tenoit les Juyfs en servaige. Et comme celluy faist querir par tous royaumes les plus nobles pucelles, les plus belles et mieulx enseignees pour choisir une qui mieulx luy playroit pour estre sa femme," entre les autres luy fu amenee la noble, saige, bonne, belle et de Dieu amee, la pu/celle Hester, qui estoit hebrieue. Laquelle luy plut sur toutes, et l'espousa, et tant l'ama celluy de grant amour que ne luy reffusast chose qu'elle requeist." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 861.

> "She therefore dressed herself up in her finest clothes and pretended to be going out with her ladies for a walk, choosing a garden which she knew the king could see from his windows... The king was so struck by this display of humility [her greeting] and so delighted by her dazzling beauty that he called out to her, saying that whatever she asked him for, he would not refuse her. …He dined with her three days in a row, and was so captivated by her elegance and dignity, her charm and beauty, that he urged her once again to ask him any favour."[216]

In this story, we see themes supporting the argument that young married women could use beauty as a tool for social influence. However, Pizan includes several moralizing caveats. At the story's beginning, she makes clear that God has chosen Esther to save the Jews from pagans. This clarification is important because it suggests that all of Esther's subsequent actions while completing the task are guided by divine approval. We also see that of all the qualities Esther possessed, Ahasuerus chose to make Esther his bride because her beauty and virtue were his primary considerations. After learning of her husband's treachery, Esther uses the beauty practice of dress to enhance her appearance. It is also made clear to the reader that her adornment is only used in an effort to convince Ahasuerus to stop hurting her people and not from personal vanity. By applying these beauty practices, she fashions an image which she will use to charm and influence the king. It is also important to remember that King Ahasuerus is her husband, so in 'charming' him, Esther has not damaged her virtue. Esther retains her virtuous reputation because she is married and acting on behalf of her family and community.

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[216] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 133; "Si se vesti et para le plus noblement que elle pot et ala, ses femmes avecques elles comme pour soy esbatre, en un jardin ou elle savoit que le roy estoit aux fenestres; et quant vint au retour vers la chambre du roy comme se elle n'y penssast point et elle veist le roy aux fenestres, tantost celle se laissa cheoir a genoulz et, toute estandue sur sa face, le salua. Et le roy, a qui moult plus son humilité et qui a grant plaisance regarda la grant biauté dont elle resplandissoit, l'appella et luy dist qu'elle demandast quelconques chose qu'elle vouldroit et elle l'aroit….Et comme par jour suivantment y disnast et eust aggreable la chiere, l'onneur, la bonté /et biauté de celle dame, que adés [la] pressoit de luy faire aucune requeste, celle se gitta a ses piez et en plourant luy prist a dire que elle luy prioit que il eust pitié de son puepple et que il ne la voulsist mie tant aviller, puisque en si hault? honneur l'avoit mise, que son lignaige et ceulx de sa nacion fussent si villainement destruiz. A donc le roy, tout ayrez, respondi: 'Dame, qui est cil si hardis que l'ose faire?' Elle respondi: 'Sire, se fait faire Naman, vostre prevost, qui yoy est.' "A te dire la chose en brief, le roy rappella sa sentence; Naman, qui par envie avoit tout ce basti, fu pris et pendus par ses desmerites." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 862-863.

Through the story of Esther, Pizan shifts the perspective to one in which beauty practices employed for social influence are seen as positive and acceptable. This is important as Pizan is also trying to combat claims that women seek to seduce men with their beauty and commit unvirtuous and adulterous acts for either their pleasure or their political benefit.[217] Another example Pizan includes is of Mariamme, a beautiful woman who remained virtuous despite her power to attract men. Pizan explains that Princess Mariamme:

> “Was so lovely that... she surpassed all other women in beauty, but also that she was more of a godlike and heavenly creature than a mere mortal woman…Despite the fact that many great princes and kings were tempted by her stunning looks to try to seduce her, Mariamme resisted them all, thanks to her great virtue…which only increased her fine reputation further. This was all the more to her credit, considering that she was very unhappily married to Herod Antipater, king of the Jews."[218]

In this excerpt, Pizan explains that while Mariamme's beauty attracted men, she never encouraged their advances and could not be tempted into leaving her husband. She argues that despite what many male authors believed, beautiful women were not necessarily less virtuous. Pizan also claims that Mariamme's virtue and resistance to temptation increased her reputation as an ideal woman. She uses both Esther and Mariamme's examples to counter arguments that women only use beauty practices to attract men. While Pizan never outright denies that women may use these practices in order to influence the desires of men, she also adds that this criticism is unfairly focused on women when there are also men who use adornment to benefit their

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[217] Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, 188-189.

[218] Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, 145; “Elle fu de si grant biauté que non pas tant seullement en ycelluy temps on creoit que elle passoit et excedoit toutes femmes en blauté, mais jugoit on que plus tost fust ymaige celestiel et divin que femme mortelle. Et de ceste fu painte la figure en un tablel et envoyé au roy Anthoine d'Egypte, lequel par tres grant admiracion de tel biauté dist et jugia qu'elle estoit fille du dieu Jupiter: car ne creoit mie que de homme mortel peust estre engendree ceste dame. Nonobstant son excellant biauté et qu'elle fust temptee et essayee a avoir de plusieurs grans princes et roys, toutes voyes par grant vertu et force de couraige resista a tous; et pou[r]tant fu plus louee et plus resplandissant en renommee. Et encores qui plus croist son grant los est qu'elle estoit tres mal mariee: c'est assavoir de Anthipater, roy des Juyfs, qui fu homme de grant cruauté et qui meesmement avoit fair mourir le frere d'elle.” Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 881-882.

appearance, either to increase attraction or purely out of pleasure for nice things. Pizan does not condemn beauty practices; in fact, like Anne of France, she believes that beauty practices can be applied and are useful in moderation and always with virtuous intentions.[219]

Pizan's focus on Mariamme's reputation reflects another point she makes later in her text about men who value beauty over virtue. Through the voice of Rectitude, Pizan explains that rather than women being judged on their attractiveness, it is the men who value beauty over virtue who should be judged. She writes:

> "Even supposing that the reason women put such efforts into making themselves beautiful and seductive, elegant and alluring, *were* because they wanted to attract male attention, I'll prove to you that this does not necessarily mean that men who are decent and sensible are going to fall more quickly or more heavily for them. On the contrary, those men who value integrity are more readily attracted to women who are virtuous, honest and modest, and love them more deeply."[220]

In this passage, Pizan suggests that some women do seek to enhance their appearance to attract men but argues that beauty can be a powerful tool when used with good intentions (as seen in her story about Queen Esther). However, she also writes that men who claim to have integrity should value women for their behaviour and virtue, even if they do not adhere to the beauty standard. Both Anne of France and Pizan's emphasis on virtue and their instruction on how women should behave can be viewed as an attempt to broaden the ways in which women could gain social influence – one that did not rely on appealing to men. From the writings of Castiglione and d'Este, we see a culture focused on beauty that created a restrictive system excluding older

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[219] Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, 188; Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 82, 86, 88, 89.

[220] Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, 190; "Et que femmes, poson que elles voulsissent estre amees se penassent pour celle cause d'estre jolies, baudes, mignotes et curieuses, je te prouveray / que celle achoison ne les fait pas plus tost ne mieulx amer de hommes saiges et de vallue et que plus tost et mieulx amees sont de ceulx qui aiment honneur, les vertueuses honnestes et simples que les plus cointes, poson que moins fussent belles. Sy me pourroit doncques estre respondu, puisque femmes attrayent les hommes par leur vertu et honneste té, puisque c'est mal qu'ilz soyent attraiz, mieulx vauldroit que moins." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 958.

women and women who did not reflect the ideal image. In contrast, Christine de Pizan and Anne of France's advice to cultivate and utilise a reputation of virtue appears more inclusive because, in theory, modesty, chastity, and piety are achievable qualities for all, despite age or physical appearance.

Laura Cereta

Laura Cereta's work builds on the ideas Pizan introduced; however, Cereta argues that women should abandon all beauty practices and focus on living a virtuous life devoted to learning. Cereta's view on women's application of beauty practices is resoundingly negative. In her writing, she characterizes women, married or otherwise, who participate in beauty practices as silly and indulging in a culture of vanity. She advocates for women to take up learning, even foregoing social obligations and events, in order to devote themselves exclusively to study. However, in one letter, Cereta takes up the same argument as Pizan, who states that men of integrity should remain consistent with their image and value women for qualities beyond beauty. In a letter to her husband Pietro Serina, Cereta remonstrates him for equating her lack of beauty practices with the quality of their relationship. In 1485 She wrote:

> "But as to your writing me that I don't love you very much...You are measuring a very healthy expression of a wife's loyalty by the standard of the insincere flattery of well-worn phrases. But I shall love you, my husband. What does it mean to you that you reassure me with those trivial little compliments? Do you want me to believe that you expect me to comb my hair in a stylish fashion for your homecoming? Or to feign adoring looks with a painted face? Let women without means, who worry and have no confidence in their own virtue, flutter their eyelashes and play games to gain favour with their husbands. This is the adulation of a fox and the birdlime of deceitful bird hunting. I don't want to have to buy you at such a price. I'm not a person who lays more stock in words than duty. I am truly your Laura, whose soul is the same one you, in turn, had hoped for. Vale."[221]

[221] Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 91. [Not in the 1640 Tomasini edition, which is the only edition available online.]

In this published letter, Cereta expresses her dismay at her husband's comments. It appears he has interpreted her behaviour as a lack of affection towards him. Cereta attempts to convince him of her love, but the letter is also an important part of her larger argument. She rejects the idea that a wife's application of beauty practices is in some way reflective of her feelings towards her husband and her value as a partner. She argues that participating in flattery and dressing up for her spouse would be insincere and in no way reflects the loyalty of a wife. She also lists the beauty practices she is not applying for the benefit of her husband and suggests that women who do use them to impress their spouses are insecure in their position and reputation as a wife. Finally, she writes that these behaviours are part of a game which she does not want to be a part of and that she should not have to employ these practices to win her husband's regard.

What is so interesting about this passage is that it contains three perspectives. The first and most apparent is Cereta's perspective, who has fashioned herself as a woman who cares only for virtue and learning and refuses to participate in beauty practices despite the inherent benefits they may provide. The second perspective is attributed to her husband, who represents the broader cultural expectation that wives should enhance their appearance for their husbands' pleasure and that the employment of these beauty practices and specific behaviours (flattery and adoration) is part of women's expression of loyalty and affection. The last perspective Cereta refers to is from the "women without means" who, like Anne of France and Isabella d'Este, value beauty as a tool of self-fashioning to gain favour within their marriage. While this letter suggests that Cereta may have been lucky enough not to need to worry about engaging her husband's favour, this was not always the case for other women. As seen in Anne of France's lessons, she instructed her daughter to dress in a manner that pleased her husband and to use dress that would benefit her reputation and social standing.[222] The same can be said of d'Este, whose threat to Lady Polissena's skin and beauty stemmed from the insecurity of her position during the first years of her marriage.[223] Cereta might imply these actions are petty, but the context in which women utilized these practices could significantly affect their lives and their influence on their spouses and within their households. Within the context of marriage, perhaps we should add beauty practices to Broomhall's category of emotional strategies.

