

# *Clothing the Female Life: Self-Fashioning and Memory Making at the Malatesta Network of Women Between the Fourteenth and the Fifteenth Centuries*

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This article discusses the relationship between women and their garments by examining written, visual, and material sources about dress drawn from the historical records of the Malatesta family.<sup>1</sup> The House of Malatesta prospered during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in alliance with the papacy, in serving as its representatives in their territory which extended from Romagna to the Marche, with court seats in Rimini, Cesena, and Fano. The objective of this research was to understand whether women of this House had any degree of autonomy regarding the garments that they chose to ‘self-fashion’ their identities,<sup>2</sup> and whether they were aware of the multiple meanings the clothing held beyond economic, political, and social status, in addition to their cultural and symbolic values. Indeed, these last two factors rendered these objects into powerful and immediate transmitters of expression and communication that surpassed the conventions of their time, as will be shown in this analysis that includes secular and religious clothing.

Two points of view have been presented, one concerning the clothing of nobility as emblems of luxury, while that of the religious orders will be viewed as emblematic of abstinence: two different and contrasting methods adopted by women to identify themselves and their radius of action. If the first method was in line with the conventions of the time, which called for a way of dressing for each echelon of society, the second could be perceived as unconventional when the abstinence was radical and undertaken by women who knowingly and autonomously rejected their privileged social status in favour of a religious objective. Being excluded from politics and inhabiting a social sphere with limited interaction beyond the family, women were relegated to the use of clothing and fashion as one of the few

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend Heather Dawe (1955–2017), who translated the first version of the paper from which this contribution was inspired.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University press, 1980); Bella Mirabella, ‘Feminist Self-Fashioning: Christine de Pizan and The Treasure of the City of Ladies’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 6, 1, (1999), 9–20; Simona Lorenzini, Deborah Pellegrino (eds.), *Women’s agency and self-fashioning in early modern Tuscany: (1300–1600)* (Roma: Viella, 2022).

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ways in which they were able to assert themselves,<sup>3</sup> despite not having full control over the clothing that they used.

When money was spent on luxury items for women, it was done with the complicity of men. Men adorned their daughters, wives, and sisters with dresses and jewels, which were distinctive symbols of the family and made these women the showpieces of their Seignory.<sup>4</sup> Women had limited economic resources that they could independently manage, a good portion of what they did have came from dowries. The dowry was the product of negotiation between the two families involved; it was the value that corresponded to the woman's social status. This is attested to in the case of Elisabetta Montefeltro as recounted here, the details of which are known via the claims of her family towards her dowry after she became a widow a few short years after her marriage to Roberto Malatesta.<sup>5</sup> The woman's matrimonial worth was visibly expressed in terms of sumptuous dress, the first example of which would be exhibited during the wedding ceremony.<sup>6</sup> This accounts for the number of fifteenth-century Italian wedding portraits which have survived to the present. These were commissioned by the noble houses involved in these matrimonial alliances to demonstrate their economic investment in textiles, clothing, and precious jewels.<sup>7</sup> The oldest portrait of this genre is that of Ginevra d'Este, the first wife of Sigismondo Malatesta; it is one of the only surviving testimonials to the life of this young woman who died when she was only twenty-one years old. The affairs of the Parisina Malatesta, Ginevra d'Este's mother, known from written sources, permit analysis of the consumption patterns of fifteenth-century noblewomen, including items featured in these wedding portraits. Accounts of the activities of these women attest to their role in these Renaissance courts and the social status of daughters, wives, and widows by describing the function that clothing and dowries played in the construction of their self-fashioned feminine identities.

Details have emerged regarding the affairs of some members of the Malatestian network of women concerning the case of two different items of religious clothing, providing a previously unavailable perspective from which to analyse the close

<sup>3</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, 'Le mode femminili e il loro controllo', in Georges Duby, Michele Perrot (dir.), *Storia delle donne, Il Medioevo*, ed. by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Elisa Tosi Brandi, 'Fashion, Art, History and Society in Portraits of Women by Piero del Pollaiuolo', in Aldo Galli, Andrea Di Lorenzo (eds.), *Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo. "Silver and Gold, Painting and Bronze..."* (Milano: Skira, 2014), 103–17.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, 'From bride price to dowry in Mediterranean Europe', *Journal of Family History*, 3 (1978), 262–96; Paola Lanaro, Gian Maria Varanini, 'Funzioni economiche della dote nell'Italia centro-settentrionale (tardo medioevo/inizi età moderna)', in Simonetta Cavaciocchi (ed.), *La famiglia nell'economia europea, secoli XIII-XVIII/The economic role of the family in the European economy from 13th to the 18th centuries*, (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2009), 81–102.

<sup>6</sup> Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *La famiglia e le donne nel Rinascimento a Firenze* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1995), 153–211.

<sup>7</sup> Everett Fahy, 'The Marriage Portrait in the Renaissance or some Women Named Ginevra', in Andrea Bayer (ed.), *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 17–27; Tosi Brandi, 'Fashion, Art, History'.

relationship between women and clothing in the late medieval and Renaissance periods. If women had to depend upon their families for their clothing, it stands to reason that some of them may have held a certain amount of autonomy in situations where they chose to renounce their social status and luxuries in order to live the life of a penitent, replacing sumptuous attire with clothing meant to symbolize self-denial. Sartorial decisions based upon religious reasons are evidence of female agency through clothing, as in the case of the penitent Chiara of Rimini, and Margherita d'Este, widow of Galeotto Roberto Malatesta, who was an example of the bequeathing of important articles of clothing. These two cases demonstrate how women in this sphere were able to experiment with original and autonomously interactive strategies and promote the preservation and transmission of clothing as memorials with a high symbolic value.

CLOTHING AND IDENTITY. PARISINA MALATESTA D'ESTE AND HER DAUGHTER  
GINEVRA D'ESTE MALATESTA

Parisina Malatesta (1404–1425) was the daughter of Lucrezia Ordelaffi and Andrea Malatesta, Lord of Cesena. She married the Marquis of Ferrara Nicolò III d'Este in 1418, when she was fourteen years old. Parisina is best known through several literary works recounting the events that brought about her tragic death resulting from adultery with someone her own age, namely, her stepson Ugo.<sup>8</sup> The affair was discovered by her husband and culminated with the decapitation of both lovers in 1425.<sup>9</sup>

Her given name was Laura, but this is rarely remembered. She was known as Parisina – so much so that she herself signed her name this way. Her name evoked Paris and more generally France, which thanks to courtly literature,<sup>10</sup> was considered the heart of European culture from the second half of the fourteenth century until the mid-fifteenth century. This nickname likely denoted her beauty, elegance, and refined taste. After her father's death in 1416, Parisina was educated in Rimini by her uncle Carlo Malatesta and her aunt Elisabetta Gonzaga, receiving an extensive instruction for the time,<sup>11</sup> as seen in the young lady's belongings in Ferrara.<sup>12</sup> Documents show that between 1422 and 1424

<sup>8</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Parisina: Tragedia lirica in 4 atti. Composta da Pietro Mascagni* (Milano: Casa musicale Lorenzo Sonzogno, 1914); Antonio Somma, *Parisina: Tragedia* (Livorno: Tipografia Bertani, Antonelli, 1836); Raffaello Barbiera, *Parisina, narrazione storica. Novelle del Bandello e del Lasca. Poema di Lord Byron, tradotto da Andrea Maffi. Tragedia lirica di Felice Romani. Tragedia di Antonio Somma* (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1913); Adriano Lualdi, *Mascagni, D'Annunzio e "Parisina": Quattordici lettere inedite, Quaderni dannunziani*, 30–1 (1965), 63–100; Loren Glass, 'Blood and Affection: The Poetics of Incest in Manfred and Parisina', *Studies in Romanticism*, 32, 2 (1995), 211–26.

