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Women's body, dresses and fashion in Italy

Abstract: During the first half of the twentieth century, in Italy there were significant differences between male and female education. Being a girl meant being subject to prejudices and rules from which male peers were free. The norms, which concerned both the physical and moral spheres, aimed to educate girls, future women, to be silent, calm, modest. The girls had to prepare themselves for being good housewives, wives and mothers. The female body had to be hidden as much as possible. Otherwise, the girl could be considered vain or of loose morals. Such ideal guidelines were communicated via fairy tales, manuals of etiquette, novels, fashion magazines, and women's style columns.

Keywords: female education, female body, fashion, moral

Introduction

Up to and beyond the middle of the twentieth century, being a small, then teenage, girl and – finally – a woman meant having to learn a set of imposed rules that were vastly different to those taught to males. These precepts, designed to train girls to be silent, calm, modest, and good, were not confined to morals, but also extended to the physical sphere, given the key messages that the body has the power to convey. While on the one hand, the female body was to be concealed as much as possible if a woman was to avoid being perceived as vain or of loose morals, on the other hand, it was expected to be suitably dressed up and put on show, not only to mark the woman's moral rectitude or social status, but also with a view to fulfilling her primary purpose in life: getting married. Such ideal guidelines were communicated via fairy tales, manuals of etiquette, novels, fashion magazines, and the women's style columns that were beginning to be featured in periodicals. These same sources enable us to document how fashion and conceptualisations of the body tend to mirror changes in the social, economic, and political life of a nation over a given historical period. Arguably, twentieth-century fashion and style columns sometimes called for a woman who did not yet exist, while at other times women themselves took the lead in dropping a style of dress that no longer matched their new occupational roles, but in any case – yesterday as today – fashion both dictated the rules and, in its turn, reflected the social codes of a given system.

Proverbs and fairy tales: folk wisdom and female education

Folk sayings and fairy tales have ancient roots and form the cultural heritage of the humbler, less literate classes. Any outline of the fashion cues to which young women in the late 1800s and early 1900s were expected to conform must therefore take account of the wisdom, but also the stereotypes, contained in the lore of 'the elders' that had been handed down the generations, first in oral, and later in written, form.

In a society like Italy that was still predominantly rural and poorly educated, it was natural to draw on folk sayings, not only to identify the most favourable period for sowing crops or bottling wine, but also to convey key life lessons to the younger generations. In relation to the female sphere, the messages communicated were often contradictory. On the one hand, good-looking women and girls were considered fortunate (*'Donna bella ancora non è nata che già è maritata'* [A beautiful woman is married off no sooner than she is born]). On the other hand, however, the ephemeral nature of beauty was constantly emphasised (*'Ogni bella scarpa col tempo si sforma'* [Every pretty shoe loses its shape as time goes by]) as well as its uselessness, or even counterproductiveness, in the absence of other good qualities (*'Se unita non é alla saggezza, dono funesto è la bellezza'* [If it is not joined with wisdom, beauty is a ruinous gift]). These last-cited proverbs clarified that marriage, a key moment in the life of every woman, could be achieved by means other than physical attractiveness. For example, tidiness and cleanliness compensated for a lesser endowment of good looks (*'Donna linda e pettinata, presto è maritata'* [A clean and well-groomed woman, will soon be married off]), while other virtues – of the moral rather than physical kind – were far more greatly valued than handsomeness (*'Onestà e gentilezza sopravanza ogni bellezza'* [Virtue and kindness surpass all beauty]). The folk sayings further told young women that modesty was the best route to follow, but if, despite this advice, they nonetheless wished to show off their physical appearance, they had to be prepared to suffer as a consequence (*'Se bella vuoi apparire, un po' devi soffrire'* [If you want to look pretty, you must suffer a little] and its variations *'mille pene devi soffrire'* [you will have to suffer a thousand pains] or *'pene e guai devi soffrire'* [you will have to suffer pain and trouble]). Obvious examples of this include the compression of the female torso into whalebone corsets or – in more recent times – the wearing of high-heeled shoes.