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[222] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 81-82.
[223] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 27-28 (AG 2904 libro 136 cc.4v-5r).

Cereta uses her writing to self-fashion an image of attainable exceptionalism. Through her letters, she often writes that she is not exceptional and that other women could become as learned as her if they put their minds to it. All they need to do is follow her example and cast aside behaviours and practices concerning appearance. In a letter to Bibolo Sempron, Cereta reinforces ideas about the immorality and lack of substance in women who take an interest in beauty practices.

> "But here, the question of my exceptionality remains. And here, choice alone, since it is the arbiter of character, is the distinguishing factor. For some women worry about the styling of their hair, the elegance of their clothes, and the pearls and other jewellery they wear on their fingers. Others love to say cute little things, hide their feeling behind a mask of tranquillity, indulge in dancing, and lead pet dogs around on a leash. For all I care, other women can long for parties with carefully appointed tables for the peace of mind of the sleep, or they can yearn to deface with paint the pretty face they see reflected in their mirrors. But those women for whom the quest for the good represents a higher value restrain their young spirits and ponder better plans."[224]

Like many of her other letters, these criticism are placed upon women as a group rather than women in specific stages of life. Cereta's differentiation between herself and other women is an ongoing theme that supports her exceptionality to her reader. While she was writing for a male audience, she explicitly included instructions to women on what they should avoid and how they could follow her example. As discussed, Cereta's value on virtue and education over beauty is apparent not just in her attempts to distance herself from her peers but in her effort to align herself with contemporary male scholars. In the excerpt above, Cereta focuses on behaviour,

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[224] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 78-79; Laura Cerete in Bibulum Sempronium Deliberali Mulierum institutione Desensio "Superexta, raritatis nostrę sola questiuncula, quam culpatrix morum electio sola distinguit, Nam alijs insidet animo cura diserinainari pectino comas, induere molliores amicus, et digitos vnionibus, atq; super additis gemmis otnare; Alia pręmeditata verbula compositis delestantur buecis essundere; Indulgere choreis; eblanditos tractare catellos. Studeant aliçinhiare accuratioris mese couiuijs, dare quietem animi somno, et inspeculis formosas facies dedecorare pigmentis. At illae, quibus ad virtitem integritas maior alpirat, sręnat principio iuuenilem animum, meditantur meliora consilia, durant sobrietate et laboribus corpus, cohibent deinde linguam, obseruant aures, componunt in vigilias ingerium, et mentem excitant in contemplationem ad literas probitati semper obnoxlas." Laura Cereta and Giacomo Filippo aut Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae Brixiensis Feminae Clarissimae Epistolae Jam Primum È M S in Lucem Productae À Iacobo Philippo Tomasino, Qui Eius Vitam, & Notas Addidit ..*, *Internet Archive*, Epist.LXV, 192.

equating interest in beauty practices with immorality or vanity. She suggests that women who enjoy or participate in beauty practices are unrestrained and even unintelligent. In doing so, Cereta implies that her values and that of other women cannot overlap. Cereta's letter also ignores that women like d'Este, who cared deeply about her appearance and public image, were often well-educated and used their learning, good reputations and beauty practices to navigate positions of social influence and power—often utilising their portraiture and patronage in their political personas.[225] Elite women like d'Este and Anne of France also successfully promoted artists and writers in their court with whom their beliefs aligned.[226] The next section of this chapter will discuss how personal portraiture continued to be an essential part of married women's self-fashioning and expression of power.

Perspectives

The passages in this section reflect a shift in the agency from a woman's unmarried youth into marriage. D'Este's letters and Anne's *Lessons* show that married women played an active role in both the political and cultural spheres of court life. The selected texts suggest that married women continued to engage in beauty practices to adhere to the beauty standard and fashion a political reputation for themselves. Anne's *Lessons* reveal that with this change in life stage, the social benefits of using beauty practices focused on displaying social class and legitimising authority. Section 3.2 of this chapter will analyse how the themes reflected in the texts are displayed through the imagery and self-fashioning of Anne of France and Anne of Brittany. The following section also addresses how elements of beauty practices, which appear inconsistent with the beauty ideal of a youthful Venus, are connected to age and criticisms of beauty culture, emphasising virtue with the inclusion of religious iconography.

3.2 Married Women and Artistic Patronage

[225] 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, no. 3 (June 2009): 7-8.
[226] Adams, "Anne de France and Gift-Giving: The Exercise of Female Power," 66-68.

Personal portraiture in formalised portraits, books, and religious objects was another powerful device for elite 15th-century married women to express and legitimise their authority and influence.[227] In both a French and Italian context, women like Anne of France, Isabella d'Este, Louise of Savoy and Anne of Brittany were able to present idealised images of themselves, showcasing their appearance, power, and virtues. In addition, elite women commissioned artists and writers to promote their ideals and their families' reputations.[228] Female patronage was an essential part of gaining and maintaining social capital within the accepted roles of a female family member. However, in personal portraits, an idealised version of the subject's beauty still played a role in women's expression of their public image.[229] This is important as natural beauty continued to be associated with virtuous characteristics and further reinforced the self-fashioned image of the subject. In addition to portraits, religious art was often utilised to showcase the subject's piety and legitimise their authority through the presentation of divine guidance and support.[230]

This section will focus on two illustrations of Anne of France and Anne of Britanny, both women of the French court who used art and literature as a means of social influence. After briefly introducing Anne of France and Anne of Britanny, we will analyse their portraits through the commissioners' self-fashioning and the messages they wished to portray to their audience. Included will be a discussion of how beauty plays a critical role in depicting female authority for these women and how the subjects' fashioning connects to the writing of the primary source authors Anne of France and Christine de Pizan. While these concepts can be applied in an Italian context as well, as we can see in d'Este's regency, this section will focus on the French court because of its connection to Pizan's *City of the Ladies,* which could be categorised as one of the first popularised works of female literature about female governance and power.[231]

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[227] Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua*, 66-69.
[228] Joyce de Vries, *Caterina Sforza and the Art of Appearances* (Routledge, 2010), 75-76.
[229] Toreno, *Netherlandish and Italian Female Portraiture, 53-56,* 59-61.
[230] Megan Holmes, "Giovanni Benci's Patronage of the Nunnery, Le Murate," in *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin (Cambridge, Uk ; New York, Ny, Usa: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 121; Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua*, 63.
[231] Pizan describes the purpose of the three virtues' visit and the intentions of her book.
Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 11; Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 15.

In her introduction to *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483–1563,* Susanne Broomhall writes that the regency of Anne of France marks a beginning of a normalization of female regency and influence in France.[232] She also writes that Anne of France's creation of the educational environment for young women at court created a culture in which young elite women were encouraged to learn and adhere to the ideals of governance and female authority, which were inspired by both the work of Christine de Pizan and Anne of France herself.[233] Broomhall's writing also ties into this thesis's analysis of social influence as a subset of social mobility.[234] In terms of how female authority could be utilised and expressed, Broomhall writes that traditional concepts of power were often divided between 'soft power' as a courtly cultural influence and formalised political roles.[235] Broomhall argues that by dividing these concepts, historians are gendering expressions of authority and influence, which both men and women utilise. As illustrated through Broomhall's focus on how female regents could use patronage and cultural influence to enact political change, these expressions of power were often intertwined for women during this period.[236]

In her book *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua: Matrons, Mystics and Monasteries*, Sally Anne Hickson adds to this by focusing on the religious patronage of the Gonzagas in Mantua, including that of Isabella d'Este.[237] While Broomhall emphasises all artistic patronage as a form of expressing power within the French court, Hickson's focus is on how a religious influence portrayed elite women as a legitimising authority, cultivating personal reputations and convincing others of their morality and piety as a leader.[238] Hickson's focus on Christian iconography not only delves deeper into the topics Broomhall overs in her introduction but illustrates how the kinds of patronage women engaged with shifted as they aged and were met with new societal expectations. Similarly, in her article "Louise de Savoie, régente et mère du roi : l'investissement symbolique de l'espace curial," Aubrée David Chapy presents yet

[232] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 15.
[233] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 15-16.
[234] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 21-22.
[235] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 21.
[236] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court,* 21.
[237] Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua* (Routledge, 2016).
[238] Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua*, 27-28.

another layer to women's self-fashioning and image-making.[239] Louis of Savoy will be further discussed in Chapter Four. Her artistic patronage and expression of beauty practices were used to cultivate her reputation for piety and devoted motherhood. While a shrewd political player, Chapy argues that Louise's role as the mother of the King informed her public image, purposely linking her and her son's roles as a form of legitimacy through their shared familial bond. In the examples below, both Anne of France and Anne of Brittany also use symbols of inherited nobility to legitimise their authority further. But how did beauty continue to play a role in the self-fashioning of married women through artistic depictions?

As stated in Chapter One, certain aspects of the late medieval beauty standard were representative of a woman's virtue. From Anne of France's *Lessons* and Pizan's writing, we know these authors did not necessarily hold the same view. However, both still understood the importance of a woman's adherence to the standard and the implication of a woman's appearance in the general culture. Therefore, including a subject's visual idealisation was still significant in expressing power and political image-making through cultural means. The illustrations of Anne of France and Anne of Brittany are good examples of Anne of France and Pizan's work used in practice.

Figure 1. Moulins Triptych right panel.

<u>Anne of France</u>

The image in *Figure 1* is the right panel of Moulins Triptych, commissioned by Anne of France and her husband, Peter II, Duke of Bourbon, during their regency for Anne's brother King Charles VIII.[240] Charles VIII was only 13 when he succeeded his father,

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[239] Aubrée Chapy, "Louise de Savoie, Régente et Mère Du Roi : L'investissement Symbolique de l'Espace Curial," *Réforme, Humanisme, Renaissance* 79, no. 1 (2014): 65–84, https://doi.org/10.3406/rhren.2014.3382.
[240] Jean Hey, *The Triptych of the Master of Moulins*, Moulins Cathedral, accessed June 21, 2023, https://paroisse-notredamedemoulins.catholique-moulins.fr/triptyque-du-maitre-de-moulins/.