<sup>9</sup> Roberta Iotti, 'Parisina Malatesti d'Este', in Anna Falcioni (ed.), *Le donne di casa Malatesti*, (Rimini: Bruno Ghigi Editore, 2004), 269–96. See also: Élizabéth Crouzet-Pavan, Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate. Tre donne nell'Italia del Rinascimento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Crouzet-Pavan, Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate*, 154–9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 24; Anna Falcioni, *La signoria di Carlo Malatesti (1385–1429)*, (Rimini: Bruno Ghigi Editore, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Roberta Iotti, Malatesta, 'Laura detta Parisina', *Dizionario Biografico degli italiani* (hereafter *DBI*), 68 (2007): [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/laura-detta-parisina-malatesta\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/laura-detta-parisina-malatesta_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/) (accessed March 2024).

she had acquired seven books, an astonishing number for this era. They included a copy of *Tristan*, four devotional books, and two books of reading instruction which she would later use in the education of her two daughters.<sup>13</sup> A cultured woman, Parisina had a variety of interests: she loved to travel, play the harp, fish with nets, or hunt with hawks; she loved horse races as well. Parisina owned parrots, which she kept in cages draped with red covers and whose health she cared for, providing them with feed obtained from Venice, from where she also ordered her oriental perfumes and ivory combs. This information can be found in the d'Este family accounting ledgers<sup>14</sup> which listed purchases made by the young marchioness, who, as was done elsewhere, oversaw at least a portion of the delicate management of the court finances centred around the domestic sphere.<sup>15</sup>

Surviving accounting books show that Parisina had an ample amount of independent spending power. The marchioness primarily drew from the signoria's treasury, making payments for a variety of ordinary items and services including clothing and footwear for the lord's family.<sup>16</sup> For less common expenses, Parisina had use of a personal treasury which similarly came from an annual marriage settlement provided by her husband, as was the custom.<sup>17</sup> One example of her use of this personal bank was the payment of a debt of 1000 ducats to a Venetian merchant who provided her with velvets to make garments for her and the marquis, amongst other things.<sup>18</sup> Accounting documents state that Parisina had agents not only in Venice but also in Milan, as well as local contacts such as the haberdasher, who supplied silk threads and tassels, fabrics, and ornaments to decorate her clothing, sleeves, and headwear (*balzi*).<sup>19</sup> Parisina dressed according to the current fashion; her wardrobe held the most fashionable clothing custom made by her personal tailor. It contained items made from precious velvets and brocade, as well as embroidered crimson and green fabrics. Her portrait in the *Genealogy of the Casa d'Este*<sup>20</sup> offers a view of the upper part of her gown: an over-gown called *pellanda* with

<sup>13</sup> Crouzet-Pavan, Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> The d'Este family accounting ledgers are conserved in Modena, Archivio di Stato, Camera Marchionale, *Registrum literarum et mandatorum Nicolai III Marchionis Estensis quandoque et Dominae Parisinae Marchionissae*, 1422–1424.

<sup>15</sup> Evelyn Welch, 'The art of expenditure: the court of Paola Malatesta Gonzaga in fifteenth-century Mantua', *Renaissance Studies*, 16, no. 23 (2002), 306–17.

<sup>16</sup> Luigi Alberto Gandini, 'Saggio degli usi della corte di Ferrara al tempo di Nicolò III (1393–1442)', *Atti e memorie della Regia Deputazione di Storia Patria per le province di Romagna*, s. 3, 9 (1890–1891), 148–69; Crouzet-Pavan, Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate*, 126–31.

<sup>17</sup> Welch, 'The art of expenditure'.

<sup>18</sup> Crouzet-Pavan, Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate*, 133–5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>20</sup> This *Genealogy* was made in 1474 so the portraits of persons who had died before this date, such as Parisina, are not reliable. However, the fashion depicted in this work of art is faithful, representing the trends attested from the first half of the fifteenth century which lasted until the second half of that century: Bonifacio Bembo (attributed to), *Portrait of Parisina Malatesta d'Este*, in *Genealogia dei Principi d'Este*, 1470s, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Roma, MS Vitt. Em. 293, fol. 6r.

tight, green sleeves. The *pellanda* is the garment most frequently cited in Este family sources, which have provided us with further information about the marchioness' wardrobe in addition to what has been gathered from the account books.<sup>21</sup>

The Este ledgers show that Parisina oversaw the wardrobe for her twin daughters Ginevra and Lucia, born in 1419, as well as that of her stepdaughters and some eleven other young girls. When these girls reached marriageable age, she gave each of them a trousseau, a hope chest, painted jewellery boxes, and a cash dowry, treating them like a true mother. Between 1422 and 1423 she gave a certain Chiara a dowry of 600 *lire*, while she paid thirty ducats for two painted, gilded chests (*coffani*) destined for another girl named Pellegrina.<sup>22</sup> The objects in the dowry represented a direct link with the bride's family, as it was an occasion for mothers to pass down their own belongings to their daughters, who would follow the same example once they themselves became mothers. The wardrobe of the Ferrara court women also included clothing made of more economical and durable fabrics for daily use, for example., fustian (*pignolato*), wool cloth, or cotton, all featuring the family colours of white, red, and green which were incidentally also those of the Malatesta.<sup>23</sup> Documents indicate that the court tried to be prudent by recycling the material of old clothing to make the linings for new dresses or by buying second-hand clothes (as was common practice).<sup>24</sup> The court's opulent lifestyle required careful and attentive management of financial resources. Due to the elevated fixed costs, excepting special occasions, daily life inside the courts was characterized by frugality. These sources state that Parisina had her tailor lengthen the hems and sleeves of the youngest girls' clothing: the sleeves cited in the document were open and draped as was dictated by the fashion of the times.<sup>25</sup> In the fifteenth century, sleeves became a very important accessory in the female wardrobe, as they were the ideal part of the dress to exhibit embroidered mottos and coats of arms.<sup>26</sup> The embroiderers of the court of Este came from northern Europe and the demand for their work was such as to keep them busy in Ferrara for months at a time, where they received a monthly salary of three ducats.<sup>27</sup> The large quantities of stored fabrics from Renaissance courts like that documented by the house of Este testify to the practice of stocking for future needs, for example, to make dresses or gifts

<sup>21</sup> Gandini, 'Saggio degli usi', 162–3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–5.