Fairy tales, throughout the long history of their oral transmission up to their recording as written texts, doubled as guides to development, showing children which models they should emulate or reject, and illustrating the behaviours they needed to conform to if they wished to get on well in life. In his introduction to

Fiabe Italiane [Italian Folktales], Italo Calvino (2006, pp. XIV–XV) wrote that ‘Fairy tales are true. They are [...] a general explanation of life [...]; they are the catalogue of the destinies that a man and a woman may encounter, especially for that part of life which is precisely the making of a destiny’.

It is beyond our scope here to engage in a thorough analysis of the physical and moral models for women and the representations of the female body to be found in fairy tales. Rather, I offer some general remarks, drawing – by way of illustration – on some of the better-known tales that already in the late 1800s and early 1900s formed a shared cultural ground for children.

The importance of modesty in girls and young women was one of the messages most strongly driven home in fairy tales too. Indeed, physical mutilation was often used as a device to further enforce this point. This is the case, for example, in Hans Christian Andersen’s story *The Red Shoes*, originally published in 1845 in Copenhagen. The Danish author’s stories became popular in Italy after Hoepli published a collection of them, translated by Maria Pezzè Pascolato, in 1904. While *The Red Shoes* was not included in that first Italian-language anthology, it certainly featured in a later collection published by Einaudi in 1954 and was almost certainly brought out as a stand-alone novella in between. The main character in the story is Karen, a poor but pretty child who, on the day of her mother’s funeral, is noticed by a rich old lady who decides to adopt her. This represents a key turning point in the young girl’s life: ‘Karen was given nice new clothes. [...] People said she was pretty, but her mirror told her, “You are more than pretty. You are beautiful.”’ (Andersen 1973, p. 181). In this case, as in other fairy tales, proverbs or novellas, the mirror – the reflection of the looker’s image – is the medium through which vanity begins to erode a girl’s modesty. However, what eventually leads Karen to her destruction is one of the accessories traditionally most prized by women: shoes. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, footwear became increasingly more sophisticated and was often fashioned from precious materials, ranging from silk to damask to gold-tinted or crocodile leather (Gigli Marchetti 1995, p. 201). Andersen – whether consciously or otherwise – picked up on this trend by attributing his heroine with a fatal attraction for a pair of red morocco shoes. Karen has to choose a new pair of shoes for her Confirmation and takes advantage of her elderly benefactor’s failing eyesight to pick the red pair, although she is well aware that this colour is more suited to going dancing than to attending church. When the old lady finds out about her misdemeanour, she makes the girl promise never to wear the red shoes to church again, but the following Sunday Karen succumbs to temptation once more. This time, her punishment is merciless and from the moment she leaves church, she is unable to stop dancing. When she attempts to return to the church to ask

forgiveness, a stern-looking angel prevents her from entering: 'Dance you shall!' he told her. 'Dance in your red shoes until you are pale and cold, and your flesh shrivels down to the skeleton. Dance you shall from door to door, and wherever there are children proud and vain you must knock at the door till they hear you, and are afraid of you. Dance you shall. Dance always!' (Andersen 1973, p. 184). Karen, full of remorse for her vanity, goes to the village executioner – dancing all the way – to ask him if he can cut her feet off. The man agrees and also makes her wooden legs and crutches. Thinking that she has done enough to redeem herself, the young girl goes back to the church yet again, but finds her amputated feet, still dancing and still wearing the red shoes, barring her way. In tears and sorry for her fresh sin of pride, Karen asks a pastor and his wife if she can work for them. She is particularly kind and patient with their children but shakes her head in distress when the little girls in the family speak of 'frills and furbelows, and of being as beautiful as a queen' (ibid., p. 186). The tale has a happy ending in spiritual, but not in earthly, terms. The angel invites Karen to finally attend the Sunday service in church, where her heart is filled with such warmth, joy, and peace that it breaks: 'Her soul travelled along the shaft of sunlight to heaven, where no one questioned her about the red shoes' (ibid.). The young woman's sin of vanity had been harshly punished: little girls reading the story had been warned.