Louis XI, and as a result, his sister Anne became his regent from 1483-1491.[241] Anne's position of authority and influence over the court was legitimised by her position as regent, sister to the king, and duchess of Bourbon. During her regency Anne, and later Louise of Savoy, modelled their regencies on the virtues described by Christine de Pizan.[242] Through her influence in court, Anne secured her family's rule and arranged the marriage between her brother and Anne of Britanny, therefore consolidating the duchy of Brittany under French rule.[243]

In her essay, Aubrée David-Chapy creates a connection between Anne of France's *Lessons* and Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, as both instruct their audience in how to create an idealised public image and focus on being able to determine between reality and a fashioned appearance.[244] While Castiglione's book primarily discusses male courtiers, it is important to compare his and Anne's opinion on the appearance of women. As noted earlier, Anne's *Lessons* combine the practicality of utilising beauty practices to fashion an idealised reputation of virtue, while Castiglione merely intrusts that women should 'be natural' and 'be beautiful' while also adhering to the common virtues. In contrast, Anne's work speaks directly to the women of her court, guiding them on how to govern and succeed in a system that values women primarily for their appearance and virtuous reputation. Her portrait in Figure 3 should be viewed in context with Anne's philosophy of expressing power, as illustrated in her book *Lessons for My Daughter.*[245]

Adding to the confusing abundance of women named Anne in this section, the right panel of the Moulins Triptych illustrates Saint Anne presenting Anne of France and her daughter Suzanne to the Madonna and child. Saint Anne was the mother of the virgin Mary and, as such, creates a parallel between Anne of France, also a mother to a daughter, and suggests that the regent has a close relationship to Christ, as his own grandmother is facilitating her introduction. The inclusion

[241] Aubrée David-Chapy, "The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie: From the Genesis to the Glory of Female Regency," in *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 44.
[242] David-Chapy, "Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 52.
[243] David-Chapy, "Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 50, 51;
Kathleen Anne Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 66.
[244] David-Chapy, "Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 55.
[245] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 68-79.

of the saint and the subject's positions of prayer also highlights Anne of France's piety and virtue. This focus on piety and virtue, present in Anne's writing, is also visually displayed to an audience, illustrating the legitimisation of her powerful position. Both Anne of France and her husband, Peter II, commissioned the Triptych. On the left panel, Peter II, also kneeling, is presented to Mary and Jesus by Saint Peter.

In addition to the image of Saint Anne guarding over Anne and her daughter, several other messages are displayed to the viewer. Anne is crowned over a head cap of gold and jewels. It was the fashion for older and married women to cover their hair as a form of modesty. Anne is also wearing a mantel of red cloth lined inside with white fabric. Her bodice is also lined with white ermine with a stomacher of gold and jewels. Red and white are again reoccurring colours symbolising purity and passion, and ermine fur was reserved only for royalty.[246] Anne is also wearing a black skirt, black was an extremely expensive colour to make, as it required heavy amounts of costly dyes to darken the fabric.[247] Anne herself is illustrated with dark hair, pale skin, a high hairline, and thin eyebrows. These last aspects of her appearance fall within the standard at the time, but rather than being painted with a more 'venus-like' appearance, Anne is presented with an almost severe countenance, perhaps once again using her outer appearance to reflect her inner virtues and fashion an image of a leader who models her governance on moral virtues and displays political acumen. As a regent of France and a wife and mother, Anne no longer needs to utilise beauty to attract a spouse through a marriage portrait like that of Bianca Sforza and Isabella of Aragon. Anne now utilises the language of beauty and appearance to reflect competent and respected leadership. By the language of beauty, I refer to the fact that this portrait is still an idealised version of Anne, and her appearance is fashioned to represent the values she wishes to portray. Her dress is also an important indicator of her status, which is a theme often addressed in her book.

Anne's daughter Suzanne is also a key figure in this panel, as she is depicted praying behind Anne. Suzanne is painted smaller than Anne, reflecting her young age and lower importance compared to her mother. Suzanne is also wearing a small crown; her brown hair is uncovered, and she, too, is covered in jewels and ermine. Suzanne is shown in almost the same dress as her

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[246] Drew-Bear, *Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage*, 21-23.
[247] Alexandra Bosc, *L'étoffe Des Flamands* (Snoeck Publishers, 2022), 114.

mother. However, she wears no mantel and is dressed in red and flowered gold cloth with the hand of Saint Anne on her head. Suzanne's inclusion in the painting is indicative of her status as her parent's sole heir. Something missing in the Triptych is the presence of Anne's brother Charles VIII. The Triptych is intended to celebrate the regency of Anne and her husband, placing the viewer's focus on her nuclear family. However, it is still surprising that her brother is entirely absent from the image.

Anne's family portrait in the Triptych is a powerful message to the audience. The painting illustrates her rule as pious and divinely guided, and her role as a female regent who used her image to present a reputation of a leader who shaped their public image through symbols of virtue, wealth, and status, using beauty practices such as dress only to enhance the depiction of these values.

Anne of Brittany

Anne of Brittany (1477–1514) was the daughter of the Duke of Brittany and, as her parent's heir, succeeded her father in 1488.[248] Only 12, Anne quickly became embroiled in French claims to her Duchey, which ended in her arranged marriage to Charles VIII, the brother of Anne of France.[249] Childless, Charles died in 1498, and Anne was married to his successor Louis XII (1462–1515).[250] Louis would later go on to invade and claim the kingdom of Naples.[251] Anne of Brittany became queen consort of France twice. In her her second marriage, she negotiated for more autonomy in her governance of Brittany, which she endeavoured to keep separate from France.[252]

Figure 2. Horae Ad Usum Romanum, Dites Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne

[248] Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France*, 61, 62.
[249] Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France*, 64.
[250] Cynthia J Brown, *The Queen's Library Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany, 1477-1514* (University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 1.
[251] Brown, *The Queen's Library Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany,* 86.
[252] Brown, *The Queen's Library Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany,* 98.

Anne of Brittany was a prolific patron in the French court and continued to follow the methods established by her predecessor Anne of France.[253] On folio 3r of the manuscript *Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne* (BnF ms. lat. 9474), an illumination by Jean Bourdichon depicts his patron, Anne, kneeling in prayer.[254] The Book of Hours is thought to date from between 1503-1508, placing Anne in her thirties at the time of the book's commissioning.[255] The illumination in *Figure 2.* depicts Anne kneeling in prayer, surrounded by Saint Anne, Saint Ursula and Saint Catherine. In this image commissioned by Anne, we see her prominent placement—highlighting her as a queen who is pious and divinely guided. Interestingly, behind her is a flag bearing the symbols of Brittany, signalling Anne out as the sole ruler of her Duchey despite her marriage to the French king. Anne is painted in an idealised light and wears the period's fashions with wide fur sleeves and a French hood gilded in gold. She is dressed in golden brocaded cloth and wears pearls and jewels around her neck. She is also presented with pale skin and blushed cheeks, further emphasising her beauty.

Figure 3. Des Remedes de Fortune [de PETRARQUE]

The image in *Figure 2* celebrates Anne, highlighting her beauty and signalling her independence as ruler of Brittany. However, this image, seemingly made in praise of Anne, is in steep contrast with one commissioned by her husband. In *Figure 3,*[256] we see several political statements made by Louis XII about his wife.[257] In this painting, we see a court procession led by Louis XII to confront the virtue Reason about his lack of male heirs. In the image, Louis speaks to Reason, seated on a throne. He points at Anne, looking unhappy in the bottom left corner. Anne is shown surrounded by her ladies, and she modestly looks down as she holds her daughter Claude on her lap. Cynthia

[253] Brown, *The Queen's Library Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany,* 21-22; Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France*, 100, 104.
[254] Brown, *The Queen's Library Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany,* 83.
[255] Jean Bourdichon, *Horae Ad Usum Romanum, Dites Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne*, 1503, *Gallica.bnf.fr*, 1503, National Library of France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52500984v/f14.item.
[256] *Des Remedes de Fortune [de PETRARQUE]*, 1503, *Gallica.bnf.fr*, 1503, National Library of France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b60007782/f341.item.
[257] Brown, *The Queen's Library Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany,* 1-4.

Brown writes that while "mother and daughter appear at first glance to be visually celebrated, but are in fact pictorially and textually questioned."[258] The illumination in *Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne,* commissioned by Anne, depicts her as she wanted to be presented—as Brittany's pious and autonomous leader. This is even more apparent when, through the lens of her Husband's patronage, she is depicted in a more subservient and subordinate light.

3.3 Conclusion

Through the writing of Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta, we see that married women continued to utilise beauty practices to achieve the social benefits of adhering to the beauty standard. However, while beauty continued to facilitate social influence for women during this life stage, the ways in which women used beauty practices changed. Women adapted their use to accommodate their changing roles as wives and mothers and the associated cultural expectations. Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta also debate the value of virtue over beauty and discuss their own nuanced opinions about the relationship between married women who applied beauty practices for social gain. Anne of France and Isabella d'Este's more practical views give us insights into the utility of an idealised image through the use of portraits, dress, and reputation.

In contrast to marriage portraits, the portraiture of married women in the 15th century was used to solidify and maintain social connections outside of marriage. As seen through d'Este's letters, elite women commissioned portraits to be shared with those in their networks. They used visual symbols of beauty, wealth, virtue and piety to fashion public images expressing and legitimising their authority. As women aged and no longer needed high-profile marriages for themselves, the role of beauty and beauty practices shifted to maintaining cultural influence and projecting an image of good governance. This can be seen in the illustrations of Anne of France and Anne of Brittany, who utilised dress and visual depictions of piety to self-fashion reputations aligned with their political positions and social roles. In the case of Anne of Brittany, we can also see the contrast between her own self-fashioning and that of her husband, Louis XII, who desired a male heir and control over his wife's duchy.

[258] Brown, *The Queen's Library Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany,* 3.

Chapter Four of this thesis will examine what role, if any, beauty continued to play in the lives of elite women who had outgrown their youth or become widows. The chapter will examine how women continued to fashion their image and reputation and analyses the primary authors' opinions on the relationship between old age, widowhood, and beauty practices.

CHAPTER FOUR: Older Women in Marriage and in Widowhood

"…whatever beauty a woman has had, once she has passed the age of forty, there is no clothing, however beautiful, that can make the wrinkles on her face disappear."[259]

For women in the late medieval period, ageing presented new challenges to their status within the community. Women past their youth were no longer considered marriageable and, therefore, not expected to resemble the beauty standard of the youthful Venus. However, some older women, like Isabella d'Este, continued to maintain their appearance according to the standards of their age through cosmetics in order to reap the benefits associated with retaining some semblance of youth. Moreover, D'Este and her contemporaries also continued to self-fashion their public appearance through portraiture.