<sup>23</sup> Giovanni Rimondini (ed.), *L'aldica malatestiana*, (Verucchio (RN): Pazzini, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Gandini, 'Saggio degli usi', 154–5.

<sup>25</sup> Elisa Tosi Brandi, 'Abbigliamento e moda del Quattrocento dagli affreschi del Salone dei Mesi, Palazzo Schifanoia', *Schifanoia*, 62–3 (2022), 65–81.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 10–38.

<sup>27</sup> Crouzet-Pavan, Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate*, 129–30.

for friends and relatives or to reward services and favours.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, precious fabrics and jewels were often pawned to obtain cash.<sup>29</sup>

Spending orders document Parisina's responsibility at the court as well as her sphere of action regarding domestic management and personal consumption. While purchased items reveal her lifestyle and the refined taste of the Este, we also learn that Parisina regularly made charitable donations bestowed on behalf of her family, such as when she provided attire to a group of Franciscan monks, who received mantels (*cappa*) and tunics (*tonaga*) made of undyed wool cloth (*berettino*). Dressing poor monks counted as an act of charity and generosity on behalf of the court and went beyond being an act of power and prestige. Another court requirement that the marchioness fulfilled was providing economic assistance to poor girls from Ferrara of marriageable age (*povere donzele*) by donating the cloth (*panno roxado*) and the dressmaking of the wedding gowns.<sup>30</sup> Parisina's other charitable acts included procuring garments for the clergy (*pianede*) and altar cloths (*pallio da altare*) for churches. Este sources reveal that these last items were produced from costly velvet garments obtained from the second-hand market.<sup>31</sup>

The brutal death of Parisina did not disrupt the good relations between the Este and the Malatesta. Nicolò III d'Este remarried, and at the first opportunity, he gave Ginevra (1419–1440) – his daughter with Parisina – in marriage to the Lord of Rimini, Sigismondo Malatesta (1417–1468). The name Ginevra reflects the influence French chivalrous literature had on the Este and Malatesta courts, revealing, as previously mentioned, Parisina's fondness for this culture.<sup>32</sup>

Very little is known about Ginevra: her life virtually disappeared into the shadows of stronger personalities surrounding her: first that of her mother Parisina, then her husband Sigismondo. Ginevra arrived in Rimini in 1434 when she was fifteen. She gave birth to a son who did not survive his first year, and she herself died in 1440. No documents concerning Ginevra have survived amongst the Este or Malatesta records, only traces of her dowry that were possibly part of her trousseau, which contained several items such as little bags

<sup>28</sup> Gandini, 'Saggio degli usi', 148–69.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 160; Crouzet-Pavan, Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate*, 128–30; Welch, 'The art of expenditure', 307–8; Elisa Tosi Brandi, *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta. Oggetti, relazioni e consumi di un signore del tardo medioevo* (Fano: Jouvence, 2020), 202–9; see also Elisa Tosi Brandi (ed.), *Valore e valori della moda: produzione, consumo e circolazione dell'abbigliamento fra XIII e XIV secolo*, *RM Rivista*, 24, 1 (2023): 439–595: <http://www.serena.unina.it/index.php/rm/issue/view/709> (accessed March 2024); Anne Kucab, 'Les circulations du vêtement en ville à la fin du Moyen Âge', in Danielle Alexandre-Bidon, Nadège Gauffre Fayolle, Perrine Mane, Michael Wilmart (eds.), *Le vêtement au Moyen Âge. De l'atelier à la garde-robe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 185–98.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 152–3; Isabelle Chabot, 'Renaissance female luxury garments on the move. When bride's silk brocades ended up dressing ecclesiastics (Florence, 14th–15th centuries)', in Lucio Biasiori, Federico Mazzini, Chiara Rabbiosi (eds.), *Reimagining Mobilities across the Humanities*, vol. 2: *Objects, People and Texts* (London: Routledge, 2023), 21–39.

<sup>32</sup> Crouzet-Pavan, Maire Vigueur, *Decapitate*, 154–9.



made of silk and gold; two caskets, one in silver and the other in ivory; and two painted marital chests ( *cassoni*). Parisina had not contributed directly to Ginevra's trousseau, as her daughter was only about six years old when her mother died, but we can suppose that it was similar to the ones she had prepared for the young girls of marriageable age at the Este court. Unfortunately, Ginevra was prevented from showing her beautiful painted chests during the wedding procession in Rimini due to bad weather, which compromised the celebrations and did not bring good luck to the young bride.<sup>33</sup>

Despite her brief life, Ginevra is now one of the most recognized women of her time thanks to a portrait in the Louvre Museum in Paris by Pisanello known as the *Portrait of a young princess* (Fig. 1). Though the attribution of the portrait subject is still being debated, it is this author's opinion that this is the wedding portrait of Ginevra d'Este, which scholars estimate to have been executed between 1435 and 1440. This proposal is supported by the tricolour white, red, and green of the princess' outfit, and the presence of the juniper branch. It is interesting to note that this is one of the earliest individual female portraits to be preserved. Portraits of this type were particularly common in the Florentine area in the second half of fifteenth century and were perhaps linked to the traditions of coin and medal production of imperial antiquity which were probably designed to commemorate weddings.<sup>34</sup> To the contemporary eye, the women depicted did not lose their function as a *medium*, a concept originating centuries ago from the need to convey and communicate the prestige of their families of origin. In paintings of this genre, the artists show the upper part of the body, highlighting the emblems of the families through finery and textiles, taste, and fashion: ideas that on close inspection emerge as the true subjects of these artworks. Indeed, the young woman portrayed from the left profile provides information related to her family origin, which was usually conveyed, as this portrait attests, through heraldic symbols shown on the single visible sleeve. This portrait represents the Italian fashion sensibility characterized by a restrained elegance, mitigating the excesses of the late Gothic style.<sup>35</sup>

The emblems of her gown display the Este and Malatesta tricolour uniform (*divisa*) of white, red, and green. The ample *pellanda* or over-gown is white with long, flowing, hanging sleeves embroidered with a design of an amphora with two handles, which was one of the coats of arms of the Este. The *cotta* or inner garment of which only the sleeves are visible, is red, while the belt on her waist is green. A tricoloured trim runs along the hem of the *pellanda*, while a juniper branch has been placed upon her shoulder. The juniper branch was not only

<sup>33</sup> Luigi Tonini, *Storia di Rimini*, V/1 (Rimini: Bruno Ghigi Editore, 1971), 101–2; in this book Tonini refers to the *Malatesta Chronicles*.

