PERFORMATIVITY AND IDENTITY IN THE ILLUMINATED PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE COUNTESS DE CASTIGLIONE

by

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ABSTRACT

The illuminated photographs of the Countess de Castiglione are unique in the way they demonstrate identity and performativity both through documentation and through fictionality. By combining photography and painting, the Countess created new personas for herself that interrogated the feminine roles expected of an 1860s celebrity and complicated the central role visuality played in these expectations. Three of these illuminated photographs are considered in this thesis. In *Ritrosetta* (1864), Castiglione employs extreme manipulation and introduces the central motifs found throughout several of her other illuminated photographs. Conversely, *The Marquise Mathilde* (1861-66) confronts the viewer's gaze directly and examines the act of looking, placing the character in the image in the position both of a sitter and of a viewer; she achieves this by focusing her gaze out of frame and directly at the viewer, while she herself becomes the viewed. Finally, *The Queen of Hearts* (1863) demonstrates the fluid nature of Castiglione's illuminated photographs exhibiting a persona that at once directs the viewer's gaze and grants it autonomy, thereby allowing the view to project any desire onto the character. These three illuminated photographs straddle the fine line between documentary photography and painterly expression, and they cooperate to create a complex position of the increasingly differentiated women's roles and expectations in 1860s Europe.

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INTRODUCTION

"The life of this woman was nothing but a lengthy *tableau vivant*, a perpetual *tableau vivant*" (Montesquiou qtd. in Solomon-Godeau 81). Describing the life of the Countess de Castiglione, Virginia Verasis Oldoini, the poet Robert de Montesquiou touched upon the central theme in her life: performance. An aristocrat and socialite, a purported spy and courtesan, a devotee among the *demimonde*, and a powerful woman at the Emperor's side, Castiglione assumed a variety of roles, each reported and sensationalized by the weekly gossip columns of Europe. She appeared at balls and ballets, participated in public *tableau vivants* for charity, and handed out *carte-de-visite* portraiture across Europe. She was constantly in the public eye and one of many women who would experience the newly forged position of celebrity in Second-Empire Paris. However, her celebrity rested on her physical appearance and her ability to retain the appellation of "most beautiful woman of the century" – an impossible role to fulfill when confronted with the rapidly fracturing ideals of femininity produced by social and economic change within industrialized Europe (Demange 72).

Castiglione's photographic work enacts a struggle between selfhood, identity, and performativity. As a public figure, she frequented the prestigious studio of Pier-Louis Pierson, the preferred photographer, of the Parisian elite and personal photographer for Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie. As a professional specializing in *carte-de-visite* portraiture, Pierson directed studios that were also known for ranking among the earliest

studios to employ a painter, Aquilin Schad, both to add color to the portraits as well as to correct subtly the flaws made apparent in typical photographic portraiture. Castiglione, with Pierson as her photographer, began experimenting with the photographic process early on, creating odd scenes that violated the *carte-de-visite* portraiture rules by isolating her body parts, documenting her possessions, and even featuring their subject *en déshabilé*. However, when Aquilin Schad began painting entire photographs, Castiglione began commissioning illuminated photographs of her favorite prints. Though she and Pierson produced more than four hundred photographs during their collaborative period between 1864 and her death in 1899, only a small handful of illuminated photographs were ultimately completed. Though few remain, the illuminated images are some of her most visually complicated works. It is these illuminated photographs that best demonstrate the play between Castiglione's depiction of selfhood and the performative roles she played as a person continually in the public eye, and these deserve particular attention.

This thesis examines three images that specifically demonstrate the Countess negotiating her identity in unusual and interesting ways. First, I examine *Ritrosetta*, an early illuminated photograph highlighting the formal characteristics of performance, gaze, and commodity so important to her later works. *Ritrosetta* (1864) casts the Countess in the role of the naïve *ingénue* and directly references Claudio Monteverdi's madrigal *Non Partir, Ritrosetta*. Castiglione's *Ritrosetta* combines documentary detail with the sort of imaginative performativity represented in many of her other illuminated photographs. Next, I turn to *The Marquise Mathilde*, an example of multilayered performance through the use of painting and photography, object and gaze, and reality

and fantasy. *The Marquise Mathilde* (1861-66) enlists many of the same motifs seen in *Ritrosetta*; however, the Countess instead adopts the role of a confident and flirtatious eighteenth-century court lady. Unlike in *Ritrosetta*, in *The Marquise Mathilde*, the Countess flirts overtly with the viewer's gaze and adopts a role, combining photography and painting in a manner that allows her to commemorate the ball wherein she first caught Napoleon III's eye. Through the lens of a fictionalized character, Castiglione is able to reframe herself as the strong, powerful court force she felt herself to be. Finally, I consider *The Queen of Hearts*, the most striking example of Castiglione's illuminated photographs in its performative construction and symbolic resonance. In *The Queen of Hearts*, Castiglione combines the devices seen in both *Ritrosetta* and *The Marquise Mathilde* to create an almost totally fantasized commemoration of the same court ball that solidified Castiglione's celebrity, a moment she considered to be the height of her accomplishments. *The Queen of Hearts* most conspicuously demonstrates the illuminated photograph's potential to express the complexity between documentary and fantasy, photography and painting, as it can simultaneously amalgamate private/public identity and performance.

The Illuminated Photographs in Context

Creating an illuminated photograph was not a project unique to Castiglione; Empress Eugenie had several of her photographs illuminated to add color and it became popular for the upper classes to do so as well. However, few manipulated their prints to the extreme degree that the Countess did. Nevertheless, as radical as Castiglione's prints would become, she began by timidly experimenting with simple portraiture at Pierson's

studio. At this time, newly introduced commercialized photographic portraiture both shaped and aided the Second Empire's evolving conception of celebrity, especially for women. Easily created, reproduced, and distributed, photographs became literally the calling card of the elite. Photography and its distribution offered a new avenue to connect with others across great distances, thereby facilitating an economy of acquaintances: family albums often displayed photographic portraiture of close friends, famous people who had stayed at their home, or contacts across Europe with whom letters and photographs were exchanged. For the Countess de Castiglione, photography was the means whereby she could demonstrate and perfect her identification with, and understanding of, the manifold feminine roles she was expected to perform. With her photographic images, the Countess positioned herself as an object to be viewed while, at the same time, she occupied the role of the viewer to understand and embody the subjective visual tastes of her culture.

The Countess's illuminated photographs more specifically demonstrate their creator's complex understanding of visuality and the complicated interplay between viewer and object by simultaneously employing photography and painting. Of the hundreds of photographs Castiglione and Pierson created, only a select few were illuminated in any sense; some she simply touched up with pencil or watercolor. Other photographs included notes in Castiglione's hand on their reverse side describing how she would eventually like them to appear. However, even fewer were completed as oil and gauche by Aquilin Schad. Though fewer than a dozen finished illuminated photographs are extant, the vestiges of forthcoming planned portraits appear in the many

slight alterations made to the vast collection of Castiglione's unclaimed photographs and in the negatives that still reside in the Pierson studio archives.