In her book, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages*, Irina Metzler writes that from the Ancient period to the early modern, old age was generally considered to be between the age of sixty and seventy.[260] She writes that during the medieval period, old age was the last life stage and one in which physical and even mental degeneration occurred.[261] However, age was also thought to bring wisdom, and one's experience was considered dependent on how one lived their life up until that point—including the sins committed in their youth. While Metzler's chapter on age generally focuses on the physical impairments associated with ageing and the inability to perform work, she also writes about the gendered expression of age in the literature of the period. Metzler explains that while male ageing was dependent upon the physical condition of the body, women's ageing was dictated by menstruation.[262] The late medieval definition of women entering 'old age' is determined by being post-menopausal, just as women's entrance into 'adulthood' is determined by the beginning of menstruation in adolescence.[263] Metzler writes that in literature, older women were often depicted as ugly, ill-formed, and even poisonous because they could no longer expel menstrual blood, which was considered to be toxic.[264] With such negative depictions

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[259] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter*, 86-87.
[260] Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2013), 98.
[261] Metzler, *A Social History of Disability,* 101.
[262] Metzler, *A Social History of Disability,* 114.
[263] Metzler, *A Social History of Disability,* 112.
[264] Metzler, *A Social History of Disability,* 113-117; For more on old age in general, see also:

of ageing women, it is no wonder that many utilized beauty practices to avoid comparison to these illustrations. Or that in official portraits, women still desired an idealized image over accuracy.

Fertility was a large part of an elite woman's value, as heirs were essential for continuing family lineage and creating marital binds with other aristocratic families. However, post-menopausal women were still able to maintain and gain influence by utilising their social positions and emotional strategies over their family members.[265] Elite women could also take advantage of their social networks to maintain authority over their children and gain influence within their communities. As noted in previous chapters, their influence was built upon the reputations they had established during their earlier life stages. While older women were no longer expected to retain the appearance of their youth, they were expected to dress according to their social position. In entering the final life stage, they continued to use the beauty practices of dress and cosmetics to maintain some aspects of youthful beauty and to continue fashioning a public image which fit the culturally acceptable roles for their age. Strategies in self-fashioning, such as the use of beauty practices and patronage, could also be used to cultivate a lasting reputation of authority and respectability, perpetuating an enduring and captivating image of power. Women such as Anne of France and Louis of Savoy commissioned and utilised portraiture to emphasise their royal status, as well as their piety and virtue, qualities which, unlike beauty, lasted beyond the earlier stages of life.[266]

This chapter will focus on how beauty, or the maintenance of a younger appearance, could facilitate social influence even in an older life stage or widowhood. Using examples from authors Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta, section 4.1 will analyse views on the application of beauty practices later in life. While Pizan's *City of the Ladies* provides few examples of ageing protagonists, her inclusion of widows is important in examining the changing expectations of beauty practices for women transitioning between the life stages of marriage and widowhood. Section 4.2 will further analyse how idealised portraits

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Gretchen Meizkowski, "Old Age an Medieval Misogyny: The Old Woman," in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 299–319; Albrecht Classen, *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 217-302.

[265] Broomhall, *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563*, 11.

[266] David-Chapy, "The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 52-53.

continued to be a critical part of establishing cultural influence and fashioning a reputation and legacy that would live beyond the subject and their contemporaries.

4.1 Primary Source Authors

Authors Anne of France, Christine de Pizan, and Laura Cereta were all writing from the perspective of older women and widows. While Isabella d'Este's letters span her life, the letters used in this section are selected from the period after her husband's death in 1519.[267] In this period d'Este continued to take part in the governance of Mantua, often writing to and advising her sons while continuing to retain her autonomy and make decisions independently. The passages in this section contain insights into the experiences and ideals of women who reached old age or became widows. It will become clear that beauty practices continued to be utilised by women who had reached old age, and we can, in part, attribute this to the importance of keeping up appearances and the general negativity surrounding older women in medieval culture.

Isabella d'Este

Isabella d'Este continued to use cosmetics and dress to uphold her reputation as head of the Gonzaga family and a politically powerful and culturally influential leader in the Mantuan court.[268] In their older stages of life, she and her sister-in-law, Elizabetta Gonzago, ruled their courts and took charge of family networks and politics.[269] From d'Este's letters after her husband's death, we can see that in addition to concerns over the governance of her city and the economic prosperity of her family, d'Este wrote to request expensive and exotic cosmetics. For example, in 1531 d'Este (57 at the time) sent a letter to Giovanni Borromeo requesting soap and other items for beauty and cleanliness.[270] That same year she also wrote a letter to Benedetto Angello requesting perfumed water from Venice.[271] In this letter, she asks for *acqua nanfa,* a distilled liquid made from orange blossoms, along with demask water from Venice and an order

[267] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 437.
[268] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 441-443.
[269] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 463.
[270] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 546.
[271] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 550.

of silk. These letters requesting luxurious fabrics and beauty and hygiene items suggest d'Este's continued interest in fashion as a beauty practice and a desire to maintain her appearance. By connecting d'Este's consumption of these products to her letters concerning portraiture and her opinions regarding her own and other women's appearance (as discussed in chapters two and three), we see that as an older woman and widow, she still considered beauty an important part of a woman's public image. This is perhaps most evident in her letters describing her son's potential spouses and what she sought in a daughter-in-law. While we have little evidence for her views relating to her daughter's public image, we do have her opinions on her son's potential brides and the portraiture of her female correspondents. In her edition, Shemek writes that early 20th-century scholarship on d'Este often painted her as vain and frivolous.[272] While d'Este does not often write specifically about beauty or buying items for beauty practices, it is clear that she was aware of the social benefits of utilizing beauty practices to adhere to the standard, and as such, used strategic applications of these practices to fashion a reputation which would embody the qualities of the ideal noblewoman.

However, perhaps most integral to this chapter's discussion of beauty and reputation is the complimentary poem d'Este received in 1521 from Gian Giorgio Trissino. In her response to Trissino, she writes, "We read the most learned and most elegant song you sent us, with which you honour us and ascribe to us much more than benefits our condition."[273] This poem by Trissino is cited by Mary Rogers in her article, 'The decorum of women's beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the representation of women in sixteenth-century painting'.[274] In this article, Rogers writes about word painting and party games in which elite persons would pass around portraits or descriptions of their famous contemporaries and try to guess whom they described. Trissino's *Ritratti* is a poem describing a scene in Milan in 1507.[275] In this poem, he describes a Ferarese woman spotted on her way to church. The woman described is a younger Isabella d'Este. However, the poem was officially published in 1524, three years after d'Este's letter of thanks was sent to Trissino.

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[272] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 5-9.
[273] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 459.
[274] Mary Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the Representation of Women in Sixteenth-Century Painting," *Renaissance Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 1988): 47–88, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.1988.tb00137.x.
[275] Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty," 49.

Rogers writes that Trissino's poem about d'Este first describes her beauty, virtues, and talents; d'Este was known by her contemporaries as a talented singer and took lessons.[276] In the imagery created by Trissino, two men watch as d'Este exits her carriage with an open prayer book in hand and walks into the church, followed by many attendants. Rogers states that, most critically, Trissino's image depicts a public appearance by a political figure.[277] D'Este's appearance, adorned in finery with a retinue, represents her wealth, status, and piety. Notably, Rogers also writes that these physical depictions of the female elite were often focused on the face and their dress, avoiding physical descriptions that suggested some insight into the subjects' bodies and inappropriate intimacy.[278] The poem's complementary image of d'Este's holding and reading of a prayer book evokes the lessons Anne of France taught in her book, suggesting that d'Este cares for the virtue of not just herself but also her court.

In addition, while Trissino's poem illustrates a scene 14 years prior, the version of d'Este he describes adheres to the beauty standard, and the image presented adds to her reputation as a woman whose beauty is shown just as vibrantly on the outside as her virtue from within. While this poem depicts d'Este as a young woman, it is sent to her later when she perhaps no longer fits the image presented in Trisssino's work. Her delight with the poem indicates her desire to continue building her image as a powerful influence on the fashion and culture of her peers. The poem's image of d'Este is also important as it reflects the author and contemporary culture's value of beauty in elite women as a marker of their cultural relevance and significance. As both an influential and highly educated member of the elite, d'Este provides a fascinating example of the practical uses of beauty in patronage and image-making, particularly when viewed in context with author Laura Cereta, who was critical of beauty culture.

Anne of France

Like Isabella d'Este, who continued to govern Mantua while a mother and new widow, Anne of France remained a figure of cultural influence in the French court long after her regency. In *Lessons for My Daughter*, Anne of France instructs her daughter on transitioning from a young

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[276] Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty," 51.
[277] Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty," 51.
[278] Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty," 58.

married woman to entering old age. In this passage, Anne advises how to navigate the criticisms of others at court by dressing well while avoiding the negative attention of people's envy. She writes:

> "In addition, my daughter, you must ensure they are sensibly dressed, without excessive pride, so that they will not attract envy. As I told you before, envy will often damage their well-being and discourage their advancement; for this reason, always be sensible, setting them a good example. And when they [your daughters] reach an age to be fully arrayed, little by little reduce your own adornment, always conducting yourself honorably so that no one has any reason to speak ill of you; never behave as those arrogant mothers who display themselves with their daughters, next to whom they look like grandmothers! Such women are mocked, so it is better to avoid such behavior and take up some gracious pastime when you reach this age. I do not mean to say that a noblewoman, whatever her age or rank, should not, within reason, show herself to best advantage over others, but whatever beauty a woman has had, once she has passed the age of forty, there is no clothing, however beautiful, that can make the wrinkles on her face disappear. Therefore you should act your age."[279]

In this excerpt, Anne details how adornment should decrease with age. Moreover, one should never attract too much attention, which might lead to negative assumptions about virtue. She also suggests that incurring the envy of others could be damaging to Suzanne's advancement, and her focus should be on creating positive connections which inspire admiration in others instead of jealousy. When speaking about ageing, Anne also warns her daughter to avoid falling into the

[279] Jansen, *Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter,* 86-87; "Outre, ma fille, les devez tenir raisonnablement habillées, sans grant orgueil, affin que sur elles on n'aye nulle envye. Car, comme je vous ay dit devant, par l'envye des maulvaix sont plusieurs reboutez de leur bien et avancement; pour ce, mectez raison partout, en leur donnant exemple de bien en mieulx. Et quant elles seront en eage de porter atours, peu à peu vous devez laisser les vostres, en vous conduisant tous jours honnorablement, affin qu'on n'aye occasion d'en mal parler, sans faire ainsi que ces oultrecuidées mères, à qui il semble beau d'estre veues devant leur filles, auprès des quelles elles souvent ressemblentestre gransmères,dont elles sont mocquées. Par quoy il s'en fait bon garder, pendant qu'il est assez d'autres gracieux passetemps, en cest eage. Combien que je ne veulx pas dire, que nobles femmes, en quelque eage ou estât qu'elles soient, ne se puissent en raison mieulx monstrer que nulle des autres. Et, depuis que une femme a passé quarente ans quelque beaulté que jamais elle ait eue, l'on voit qu'il n'est habillement, tant soit bien fait qui luy puisse, musser les fronces du visaige. Par quoi l'on se [doit] maintenir selon l'eage que l'on a." Anne de France, *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France ... à Sa Fille Susanne de Bourbon, Publ. Par A.-M. Chazaud*, 1878, Ch XXV 106-108.

trap of seeking youthful looks in old age. Anne instructs Suzanne that when she reaches old age (around 40), she should still dress to her best advantage, keeping in mind how she wants to be perceived by others, but recognise the change in her social role.