<sup>34</sup> Fahy, 'The Marriage Portrait', 17–27.

<sup>35</sup> Tosi Brandi, 'Fashion, Art, History'; Tosi Brandi, 'Abbigliamento e moda', 65–81.



Fig. 1 Pisanello, Portrait of a Princess of the House of Este, 1425–1450, oil on panel, cm 43 × 30, Paris, Musée du Louvre (© Musée du Louvre, Paris)

the symbol of happiness and peace, it also evoked her name, Ginevra. The hairstyle is most interesting and features a high forehead obtained by hairline depilation<sup>36</sup>; behind it is the mass of hair that has been braided with white ribbon, gathered at the nape, and wrapped around a support to give greater volume.

Ginevra's portrait shows part of the goods that had been acquired a decade earlier by Parisina, as shown in the Este account books. The garments worn by Ginevra in the portrait are the same that her mother typically

<sup>36</sup> Evelyn Welch, 'Art on the Edge: hair and hands in Renaissance Italy', *Renaissance studies*, 23 (2009), 241–68.



had made for the marriageable young girls of the court, including the silk *pellanda* with open sleeves as was popular at that time, sewn with care and adorned with the elements necessary to render this gown worthy of a noblewoman. It is rare for two disparate sources, one written, other visual, produced within the same environment to be able to have a dialogue as effective as the ones discussed here. The consumption and exhibition of these luxury goods by women transmitted the decorum and prestige of the dynasty. It remained an expression of an environment completely dominated by men, despite whatever personal tastes or spending autonomy the woman may have had. Each feminine action and personal initiative were delineated by masculine authority and had to be modelled upon court etiquette and the social class to which they belonged. Investment in durable goods such as clothing and jewellery, which had a longer lifespan than any human,<sup>37</sup> were family assets requiring careful management. Garments were long-lasting goods that were only in temporary use by the women, who were aware that they might have to cede, donate, pawn, or sell them whenever requested to do so. This was something that Elisabetta Montefeltro would be obliged to take notice of, against her will. Elisabetta is the protagonist of the next case, which deals with the authority wielded by wives, mothers, and widows through the lens of an economic evaluation of their role in society by examining their clothing and jewels.

#### VALUATING CLOTHING, VALUATING THE BRIDE

On 10 September 1482, Elisabetta Montefeltro (1462–1520) lost both her husband Roberto Malatesta (1440–1482), Lord of Rimini, and her father Federico (1422–1482), Duke of Urbino. Alone and without any male progeny, the young widow chose to leave the city that had received her with great celebration seven years earlier.

Elisabetta, daughter of Federico Montefeltro and his wife Battista Sforza, had married Roberto Malatesta in Rimini in June 1475.<sup>38</sup> Their marriage was an important political union that established peace between the rival Malatesta and Montefeltro families whose territories bordered each other in the Marche.<sup>39</sup> Elisabetta arrived in Rimini amid pomp and ceremony: performances, banquets, dances, and tournaments were organized in honour of her wedding for the considerable expense of 25,000 ducats. Chronicles have reported the most minute details of the event, from which we can garner a

<sup>37</sup> Carole Collier Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence. Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 131.

<sup>38</sup> Angelo Turchini, *La signoria di Roberto Malatesta detto il Magnifico (1468–1482)* (Rimini: Bruno Ghigi Editore, 2001); Anna Falcioni, 'Montefeltro, Elisabetta di', *DBI*, vol. 76 (2012), 51–3: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/elisabetta-di-montefeltro\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/elisabetta-di-montefeltro_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/) (accessed March 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Duccio Balestracci, *Il duca. Vita avventurosa e grandi imprese di Federico da Montefeltro* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2022).

portrait of this woman.<sup>40</sup> The earliest and only details regarding her physical appearance can be traced back to her wedding day, though it is limited to her clothing with a description of magnificent jewels – descriptions of which have not been provided in details by historical sources – and a lavish gown made of gold cloth.

Just three days after that wedding, Elisabetta Aldobrandini (1450–1497), mistress of Roberto Malatesta, gave birth to Pandolfo, the eldest child of the Lord of Rimini.<sup>41</sup> The future looked dim for Elisabetta Montefeltro, who was only thirteen at the time. During the next years, bad luck befell the young bride: while Elisabetta Montefeltro gave birth to a baby girl named Battista, Elisabetta Aldobrandini delivered Roberto's second male child and was named official guardian and nursemaid of the children in his absence. Upon Roberto Malatesta's death in 1482, Elisabetta Aldobrandini assumed her role in the government of the Malatesta state as the children's legal guardian. With the death of her father Federico, which unfortunately occurred the exact same day and year of her husband's death, albeit in different places and circumstances, Elisabetta Montefeltro was aware that she was definitively excluded from any political decisions and resolved to return to Urbino. However, she first had to settle certain bureaucratic matters, as evidenced in documents that reveal a conflict of interest between the widow and the heirs. Elisabetta Aldobrandini, as legal guardian of the children, behaved like the head of the Malatesta family and contested Elisabetta Montefeltro's rightful claims, such as the restitution of her dowry and being the acknowledged owner of some precious wedding gifts.

To better understand this episode, it is necessary to explain exactly what the dowry consisted of, what its practical purpose was, and what rights women had over it in the late medieval period. According to jurists, the main purpose of the dowry was to provide the newlyweds with economic support during the early years of the marriage.<sup>42</sup> It was therefore comprised of either money or precious objects, such as clothing, textiles, and jewellery that could be easily converted into cash. Women had no rights over the dowry, which was to be used by the bride's and her husband's families and would only be returned – with considerable difficulty in the case of heirs – to the bride's family in the

<sup>40</sup> Gaspare Broglio, *Cronaca universale*, manuscript, fifteenth century, Biblioteca Civica Gambalunga, Rimini, SC-MS 1161. The chronicle has been partially edited by Antonio G. Luciani, *Cronaca malatestiana del secolo XV (dalla cronaca universale)* (Rimini: Bruno Ghigi Editore, 1982). See also: Francesco V. Lombardi, 'Liste delle nozze di Roberto Malatesta ed Elisabetta da Montefeltro (25 giugno 1475)', *Romagna Arte e Storia*, 18 (1986), 13–26.