However, the most famous shoe in the world of fairy tales is Cinderella's slipper. This story derives from an extremely ancient tale, of which the earliest written record dates to the ninth century BC in China (Bettelheim 2005, p. 227). Its Oriental origins explains its emphasis on small feet as a symbol of virtue, refinement, and beauty, but behind this obsession lay a terrible practice that deformed the female body. For many centuries, when Chinese girls were between two and eight years of age in wealthier families, and somewhat older in peasant families whose daughters were required to work, their feet would be tightly bound with a view to training them into a crescent moon shape and thwarting their natural growth. These artificially deformed extremities were known as 'golden lotus' feet, because the women subjected to this practice, which was finally abandoned in the mid-twentieth century, developed a flowing gait reminiscent of the lotus flower blowing in the wind (Ko 2005).

However, small feet were long viewed as an asset in Western culture also. For example, in the eighteenth century, the requirements for a lady to be considered beautiful included 'short feet' (Gigli Marchetti 1995, p. 16), because big feet were a sign of lower rank and a life of toil, while small feet were seen as 'romantic' with the power to attract the attention of even the most disinterested man (ibid., p. 21).

It is therefore not surprising that in the version of *Cinderella* passed on to us by the Brothers Grimm, the stepsisters are prepared to mutilate their own feet to make them fit into the heroine's tiny slipper in the hopes that they will be chosen to marry the prince. The slipper meanwhile, whether of glass as in Charles Perrault's version or of gold as in the Grimm Brothers', is invariably made of a rigid material so that the only foot it fits is that of Cinderella, a girl who is noble of soul – as well as of foot (Bettelheim 2005, p. 254). Hence, the stepsisters' attempts to don the slipper are doomed to failure, even after – on their mothers' advice – one of them cuts off her big toe and the other cuts off her heel.

Meanwhile, vainglorious beauty, which is destined to fade with time and yet is a valuable asset and weapon of seduction for women, is evoked in the famous question that Snow White's stepmother (or mother in the folk version of the tale) obsessively addresses to her mirror:

'Looking-glass, looking-glass, on the wall,
Who in this land is the fairest of all?' (Grimm/Grimm 1914, p. 54)

In his 1893 work, *Physiology of Women*, Paolo Mantegazza (1893, p. 135), an Italian pathologist, hygienist, anthropologist, physiologist and Darwinist, illustrated the decline of the female body due to old age, while holding out a glimmer of hope for the future: 'One day, health conditions and civilization will ensure that old age will be less ugly for women too' (ibid.) While upper-class women had always taken care with their appearance, the same could not be said of the poor. According to Paola Carrara Lombroso, an Italian journalist, writer, and educationalist, beauty was a fragile and delicate plant for which 'only the living conditions of the wealthy classes [offered] the required care' (1909, p. 91).

However, in the years immediately following the Great War, investing in one's appearance seemed to become the standard. Women, including those who had only recently left the home to pursue a career, now used creams and beauty treatments to postpone the feared aging process for as long as possible. Snow White's stepmother's dread of seeing beauty like hers blossom in a younger woman (Bettelheim 2005, pp. 195–200) as she herself grows older, was clearly shared by the women of the early twentieth century. *Margherita*, a women's magazine, declared in 1907: 'Being beautiful means being all-powerful and happy. [. . .] In our society [. . .] trying to hold on to beauty and prolong youth is one of the leading aspirations of womankind, who know that these are the only bases for their power of seduction, their joy, their dominion' (Gigli Marchetti 1995, pp. 234–235). During these years, alongside beauty lotions and creams, which had always been used, women began to seek massage treatments and even fat

injections for smoothing wrinkles, as part of their striving for eternal youth (ibid., p. 196).