Entering this older stage of life, Anne advises her daughter to choose a pastime that will increase her reputation, perhaps one which will continue cultivating a culture of virtue and piety within her household. As discussed in Chapter Three, Anne utilised beauty practices to present herself as a powerful but practical ruler whose image (pictured in Fig 1.)[280] symbolised her piety, virtue, and social position rather than emphasised her beauty or fashion. Anne's warning against competing with younger women, including one's own daughter, is particularly poignant as she was writing from the perspective of a mother nearing old age herself—one who recognised the change in her stage of life and modified her public image accordingly.

Christine de Pizan

Metzler cites Christine de Pizan's *City of the Ladies* in her chapter on ageing, where she notes that in addition to Pizan's general defence of women, she advises the young to respect the old for their wisdom and argues that bodily decline only increases a woman's virtue.[281] While Pizan includes no explicit stories about ageing women, she does include many on honourable widows. For example, the tale of Judith was popular as an example of a virtuous and powerful widow for late medieval women.[282] While Judith is a young widow, she is held up as an ideal that exemplifies virtue and justifies widows' power in utilizing their appearance for the benefit of their community. Pizan writes:

> "Judith, the noble widow, saved the people of Israel from destruction…Holofernes and his great army were besieging the Jews inside the city and had already inflicted so much damage on them that they could scarcely hold out much longer…God heard their

[280] Jean Hey, *The Triptych of the Master of Moulins*, Moulins Cathedral, accessed June 21, 2023, https://paroisse-notredamedemoulins.catholique-moulins.fr/triptyque-du-maitre-de-moulins/.
[281] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 119, 214, 215.
[282] Kathleen M. Llewellyn, "The Example of Judith in Early Modern French Literature Kathleen M. Llewellyn," in *The Sword of Judith*, ed. Kevin R Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann (Open Book Publishers, 2010), 214.

prayers…He chose on this occasion to send a woman to their rescue…Judith, who was a young and lovely woman of exemplary virtue and chastity… Judith hatched a daring plan…and headed for Holofernes's camp. When the soldiers who were on sentry duty saw in the moonlight how beautiful she was, they took her straight to Holofernes, who was delighted to receive such a dazzling woman. He made her sit down beside him and was soon entranced by her intelligence, proud bearing and beauty. The more he gazed at her, the more he burned with desire for her. She, who had other ideas, offered up a silent prayer to God to beg for His help in her endeavours…When he [Holofernes] told her what he wanted, she was ready to do as he wished on condition that, for the sake of propriety, he made all his men leave his tent. He should then get into bed first, to be joined by Judith at midnight when everyone else was asleep…When Judith thought that Holofernes would have fallen asleep, she and her maidservant crept up to the opening of his tent…She went inside and fearlessly grabbed hold of his sword … she cut off Holofernes's head without making a sound…Thus the people of Israel were delivered out of the hands of Holofernes by Judith, that valiant woman whose praises shall be sung forever in Holy Scripture."[283]

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[283] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 131-132; "Judich. La noble dame vesve, sauva le pueple d'Isreal d'estre periz… Et comme le dit Olophernes eust a moult grant puissance assigiez les Juyfs en la cité, et ja les avoit si malmenés que mais ne se povoyent tenir, et les conduis de l'eaue leur avoit toulus et tous vivres leur estoyent comme au faillir, ne n'avoyent mais esperance de eulx povoir tenir, et estoyent Juyfs si comme au point d'estre pris de celluy qui moult les menaçoit dont ilz estoyent a grant douleur;...Dieu ouy leurs oroisons; et si comme il voulst sauver l'umain lignage par femme, voulst Dieux yceulx autresi secourir et sauver par femme. "En celle cité estoit adonc Judich, la noble preudeffemme, qui encore jeune femme estoit et moult belle, mais encore trop plus chaste et meilleure estoit. Celle ot moult grant pitie du pue pple qu'elle veoit en si grant desolacion, si prioit Nostre Seigneur jour et nuit que secourir les voulsist…Seigneur, se parti de la cité entre elle et sa servante et ala tant que elle vint en l'ost de Olophernes. Et quant ceulx qui faisoyent le guait de l'ost apperceurent a la lumiere de la lune sa grant biauté, ilz la menerent tantost a Olophernes qui a grant joye la receut pource que elle estoit belle. Et coste luy la fist seoir et moult prisa son sçavoir, biauté et maintien; et en la regardant estoit fort embrase d'elle, et par grant desir la couvoitoit. Mais celle, qui ailleurs penssoit, priot tousjours Dieu en son couraige que il luy pleust luy estre en ayde de parfurnir ce que faire vouloit.…Celle par belles parolles avoit tousjours pourmené Olophernes tant qu'elle veist son point.…Il luy dist sa voulenté, et celle point ne l'en escondit; mais elle luy dist que elle luy prioit que pour plus grant honneste té, il feist vuidier son pavillon de toute gent et qu'il se couchast le premier, et qu'elle vendroit a luy sans faille environ minuit, quant chascun dormiroit. Ainsi celluy l'accorda;...Quant Judich penssa que Olophernes fust endormis, elle vint tout coyement entre elle et sa meschine et escoute a l'uys du pavillon et entend que celluy dormoit tres fort. Adont dist la dame: 'Allons hardiement, car Dieux est avec nous.' Si entra dedens; et sans paour prist l'espee qu'elle vid au chievet et la trait nue, puis la haulça de toute sa force et trencha a Olophernes la teste sans que de nul fust ouye, si met le chief en son giron et le plus tost que elle pot s'en vet vers la cité tant que sans encombre vint aux portes; si hucha: 'Venez, venés ouvrir, car Dieux est avec nous.'... Et ainsi fu de livré le pueple de Dieu des mains de Olophernes par Judich, la preudesfemme, qui tousjours en la sainte Escripture en sera louee." Christine de Pizan and Curnow, *The Livre de La Cité Des Dames of Christine de Pisan*, 857-860.

In this story, Judith uses her beauty to ensnare the evil Holofernes but maintains her chastity and purity through his beheading. While this story serves as an example of a woman who used her appearance and intelligence to benefit her community, the tale also shows the lengths to which the character of Judith would go to maintain her 'virtue'. While committing murder hardly seems virtuous, for Pizan, Judith is a standard for widows to hold themselves. She is active in politics, uses her virtue and agency for pious ends, and maintains her virtue despite circumstances which could have tested it.

While Judith is described as a model widow through her piety and chastity, there is a conflict between this ideal image and her 'seduction' of Holofernes. Pizan tries to smooth this over by eliminating any descriptions of Judith's further use of beauty practices to seduce the king, leading the reader to assume that Judith's beauty is natural and Holofernes's attraction to her is an unintentional consequence of her appearance. In this version, Judith is passive about the king's desire until she decides to take advantage of his interest to benefit her people. There is an important distinction between how Pizan describes Judith and Queen Esther.[284] In Esther's story, she uses beauty practices to seduce her husband, spending several nights with him to convince him to help her people. However, in Judith's story, the widow is passive about her appearance and tricks the king into stopping his siege without compromising her virtue. This difference stems from the characters' marital status and the acceptability of using beauty practices during widowhood. While Judith is described as a young widow, Pizan's telling of the story shows us that applying beauty practices during widowhood was no longer considered socially acceptable. This idea ties in with a general criticism of beauty culture, as seen in Cereta's work, but also provides further nuance on contemporary attitudes towards widows and beauty.

During the older stages of a woman's life, many became widows. This category brought its own cultural and legal expectations. As a social status, widows were a distinct category but not always separate from the characterisation of older women.[285] Widows were often portrayed as poor and destitute or modest paragons of virtue. In contrast to Judith in Pizan's *City of the Ladies,* young widows without children often remarried. For women, remarriage with

[284] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 133.
[285] Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 124-127.

stepchildren, or the possibility of having their own, could result in some financial security and allow elite women to maintain their social status as the caretakers of their husband's heirs.[286] However, for Pizan, ideally, a widow would not have to remarry. Instead, she could use her agency to devote herself to the pursuit of virtue, piety, and community building, as exemplified in the story of Judith.

As with our primary authors, who were all elite widows, women often retained control over some aspect of their dower. Apart from Laura Cereta, all had children with their partners and retained a prominent position in their households. In some sense, widowhood provided a limited amount of independence and agency for elite women. While being widowed did not come with the same expectations as those for older women, as displayed in Pizan's writing, widows were expected to continue upholding the values of chastity, virtue and piety. However, like Judith, young widowed women were still somewhat held to the same beauty standards as young married women. Pizan's philosophical view on the ideal behaviour and characteristics of widows was highly influential for Louise of Savoy, a French regent and widow who shaped her image around the virtues described by Pizan.[287] Elite women like Savoy and Laura Cereta also adopted ideas that criticised women who engaged with beauty culture. As discussed earlier in this thesis, Cereta was a strong proponent of women rejecting beauty culture.

Laura Cereta

In keeping with Pizan's examples of ideal widows, Laura Cereta described her own appearance as plain, and she claimed to model her behaviour on biblical and classical examples like Odysseus's humble wife and weaver Penelope.[288] Cereta also writes that while men may seek women for beauty—as exemplified by Helen of Troy and Cleopatra—she decided to model herself after the biblical examples of Rebecca and Rachel. Cereta explains that these more modest women are known for their integrity and modesty rather than their beauty and male

[286] Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*,120-124.
[287] David-Chapy, "The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 52-54.
[288] In her chapter, Natasha Amendola wirtes about Cereta's use of weaving metaphors in relation to her own virtue and ideal feminine characteristics. Natasha Amendola, "Weaving Virtue: Laura Cereta as a New Penelope," in *Virtue Ethics for Women 1250-1500*, ed. Karen Green and Constant Mews (Dordrecht, NL: Springer, 2011),137-138.

admirers.[289] With this stance, Cereta separates herself from her female peers and bolsters her broader argument against women's focus on beauty, and utilizing appearance for advantage. While Pizan seems to take a more benevolent view of women using their beauty for the good of their communities, Cereta takes a more expansive hardline approach and criticises beauty culture as a societal problem.