<sup>41</sup> Gian Ludovico Masetti Zannini, Anna Falcioni, *La signoria di Pandolfo IV Malatesti (1482–1528)* (Rimini: Bruno Ghigi Editore, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> Owen Hughes, 'From Brideprice to Dowry'; Jules Kirchner, Anthony Molho, 'The Dowry Fund and the Marriage Market in Early Quattrocento Florence', *The Journal of Modern History*, 50, 3 (1978), 403–38; Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 117–31; Sandra Cavallo, Lyndan Warner (eds.), *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1999); Cavaciocchi (ed.), *The Economic Role of the Family*.

event of a breakdown of the marriage. In reality, the dowry served as much more than support for the young couple: it symbolized the weight of investment by the bride's family in finding a dignified settlement for their daughter and a solid alliance for the family. The woman had more control over her trousseau (*corredo*) than over her dowry as the trousseau also included her personal belongings, such as household linens and items related to her toilette, which frequently handed down from the mother or other women in the family.<sup>43</sup> This corresponds to the same sort of objects that Parisina had carefully prepared for the marriageable young girls of the court, including toilette items and personal linens that served as a connection to her parental environment. The trousseau, like the dowry, might also include precious objects – jewellery, rich fabrics, and clothing.<sup>44</sup> The components of the trousseau and a further group of objects including jewels and gowns offered by the groom to the bride, known as the counter-dowry (*controdotte*) were not conventionalized, permitting wide latitude for manoeuvring by both families. The woman proudly clung on to her personal rights, protected by law, exclusively concerning the so-called *paraphernalia* – those objects and personal belongings that were generally listed alongside the trousseau. As far as everything else was concerned, including clothing and jewellery, the woman was only granted temporary rights.

The counter-dowry arose out of the need to relieve the exorbitant financial burden borne by the family of the bride; it not only helped the new couple but also the husband's family. The counter-dowry generally included a series of accessories and clothes, reflecting the husband's willingness to take care of his wife by turning his attention to her wardrobe. With the husband's gift of one or two sets of jewellery the woman's rite of passage towards becoming a bride was accomplished (*vestizione*). The jewels and gowns acquired by the husband for his bride that were then worn by her not only ratified their union, it was also a public representation, marking the culmination of rituals surrounding the unification of two Renaissance families.<sup>45</sup> Whereas items selected for the trousseau projected the chosen image of the bride's family, the dress and ornamentation presented by the husband bore tangible witness to the preceding negotiations, demonstrating the financial prestige and respectability of the houses involved. The display of splendid items such as gowns and jewels symbolized the social condition of individuals and groups, as did any ostentation of monetary wealth; but unlike the latter, body ornaments had an additional value as they reflected

<sup>43</sup> Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 213–46.

<sup>44</sup> Isabelle Chabot, "La sposa in nero". La ritualizzazione del lutto delle vedove fiorentine (secoli XIV–XV), in *Quaderni Storici*, 68 (1994), 421–62; Isabelle Chabot, "Io vo' fare testamento". Le ultime volontà di mogli e mariti, tra controllo e soggettività (secoli XIV–XV), in Maria Clara Rossi (ed.), *Margini di libertà: testimonie femminili nel Medioevo* (Verona: Caselle di Sommacampagna, 2010), 205–38.

<sup>45</sup> Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*.

a cultural and aesthetic sensibility.<sup>46</sup> This is attested to in the abovementioned portrait of Ginevra.

Both Elisabettas<sup>47</sup> were aware of the social and political value of gowns and jewels; however, in this case their economic worth was far more important – a worth that neither family wanted to forsake. Extraordinary revenues stemming from wedding gifts were vital to the court treasure chest, and they frequently resorted to borrowing money and pawnbrokers to meet the demands for liquid assets.<sup>48</sup> Some of the marvellous jewels, specifically, a gold necklace worth 5,000 ducats and an unappraised brooch with rubies and large pearls, were given to Roberto and Elisabetta as wedding gifts had already been pawned at the time that her restitution was requested.<sup>49</sup> Albeit with some difficulty, Elisabetta Montefeltro was immediately able to recuperate her own trousseau. The dowry or trousseau was largely composed of goods of deep sentimental value, passed on from one generation to the next, keeping ties between mother and child alive, and more generally, between female descendants.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, Elisabetta Montefeltro could not pass these goods to her own daughter Battista, who had died at a tender age by 1492. Elisabetta subsequently chose to spend the rest of her life in a convent,<sup>51</sup> as she had resigned herself to the loss of part of her dowry, having managed to acquire her clothes and wedding ring, but no other wedding gifts and only part of all the items brought as a dowry.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, Elisabetta Aldobrandini governed over the city of Rimini, the last stronghold of the Malatesta state, as though she were the true sovereign, even after her son Pandolfo came of age. She took direct control of power amidst family plots and conspiracies, but she did not pass onto succession with the Seignory of Rimini that, at the dawn of the 1500s was passed over to Cesare Borgia, then went successively to Venice, then finally and definitively to the papacy.<sup>53</sup>

The complete Malatesta family appears in an artwork produced around 1494 by the school of the Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio (Fig. 2). Elisabetta Aldobrandini, who commissioned the piece, dominates the members of her family, daughter-in-law Violante Bentivoglio and sons Pandolfo

<sup>46</sup> Tosi Brandi, 'Fashion, Art, History'.

<sup>47</sup> Gian Ludovico Masetti Zannini, 'Le tre Elisabette', in Falcioni (ed.), *Le donne di casa Malatesti*, 445–57.

<sup>48</sup> Tosi Brandi, *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta*, 202–9; Mauro Carboni, Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli (eds.), *In pegno. Oggetti in transito tra valore d'uso e valore di scambio (secoli XIII–XX)* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Carlo Grigioni, 'Nella casa di Roberto Malatesta', *La Romagna*, 9 (1912), 272–7.

<sup>50</sup> Isabelle Chabot, 'Ricchezze femminili e parentela nel Rinascimento. Riflessioni intorno ai contesti veneziani e fiorentini', *Quaderni storici*, 118 (2005), 203–29.

<sup>51</sup> Turchini, *La signoria di Roberto Malatesta*, 290; Anna Falcioni, 'Suor Chiara Feltria: una vocazione femminile nelle relazioni tra Osservanza francescana e politica ecclesiastica dei Signori di Urbino', *Picenum Seraphicum*, 36 (2022), 37–70, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Elisa Tosi Brandi, 'La cultura materiale alla corte di Federico Montefeltro e Battista Sforza: alcune tracce dalla dote e dal corredo della figlia Elisabetta', in Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri (ed.), *Federico da Montefeltro nel terzo millennio 1422–2022* (Urbino: Urbino University Press), forthcoming.

<sup>53</sup> Elisa Tosi Brandi, *Rimini* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2017), 55.