The young Castiglione used this relatively new medium as a chance to document her renowned beauty for the new court acquaintances she made after her marriage and arrival in Paris. Her first sitting in 1856, *The Nursemaid*, is simple and straightforward, following the same generalized guidelines of all sitters inexperienced in being photographed, for she poses in the ubiquitous, if unimaginative, *carte-de-visite* style. However, the resultant image captures more than merely the sitters' appearance, it highlights their uncomfortable attitudes, their apprehension and uncertainty. *The Nursemaid* is a group portrait of the young Castiglione, her son Georgio, and his nurse. Positioned with seemingly little attention to aesthetics, Castiglione stands uncomfortably next to her son, leaning awkwardly to her right as if unsure of what the camera would or could capture. Her smile is static, strained and her posture is stiff. She wears a large, rigid gown that conceals most of her body and converts her famous curves into geometric abstractions – a triangular bodice ponderously attached to an oversized rounded skirt. Georgio sits on an ottoman at her side engulfed in the ruffles of his jumper, barely distinguishable among the pressing fabric of all three sitters. Despite the nurse's attempts to hold his head still, his face is blurred. The nursemaid herself seems eager to hide from the camera's view; bowing behind Georgio, she exhibits an irritated grimace as the shadows conceal her face. All three sitters seem aggravated, uncertain. The experience and process of photographic posturing is clearly new to all three sitters, and the resulting image mirrors the general feelings of the culture toward a novel and strange medium. The three sitters provide not only a portrait of a wealthy family but also a portrait of the

social reaction to photography – uncertain, uncomfortable yet hopeful and intrigued. Only later, when Castiglione became a powerful and well-known force within Parisian high society, did Castiglione's compositions take on the unique and unconventional character for which they are known for today. As she used photography to reenact and document crowning moments of her life in a more permanent form than her own memory (or, as we will see, her fantasy), her photographic understanding matured and evolved along with photography itself and the culture that so idolized it.

One of the most striking differences between the 1856 sitting and Castiglione's later, more mature works is the latter's awareness of visual literacy and performative theatrics so obviously lacking in the former. The sitters in *The Nursemaid* have no clear narrative; rather, they fill the same space as any *carte-de-visite* sitters. The photograph presents very little information to the viewer and is self-consciously formulaic, rendering the sitters indistinguishable from any other *carte-de-visite* portraiture. The image lacks legibility, organization, aesthetics, and visual force; its only legible element is the presence of sitters and the act of being photographed. *The Nursemaid* scarcely acknowledges that the function of a photograph is to be read and interpreted by a viewer. The sitters' forms are conflated and confused, the positioning awkward, and their relationships uncertain. It is as if the act of being photographed is more important than the photograph itself; the end product is almost irrelevant. Not until her later images do we see Castiglione enlist visual legibility to focus on her own identity, and herself as a sitter deliberately situated as an object designed to be viewed. In her later images, she carefully selects all ornaments and compositional cues to reinforce her role as the central theme and to guide the viewer's gaze toward the visual narrative of each piece. No more

do we see the awkward or haphazard positioning of her earlier work. Instead, the Countess chooses clothing and costumes specifically for their photographic appeal, often tight-fitting and simply patterned so as not to distract. In these later images, Castiglione acknowledges that a photograph's purpose is to be read, and we see a clearer depiction of which visual information Castiglione wants her viewers to see. She often frames her later photographs more centrally, with the sitter as the main focus. These images are choreographed, planned works, each revealing and obscuring visual information as Castiglione wishes, and all have the role of the viewer in mind.

The most well known of the Countess's experimental photographs, and a representative example of Castiglione's mature works, *Scherzo di Follia* (1863-66), interrogates the relationship between the sitter and the viewer. The image, at once supplying and withholding information, is clear in its intent if mysterious in its meaning. In *Scherzo Di Follia*, Castiglione explores the traditional *carte-de-visite* style. Displayed from the waist up and slightly turned from the viewer, the Countess is wrapped in a draped cloak falling from one bare shoulder, her body veiled beneath the folds of finery; but it appears as if the cloak may be all she is wearing. Here the Countess all but hides behind an empty picture frame held before her eye, watching the viewer through the aperture, her expression concealed. The Countess obscures not only her face but also her attitude, yet the information she leaves for the viewer is diffuse in detail. Her hand is posed in a deliberate, painterly position as she theatrically extends her index finger along the edge of the frame. She delicately presses the black velvet frame against her soft, pale face; her eye turns askance to better view the viewer. She holds her lips in a still and subtle expression below the edge of the frame, offering the viewer little insight into her

character. She displays on her shapely bare arm elaborate bracelets and beads that flow around her wrist and spill on to her upper arm and shoulder, beckoning the viewer's gaze toward her denuded shoulder. While her hair is meticulously coiffed, powdered, and curled, her face and body remain obscured, save for her keen, knowing glance, which reinforces the viewer's role as voyeur and the Countess's duel role as both object and viewer.

Though the meaning of the image is ambiguous, its sense of organization and purpose are readily accessible. Her position invites the viewer to gaze longer and more closely at this enigmatic woman than is normally permitted in the traditional *carte-de-visite* form. Castiglione knows how to engage the viewer's eye to create a visual economy that allows her at once to control the legible information and to function as the object supplying that information. She is aware that the purpose of the sitting, and the resultant photograph, is to be viewed. As she peers through the velvet frame, she directly enlists the viewer into the process of image creation. The photograph itself would signify little were it not for the participation of the viewer, yet at the same time as she plays both sitter and object, she dictates what that viewer sees. *Scherzo de Follia* provides a mature commentary on the cyclical nature of photographic production and interpretation. The photograph, as the focus of mediation, becomes a forum wherein the visual desires of both sitter and viewer are fulfilled. And as the practice of photography matured, so did Castiglione's understanding of its potential.

Castiglione's illuminated photographs articulate the roles played by the viewer and the object viewed. These salient prints transform the sitter herself into a symbolic and complicated visual performance. Composed during her first photographic phase in

the 1860s, Castiglione's illuminated photos were conceived almost exclusively for her own personal consumption and, thus, were rarely exhibited or viewed by anyone other than their creator. She sequestered the completed illuminated photographs in private apartments into which few people were ever admitted. Though many prints in various collections reveal subtle alterations in watercolor, only a very few completed illuminated photographs exist today. Consequently, modern scholarship treating the final illuminated product has been cursory.

Review of the Literature

Until relatively recently, Castiglione's photographs received little critical attention. If she was discussed at all it was usually in anecdotal tabloids or as a footnote in sweeping accounts of notable people of the Second Empire.[1] This lack of attention is due largely to the art form of photography and the complications of authorship; Because of the Countess's biographical notoriety, critics understood her photographic extravagances only as a symptom of her extreme vanity. However, such treatments fail to acknowledge that, for most aristocratic European women, being photographed was a popular and fairly commonplace act. With the new infusion of *demimonde* celebrity and the rapidly produced and distributed photographic advertisements, photography became a popular and pervasive public act. Indeed, late nineteenth-century popular culture was saturated with almost a century's worth of photography, many in the *carte-de-visite* style reminiscent of many of the Countess's photographs. The Countess's odd creations were

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[1] Mostly historical accounts such as Roger L. Williams' *Gaslight and Shadow: The World of Napoleon III* (NY: Macmillan, 1957), wherein a scathing chapter is dedicated to the Countess and her "snobbish" nature.