Importantly, Snow White's stepmother's question to the mirror became even more deeply embedded in the collective imaginary thanks to the animated film version *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, produced by Walt Disney and directed by David Hand, which reformulated it as: 'Magic mirror on the wall, Who is the fairest one of all?'. The movie came out in the United States in 1937, but by the following year it had already arrived in Italy, where it was met with great acclaim at the Venice International Film Festival. However, the historical context had now changed and the lead character in the animated film, Snow White, the prototypically pretty but oppressed young maiden, whose rosy cheeks and rounded form stood in contrast with the more angular Queen Grimhilde, unwittingly embodied messages dear to the fascist regime, such as youth, health, and physical vigour. Snow White's shapely arms and healthy complexion, her soft – though slim and agile – femininity, and the difference between her looks and her stepmother's androgynous appearance, fitted perfectly with the notion of woman that the fascist regime was now seeking to restore, after the years of the Great War which had led to the popularisation of military-style female fashion and the idealisation of a narrow-hipped female body. The woman advocated by the regime was expected to reaffirm her natural shape and at the same time, her motherhood role, in keeping with Mussolini's desire to fill cradles and thereby expand the empire. Aristocratic pallor was rejected, and the young Italian woman was now encouraged to proudly show off her tanned complexion, a sign of good health and the laudable practice of sport (ibid., p. 207). Furthermore, both the Grimms' and Disney's Snow Whites represented the perfect housewife. The dwarfs ask her to 'take care of our house, cook, make the beds, wash, sew and knit, and [...] keep everything neat and clean [...]' (Bettelheim 2005, p. 201). This represented a powerful affirmation of the woman as the angel of the home, an idea that was popular with the fascists but would also appeal to democratic forces in 1950s Italy.

The female body in the late 1800s and early- to mid-1900s: from constraint to liberation?

The period spanning the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century saw the expansion, in Italy as elsewhere, of anthropometry, a social science focused on the human body, both male and female. Data was gathered, and statistical and theoretical analysis conducted, on the shape of the Italians' skulls, noses, faces, and foreheads, as well as on their weight and height. Based on

this work, speculation arose about whether bodies could be changed, especially women's bodies (De Giorgio 1992, pp. 153–154). And thus began the genesis of she who would later be termed the 'New Woman' (Pironi 2008, pp. 249–281), a physically healthy and robust woman who was more independent than her counterparts of the past. In Italy, however, this model of woman was slow to take hold. Although as early as 1893, Paolo Mantegazza in his *Almanacchi Igienico Popolari* [Almanacs of Popular Hygiene] had been preaching that the secrets of beauty were exercise, hygiene, and a healthy diet (De Giorgio 1992, p. 150), women long after continued to rely on 'armoured' clothing to enhance their physical appearance. The collective imaginary and fashion were slow and resistant to change in Italy, especially in the sphere of women's clothing, a pattern that reflected women's struggle to conquer a new role for themselves. In the second half of the nineteenth century, women continued to compress their bodies into unhealthy corsets, which however endowed them with the much coveted wasp waists, and into crinolines or panniers that even made use of iron hoops and springs to increasingly extend the width of their skirts (Vigarello 2018, pp. 131–147). In vain did doctors criticise corsets on the grounds that they compressed the upper body to the extent of causing serious respiratory disorders, displacing organs such as the stomach, liver and kidneys, and possibly leading to fatal aneurysms (De Giorgio 1992, pp. 213–214). Similarly, the cages used to inflate skirts often caused women to trip up, leading to sprained muscles and fractured limbs (Gigli Marchetti 1995, pp. 117–118). More successful was a turn-of-the-century media campaign that emphasised practical rather than medical considerations. For example, the readers of *Margherita*, one of the most widely circulated women's magazines in the late 1800s, were informed that panniers were 'extremely inconvenient' because they made rooms seem too small: only one lady could sit on a sofa at a time, while two panniers took up the entire width of a street (ibid., p. 149).