In her letter to Augostino Emilio, Laura Cereta writes about the feminine culture she sees around her. In this example, she focuses on the application of beauty practices, claiming that women's use of and focus on beauty are to blame for a general degradation of virtue in society. She writes:

> "Wives are too often led astray by ostentation; but the men who squander their patrimonies because of their appetite for such display err more profoundly. Today our city has become a disciple in the passions of women…In no age has there been a more wasteful tolerance for vanity…Some of these women sport a knot of somebody else's hair piled up like a tower; another woman's hair hangs down on her foreheaded in curls. Another puts her blond hair up, tying it back with a soft gold clasp so that she bares her neck; still others wear necklaces on their shoulders or arms, or hanging down from their necks to their breasts. Some wind strings of pearls around their throats, as though they were captives proud of being owned by free men; most of these display fingers sparkling with gems…Some trail silken tunics from their shoulders. Still others, redolent with perfumes, swathe themselves in Arabian veils. Women who reveal slippers turned into high-heeled footgear of leather are not poorly dressed, but it is common knowledge that other, more elegant women bind their legs more delicately with fine cloth wrappings." [290]

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[289] Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 83-84.

[290] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 83 -84; Ad Augustinū AEmylium. Lau. Cer. deploration. "Falluntur nimium pompis Vxores: Delirant magis, qui pro earum appetitu patrimonia dilacerant. Hodie amore mulierum Ciuitas nostra discipula facta est, immo spoliatrix orientis. Nulla aetate prodigalior vanitatis creuit hicluxus. Ingrediantur increduli stationes Ecelesie: Conspiciant plenas matronis sedentibus nuptias: Intueantur eas, quae maiestate superbâ medium per plateas populum secant. Harum hanc, atq; illam ex alienis capillis in summū verticem tuttitus nodas adstingit. Huis crines in frontem undatim crispi dependent. Illasulous ut colla denudet, auro molli subnectit. Haec humero, illa brachio, ista collo in pectus habet monile demissum: Aliae gulam sufferunt margaritarum nexu substrietam tanquam ex libris glorientur haberi eaptiuae: Radiantes item pleraeque digitos gemmis ostendunt: Sed haec ambitione fratumet angustiore cingulo pectus arctatum: Trahunt sericas humero tunicas aliae: Aliae fragrantes odoribus paliolo subtergunter arabico. Nec desunt, quae cum scaligeris suppedalibus inuersos pelle proferant soacos. Est et peruulgatum in omnes, quòd lautiores alio sindonicis fasciolis euincta mollius crura subtexunt." Laura Cereta and Giacomo Filippo aut Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae Brixiensis Feminae Clarissimae Epistolae Jam*

In this excerpt, Cereta suggests that women are easily swayed from the path of virtue by indulging in beauty practices. She implies that women's desire to look beautiful is harmful to society as a whole, and while she acknowledges and condemns men for creating a culture which rewards beauty, she still focuses her criticism on what she sees as women's errors. For example, in her criticisms of women adorning their necks with pearls, the passage suggests that women who use beauty practices to attract men are in some way giving up their agency. In that line, Cereta balances the symbolism of pearls (purity and chastity) with the corruption she connects with the use of jewels to enhance one's appearance.

In another criticism, Cereta notes the style of tying hair back in a low ponytail to bare one's neck. Examples of this style are visible in the portraits of Isabella of Aragon and Bianca Maria Sforza, discussed in Chapter Two. Cereta also emphasizes the unchristian nature of beauty practices by comparing women wearing expensive foreign goods (like Arabian silks and high heels) to the Ottomans, further illustrating a lack of piety.

In the same letter, another quote focuses on ageing women who use cosmetics to conceal their years and preserve a youthful visage. She writes:

> "Many women press bread on their faces to soften it, and many erroneously polish skin that is full of wrinkles. Truly, there are few women who do not paint their bloodshot faces with a snow-white powder made from white lead. Some strive to seem more beautiful in their exquisite and exotic dress than the creator of beauty intended them to be. One is ashamed of the irreverence of certain women who redden their milk-white cheeks with purple dye, and who use their furtive little eyes and laughing mouths to pierce the hearts, already poisoned, of those who gaze on them. Ah, how careworn one's brow grows at such a greedy consuming of honor."[291]

Primum È M S in Lucem Productae À Iacobo Philippo Tomasino, Qui Eius Vitam, & Notas Addidit .., *Internet Archive*, Epist.XXX. 67-68.

[291] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 84 -85; "Eollitum multae premunt panem in vultum. Multae distentam à rugis talsò cutem expoliunt: Sunt verò paucae, quibus non sanguineę facies cerusae candore pingantur: Aliae alio et exquisitiore cultu formosiores videri derinituntur, quàm conditor formae disposuit ostro rubentium, quae furtiuis ocellis et ridentibus buccis venenata intuentium corda transuerberant. Proh deuorati pudoristrita frons:" Laura Cereta and Giacomo Filippo aut Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae Brixiensis Feminae*

Here Cereta gives more examples of beauty practices used to enhance one's appearance and reduce signs of ageing. She describes older women who try to soften their skin and erase wrinkles through cosmetics. Her criticisms levelled at older women seem even harsher than those given to women in general. Her example of "bloodshot faces" references an aged face, which she writes women try to cover up with white lead. She also references the use of cosmetics to colour the face according to the ideal skin tone of red and white. White lead was poisonous and damaged the skin, often causing the wearer to continue using it to cover up the damage.

Cereta also cites ostentatious dress as an overused and corrupt beauty practice, explaining that women use dress to make themselves more beautiful than God had intended—thus suggesting that an unnatural appearance is sinful. In addition to the sinful nature of beauty practices, Cereta criticises the behaviour and strategies employed by women to attract men. However, through her criticism, she unintentionally illustrates the importance of beauty and the appearance of youth as important, even into the beginning of old age. In her writing, Cereta reprimands women for believing that beauty is their most valuable asset and expresses her opinion that women who indulge in beauty practices are wasting time, they should devote to virtue. An analysis of the passage above gives us insight into the beauty practices used, the continued importance of beauty in the social influence of women, and the lengths to which ageing women would go to retain youth, perhaps because they perceived their appearance as critical to their social success.

In a more general criticism of the culture that facilitates what she sees as sinful behaviour, Cereta asks:

> "Alas, how crooked is the weakness of our sex in its delights. For what else have we that would enable us to imitate nobility other than earrings shimmering with rubies and emeralds dangling from our ears? For we weren't born to dote with corrupt devotion on the images of our own faces in the mirror, were we? Or have we Christian women refused ostentatiousness at our baptismal ceremonies so that we could make ourselves up like Jewish or pagan women? Our misguided ambition for this kind of superiority should

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Clarissimae Epistolae Jam Primum È M S in Lucem Productae À Iacobo Philippo Tomasino, Qui Eius Vitam, & Notas Addidit .., *Internet Archive*, Epist.XXX. 68-69.

> make us blush. The lascivious nature of our madness should make us shrink back in fear from such arrogance; and mindful of the ashes from which we have come, let us put an end to sins reborn from our desires.”[292]

The first lines of this passage suggest that women have been taught to value beauty over other qualities. This suggests that Cereta understood the perspective of the women who focused on their appearance. However, she also emphasizes the choice she believes women have. Rather than imitating what she sees as non-christian behaviour, they could focus on piety, reclaiming the Christian values they should emulate despite a patriarchal culture that sees women’s primary value stemming from their appearance. Cereta’s insistence that she tried to mould her behaviour and values upon the virtues of biblical characters was also not an uncommon strategy used by other female leaders. Perhaps Cereta’s perspectives on beauty practices and their role in the lives of married, widowed and older women are best illustrated through artistic representations of her contemporary, Louise of Savoy. Savoy commissioned artworks depicting herself in plain dress with solemn expressions and symbolism suggesting her piousness. Like Savoy, Isabella d’Este also used patronage to create lasting public representations of herself. The two women had very different approaches to self-fashioning, but both worked to cultivate lasting and influential reputations for themselves through portraiture.

<u>Perspectives</u>

The primary authors' passages relating to old age and widowhood illustrate the continued use of beauty practices in these life stages. However, these examples, particularly those of Laura Cereta, also reveal how women navigated increasing cultural commendation for using beauty

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[292] Cereta, *Collected Letters*, 85; “O’ curua in deliciis nostri sexus infirmitas! Quid nam ad gentilitatem imitandem restitit nobis, nifi ut ab auribus defluant armillulae, carbunculis smaragdis’q; tremetentes; Num ad hoc fortè gignimur, ut nostri vultus Idolum hac impudicâ deuotione adoremus in speculo? An obid in baptismate renuntiauimus pompis, ut Christianae Iudeas, barbaras’q; mentiamur? Erubescat in hac cupidine excellentię fracta nimis ambitio. Vereantur ab hoc tanto fastu lasciua nostri furoris ingenia, et memores cineris’, ex quo sumus, resecemus ab desideriis renascentes errores.” Laura Cereta and Giacomo Filippo aut Tomasini, *Laurae Ceretae Brixiensis Feminae Clarissimae Epistolae Jam Primum È M S in Lucem Productae À Iacobo Philippo Tomasino, Qui Eius Vitam, & Notas Addidit ..*, *Internet Archive*, Epist.XXX. 69.

practices while ageing and a broader cultural disdain for older women. This double standard initiated a shift in beauty practices to applications that benefited older and widowed women at this life stage—primarily those practices that highlighted their social status, virtue and authority. Section 4.2 will show how the themes represented in the textual analysis are illustrated through the portraiture of Isabella d'Este and Louise of Savoy. This section also discusses how the self-fashioning of these women played a part in their political ambitions and the creation of their legacy as symbols of female authority.

4.2 Older Women in Portraiture

Isabella d'Este

Figure 1. Isabella d'Este (1474-1539)

After Isabella d'Este's husband died in 1519, the family title was passed down to her son Frederico II Gonzaga.[293] However, Frederico was embroiled in a military campaign for Charles V (who attempted to force the French out of Naples), so Isabella remained regent of Mantua, taking part in the city's governance and arranging the sale of arms and weaponry to be sent to her son. Isabella also utilized her daughter's new position as the Duchess of Urbino to increase her family's influence over the region and initiate alliances with the pope and other aristocratic families.[294] As regent of Mantua and mother of the marquess, d'Este continued strategic acts of patronage, which aligned with her new role as an older woman and widow, or reflected her legacy through her image as a younger woman.[295]

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[293] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 441.
[294] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 442.
[295] Rose Marie San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma: Isabella d'Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 1991): 67–78,

The most famous painting of d'Este, 'Isabella in Black' by Titian (*Figure 1*), is based on an earlier portrait by Francesco Francia sent to Titian to use as a template.[296] In a letter sent to Benedetto Agnello from d'Este in 1534, she requests the return of this portrait, which Benedetto had borrowed, to have it sent to Titian for his reference.[297] D'Este wanted Titian to create a portrait of her younger self.[298] In her article, Sally Hickson writes that Titian often based his portraits of female aristocratic patrons on earlier portraits loaned to him by the subjects. Like d'Este, older women sometimes sought to have depictions of their younger selves reimagined by famous painters.[299] This trend also connects to the idea of family memory, suggesting that these older female patrons wanted to be remembered for an idealised version of their youthful beauty instead of an accurate representation of themselves in old age. The purpose of Titan's portrait was to create a living and natural image of Isabella in her youth. In her letters d'Este voices her expectation that a good portrait should still be recognisable to the subject. Hickson and Mary Rogers write that in painted likenesses and poems or 'word paintings' about the appearance of elite persons, specific physical and behavioural attributes were employed to make the interpreted description or image relatable to the audience.[300] It is also important to note that the audience would likely have already been familiar with the subjects through a shared social network.