drowned in the deluge of photographic images. Many biographers interpreted Castiglione's more than four hundred such photographs, taken throughout her lifetime, as just another monument to the Countess's severe narcissism, and they accordingly overlooked the unique nature of these images. They tended to dismiss the Countess as an embellished tale for the gossip columns; the story of a woman who enthralled the elite at social gatherings but led an obscure domestic life behind closed doors smacked of the romanticized tales popularized in weekly tabloids. This attitude would ultimately lead them to eschew any serious study of her photographic works.[2] It is no wonder that her vast collection often disappeared into the main body of Second Empire portraiture despite its unique qualities. The sheer quantity of her works and their various fates only compounded this lack of recognition after the Countess's death. The Italian government, ignoring Castiglione's final wishes, seized most of her property and held a large auction in the French Hôtel Drouot where she had once lived (Heilbrun 75). Open to the general public, the auction sold off many of Castiglione's photographs to anonymous bidders, dissolving large collections and dispersing the prints and originals across Europe to rest in mixed albums and private collections. Countless more photographs were destroyed along with much of the Countess's personal papers and correspondence, providing a sizeable vacuum of credible information about both the Countess's life and her photographic work. Robert de Montesquiou, the Countess's most ardent admirer, bought large collections of her more experimental works at the hotel auction, along with several of the Countess's most prized possessions – some of which could be seen in the very

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[2] As Pierre Apraxine states, "The most serious obstacle to any critical assessment has been the personality of the Countess herself and the singular relationship she entertained with her own work, for she appears to have applied the same energy to withdrawing it from public view as she did to creating it" (12).

same photographs. However, the majority of the intact collections available today were spared the auction fate, most residing as prints in the personal archives of Gaston Braun, who inherited the Mayer and Pierson studios after the death of the Countess's trusted photographer, Pierre-Louis Pierson (Apraxine and Demange 8-9).

For decades, the Countess's photographs lay in relative obscurity, eclipsed by the Countess's mythic reputation, ironically perpetuated by Montesquiou himself and his sensationally romanticized 1913 biography *La divine comtesse: étude d'après Mme de Castiglione*. Montesquiou's biography derives largely from two sources: journal accounts of people who had met the Countess decades before, and as articles from celebrity gossip newspapers, such as *Le Gaulois*, which continued to run anecdotal accounts of the Countess's life long after she had passed away. Interest in the Countess briefly reemerged in the 1950s, including a 1954 film[3] and a biography by historian Alain Decaux in 1958.[4] However, both works were more interested in the scandalous nature of her life than her photography. A third work, Frédérick Loliée's 1958 *Les Femmes du Second Empire*, revised from the original 1906 publication, attempts to document her life through fact. Though Loliée purports to deliver an unbiased account of the Countess's biography, he nevertheless relies heavily on rumor and anecdote, privileging secondhand stories of an often bawdy nature and journal excerpts from her contemporaries who themselves often traded in scandal and intrigue.

The Countess's photographic work was thus more or less forgotten for nearly a century, and the Countess herself was only occasionally mentioned as an example of

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[3] *La Castiglione*, directed by Georges Combret (Taurus Film et Radius Productions, 1954).
[4] *La Castiglione: Dame de Coeur de l'Europe* (Paris: Le Livre Contemporain, 1958).

Second Empire extravagance and court scandal. Not until women artists and photographers emerged in a more theoretical light in the 1970s did some of her photographs begin to appear as footnote examples to larger arguments in photography journals.[5] However, such instances lack any critical discussion of the work itself and inevitably fail to acknowledge the creator of these images. Her images were often employed as foils to a larger argument or as examples of the eccentricities of Victorian photo portraiture – thereby garnering little academic interest or scholarly credibility.

Finally, in 1986, feminist theorist Abigail Solomon-Godeau provided the first sustained analysis of the Countess's photographs. Solomon-Godeau's "The Legs of the Countess" discusses Castiglione and her photographic desires as reification of three predominate cultural fetishisms converging on the construction of feminine identity. Solomon-Godeau discusses these fetishisms as

> The psychic fetishism of patriarchy, grounded in the specificity of the corporeal body; the commodity fetishism of capitalism, shrouded in what Marx termed the 'veil of reification,' and grounded in the means of production and the social relations they engender; and the fetishizing properties of the photograph – a commemorative trace of an absent object, the still picture of a frozen look, a screen for the projective play of the spectator's consciousness. (Solomon-Godeau 67)

Solomon-Godeau locates the Countess within a specific cultural framework that demonstrates a larger fascination, and arguably exploitation, of the feminine. Castiglione's photographic work, she argues, mirrors these cultural fetishes; most evident in the images wherein the Countess photographs her bare legs. In such instances, Castiglione identifies with her own objectification, and Solomon-Godeau concludes that we are inevitably unable to read the Countess's photographs. For Solomon-Godeau,

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[5] See *Artforum* 13 (1974): 9; *Art in America* 65 (1977): 37; *History of Photography* 3 (1979): 368; and *Pantheon* 41 (1983): 279.

Castiglione's work resists interpretation due to a simple question: whose desire is being portrayed in these works? the Countess's own desire for visuality? or her reification of the male viewer's desire?

By acknowledging Castiglione as a conscious participant in her images, Solomon-Godeau's article stands apart from all previous discussions of the Countess. No longer relegated to the role of a vapid and inconsequential sitter who photographed herself to flatter her vain conceits, Castiglione is instead placed at the forefront of the discussion as an active participant in her works creation; her photographs thus not only reflect her own biography but also perform a cultural commentary on an era that has defined many modern conceptions of femininity.

Understanding Castiglione as a touchstone of nascent photography became more prevalent in 1999, when Pierre Apraxine curated *La Divine Comtesse: Images of the Countess de Castiglione* for the Musée d'Orsay. The surprisingly popular exhibition traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000. As if to enact Solomon-Godeau's notion of the convergence of three fetishes in Castiglione's photographs, the very tangible, commodity-driven exhibition comprised not only the Countess's photographic collections but also several personal possessions purchased by Montesquiou at the posthumous public auction. These possessions included numerous pieces of apparel, shoes, fans, mirrors, and – quite fittingly – plaster casts of the Countess's feet and ankles. Juxtaposed with these intimate possessions and photographs were diverse portrayals of the Countess produced after her death by subsequent admirers, along with a recreation of her boudoir at the time of her affair with Napoleon III and a few handwritten letters from

the Countess to various European aristocrats and political associations (Apraxine, "Introduction").

The accompanying catalog featured several essays privileging the Countess's anecdotal life and her current mystique in French popular culture over her aesthetic contributions. What emerges is a comprehensive and engaging discussion of how the Countess was perceived socially, derived from the known facts of her life and the fantasy she inspired. *La Divine Comtesse* thoroughly demonstrates the same obsession with the femininity's visuality that characterized popular culture during the Countess's life as well as an overwhelming preoccupation with spectacle. Photographic historian François Heilbrun's contributing essay, "The Posthumous Life" charts the evolution of the cultish quality surrounding the Countess in France and the social idolatry she still evokes. Other contributors, including fashion photography writer Xavier Demange and theorist Michele Falzone Del Barbarò, understand the Countess's idiosyncratic biography to be the impetus for her photography, referring to her work respectively as a "photo novel" and an "altar to the past"; both view her work as primarily a study in documentation and portraiture. Curator Pierre Apraxine's own contributions to the catalog typify the biographical attitude that has been so closely tied to Castiglione's photographic recognition. In his introduction and essay "The Model and the Photographer," Apraxine ascribes full credit to the photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson as both the artist and author, casting Castiglione as merely a narcissistic and eccentric sitter. For Apraxine, the experimental and unique photographs issuing from their collaboration is ironic happenstance: seemingly self-aware images that, to modern viewers, may command a

high degree of critical interest but which meant little to the two people involved in their creation.