Fig. 2 Domenico Ghirlandaio, Elisabetta Aldobrandini and Her Family, detail of Altarpiece with Saint Vincent Ferrer, 1494, oil on panel, cm 230×198, Museo della Città, Rimini (© Museo della Città 'Luigi Tonini', Rimini)

and Carlo, like a Queen Mother. Elisabetta dons the signs of widowhood and social dignity: her veil and clothing are black, indicating mourning, and her maturity with respect to the younger family members. Elisabetta Aldobrandini always behaved as the 'true' widow of Roberto Malatesta and wanted to be remembered with the distinguishing traits that justified and confirmed her power. The clothes show in this painting are a testament to Italian fashion of the second half of the fifteenth century and the luxury goods that were manufactured by Italian artisans.<sup>54</sup>

If the cases here deal with female self-fashioning of a conventional sort and were based upon the family's shared sense of honour for all women in

<sup>54</sup> Tosi Brandi, 'Fashion, Art, History', 108–11; Richard Goldthwaite, 'The Renaissance economy. The pre-conditions for luxury consumption', in Bruno Dini (ed.), *Aspetti della vita economica medievale* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 1985), 659–75; Paolo Malanima, 'Italy in the Renaissance: a leading economy in the European context, 1350–1550', *The Economic History Review*, 71 (2018), 3–30.



accordance with their purchasing power, the following cases involving garments belonging to penitents will address the potential of the non-verbal language of clothing that occurred at the birth and development of the phenomenon of fashion, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

#### CLOTHING AS WOMEN'S AGENCY AND MEMORY MAKING

This last section will look at two garments of a religious nature acquired by women who were aware of their cultural and symbolic value, as well as the powerful message that they conveyed. If fashion and the rules that governed it were developed in a setting with the system of shared values characteristic of the later Middle Ages,<sup>55</sup> the denial of the societal norms that guided the modes of dress by the women implied a knowledge of these rules and conscious willingness to transgress them. The rejection of vanity and, therefore, of luxurious clothing and jewellery, was a recurring theme in the legends of secular saints of the late medieval period. It became commonplace for women to convert from a hedonistic to a penitent life after hearing religious sermons denouncing feminine vanity,<sup>56</sup> but not all women went about it in a way that violated societal norms. To this end, we will examine the ways in which the religious penitent Chiara of Rimini managed to completely change her lifestyle by donning a garment that went 'against the rules'. The penitent's female clothing discussed here documents a strategy that opposed conventions and was based upon extreme privation by women who had openly renounced all social dignities by donning clothes that were outside of the norms.<sup>57</sup> This case permits the evaluation of the awareness acquired by women during the late Middle Ages and of their close relationship with clothing, which was one of their only outlets of individual expression and identity.<sup>58</sup> The following paragraphs will examine two types of religious dress from a symbolic viewpoint: that of the aforementioned Chiara of Rimini, and the other of Galeotto Roberto Malatesta, Lord of Rimini held to have died a saintly death, whose penitent dress was

<sup>55</sup> Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Antonella Campanini (eds.), *Disciplinare il lusso. La legislazione suntuaria in Italia e in Europa tra Medioevo ed età moderna* (Roma: Carocci, 2003); Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, *Breve storia della moda in Italia* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011); Elisa Tosi Brandi, *L'arte del sarto nel Medioevo. Quando la moda diventa un mestiere* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2017); Giorgio Riello, Ulrika Rublack, *The right to dress. Sumpuatory Laws in a Global Perspective, c. 1200–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>56</sup> Federica Boldrini, 'Getting Naked for God: Social and Juridical Implications of Renouncing Female Vanities in the *Vitae* of Mystics of Medieval Italy', in Ghazzal Dabiri (ed.), *Narrating Power and Authority in Late Antique and Medieval Hagiography from East to West* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 1–15.

<sup>57</sup> Elisa Tosi Brandi, 'Moda e strategie dell'apparire nei secoli XIII–XVI', in Ivana Ait, Daniele Lombardi, Anna Modigliani (eds.), *Forme e linguaggi dell'apparire nella Roma rinascimentale* (Roma: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2022), 9–30.

<sup>58</sup> Owen Hughes, 'Le mode femminili e il loro controllo'; Katherine Kovesi Killerby, "'Heralds of a well-instructed mind": Nicolosa Sanuti's defence of women and their clothes', *Renaissance Studies*, 13, 3 (September 1999), 255–82.



preserved thanks to a network of women leading by her wife, Margherita d'Este. This male dress is one of the most antique garments preserved in Italy. It attests to one of the ways in which women could have access to objects, since they maintained control over it and decided how it would circulate within their network.<sup>59</sup>

### *Chiara of Rimini and the matter of the penitent*

All of what we know about Chiara derives from her hagiographic legend and a few historic sources.<sup>60</sup> Daughter of Gaudiana and Piero Zacheo, a Ghibelline family from Rimini, Chiara (ca. 1260–1324/29) lived during the political ascent of the Malatesta between thirteenth-fourteenth centuries and the local conflicts between the Guelphs and Ghibellines. Left a widow, Chiara sought refuge with her sole surviving brother in Urbino, where she remarried. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, peace was restored amongst the exiled Ghibellines and Chiara, widowed once again, returned to Rimini.<sup>61</sup> Aware of the message conveyed by clothing, Chiara abandoned luxury and chose a poor, modest tunic that declared her conversion and entry into the order of penitence.<sup>62</sup> Considered a living saint, Chiara was as loved as much as she was criticized due to her extreme behaviour, which earned her a condemnation for heresy; yet, this did not prevent her from having a wide following. This may have worked in Chiara's favour. The innate rebellion associated with penitents, which included gestures and behaviour outside of societal norms, was similarly accepted if not actually promoted by the Malatesta themselves in order to obtain the consensus of their citizens, who were known for their tolerant attitude towards heretics since the end of the twelfth century, in strong opposition to the pope.<sup>63</sup> While they had become Guelphs to help secure their power in Rimini, in reality the Malatesta maintained an ambiguous position with regard to papal politics and the local church. They tried to sustain a complicated balance between the demands of the people of Rimini, who were intolerant

<sup>59</sup> Sandra Cavallo, Isabelle Chabot (eds.), *Oggetti*, *Genesis*, 5, 1 (2006), 7–22.

<sup>60</sup> The original parchment manuscript with her life is conserved in Rimini in the Biblioteca of Seminario Vescovile, MS 144: *Questa è La vita della beata Chiara da Rimini, la quale fo exemplo a tucte le donne vane*, 29 fols. The *Vita* was transcribed for the first time by Giuseppe Garampi, *Memorie ecclesiastiche appartenenti all'istoria e al culto della beata Chiara da Rimini raccolte dal conte G.G. canonico della Basilica Vaticana e prefetto dell'Archivio Segreto Apostolico consacrate alla Santità di Nostro Signore Benedetto XIV* (Roma: Niccolò e Marco Paglierini, 1755). See also: Jacques Dalarun, *Santa e ribelle: Vita di Chiara da Rimini* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000) and Jacques Dalarun, Sean L. Field, Valerio Cappozzo, *A Female Apostle in Medieval Italy: the Life of Clare of Rimini* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia, 2023).

<sup>61</sup> Dalarun, *Santa e ribelle*, 31–46.

<sup>62</sup> Daniel Bornstein, Roberto Rusconi (eds.), *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1996); Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200–1500* (London: Routledge, 2016), 199–214.