Hence, skirts became progressively less inflated and straighter. Nevertheless, at the turn of the century, the liberation of the female body was still a distant prospect, because corsets continued to be worn, becoming indeed even tighter than before and compressing the waist even further to emphasise the hips and impose the preferred posture. The jacket, suitably adapted for female use, was borrowed from the male wardrobe and, worn with blouses, became increasingly popular (ibid., pp. 149–150). With regard to the other male garment par excellence, trousers, many obstacles lay in the way of their adoption by women given that they were viewed as unbecoming to the female sex. The refrain 'Who wears the trousers?' – which in itself proclaimed the power of men over women – would long remain a rhetorical question. In 1865, the periodical *Il patriota* stated that

while it was desirable that women should be granted greater rights, it was to be hoped that they 'would not put on the trousers too resolutely, so as not to oblige us men to wear the skirt' (Cagnolati 2008, p. 161). Wearing comfortable trousers, as the writer George Sand had provocatively done in France from the mid-1800s, remained a chimera in Italy, because it too overtly symbolised the female emancipation movement and demands for political and social rights. A woman 'in pants' was feared, even if she was only wearing them for the purposes of doing exercise. Alfonsina Morini Strada – the first woman to take part in men's cycle races such as the Giro di Lombardia (1917 and 1918) or the Giro d'Italia (1924) – was constantly attacked and ridiculed about her mode of dress during these competitions, which was deemed unsuitable for her sex (Facchinetti 2004). As early as 1910, the sports weekly *La Stampa Sportiva* warned that: 'We have no sympathy for the virago, the woman who does 200 kilometres straight on a bicycle [...] This goes beyond a healthy level of exercise suited to a woman's structural capacity. It is female acrobatics: an affair that we must castigate most severely' (Percivale 2019, p. 145). Silvio Zambaldi, writing for the *Gazzetta dello Sport*, gave the following account of Alfonsina's participation in the Giro d'Italia: 'In the pack, that is to say in the group [of riders], there was also a lively little woman with a babyish haircut and even shorter trunks, from under which her shirt-tails were impertinently sticking out. [...] The spectators [...] noticed her immediately, exclaiming with wonder, especially the women, who were perhaps scandalised to see their sex so... little represented' (ibid., p. 174).

Thus, habitually 'wearing the trousers' remained a distant eventuality for Italian women. Even when they did have occasion to don pants, for example while substituting male labour during the Second World War, or fighting in the ranks of partisan Resistance groups, as documented by many photographs, this was only for a short time and with a view to meeting a particularly pressing need. In the 1950s, women were once again ideally cast in the role of queen of the home and the skirt was again evoked as their most suitable form of dress; trousers would only become legitimate attire for the entire female sex – and not just for movie stars or emancipated upper-class women – in the 1960s.

The twentieth century also saw yet another classic symbol of femininity, women's hair, become the focus of a clash between tradition and modernity. In the 1920s, the popularisation of the so-called *garçonne* haircut in France was a key landmark in the history of female emancipation. Hair length was the most explicit outward sign of sexual differentiation and for a woman, cutting her hair short implied issuing a challenge to society. 'I've got my hair cut too', penned the writer Sibilla Aleramo in 1925. 'I tell you, it brings about a kind of

illumination: thanks to those two or three cuts of the scissors, you feel as though you are moving from one world era to another' (De Giorgio 1992, p. 192).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, women's clothing was becoming somewhat more streamlined, partly to accommodate the needs of the 'domestic angel' (who in reality was spending ever less time in the home and increasingly choosing to go to work), and corset design was brought closer in line with medical guidelines, with whalebone being almost entirely dropped as a material. However, a fresh enemy arose to impose sacrifices on the female body: the desire to be thin in order to satisfy the newly emerging aesthetic canon for women. The turn of the century had seen the advent of self-help ideology in Italy, with implications for the aesthetic sphere among others. If willpower could enable the individual to overcome all possible obstacles, then physical perfection too could be achieved by dint of determination, discipline, and strength of character. 'Where there is a will, there is a way', the slogan ran, and so a slight figure was held to be within the reach of any girl with the capacity for self-control (*ibid.*, p. 153). Nonetheless, in 1910, the magazine *Margherita* vented its disagreement to its female readership: 'If we are too thin, men are to blame. If we are victims of this constant obsession, if we stop eating, if we walk for hours at a time like automatons, if we no longer have hips, arms or shoulders, men are to blame. It is they who adore thinness [. . .] Fat has become synonymous with dumpy and the equivalent of ridiculous given the ironic tone in which men discuss it' (Gigli Marchetti 1995, p. 181).