While Solomon-Godeau and Apraxine convincingly observe that any investigation into the authorship of the final product is inconsequential, such attitudes go too far in simplifying what is ultimately an incredibly complicated body of work. Whether it was Castiglione or Pierson who decided to stage such elaborate and often bizarre images matters little; it is in the treatment of the image itself, the strange creation of the illuminated photographs, that we find a complex negotiation of the roles played between public visibility and self-identification.

RITROSETTA (1864)

Castiglione's illuminated images stand out amid the various photographic styles the Countess employed due to their insistence that the viewer as well as the sitter must participate in the construction of meaning. The few finished illuminated photographs still extant rest at the extreme end of the arc of manipulation enacted by Castiglione in most of her photographs. Though it was a common practice for Castiglione to have her photographs doctored and then re-photographed, these alterations usually effected only minor changes, such as a slimmer figure by pinning pieces of paper over the print or a more emphasized arm by painting over drapery that had obscured it.[15] These instances of photographic manipulation are interesting in their own right, but the extremity of manipulation the illuminated photographs undergo make them particularly worthy of critical analysis.

Conceiving and producing an illuminated photograph is in itself a form of objectification and performance. *Ritrosetta* (1864) is one of the earliest finished illuminated photographs, one that clearly demonstrates the radical nature of Castiglione's illumination process. To produce such a piece, the artist used a photograph of the Countess as she appeared in the studio sitting and made multiple copies of the print. The *Ritrosetta* studio print portrays the Countess posed in the sparse confines of Pierson's studio, the content of the finished illumination only hinted at by the overt theatrics of her

[15] For example, in *The Red Bow* (1861-67) series, the Countess's arms are often painted into the picture, their having previously been covered by the eponymous large red bow on the décolletage of her gown.

pose. The first stage of the illumination can be seen in the amateurish outlines of watercolor and pencil marking the studio print.[16] Once the final image was fully planned and photographed, the negative would then be processed by exposure to excessive amounts of light. Each resulting print would undergo this process until the detail in the image became almost completely obscured, replaced instead by broad white spaces capable of housing whatever visual information the Countess chose. Finally, the pale and effaced print was sent to the Meyer and Pierson studio's resident artist who painted over the photograph in the traditional portraiture style using rich oils and gauche. The final product, an amalgam of photographic staging and conventional painterly techniques, placed the illuminated photographs at the crossroads of two popular but wildly different forms of portraiture.

In *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, women's photography historian Elizabeth Seigel discusses the act of social play inherent in similar forms of photographic manipulation that were popular among aristocratic women in Europe in the nineteenth century (Siegel). Though specifically focused on British women's photocollage, Siegel understands the social attitudes and cultural commodity values revealed in the art of women's photographic manipulation to be an essential point in the larger discussion of women's access to and use of photographic media. Within the frames of these manipulated photographs, women could comment on the social stratification conditioning their lives. Seigel places women's contribution to both art forms within the larger cultural context of painting and early photography.

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[16] Solomon-Godeau notes many of the illuminated photographs are annotated in the Countess's hand and seem to have been painted by an amateur, which has led some historians to theorize the Countess may have painted them herself in order to control more fully the professionally painted final product (72).

Specifically, in her essay "Society Cutups," Siegel investigates social aspects of "cartomania," the pervasive trend of collecting and exchanging *carte-de-visite* portraiture; this exchange, she argues, led to the creation of albums displaying the collected photographs. As women began creating photograph albums, they also began finding ways to personalize them by combining the photographic albums with the already popular pastime of watercolor albums, adorning the photograph with dried flowers, pasteboard cutouts, and watercolor frames. And as photographic album making became more popular, so did the manipulation of the photographs inside. Instead of simply adding small touches of ornamentation to the existing photograph, women began physically altering the photographs to remove and add information, to reposition a scene, or even to manipulate the physical bodies of the sitters. Such alterations, Siegel argues, granted women power as social connectors by allowing them literally to rearrange their social spheres, demonstrating their own social preferences visibly through the organization and manipulation of the album's contents. Women achieved the power to express their opinions and delineate their social standing.

Castiglione would have been quite familiar with such British photocollage albums, having spent most summers in London when the cartomania craze was just gaining widespread recognition. She herself was known to grant a *carte-de-visite* to her admirers, sometimes accompanied by a lock of her hair or a flirtatious letter. However, we must distinguish between the photocollage albums described by Siegel and Castiglione's illuminated photographs: the former were made expressly to be shared, whereas Castiglione's images, with a few exceptions, seem to have been designated

primarily for intimate private viewing.[17] It is this aspect of personal consumption, not public exhibition, that renders her illuminated photographs so unconventional. The pieces are meant to display, through performance and theatrics, an alternate role Castiglione fulfills – but only for a very small, intimate audience. By keeping these illuminated images private, she both recognizes and embraces her own self-objectification. Of all Castiglione's photographic works, the illuminated photographs undergo the most manipulation and seem to be the images she most cherished; they are the most visually complicated of her photographic work. While many of her unpainted photographs contain bland backgrounds to make Castiglione the central focus, in her illuminated photographs she constructs detailed environments, situations, and commodities not present in the original. By adding this information into these images when the intended audience was Castiglione herself, she inverts the role of illuminated photographs otherwise designed for public viewing in albums. Castiglione's personal illuminated photographs function as fetishistic altars to herself, but the self they display is complicated by layers of performance and role-play that cyclically dovetail the position of the viewer and the sitter, rendering both positions essentially the same. The gaze of the viewer thus becomes the gaze of the sitter being viewed.

Theatricality itself is not foreign to the art of album photocollage. In her contributing essay, "The Page as Stage," historian Märta Weiss discusses the seemingly obsessive inclusion of theatrical imagery in album photocollage. In an age when tableau vivants dominated theater entertainment, women were creating their own similar imagined scenes within their albums, casting family and friends into roles created and

[17] Only one early portrait was exhibited in the 1864 salon.

controlled by the woman making the album. Some more flattering than others, these often bizarre scenes were communicative tools employed not only to demonstrate the album creator's talent as an artist but also to define her social position based on whose photographs she had collected and how the image was treated. Social control was the result. As Patrizia Di Bello explains, an aristocratic woman's reputation and social opportunities at the time hinged on successful skills in flirtation and witty conversation. Photographic albums became a way to express these sentiments and were often used to clarify the social standing and desires of the album maker. Di Bello invokes the *Lady Filmer Album* (1860s) to articulate the complexities of these created images. On a page titled *Lady Filmer in the Drawing Room*, the intricacies of these composite images become clear.[18] Here Lady Filmer creates a drawing room scene and pastes her cutout portrait beside an open album in the midground of the image. Various people of note are arranged around her in an expansive circle. However, Di Bello notes that the person most emphasized is a portrait cutout of the Prince of Wales, with whom the Lady Filmer maintained an active flirtation; her husband, on the other hand, is placed in the background far from the central action of the imagined image.