In Titian's portrait, the first and most noticeable of d'Este's qualities is her youthful appearance. Her skin is pale and smooth, with a slight natural blush on her cheeks. Her eyes are grey, and her golden hair curls in a natural frame around her face. Regarding clothing, d'Este wears a turban-style headdress with a black dress, green embroidered sleeves, and a white undershirt. She is also sporting some kind of spotted exotic animal fur across her body like a sash. The only jewels d'Este wears are pearl earrings and a pearl and jewelled brooch on her headdress. In this image, d'Este shows off her wealth and powerful position but also depicts herself as a naturally beautiful woman who, like Venus, is in the springtime of her youth.

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[296] Titian, *Isabella d'Este, Margravine of Mantua (1474-1539)*, Oil on canvas, Vienna, Art History Museum, Vienna, accessed June 21, 2023, www.khm.at/de/object/1940/.
[297] D'Este, *Selected Letters*, 569 (AG 3000 libro 51 c. 190r).
[298] Hickson, "'To See Ourselves as Others See Us,'" 290.
[299] Hickson, "'To See Ourselves as Others See Us,'" 303-305.
[300] Hickson, "'To See Ourselves as Others See Us,'" 304; Mary Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the Representation of Women in Sixteenth-Century Painting," *Renaissance Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 1988): 55.

While Titian's portrait serves as an example of an older female patron choosing to be remembered as youthful, d'Este also commissioned artwork that reflected her new role as a 'pious widow.'[301] A widow's public image was expected to reflect her new status. This often meant elite widows participated in religious patronage that explicitly expressed their virtue and status.[302] Often, this manifested as works that displayed their humility and emphasised their role as a mother. For example, Isabella d'Este commissioned an altarpiece for her daughter, Ippolita Gonzaga's convent.[303] In her book about religious patronage in the Mantuan court, Hickson writes that the altarpiece was a rare example of religious patronage by d'Este, and is emblematic of her awareness of the change in her public image, marking a shift from powerful political wife to widow.[304] While in her widowhood d'Este proved just as influential, if not more so, her self-fashioned image as a widow was determined by her relationships with her children and an increase in religious patronage and piety.

Louise of Savoy

Married at age 11 to Charles d'Angoulême and widowed at 20, Louise of Savoy (1476–1531) built her public image around her widowhood and motherhood.[305] Raised by her aunt, Anne of France, who was also regent to the French throne, Louise was highly influenced by the political philosophies of Anne and the work of Christine de Pizan.[306] After the death of Anne of France's brother Charles VIII in 1498, Louis XII (husband of Anne of Brittany) took the throne and demanded Louise and her son (Francios I, heir to the throne) take up residence near the court.[307] As a mother to the heir of France, Louise was an active member in the French court, but it was not till her son's ascendence to the throne that Louise would come to the height of her power as a regent and Francois' most trusted advisor.[308]

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[301] Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua*, 4-7.
[302] DePrano, *Art Patronage, Family, and Gender in Renaissance Florence*, 31-32.
[303] Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua*, 4-5.
[304] Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua*, 5.
[305] David-Chapy, "The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 43-45.
[306] David-Chapy, "The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 52.
[307] David-Chapy, "The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 49-49.
[308] Aubrée David-Chapy, "Louise de Savoie, Régente et Mère Du Roi : L'investissement Symbolique de l'Espace Curial," *Réforme, Humanisme, Renaissance* 79, no. 1 (2014): 66-67.

Throughout her adult life, Louis continued to present herself in widows' clothing—plain dress, dark colours, and a dark headdress covering all of her hair.[309] Her attire was reminiscent of a nun's habit; however, despite being described as 'plain', the fabric used was extremely expensive, and unlike religious garb, the style was meant to project humility and virtue rather than a genuine commitment to poverty.[310] By fashioning herself as 'the eternal widow', Louise followed the example of widows like Judith depicted in Pizan's *City of the Ladies*. Like these widows, Louise presents herself as virtuous and, above all, devoted to her son, the king. Her public persona focuses on piety and morality rather than expressing her power, and she never risks the perception that she desires personal gain. Like Judith, Louise fashioned her political activity as morally righteous, her actions taken only on behalf of her children and not for personal glory.

Figure 2. Portrait of Louise of Savoy

In her portrait (*Figure 2*)[311] and other commissioned images, Louise used dress to self-fashion and idealise her reputation. While she does not engage in beauty practices to adhere to the beauty standards of the time, her choice of wardrobe contributed to her public persona both in-person and in illustrations. Moreover, in Louise's portrait, we see evidence of her mentor's influence. She follows Anne of France's advice to her daughter about lessening adornment with age or a change in status. While d'Este only emphasised her piety after her widowhood and into her old age, Louise, a young widow, adapted her image much sooner. Perhaps this was because she did not remarry. While her daughter, Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549), would later be widowed

[309] David-Chapy, "Louise de Savoie, Régente et Mère Du Roi," 72-73.
[310] David-Chapy, "Louise de Savoie, Régente et Mère Du Roi," 65–84.
[311] Jean Clouet, *Portrait of Louise of Savoy, Mother of Francois I*, n.d., Oil on panel, n.d., Fondation Bemberg,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bemberg_fondation_Toulouse_-_Portrait_de_Louise_de_Savoie,_m%C3%A8re_de_Fran%C3%A7ois_Ier_-_%C3%89cole_De_Jean_Clouet_(1475;1485-1540)_22x17_Inv.1013.jpg.

and remarried, Louise, who had children with her first husband, might have found it to her advantage to take up his role as the head of household.[312]

Louise's portrait (*Figure 2*) shows her in widow's clothing. She is illustrated as modest and unadorned in comparison with the portrait of Isabella d'Este. Louise's portrait and the lack of beauty practices depicted within it align with Cereta's belief that for women to devote themselves to virtue and learning, they must avoid participation and beauty culture. The portrait also aligns with Anne of France's opinion that women should utilize a virtuous reputation to avoid criticism and justify their influence. In addition, Louise's decision to avoid using beauty practices to achieve the youthful beauty standard or to display wealth and power is a statement within itself, as it implies a kind of moral hierarchy, differentiating oneself by illustrating moral virtue. As a political strategy, Louise may not have dressed in a way that displayed her wealth and power, but the images she and her son commissioned reflect her influence at court and in the kingdom. In addition, other images commissioned during her son's reign indicate how Louise wanted to be perceived and remembered. In other representations, Louise is often depicted on a throne behind or beside her son, indicating her integral role as his advisor.

4.3 Conclusion

Women during the later stages of their lives still utilized beauty practices as a mode of self-fashioning that could shape their appearance according to the roles acceptable to them in older age. Elite women also utilized patronage to cultivate a younger representation of themselves through imagery and create a lasting image of their power. While Titan's portrait of Isabella d'Este may depict the subject as a young woman, it differs significantly from her marriage portrait discussed in Chapter Two. The intended audience for marriage portraits were potential spouses and their families, and the images included symbolic messages about the bride's character, beauty, and familial connections. In contrast, the portrait of an older Isabella depicts her alone and facing the audience with symbols of her own wealth, power and patronage. Although idealized and depicted as youthful, she presents as an influential cultural leader

[312] David-Chapy, "The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie," 72.

adorned appropriately for her stage in life. Moreover, d'Este intended the portrait to reinforce her self-fashioned public persona and outlive her.

D'Este, Savoy, Anne of France and the other primary authors referenced in the chapter adapted their expression of beauty practices in their old age or widowhood. Moreover, the attitudes expressed by Luara Cereta and Anne of France regarding older women who continued to strive for the classical beauty standard are resoundingly negative. Cereta denounced the utilization of beauty in all stages of life but was particularly critical toward older women who continued beauty practices. However, given the contemporary misogynistic illustrations of older women as outwardly hideous and internally corrupt, is it surprising that many women sought to distance themselves from the 'hag' like depictions of older women in literature and painting?

While only covered briefly, the social and cultural nuances surrounding widowhood were highly influential in a woman's expression of her appearance. The ideal widow was expected to display modesty, virtue and piety while selflessly working to support her children and community. Louise of Savoy is an example of a young widow who used strategic patronage to self-fashion visual representations of herself as a pious, virtuous mother who was the epitome of sobriety and morality at court, thus helping to build her reputation and influence in the French political sphere. While elite women continued to rely on the social networks built in their youth and through their marriages, those communities and friendships were often aided by the women's authority over their children. This was the case with Louise of Savoy, Anne of France, and Isabelle d'Este, whom all served as regents for their sons.

CONCLUSION

This thesis investigated the relationship between beauty and social mobility for aristocratic women in the late Middle Ages, specifically focusing on how beauty could be utilised to facilitate social mobility for women within the contexts of 15th-century France and Italy. Moreover, by analysing contemporary primary sources and iconography, this thesis explored the primary authors' relationship to beauty standards, expectations for women's appearance and behaviour throughout their lives, and the use of beauty practices like cosmetics. In addition, the thesis examined how late medieval expectations of beauty and the application of beauty practices changed as women aged and their marital status changed.

The main conclusion of this thesis is that despite a general commendation of women who engaged in beauty culture, women at all stages of their lives used some beauty practices to come closer to the beauty standard exemplified by the goddess Venus. By aspiring to this standard and using cosmetics and dress in their self-fashioning, elite women could gain social benefits associated with looking beautiful. These social benefits included facilitating their and their families' social influence through politically and economically advantageous marriages, which in turn provided opportunities to become culturally influential through patronage and fashion and allowed for fashioning a public image that justified their and their families' authority by inspiring respect and admiration. Moreover, all of these benefits aided in elite women's cultivation and maintenance of social networks within their communities and abroad, solidifying relationships with their aristocratic contemporaries.