Although during the post-war reconstruction era, as Italian style began to differentiate itself from French fashion, female clothing became increasingly comfortable and practical, offering women an unprecedented level of freedom, the female body continued to be controlled, albeit by different means: the diet, a form of duress that has persisted to the present day.

'Respectable' fashion for the Catholic girl

In his *De cultu feminarum*, Tertullian, a second/third-century Christian apologist and writer, exhorted women not to take excessive care over their dress or cosmetics so as to avoid becoming an instrument of the devil, who exploits female attractiveness to seduce men and lead them to sin, thereby placing their eternal salvation in jeopardy (Tertullian 1986). Thus, twentieth-century Catholic thinking about female beauty and fashion had ancient roots and this is not surprising, given that the female body was simultaneously viewed as the tabernacle of Christ and as a possible source of sin. Right up to the end of the 1950s, in keeping with a longstanding tradition, the only models put before Catholic girls were the

polar opposites of Mary – the Virgin Mother – and Eve, the woman who had led Adam to the fall. All beauty contrivances, from make-up to fashion, contributed to igniting male passion – a despised sentiment on account of its association with sexuality – causing men to stray from the ‘straight and narrow’ path. The woman, as the angel of family life, was meant to point her spouse towards salvation and girls were brought up to fulfil this mission. Chaste fashions that mortified the body helped to preserve that most excellent of female virtues: virginity. Recalling the *Crociate della Purezza* [Purity Crusades] organised by the young women’s wing of Catholic Action in 1926 and 1940–1941, Armida Barelli¹⁰ (2015, p. 255), the founder and president of the association, wrote: ‘The hope smiles upon us that [thanks to these events] many young women may have arrived pure and spotless at their wedding day. [. . .] Too many young women carry to the altar orange blossoms that have already faded, because they have not succeeded in surrounding the lily of their purity with thorns.’

Among the thorns that should have protected the purity of these young women was a ‘respectable’ mode of dress, a topic that even popes began to address as the twentieth century progressed. In 1919, Pope Benedict XV observed that changing historical and social conditions were increasingly leading women to engage with the world of work and spend more time outside the home. This novel social scenario placed an onus on women to display the virtues of respectability and modesty, including – the Holy Father stressed – in terms of their dress, and to reject the wicked and corrupting influence of fashion (Mattioni 2011, p. 152). Dressing according to the rules of decency was not only an individual duty, but also a social responsibility that implicated the consumers and designers of fashion in equal measure. Of great interest in this regard is a speech by Pope Pius XII to an international haute couture congress, in which the pontiff called for the moralisation of the clothing sector. Licentiousness could not be justified under any circumstances, because it was the duty of the fashion industry

10 Born in 1882 to a middle-class Milanese family, in 1910, Armida Barelli met the Franciscan priest, Agostino Gemelli, the future founder of the *Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*. This encounter was to change the course of Armida’s life, and in 1918 she was charged by Cardinal Ferrari, the Archbishop of Milan, with the task of founding the *Gioventù Femminile Cattolica*, a movement for young Catholic women. In the same year, she was also appointed National President of the female wing of Catholic Action. After devoting her life to the establishment and advancement of the *Università Cattolica* and founding the apostolate *Opera della Regalità di N.S. Gesù Cristo* in 1927, she died in 1952.

to defend women's inherent modesty, guard their moral virtue and shield them from 'disordered sensuality' (ibid.).