> Anyone viewing her album would have appreciated the significance of a visit from the Prince of Wales, especially for the wife of a baronet. The prince was a leader of fashionable society and a highly sought-after guest: A visit from him could help a hostess improve her social standing immeasurably, and a photograph taken during the visit served as lasting proof of the event. (49)

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[18] Mary Georgiana Caroline, Lady Filmer, *Untitled loose page from the Filmer Album,* mid-1860s.

Often these constructed scenes occur in a salon, the one place, Weiss argues, that women were able to control social functions – and the one place the finished album would be displayed.

Castiglione's illuminated photographs reveal instances of social positioning: she often enlists stock characters such as a male admirer or various fashionable partygoers. Yet, the Countess's manipulated scenes never include photographic representations of any individual other than herself; other individuals are simply painted characters included to buttress the central theme of the piece: herself. Though theatrical themes are a large part of Castiglione's photographic work in general, here again we must distinguish between Castiglione's illuminated images and the photocollage albums. Castiglione's illuminated photographs eschewed domestic settings such as salons or drawing rooms; instead, public contexts – parties, parks, and dramatic theatrical backgrounds – were used almost exclusively. While the *Lady Filmer Album* positions its namesake's social acquaintances to better reflect her social preferences, she is nonetheless relegated to the appropriate feminine sphere: the drawing room. As I will discuss in more detail later, Castiglione's *Ritrosetta* not only reimagines a social scene, an illicit flirtation, but also relocates the action to the public gardens of a gothic conservatory. The Countess, unescorted in a shared, coyly rebuffs the advances of the suave gentlemen behind the fountain; the resulting fog of intrigue and thrill is obvious, heightened by the dark romantic setting and the obscured identity of the male suitor. Whereas Lady Filmer's open preference for the Prince of Wales over her husband may appear comparably scandalous, she nonetheless locates the action of the image not only in a forum deemed socially acceptable but one in which she maintains control. The image comprises a

crowd of identifiable acquaintances, both men and women, in a domestic setting safe in its conventionality. Lady Filmer's album announces to its viewers that its owner inhabits a wide and important social sphere, one that even includes lofty flirtations; the *Lady Filmer Album* was her documented proof. Castiglione's project, as we have seen, reverses this exhibiting impulse, illustrating perhaps the most important distinction between her practice of photographic manipulation and those most commonly employed. Whereas others collected and displayed photographs of acquaintances in order to assert and demonstrate their desires, their social standing, Castiglione created and sequestered enigmatic images of herself for her own personal consumption.

This personal consumption of these images may be specifically linked to the role they fulfilled for her. Castiglione's illuminated photographs frequently commemorate events from her own life, often featuring specific objects and material details. Her accouterments – possessions, outfits, hairstyles, costumes, jewelry, etc. – were frequently mentioned in personal memoirs current among the aristocracy, tabloid accounts of parties, and word-of-mouth gossip. Those items creating the biggest sensation received honorary status in the Countess's photographs. Her famous Verasis red feather fan, for instance, often appeared at balls either to encourage or to dismiss conversations, becoming a scepter of social power for its wielder. The finished illumination of *Ritrosetta*, an image composed of an amalgam of events – mostly balls and Italian embassy functions from her earlier arrival in Paris – displays the fan prominently. Another object featured in the illuminated photograph commemorating these early successes features the Countess in a famous ball gown combining Parisian high style and traditional Italian courtwear recreating the elaborate confection of tresses that was

considered one of her defining features. Sweeping out of the dimly lit, mysterious conservatory providing the images setting, the Countess moves to the right of the frame, revealing in the process a voluminous gown bedizened with an enormous black lace bow. In her right hand lies her iconic feather fan, perhaps her most photographed possession, shielding her face from the gaze of a brazen gallant who leers at her from the shadows of an ornate, suggestive putti-themed fountain. Though deflecting the gaze of the covetous admirer, she nonetheless rewards her viewer with a coquettish, yet direct, gaze; a sideways glance, as if sharing some secret knowledge. However, as her turned head and raised fan rebuff the gaze of the admirer by the fountain, she also allows the viewer full access to her person, turning her body forward. The admirer by the fountain thus serves as a surrogate for the viewer him/herself, casting the viewer into the role of voyeur. Her left hand grasping a handful of fabric, holds the large black bow in place while at the same time drawing the viewer's attention to her pelvis, over which her hand rests. Her excessively low *décolletage*, another trademark of the Countess, is emphasized by a low hanging pendant necklace and a diagonal drape of the black-laced bow, the latter contrasting against the impossibly pale expanse of chest. The setting evokes a combination of mystery, intrigue, and eroticism that lends an air of allure to the Countess and her demure, yet mischievous, gaze. Interestingly, at the same time she underscores the materiality of the objects displayed in the piece, Castiglione also frames herself as a desirable object both for the male admirer and for the viewer.

By coupling documentary detail with playful performance — two ostensibly opposed modes of representation — *Ritrosetta* exhibits the inherently complex nature of Castiglione's experiments in illuminated photography. As painted portraiture began to be

rivaled by the quick, mimetic, and easily reproducible images of photography, the distinction between the two mediums became increasingly pronounced. Such divergence has been noted by various scholars of the period. For instance, in *The Ontology of the Photograph*, theorist André Bazin discusses the sudden relationship between painting and photography as fulfilling the need both to imitate and to express through the plastic arts. Bazin understands painting and photography in a completely dichotomous relationship: whereas photography gratified the psychological need for exact replication, painting fulfilled what he termed the aesthetic need for expression. For Bazin, one object cannot satisfy these two artistic needs: the more mimetic the piece appears, the less it can encompass the chaotic and often indescribable emotional expression; the more expressive the piece, the less substantiated in reality it becomes. Painting's failure to satisfy both these needs essentially stalled its own evolution. As Bazin states "Painting was torn between two ambitions: one, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended its model; the other, purely psychological, namely to duplicate the world outside" (6). However, with the advent of photography, painting no longer had to be concerned with mimicry and the need for replications of nature, but rather could fulfill its aesthetic obligation to pure emotional expression. This is due to what Bazin, and album makers such as Lady Filmer, saw as the "essentially objective character of photography" (7). Bazin explains,

> The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making. In spite of any objection our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. (8)

The photograph was, for all intents and purposes, tangible proof. Lady Filmer used her photograph of the Prince of Wales to prove not only that she knew him, but that she knew him well enough to own a verifiable piece of him. This act of reification, the transference of a perception into an ownable, material commodity, distinguished photographic portraiture from traditional painted portraiture and directly influenced Castiglione's symbiotic interpretation of both media. In her illuminated photographs, Castiglione's manipulates the objective nature of the photograph by also employing the artistic expression valued in painting to create images that are at once documentary and theatrical. *Ritrosetta*, along with similar illuminated photographs by the Countess, combine the tangible photograph of Castiglione in her famous ball gown with a painted fictional scene, creating an image incongruous with and distinct among the popular photographic and painted portraiture of the 1860s.