<sup>63</sup> Tosi Brandi, *Rimini*, 47.

and rejected papal interference. The delicate state of regional politics that expected all of Romagna to be subjugate to the Holy See was also a factor, as it came about thanks to the assistance of the Malatesta family, who had become Guelphs during the second half of thirteenth century.<sup>64</sup> For this reason, it can be perceived that Chiara enjoyed the protection and perhaps even a very important role within the Malatesta family, which allowed her considerable influence over Rimini's political life. We can only surmise that the Malatesta women gathered around this influential and independent woman for consolation and advice. This may explain why the church of Rimini tolerated, likely with some embarrassment, Chiara's preaching to the crowds, an activity strictly prohibited for women.<sup>65</sup>

A new 'uniform' was necessary for this new lifestyle based on sacrifice, but Chiara was not satisfied with the simple, colourless dresses imposed by the church. Probably thanks to the protection of the Malatesta, Chiara wore a dress in public that did not follow the established rules for dress, becoming the banner of her sacrifice and mortification.<sup>66</sup> With the same care that she previously applied to her style of sumptuous dress and jewellery before her conversion, Chiara selected the fabric for her new garment, which can be seen in a work of art by a Riminese artist.<sup>67</sup> The garment was a simple tunic made of crude, rough hopsacking with yellow stripes.<sup>68</sup> In the medieval era negative meanings were attributed to both stripes and the colour yellow: stripes conveyed ideas of ambiguity and shiftiness, while yellow was characteristic of socially marginalized groups<sup>69</sup>; it was perhaps these two elements of Chiara's gown that transmitted the idea of independence and led the church to condemn her outfit as a symbol of diversity and rebellion. It is this author's opinion that the significant absence of this garment in her official hagiography attests to the ecclesiastic authorities' will to diminish and control her message of independence. What can be drawn from surviving iconographic sources is that this was her most typical garment.

The oldest hagiographic *Leggenda* about Chiara surfaces from the fifteenth century and it makes mention of an iron cilice (*panzera*) worn beneath a colourless garment (*panni grigi e bigi*) paired with a white mantle.<sup>70</sup> Scholars maintain that this account came from another *Vita* written in Latin shortly after the penitent woman died. We do not know whether the

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 52–4.

<sup>65</sup> Elisa Tosi Brandi, 'The challenges of Chiara da Rimini: from Deeds to Words', in Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli (ed.), *From Words to Deeds: The Effectiveness of Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 99–116.

<sup>66</sup> Tosi Brandi, 'The challenges of Chiara da Rimini'.

<sup>67</sup> See Francesco da Rimini, *The Vision of the Blessed Clare of Rimini, 1333–1340*, egg tempera on wood, cm 55 × 60, The National Gallery of London: <https://www.nationalgalleryimages.co.uk/asset/3518/> (accessed March 2024).

<sup>68</sup> Garampi, *Memorie ecclesiastiche*, 127–50, 142.

<sup>69</sup> Michele Pastoureau, *La stoffa del diavolo: Una storia delle righe e dei tessuti rigati* (Genova: il Melangolo, 1993), 9–40.

<sup>70</sup> Garampi, *Memorie ecclesiastiche*, 134.

original source made any reference to a gown with yellow stripes, which at any rate was certainly her distinctive characteristic amongst her devotees in Rimini. This type of gown is referenced in the most well-known portrayal of the penitent, an artwork from which she was identified by her followers and around which her memory has been constructed. This was the memory that the Church struck from official record as it was symbolic of rebellion and identified her as a person who moved outside of accepted conventions.

The gown's fabric was very similar to that used as a packing material, which would have been easily available in large quantities in a commercial port city like Rimini. However, it was not a textile that was adapted for use as clothing and therefore was considered unseemingly. This material was made of undyed, raw hemp, although it did contain some coloured threads that were inserted to help identify what kind of goods the sack contained.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the lack of mention in written sources, this religious garment continued to appear in iconographic sources from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. In the sixteenth century, popular devotion to Chiara of Rimini was still thriving, which led to the beatification process. However, her devotees had forgotten about the original visual memory and in their attempts to depict the local holy woman, they relied upon the description of her gowns as recounted in the available *Leggenda*. The omission regarding her cult by the Church had borne its long-term fruit until cardinal Giuseppe Garampi of Rimini,<sup>72</sup> an erudite man who during the eighteenth century was the first to conduct scholarship regarding Chiara. He brought forth the story about her gown with the yellow stripes and the iconographic sources present in the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli.<sup>73</sup> In his monumental work sustaining the beatification cause of Chiara of Rimini, Garampi published drawings that depict the now-lost antique frescoes, where she is shown wearing a striped gown that distinguished her from her holy sisters, who wore grey gowns (Fig. 3).

Chiara's eccentric clothing is what ecclesiastic authorities tried at all costs to eradicate from collective memory, as it promoted causes of individualism that were not only difficult to control but also potentially dangerous. It recalled the story of a conscious decision of sacrifice made visible thanks to the clothing's symbolic and identity-making value. It is this author's opinion that the promoters of this penitent's cult were the Malatesta women, who had patronized local painters during the fourteenth century<sup>74</sup> and had also supported this mystic prophetess of Rimini who originated from their same feminine social network.

<sup>71</sup> Elisa Tosi Brandi, 'L'abito della beata Chiara da Rimini (1260 ca.-1324/29)', in Rosita Copioli (ed.), *Gli Agolanti e il Castello di Riccione* (Rimini: Guaraldi, 2003), 331–8.

<sup>72</sup> Marina Caffiero, 'Garampi, Giuseppe', in *DBI*, 52 (1999): [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-garampi\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-garampi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/) (accessed March 2024).

<sup>73</sup> Garampi, *Memorie ecclesiastiche*, 127–50, 440–3.

<sup>74</sup> Giovanna Ragionieri, 'La pittura e la miniatura del Trecento a Rimini e nei territori malatestiani', in Luciano Bellosi (ed.), *Le arti figurative nelle corti dei Malatesti* (Rimini: Ghigi, 2002), 25–110; Tosi Brandi, *Rimini*, 160–6.



Fig. 3 Giovanni Antonio Battarra, *Intercessione della Beata Chiara per una richiesta di guarigione*, eighteenth century, engraving, in Giuseppe Garampi, *Memorie ecclesiastiche appartenenti all'istoria e al culto della beata Chiara da Rimini* (Roma: Niccolò e Marco Pagliarini, 1755), 443

### *Margherita d'Este Malatesta and a relic to save*

Male religious clothing from the Malatesta circle has survived to the present day thanks to Margherita d'Este (1411–1476), illegitimate daughter of Nicolò III d'Este, who was given in marriage between 1427 and 1428 to the Lord of Rimini, Galeotto Roberto Malatesta (1411–1432), the elder brother of Sigismondo.<sup>75</sup> Her account, like that of many women, has been told through her husband's biography. Margherita holds a decisive role in the process that has left to posterity a most important heirloom belonging to Galeotto Roberto: a recently discovered relic that has allowed us, after many years, to resume the research on this holy man.<sup>76</sup>

The marriage between Margherita and Galeotto Roberto was short lived owing to his death in 1432.<sup>77</sup> Equal in age to her husband, the young Margherita had been destined to marry a man of deep religious vocation. Malatesta donned the frock of a Franciscan tertiary monk in 1431 and

<sup>75</sup> Roberta Iotti, 'Margherita d'Este Malatesti', in Falcioni (ed.), *Le donne di casa Malatesti*, 297–311.