In the first half of the twentieth century, most Catholic magazines for young women took the popes' recommendations to heart, introducing fashion columns to communicate a style that appealed to their readers' respect for their own bodies (and therefore avoided any tendency to be over-revealing), as well as their sense of responsibility towards society. 'Precisely you, with your little Virgin Mary face, you can be an occasion of sin for many souls. Just think that you, with your delicate little hand, can throw the door of Hell wide open in one fell swoop' admonished *Primavera. Rivista per giovinette* (1955, p. 2), a magazine founded in 1950 by the Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, the female branch of the Salesian religious order founded by Don Bosco. Girls were encouraged to feel responsible for others: they were to mortify their bodies to benefit their own souls and those of others, whose ruin they could bring about by dressing unchastely. In 1950, in a fashion column significantly entitled *Semplicità e distinzione* [Simplicity and Refinement], *Primavera* (1950, p. 16) warned its readers: 'Fashionable, yes, but with modesty. You will always come across as elegant if you show yourself to be Christian in your attire. [...] Those who are too quick to run after fashion will soon realise that it is as thieving as it is crazy. It steals everything: modesty, heart, health, money, and often takes away even Heaven itself'. The fashion garments presented in the Salesian publication, which were all very high-necked, did not emphasise the shape of the body, covered the arms to below the elbow and only showed the wearer's ankles: a few centimetres of fabric were enough to differentiate between a girl who was respectable and a slut. For example, the painter Musio, who had been commissioned to draw some cover-page illustrations for the Salesian magazine, was reprimanded in a letter from Sister Fernanda Ramella – the editor-in-charge – for depicting one girl with over-fleshy and over-painted lips and another with sleeves that revealed her elbows. Another female religious order, the Figlie di San Paolo founded by Don Giacomo Alberione in 1915, encountered similar issues in the editing of their magazine, *Così*. Renza Fozzati, long-time editor of this publication, recounted the care taken by the editorial team to make certain photographs of models more decorous, for example by drawing a shawl to cover their bare shoulders or adding an extra piece of fabric to appropriately lengthen a skirt or a dress (Mattioni 2011, pp. 158–159).

Fiamma Viva. Rivista della gioventù femminile, a magazine set up in 1921 for the young female members of Catholic Action, asked – in a fashion column entitled *Madamigella Moda* – how a sincerely Christian girl should choose to dress. According to this publication, a young Christian woman was allowed to follow fashion, but with a proviso: 'Not like dolls that passively allow it to dress them

and blindly follow its every oddity, no matter how stupid, or even immoral, but rather like a little sovereign who knows how to assert herself according to her own personal standards' (*Fiamma Viva* 1921, p. 62). But what kind of principles was a Christian girl expected to apply when it came to fashion? The magazine came to its readers' rescue by suggesting, in the same article, that their choice of dignified and sober apparel was to be guided by moral principles.

The use of cosmetics was considered inappropriate for devout Christian girls, because beauty was deemed to stem from goodness rather than from 'paints' or 'pastes'. Maria Sticco, co-editor of *Fiamma Viva*, wrote in *Il dovere e il sogno* [Duties and Dreams], a sort of manual for young Catholic women, that: 'The desire to be beautiful is licit, but the means of achieving this is not. A natural face, no matter how ugly, is better than a plastered-up face' (Sticco 1939, pp. 97–104).

In sum, these Catholic magazines told young girls and women that society, with its corrupt practices, hedonistic messages, and false allurements was not to be trusted, and that a 'pious young woman' would have to make her way through what they termed 'the mud of the world' without soiling herself, sustained above all by her prayerfulness and purity (Mattioni 2011, p. 142). To this end, it was crucial to emphasise that the only *toilette* that mattered was that of the spirit, a *toilette* that would ultimately lead young women to eternal life (*ibid.*, p. 164).

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