Moreover, Castiglione's illuminated photographs mirror the position she held in Parisian society by combining documentary and theatrics. Just as Lady Filmer needed to prove her association with the Prince of Wales, Castiglione needed to document her own physical beauty. Photography fulfilled that need; however, she was also eager to fulfill a variety of roles that were intertwined with this perception. The Countess's constructed her social roles—a court beauty, royal mistress, and active socialite — through the gaze of others, so her need to see herself through their gaze became paramount to her own self-identification. By painting over the existing photograph, the Countess found a venue wherein to restage her appearance to better fit the varied roles she desired to fulfill. The instructions Castiglione wrote on the back of the *Ritrosetta* studio print demonstrate her awareness of sensitivity to the other's gaze: "At a ball, a moonlit conservatory with

flowers and water. A pale [?] young man seems to be making remarks which make the lady blush behind her fan. White crepe dress, lace stole, red camellia. Teased blonde hair" (Walter and Wardman 173). Though *Ritrosetta* represents an identifiable image of Castiglione herself that includes the famous costume and significance monographed fan seen in so many other photographs, the Countess still insists on referring to herself as "the lady." This third-person detachment is one of many instances in which the Countess demonstrates the her own self-objectification.

This illeism is not rare for the Countess. Solomon-Godeau discusses a similar attribution written in the Countess's own journal: "The Eternal Father did not realize what He had created the day He brought her into the world; He formed her so superbly that when it was done He lost His head at the contemplation of this Marvelous work" (Loliée 27). Solomon-Godeau aptly identifies this idiosyncratic use of the third-person singular, suggesting this is Castiglione's "designation of herself as a work ('maravigliosa opera')" (69). We see here most conspicuously the strange role Castiglione designated for herself, both a visual object and an individual aware of the constant scrutiny of others. As Solomon-Godeau understands it, "The woman, whose self-worth and social value is contingent on her status as object of desire, has so internalized the male gaze as to produce a near-total identification with it" (76).

Castiglione, then, created for herself various roles that demonstrated her visual commodity value. She measured her worth by the admiration of her viewers, gauged her value by her ability to assimilate the various roles expected of her. Her illuminated photographs were, after all, made for herself, yet they also existed to mirror the gaze of others. This layering of theatrics and reality, expressivity and mimesis, produced an

image that allowed her to see herself as she wished others to see her. Combining two popular artistic practices – photography and painting – into one completed image allowed Castiglione to assume a variety of roles she wished to fulfill and provided an avenue to view herself. We can agree, then, with Solomon-Godeau's assessment: "the terms according to which the countess was perceived, and those through which she came to perceive herself, were so mediated as to make any reference to her corporeal reality almost beside the point" (77). Castiglione positioned herself not only as the author of these hybrid images, but also as the commodity object and consumer of them. The manifold commercial economy of printmaking and viewing collapse into one entity as the Countess comes to see herself, and therefore to frame herself, as an object to be viewed as well as the agent of viewing.

THE MARQUISE MATHILDE (1861-66)

Though similar in form to *Ritrosetta*, *The Marquise Mathilde* (1861-66) is a more overt flirtation with the viewer's gaze. The illuminated photograph was made to commemorate Castiglione's attendance to Princess Mathilde's Mardi gras ball in 1857 where she arrived dressed as one of the Empress Eugenie's favorite masquerade themes – Marie Antoinette. Her costume not only ingratiated her into the royal court but also caught the eye of Napoleon III. The character created in *The Marquise Mathilde* not only displays her famous costume but also emphasized the court intrigue that hinged on her willingness and encouragement to be looked at as an object of desire. As an illuminated photograph, *The Marquise Mathilde* emphasizes the Countess's adoption of a role in order to play with the gaze of the viewer inherent in looking at a photograph.

The setting of *The Marquise Mathilde* is a party in the eighteenth-century style. She is dressed in eighteenth-century attire complete with powdered hair and antique costume, as are the partygoers in the background. As in *Ritrosetta*, a hidden admirer peers at the Countess from behind a similarly putti-themed statue. However, in *The Marquise Marthilde*, Castiglione and her admirer are not alone and the Marquise is confident and unabashed. In this piece, the gallant watches her from among a crowd of fashionably dressed partygoers while the Countess stands apart, separated by an elaborate gilt wall and column. As was the case in *Ritrosetta*, Castiglione ignores the gallant's admiration. But instead of shielding herself with her fan and moving out of frame, the

Countess's interest is instead turned to the viewer, allowing both the admirer behind the statue and the viewer to fully gaze at her. There is no interaction between her and any other figure in the image, unlike the coy fan play and suggestion of movement out of frame seen in *Ritrosetta*. The soft light drifting in through the window illuminates her, reinforcing her separation from the scene unfolding in the background.

The action is quite different in *The Marquise Mathilde*. The Countess seems to rest on a small ornate gilt chair; however, the small legs closest to her push into the voluminous folds of her crinoline and are nearly lost, while the legs closest to the viewer hang unsupported in the air, creating a rather odd effect. It is almost as if the chair were a golden gilt skeletal pelvis. Its position is simultaneously within the folds of her skirt and laid bare before her. This coupled with its seemingly useless support yet promontory position within the composition makes it an oddly important detail within the larger work. Castiglione seems to be incorporating the gaudy little chair as part of her role in the piece, making it both significant and superfluous at the same time. Just as the fan in *Ritrosetta* was a prop to further the role she played but also spoke to the themes of intrigue, flirtation, and desirability, so does the chair emphasize her role as a eighteenth-century Marquise while at the same time underscoring themes of materiality, ornateness, and sexuality.

These themes are repeated in her scandalously low décolletage, outlined by the extreme curve of the neckline and further enhanced by the brilliant blue fabric against her pale skin. The Countess's chest is teasingly obscured by her raised arm, yet simultaneously alluded to by the one bare shoulder that she presents to the viewer as the sleeve of her gown slips. The Countess's attitude is playful yet guarded, obscured yet

obvious. Her right hand rests below her chin in a painterly pose, the index finger extended gracefully against her cheek, as if she were considering whether or not the viewer is worthy of her little intrigues. The role she adopts in the piece is strikingly different from that in *Ritrosetta*. In *The Marquise Mathilde*, she becomes scandalous and playful, allowing the viewer to look at her with little concealment or hesitation.

The performative construction of Castiglione's illuminated photographs is interesting in the impenetrable nature of the roles adopted by Castigione; each image is a new character such as the coquette of *Ritrosetta* or the playful and confident court lady of *The Marquise Mathilde*. These portrait-like images do not offer the sitter any clues to the personality of the sitter; instead, the illuminated portraits allow Castiglione to assume positions of others and are entirely meant for her own consumption, often obscuring the meaning of the piece. This subjective impenetrability is emphasized by the theatricality of the piece as well. Castiglione was well aware that she was constantly in the public eye and that photographic portraiture was an extension of this. Many of her unilluminated photographs deal with the act of looking while being looked at, such as in *Scherzo di Follia*. Her illuminated photographs play with the gaze of the viewer quite differently. In these images, Castiglione transforms herself into various formulaic ideals of feminine desirability; roles women play when seen. She can don the role of the shy flirt, the powerful mistress, or the risqué socialite without the viewer being able to ultimately define her other than as an image of desire.