<sup>76</sup> Réginald Grégoire, 'Tra leggenda agiografica e religiosità francescana: Galeotto Roberto Malatesta (†1432)', in Marco Musmeci (ed.), *Templum Mirabile* (Rimini: Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio, 2003), 123–37.

<sup>77</sup> Anna Falcioni, 'Malatesta, Galeotto Roberto', *DBI*, 68 (2007): [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/galeotto-roberto-malatesta\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/galeotto-roberto-malatesta_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (accessed March 2024).

withdrew to a penitent life after having governed the Seignory for only two years.<sup>78</sup> Margherita had to adapt to her husband's life of penitence, and she was likely comforted by her friend and favourite companion, Caterina Vigri.<sup>79</sup> Caterina became a nun in Ferrara in 1431 at the monastery of *Corpus Domini* and sometime between 1455 and 1456 founded another *Corpus Domini* monastery in Bologna, where today she is still venerated as a saint. Margherita lived the rest of her life as a widow, which she spent as a Franciscan *terziaria*, moving about the Romagna territory and the cities of Ferrara and Bologna as an ambassador and promoting pious acts.

This author believes that it was thanks to Margherita that the only relic of the Blessed Galeotto Roberto Malatesta has survived to this day: a well-conserved, raw wool tunic that this saintly man wore as a symbol of his condition of penitence.<sup>80</sup> This is a very important discovery for the Malatesta history, as well as the history of ancient clothing, because this perfectly preserved tunic will allow us to examine the technique of medieval tailoring on the use of gusset and a raw wool known as *panno romagnolo* (made in Romagna), documented in written sources for modest clothing during the medieval and Renaissance period.<sup>81</sup> Galeotto Roberto's robe was jealously safeguarded for more than five centuries by the cloister nuns of the *Corpus Domini* of Bologna from the moment the abbess Caterina Vigri received it from Margherita prior to her death in 1463 until it vanished into obscurity in the manner of most antique fabric relics, although it continued to be kept in storage in the monastery in Bologna. This garment reveals the deep friendship and complicity between the two women belonging to the same network, who, instead of bequeathing dress to female relatives, decided to safeguard a male religious dress for posterity. It is an example of the awareness of the strong bond of affection that objects such as clothes were able to carry forward and of the symbolic value of this raw tunic that preserved memory in the form of material culture, an item that had belonged to a Malatesta holy man.

The last two cases described here are part of the promotion of a local cult, an activity in which women were particularly sensitive to and inclined to participate. The promotion of these cults, as in the case of Parisina and her documented acts of charity, was a sphere reserved for women, where they cared

<sup>78</sup> Antonio G. Luciani, *La signoria di Galeotto Roberto Malatesti (1427–1432)* (Rimini: Bruno Ghigi Editore, 1999).

<sup>79</sup> Serena Spanò, 'Caterina Vigri, santa', *DBI*, 22 (1979): [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/santa-caterina-vigri\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/santa-caterina-vigri_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/) (accessed March 2024).

<sup>80</sup> Galeotto Roberto can be seen wearing his penitent's robe in a fresco in a town within the Malatesta territory: Anonymous, *Portrait of Blessed Galeotto Roberto Malatesta*, fifteenth century, convent of Saint Francesco, Rovereto Saltara (Italy).

<sup>81</sup> Gian Ludovico Masetti Zannini, "'Vestir di romaguolo". Panni e telai nel contado riminese del primo Cinquecento', *Romagna Arte e Storia*, 45 (1995), 65–78. The study of this garment and other Medieval and Renaissance Italian clothing are being published by Thesy Schoenholzer Nichols and Elisa Tosi Brandi.



for the family reputation while simultaneously caring for their souls.<sup>82</sup> In these spaces women could move with full autonomy and use their network of friendships and relatives while they built up their family glory and reinforced relationships by means of objects, acting as custodians or creators of memories.<sup>83</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

During the late Middle Ages, with the birth and growth of the phenomenon of fashion which engaged not only the courts but also the cities which were manufacturing centres, élite women developed the ability to utilize clothing as a means of social identity. If the majority of these women took advantage of their positions within these spheres with the complete complicity of their families, in turn making their own contributions to the fashion phenomenon, others experimented in other ways that opposed conventions. The cases of Parisina, Ginevra, and the two Elisabettas are examples of traditional ways of self-fashioning. On the other end of the spectrum, women like Chiara of Rimini constitute an opposing point of view that could be termed a female self-fashioning turn. By this I mean to say that by the fourteenth century there was an awareness on the part of women of the potential of the communicative abilities clothing held. In situations such as Chiara's, it could be used to one's advantage to have further visibility despite – or just because of – the criticisms and marginalization she experienced as a result of her provocative choices. These decisions were conscientious and were made to reach a wider audience by means of the non-verbal language of her clothing. We would have never known about Chiara of Rimini's case if it were not for visual sources intended to promote her cult that were commissioned by women from the Malatesta social network during the early fourteenth century. Women were more likely than men to reflect upon the multiple values that were transmitted by clothing. This may be attributed to the society in which they inhabited, which restricted the ways to reaffirm and express themselves, leaving them little recourse aside from use of clothing and ornamentation as modes of increasing their visibility. It was from this standpoint that they could develop specific strategies that could go beyond social conventions to express their identities, actions, and thoughts.

Knowledge about the role clothing played would increase during the Renaissance, when women would be granted a degree of control in this field at least within the private sphere and in accordance with conventions, as sources can attest. Clothing represented decorum, prestige, and familial honour, and

<sup>82</sup> Silvana Vecchio, 'La buona moglie', in Duby, Perrot (dir.), *Storia delle donne*, 129–165, 140–3.

<sup>83</sup> Evelyn Welch, 'Women as patrons and clients in the courts of Quattrocento Italy', in Letizia Panizza (ed.), *Woman in Italian Renaissance. Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18–34.



it was a chore left to the women, who also maintained the relative rules and ensured that they would be passed on to future generations. However, this did not stop them from spreading and promoting values that were also at times in contrary to the rules, as shown in the study of the two religious garments, which attest to the solidity and effectiveness of female social networks through which women were able to impose their authority. These cases attest to the will to transmit memories by means of the inherit power of specific objects, paintings, or materials. It is no coincidence that the clothing was the *medium* by which this passage took place. It is an indicator of the strong relationship between women and clothing. A close connection created by the masculine authority that women knew how to decline to their own advantage, by mastering the language of a semantic system in which they were sure that their greater potential could be reached.

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