This thesis first looked at late medieval concepts of beauty and social mobility. Chapter One defined how beauty and social mobility could be applied to the thesis' primary sources and examined the beauty standard of the era, along with the ways historians have defined social influence as both cultural and political. Chapter One's investigation of beauty examined the contemporary standard and the beauty practices used by elite women to come closer to this idealised image. As discussed, the beauty standard was often portrayed as the youthful classical version of the goddess Venus. Traits associated with her depiction were related to contemporary ideas about health, virtue, and humanism, which combined to create an idealised vision for

women to adhere to. As evident in the primary source authors' letters, elite women utilised beauty practices such as cosmetics and dress to recreate these preferred physical characteristics and come closer to the beauty standard of the day. However, behaviour was also considered an essential aspect of physical beauty, and women were encouraged to be 'natural', avoiding any signs of affectation that suggested they were concerned with their appearance. Chapters Two, Three and Four examined how beauty standards, practices and expectations varied throughout major life stages for elite women by analysing the primary source authors' writing and portraiture.

Chapter Two: Maidens and Brides, investigated the role of beauty and beauty practices in young unmarried women's options for social mobility and marriageability. Through an analysis of the writings of Isabella d'Este, Anne of France, Christine de Pizan and Laura Cereta, this chapter delved into a young woman’s most important qualities (beauty, money, and virtue), how these attributes were expressed, and the benefits and consequences surrounding a potential brides adherence to the beauty standard. Possessing these qualities influenced a young woman’s marriageability and her and her family’s potential for social mobility and expansion of influence. For aristocratic families, marital unions provided the opportunity to form political and economic alliances that could aid and protect familial interests. In order to attract potential spouses who had not seen the bride, marriage portraits were commissioned to convince potential husbands that an alliance with the bride and her family would not only be economically and politically beneficial but also possibly one which promised some degree of attraction.

Chapter Three focused on beauty and behaviour expectations for young married women. Once married, young aristocratic women continued to utilize beauty practices to achieve the social benefits of adhering to the beauty standard. A woman's beauty continued to facilitate social influence in marriage. However, cultural opinion on women’s application of beauty practices shifted as the focus of their roles changed from marriageability to becoming wives and mothers. By looking at both the primary texts and the iconography from portraits of Anne of France and Anne of Brittany, we see that as women aged, the use of beauty practices shifted from presenting an image of youth and value as a potential spouse to maintaining cultural influence and self-fashioning a public reputation. In changing their public image, elite women sought to

fashion reputations that highlighted and legitimized their authority through visual symbols of beauty, wealth, virtue and piety.

Chapter Four: Older Women in Marriage and Widowhood, analysed the primary authors' criticisms of beauty culture related to older women and beauty practices. Women who were older or widows continued to utilise beauty practices as part of their self-fashioning according to the roles deemed acceptable. To combat contemporary perceptions of older women as 'hag-like' and immoral, elite women such as Isabelle d'Este often used artistic patronage to cultivate an idealised and youthful public image of themselves. By doing so, they could create a lasting image of power that would display them through the lens of their younger appearance. However, trying to retain the appearance of youth also came with its consequences. Negative judgments, like those from authors Laura Cereta and Anne of France, criticised older women who engaged in beauty practices. Chapter Four highlighted Laura Cereta's criticisms of beauty culture and practices for women in all stages of life, particularly for older women. Widowhood also played an influential part in the cultural expectations of women's appearance and self-fashioning. By analysing portraits of influential widows and Christine de Pizan's *The City of the Ladies*, we see the ideal widow depicted as modest, virtuous and pious. In addition to these qualities, the ideal widow's social role was to work selflessly to support her children and community. Louise of Savoy embodied many of the social expectations for widows. Using dress and artistic patronage to shape her public image, Savoy self-fashioned herself as a devoted mother and a symbol of sobriety and morality at the French court. Moreover, as depicted in paintings, her self-fashioning pointedly displays a lack of beauty practices. The older life stage also offered some aristocratic women opportunities to expand their existing social networks and authority through their children via marriages and regencies. A few examples are d'Este, Anne of France, and Louise of Savoy, whom all served as regents for their sons.

Perhaps it is not surprising that for elite women in the 15th century, adhering to the beauty standard helped cultivate social networks and expand cultural and political influence. However, the analysis of cultural expectations around women's utilisation of beauty practices in their self-fashioning during key life stages reveals nuances that would otherwise be lost without examining differentiations based on age and marital status. The use of beauty practices, or lack

thereof, played an important role in women's expression of power and agency in cultivating their public image and representation. Another perspective this thesis presents is female authors' criticism of beauty culture. While authors d'Este and Anne of France took a more practical approach to the relationship between beauty practices and social influence, Pizan and Cereta generally advocated for moving beyond women's focus on beauty and rejected beauty practices—placing greater importance on virtue and education. The difference between these authors' perspectives can be viewed through their approaches. D'Este and Anne express agency by recognising the existing cultural value of female beauty and women's roles and working within these constraints, while Pizan and Cereta's work seeks broader cultural change by rejecting the importance placed on women's appearance. Even more intriguing, we can track the influence of Christine de Pizan's writing through the self-fashioning of prominent members of the French court. Anne of France's *Lessons* and her own portraiture reflect Pizan's ideas regarding virtue, just as Louise of Savoy's image as the eternally virtuous widowed mother seems heavily influenced by Pizan's *The Cities of the Ladies*. By examining these nuances and applying self-fashioning to the subjects' portraiture, this paper explored the personal differences between how subjects wanted to shape their reputations and what they wanted to be remembered for. Moreover, by studying visual sources and iconography, this thesis examined how women's artistic patronage and the utilisation of beauty created a lasting image of power.

The research presented in this thesis bridges a gap between studies about beauty and elite women’s social influence in the late Middle Ages. The intention was to expand the understanding of women’s agency in 15th-century France and Italy and delve further into the specific constraints and expectations of how women were allowed to shape their public image through the utilisation of beauty practices. This thesis' discussion focused on aristocratic women in just two regions of late medieval Europe but, ideally, will initiate questions about women's experiences in other regions and social classes. Do the conclusions here apply to women from lower classes or different religious or ethnic groups? Were there differences in beauty standards or social expectations regarding how and why women might apply beauty practices in other regions of Europe? I hope that further research will be done to answer these questions.

Questions about beauty standards and the connection between attractiveness and social advantage remain pertinent today. While 15th-century women navigated a different culture from ours, ideas about 'naturalness' and the rejection of beauty culture (present in Laura Cereta's letters) still echo in the modern discourse around feminism and ideal womanhood. Women of every era have worked within societies that capitalise on their insecurities while shaming them for participating in beauty culture. Women such as Isabella d'Este and Laura Cereta can be viewed as part of a spectrum of women's personal preferences concerning the role of beauty in their self-fashioning. This spectrum is part of an ongoing negotiation of cultural expectations about women's self-fashioning, the benefits and consequences of using beauty practices, and how these change with age and marital status. While it can be easy to view authors like Cereta as having rejected beauty culture, it is worth noting that even those who distance themselves from it still utilise tools we would categorise as beauty practices to fashion a reputation for themselves. In a rejection, an embrace, or ambivalence to beauty culture, a statement is made about an individual's views and relationship to these practices. Whether consciously or not, we all use some elements of beauty practices to self-fashion and shape how our contemporaries see us.

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Appendix

Images of Venus (Chapter 1)

Figure 1: Manuscript minature from Christine de Pizan's *City of the Ladies* Harley MS 4431 F100r

Figure 1.

Christine de Pizan and Master of the Cité des Dames and workshop and to the Master of the Duke of Bedford, *The Book of the Queen: Harley MS 4431 F100r*, Illuminated manuscript minature, The British Library, accessed June 19, 2023, https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_4431_f100v.

Figure 2.

Epithalamium de Nuptiis Petri Comitis et Helisabeth Vicomercatae, M.1148 Fol. 1r., n.d., *Index of Medieval Art*, n.d., Index of Medieval Art, https://theindex-princeton-edu.proxy.library.uu.nl/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=0B6C9B98-7630-4FAA-983D-4D3E285A1B1D.

Figure 2: Epithalamium. Manuscript wedding book written and illuminated in Milan, Italy, ca. 1450-1466.

Marriage portraiture (Chapter 2)

Figure 1.

Ambrogio de Predis, *Bianca Maria Sforza*, Oil on poplar panel, *Www.nga.gov* (National Gallery of Art, 1493), National Gallery of Art, https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1192.html.

Figure 1: Portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza (1476–1510)

Figure 2: Portrait of Isabella of Aragon (1470-1524)

Figure 2.

Circle of Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Isabella of Aragon, Duchess of Milan (1470-1524)*, *Onlineonly.christies.com*, Christie's, accessed April 25, 2023, https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/remastered-contemporary-art-old-masters/circle-leonardo-da-vinci-vinci-1452-1519-amboise-6/95155.

Married Women and Artistic Patronage (Chapter 3)

Figure 1. Moulins Triptych right panel.

Figure 1.
Jean Hey, *The Triptych of the Master of Moulins*, Moulins Cathedral, accessed June 21, 2023, https://paroisse-notredamedemoulins.catholique-moulins.fr/triptyque-du-maitre-de-moulins/.

Figure 2. Horae Ad Usum Romanum, Dites Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne

Figure 2.
Jean Bourdichon, *Horae Ad Usum Romanum, Dites Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne*, 1503, *Gallica.bnf.fr*, 1503, National Library of France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52500984v/f14.item.

Figure 3.
Des Remedes de Fortune [de PETRARQUE], 1503, *Gallica.bnf.fr*, 1503, National Library of France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b60007782/f341.item.

Figure 3. Des Remedes de Fortune [de PETRARQUE]

Older Women and Widows in Portraiture (Chapter 4)

Figure 1.

Titian, *Isabella d'Este, Margravine of Mantua (1474-1539)*, Oil on canvas, Vienna, Art History Museum, Vienna, accessed June 21, 2023, www.khm.at/de/object/1940/.

Figure 1. Isabella d'Este (1474-1539)

Figure 2.

Jean Clouet, *Portrait of Louise of Savoy, Mother of Francois I*, n.d., Oil on panel, n.d., Fondation Bemberg, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bemberg_fondation_Toulouse_-_Portrait_de_Louise_de_Savoie,_m%C3%A8re_de_Fran%C3%A7ois_Ier_-_%C3%89cole_De_Jean_Clouet_(1475;1485-1540)_22x17_Inv.1013.jpg.

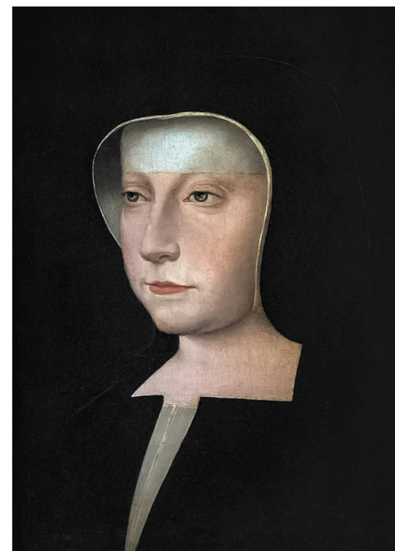

Figure 2. Portrait of Louise of Savoy