The Marquis Mathilde epitomized the inscrutable quality of Castiglione's illuminated photographs. The image presented to the viewer seems like a straightforward representation of an eighteenth-century ball, with a woman in the foreground striking a

common *carte-de-visite* pose. However, with closer inspection and a knowledge of Castiglione's oeuvre, the image is inexplicable. The seemingly simple setting becomes complicated; whether it is an imagined representation of an eighteenth-century ball or a descriptive image of the contemporary masque Castiglione attended is uncertain. The woman who mockingly holds the viewer's gaze could be Castiglione in costume or an imagined character modeled on her photograph. Her straightforward gaze at the viewer begs the question of whether the character is aware of the viewer or simply posing for the portrait. The meaning becomes uncertain and Castiglione's control of the image's interpretation is made evident. She seems to deliberately reference the viewer's role in the completion of the work, framing her characters as though they are aware of the viewer's gaze. The image seems to allude to the fact that the image is not complete unless it is being viewed. And, since Castiglione was her own intended audience, the illuminated photograph could not fully function as a completed piece unless she herself was doing the viewing. The inscrutable quality of these images, with the inclusion of strange and confusing details and actions, could be said to stem from the fact that only she herself was versed in their ultimate legibility.

The roles of the characters she chose to portray, however, were based on what she saw as the paramount forms of femininity valued at her time and created by the social agreement of viewers. Regardless of the internal stories she saw within her images, she still framed the pieces as a way to see herself as an object viewed by others. The pragmatist and sociologist George Herbert Mead discusses this process of subjective identity formation as an act of accepting social objectification in "The Mechanism of Social Consciousness" and "A Contrast of Individualistic and Social Theories of the Self"

(*Mind, Self, and Society* 222-26). Mead argues that the formation of subjective identity is based on two perceptions of self; an objective socially constructed self and a subjective self formed by individual desires and impulses. The socially constructed self is the one that is presented to others while the subjective self is the one that is created in reaction to this presentation. For Mead, identity is created through social realization as a variety of roles are taken on. This enables the individual to create a subjective identity through their understanding of the perspective of others. As Mead states,

> The existence of private or 'subjective' contents of experience does not alter the fact that self-consciousness involves the individual's becoming an object to himself by taking the attitude of other individuals toward himself within an organized setting of social relationships, and that unless the individual had thus become an object to himself he would not be self-conscious or have a self at all. ("A Contrast" 298)

He argues that in order for an individual to fully realize and create an internal subjective identity, that individual must first be able to conceive of their self as an object; the rationale is that just as we distinguish ourselves from inanimate objects, so must we view other individuals as objects since their internal subjectivity can never be made external. In other words, the individual must identify his or her self as an object in order to see his or her self as others might. This is accomplished by the individual donning different roles in society that then help to either support or negate the individual's previous identity assumptions while at the same time creating an exterior identity visible to others. For Castiglione, this adoption of various roles is the driving theme throughout the complete collection of her photography. It is in the illuminated photographs, however, where the negotiation of social awareness becomes a key factor in the creation of her persona.

The uneasy relationship between painting and photography, subject and object, self and other that are played out in Castiglione's illuminated photographs all hinge on

the desirability given by the viewer to the object. In these illuminated photographs, Castiglione fulfills both roles of subject and object and functions as both a producer and consumer of her own visuality. Castiglione attempts to fulfill roles of femininity she herself has created based on the social attitudes of her culture, continually staging herself as the locus of multiple identities, each a variation of the seminal theme of desire. In these images of fantasy, Castiglione attempts to adopt the gaze of the other, her viewer, while at the same time taking the role of the object viewed. The illuminated photographs become the stage on which her ultimate desires are played out for her own fetishistic consumption. The overt theatricality lends the image the anonymity of the sitter who is simply an actor aware that she is playing a part for the benefit of the viewer. With these images Castiglione creates an endless cycle that plays with the notion of looking. She poses for the photographs and then creates a character for herself by having the images illuminated. She then keeps the finished image for herself; looking at herself as a third party might look at her. All the while the character within the illuminated photograph gazes back at the viewer, aware of the act of looking. The mask of femininity she creates can be easily changed and reimagined to better fulfill the role she desires to see herself play and the subjectivity of the sitter is erased in the process, allowing Castiglione to consume the images freely.

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS (1863)

The Queen of Hearts (1863) commemorates the royal masquerade ball Castiglione attended as Napoleon III's recognized mistress; a ball that was also attended by his wife, the Empress Eugenie. Castiglione attended the masque as the Queen of Hearts, a costume she specifically made for the event that combined Second Empire and eighteenth-century fashion with her own added details such as sheer material, no corset, and a tight fitting bodice all decorated with a heart themed motif. The costume's risqué theme and appearance created such a scandal for the attending elite that it solidified her reputation, for good or for ill, for the rest of her life. Tabloids across Europe discussed the costume for weeks, some even reporting that she had arrived barely clothed (Loliée 14-15). One particular element of the costume that stood out as particularly shocking was the inclusion of a large heart directly placed over her pelvis, a direct visual reference to the source of her power at court. As if speaking for the rest of the scandalized court, Empress Eugenie herself expressed, "Your heart seems a little low down" (14), a remark on the placement of the decoration as well as a scathing rebuke of Castiglione's willingness to publicly flaunt her position as Napoleon III's mistress in the Empress's presence. As The Queen of Hearts, Castiglione made a permanent mark on the elite Parisian society and considered the ball her crowning achievement since it marked her introduction to the highest circles of Parisian society as well as announced to all that she was desired by the most powerful man in France. A contemporary and later biographer

would write, “Madame de Castiglione may be said to have carried in her train all the hearts she had thus daringly symbolized” (14).

The resultant illuminated photograph commemorating this very important event is a fantasized interpretation of what Castiglione considered the pinnacle of her achievements. Set in a lavish conservatory, with mysterious shadows and a luridly lit ball, the Countess stands separated from the other partygoers once again. She is bathed in a halo of light while another gallant gentleman watches her from the shadows, this time dressed in a debonair costume and stroking a well-manicured goatee with considering admiration. Behind him, a woman dances in a peasant girl costume while other revelers watch, yet his attention is wholly devoted to Castiglione. She pays him no attention at all; no longer coquettish or playful, the Countess seems emotionless and empty. Confronting the viewer head-on she makes no attempt to obscure any allusion to her sensuality. She displays her body directly to the viewer, without the playfully teasing modesty as seen in Ritrosetta or the tongue in cheek coquetry of *The Marquise Mathilde*. Instead her arms rest delicately at her sides, leaving her exposed chest as a focal point in the composition, emphasized by a crimson heart pinned beneath her cleavage. The heart theme is repeated throughout the costume, often deliberately placed to draw the viewer’s eye to what Castiglione considered her best attributes, such as her elaborate hairstyle, chest, ankle, and pelvis. Described by one of the ball’s attendees, he states, “These ornaments consisted of a number of hearts scattered over the dress, some being in places in which one would hardly expect to find that symbol” (14). In her left hand, she again holds bunches of her crinoline; however, this time she slightly lifts the fabric to reveal her small delicate foot with an intimate charm wrapped around her ankle; a deliberate

exposure controlled by her hand giving the viewer teasing view beneath her skirts. Castiglione directs the viewer's gaze further with her left index finger, resting it on the edge of a hanging heart pendant, alluding to the unmistakable motif of sexuality and value. Her right hand holds a small lyre close to her pelvis and her right index finger once again points to the folds of fabric accumulating beneath the very intentionally placed heart that rests directly over her sex. In addition to the libidinously placed ornaments, a heart-shaped purse hangs from her left hip, symbolizing the relationship between sexual desirability and monetary power—the benefit of a royal mistress.

Like most of Castiglione's illuminated photography The Queen of Hearts is a monument to her own materiality and ability to fulfill a role that hinges on the desire of her viewer. The costume was designed by Castiglione to leave no doubts in the minds of those in attendance that she was in a favored position due to her sexual desirability. Commemorating the event and the iconic costume that was decorated with "suggestive hearts which drew all eyes and inspired libertine suggestions," the illuminated photograph creates a persona that is perhaps the most inscrutable of all the roles played by the Countess (15). She does not present herself as the modestly teasing Countess in ball dress as seen in Ritrosetta or the daring court lady of the Countess embodying past feminine ideals as in *The Marquise Mathilde*. In *The Queen of Hearts*, Castiglione becomes an ideal made physical while at the same time acting as a blank canvas for the projection of the viewer's desires. The Countess frames herself as a desired object for the viewer, with the ultimate consumer of the image being the Countess herself. The lack of coquetry or allusion, the blank expression placed on the personification of beauty leaves the individual in the illuminated photograph as the epitome of feminine charm and desire

without a specifically defined role to be played. The image allows Castilgione to image any variation of the feminine roles she wishes to occupy. The Queen of Hearts could be any woman; she could be modest or risqué, shy or aggressive, she could fulfill any number of feminine ideals The image seems to say that she could be anything the viewer wants her to be, she is pliable, open, and undefined as anything more than a personification of beauty and desire. The Countess does not adopt a specific role; she creates a persona that can be read as the equivalent of *all* feminine roles.

The materiality of the costume along with the elaborate setting of the image seem to almost overwhelm the viewer, yet the action of the Countess herself seems static. In both *Ritrosetta* and *The Marquise Mathilde*, the Countess gives the viewer a small semblance of story. In *Ritrosetta*, a shy and proper lady flees the advances of an overly forward admirer and in *The Marquise Mathilde*, a confident and teasing Marquise plays with the viewers gaze and feigns ignorance of her admirer. But in *The Queen of Hearts*, the story is undefined. The attitude of the character of the eponymous Queen is uncertain and her position within the image seems disconnected. There are few clues for the viewer to pin down the personality of the woman who so boldly holds the viewer's gaze. Her pose is oddly staged and seems more painterly than photographic; her hands are deliberately positioned with the fingers pointing out specific details. Her skirts are calculatingly lifted like a stage curtain to reveal her foot and the affixed charm. This awkward positioning lends to the image a sense of stiff staging that is not present in her other illuminated photographs. Though the separation of the character from others is certainly evident in her other illuminated photographs—*Ritrosetta* is unescorted in the conservatory and *The Marquise Mathilde* poses alone by the windows—they are still

active participants in the overall scene who play with and pull the viewer's gaze within the narrative. *The Queen of Hearts* appears displaced in the action of the setting by her very pointed gestures to the viewer. Whereas the other pieces are explicitly theatric in the posing of the characters, *The Queen of Hearts* gives the illusion of being barely posed at all. She stands fully turned to the viewer, her arms at her sides and her hands subtly positioned, the only real movement is the slight lifting of her skirts. She seems wholly unaware of her surroundings, only aware of the viewer's gaze. Her lack of facial expression is also a direct departure from the themes seen in *Ritrosetta* and *The Marquise Mathilde*. Her expression is indefinable; her face appears as a blank mask that reveals neither the character of the Queen nor aids in the viewer's understanding of the action within the piece. The overall effect is an image that seems unfinished and disjointed. However, *The Queen of Hearts* is also the most carefully painted and detailed of all the Countess's illuminated photographs and was also her most cherished. Why then would the character of the Queen be left so ill defined?

The special attention the Countess gives to *The Queen of Hearts* is thought provoking; it is, after all, just one persona among many. However, it may be that the image functioned not so much as a specific persona, but more as an overarching ideal that encapsulated many personas. As previously discussed, Solomon-Godeau argues that cultural femininity ideals during the Second Empire were drastically fracturing into various forms. There was no longer a generally held social consensus as to what a feminine ideal should be, both for the general male populace that Castiglione sought to impress and to Castiglione herself who relied strongly on public opinion to influence her visuality. Castiglione not only strove to see herself through the other's gaze as an object

of consumption but also as a character aware of this viewing to begin with and an active participant within the cycle of visuality. The role visuality and the act of looking played in her everyday life can be seen in a contemporary description of Castiglione as *The Queen of Hearts* by a gentleman in attendance at the ball that made her so famous. He writes, "She wore no corset; and the beautiful curves of her bosom, in it's proud independence of all artificial support, were left almost wholly exposed by the light drapery of gauze" (175). The insistence of being able to look through Castiglione's drapery in such an intrusive way in order to see something hidden, in this case her body, seems to also be mirrored in the act of photographic portraiture where the viewer strives to get a sense of the sitter. Castiglione's illuminated photographs specifically negate the viewer's desire to get a sense of the sitter; instead the images create an inscrutable persona shrouded in performance and theatricality. Creating characters that not only are aware of the viewers gaze but encourage and direct it allow her to control the act of looking, just as Lady Filmer strove to control her social sphere. In *The Queen of Hearts*, Castiglione creates a character that can be interpreted as any character she wants it to be. The blank expression, the static positioning, and the alienation from the surrounding scene all act as barriers to the definition of the character, leaving her blank and open to any interpretation. The detailed costume and background setting help to maintain the character within the realms of desire but without adding a definite interpretation to the character herself. It is no wonder that Castiglione directly references the act of looking in almost all of her photographic work let alone her illuminated images; for the Countess, the role of both object and viewer were one and the same.

CONCLUSION

When the Countess de Castiglione stepped into Pierson's studios for that first awkward sitting that became *The Nursemaid*, she had no idea that her later obsession with photography would define her as an early example of women's photography. She became notorious for the biography that was propagated after her death through the rumor-oriented stories of her scandalous and bizarre public appearances. But it is her photographic ventures, from her infamous bare legged photographs discussed by Solomon-Godeau, to the *carte-de-visite* images she distributed throughout Europe, to her illuminated photographs kept in her own private collection that have set her work apart from the vast tide of photographs made during the 1860s. Her illuminated photographs demonstrate the relationship between the sitter and the viewer and how that relationship could be directed through the manipulation of the image and the adoption of performativity to create a new identity. By combining the traditions of painted portraiture with the still undefined rules of photographic portraiture she created images that both documented and fantasized moments of her life, creating idealized characters through deliberately performative gestures. The shy coquette and simple obscuring detail of *Ritrosetta* demonstrates the extreme manipulation Castiglione employed in order to create her illuminated photographs. In *The Marquise Mathilde*, she directly confronts the viewer's gaze and comments on the act of looking, using her role as a court lady to

comment on the role of both sitter and viewer. And finally, in *The Queen of Hearts*, Castiglione demonstrates the fluid nature of her illuminated photographs, creating a persona that both directs the viewer's gaze while at the same time remains undefined, a blank canvas for the projection of all the roles she wished to play. The fact that these elaborately staged and executed images were made for private viewing only adds to their strange and intriguing quality. The sense of visual literacy, the acknowledgement of the viewer's role, and the acknowledgment and acceptance of self-objectification make these illuminated photographs unique reminders of the power early photography had on the development of cultural ideals. For the Countess, photography allowed her to comment on her position within society as well as create performative identities that displayed the various roles she played in life. As Loliée states in his biography of the Countess, "All her life Madame de Castiglione preserved with lover-like fidelity pictures of herself, whether painting, sketches, drawings, modelings – any kind of image which might recall to her memory the triumphs of the past" (44).

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