

**"L'ABITO NON FA LA MONACA":
CLOTHING AND GENDER IN GIOVANNI VERGA'S
STORIA DI UNA CAPINERA**

If clothes don't make the man, does pantyhose make the woman? A popular advertisement appearing in the Italian fashion magazine *Grazia* three years ago showed a little girl in old-fashioned braids and clothes, a long-haired and scantily clad young woman, and the slogan "Non si nasce donna, si diventa." Echoing Simone de Beauvoir's dictum in *The Second Sex*, the ad claims that one is not born a woman, that femininity is no one's birthright. Rather, one becomes a woman by -- the ad implies -- wearing the right clothing, namely a sexy pair of SiSi-brand pantyhose.¹ A popular novel in an Italian fashion magazine over a century earlier had advanced this very same claim: femininity, far from being a birthright, can only be achieved by wearing the right clothes. Giovanni Verga's *Storia di una capinera* first appeared in the pages of a Milanese women's magazine between May and August 1870; the novel came out as a volume the following year.² The link between the publishing and thematic vicissitudes of *Storia di una capinera* incites the reader to reflect on the connection between the abstract and the concrete aspects of the novel, between its narration and the pages on which it unfolds.

First of all, as Kaja Silverman has rightly noted, the novel "has given complex expression to the male fascination with the female dress, a fascination that is always inflected in some way by identification" (142). Needlework and clothing subtly, indeed almost invisibly, punctuate the story in Verga's novel, with its thematic juxtaposition of women's dresses and nuns' habits, as well as the novel's material history, namely its appearance in the pages of a fashion magazine. It is on the overlap of these apparently insignificant textual details that I will focus in the course of this essay, following Naomi Schor's suggestion that "it is in textual details either overlooked or misprized by male critics that something crucial about woman's stake in representation is to be found" (X). For although the vestimentary images in *Storia di una capinera* are unobtrusive, consisting of details that can be easily overlooked (unlike, for example, Verga's own *Eva*, published just three years later, in which the protagonist's various articles of clothing are repeatedly and fetishistically represented), clothing may be said to constitute the very core of the novel, allowing us to at least partially untangle the knot of misreadings that surround this book.

Pantyhose "makes" the woman: this is contrary to the proverbial wisdom of the saying "l'abito non fa il monaco." But neither does the habit make the nun, "la monaca." And just as, according to the logic of the ad, a lack of pantyhose determines a lack of womanhood, we could also say that the sexless religious habit "un-makes" the nun, or that "l'abito *disfa* la monaca" in Verga's novel: a feminine garment -- be it a pair of pantyhose or a dress -- is necessary in order to "become a woman." In its rewriting of the popular saying, *Storia di una capinera* abandons both

its metaphorical import (it is literally a religious habit that is at stake, and not appearances) and the privileged status accorded by such metaphor to the reality behind the appearances. The novel consists of the letters which the twenty-year-old protagonist, Maria, writes about her daily life to her friend Marianna, a former companion in the convent in Catania. Its epistolarity, however, is unidirectional: no response to Maria's letters is ever printed, and the only voices other than hers - -subject and object of the narration -- are the author's in the brief preface, and suor Filomena's (the sister in charge of sending her letters) in the very last letter (also addressed to Marianna like the rest). Significantly, this narrative frame is dated after Maria's death, and the absence of an Other for her letters turns the epistolary dialogue into a monologue of isolation and exile. Maria writes at first from Monte Ilice, from the country house where she is staying with her father, his wife, and her children Giuditta and Gigi, while a cholera epidemic is devastating Catania. In Monte Ilice Maria discovers all the idyllic pleasures of the countryside, but she also meets the Valentinis, befriends their daughter Annetta, and falls in love with Nino, their son, who loves her back. As soon as Maria's stepmother realizes this she confines her stepdaughter to her room; Maria is in fact destined to become a nun because her father lacks the economic means to marry her properly (and her stepmother, it is hinted, has designs of her own on Nino as a husband for her daughter Giuditta). Once the threat of the epidemic subsides, the family returns to Catania and Maria begins her novitiate. Her progress towards physical and mental illness is accelerated by her obligation to take the veil and by the marriage of Nino with her stepsister Giuditta. It is this couple whom Maria, in her last days, obsessively spies through the window of their house, visible from the garden of the convent. When the delirious Maria tries to escape from the convent, she is caught and shut in a cell reserved for the mad nuns, where she dies soon thereafter.

Storia di una capinera was a great success, and for a long time it remained the most popular among Verga's works: by 1907, the novel had already gone through twenty-two editions, while the books that were later to be acknowledged as Verga's masterpieces, *I Malavoglia* and *Mastro don Gesualdo*, had stopped respectively at the sixth and at the fifth editions (Spartà 8). Interestingly enough, however, the success of *Storia di una capinera*, at least for some of its readers, was due to a "misreading" of its representation of women: while Verga insisted that his intention was to tell a sentimental love story, a "romanzo intimo" that recounted the passion of a woman whose forced entrance into the convent was but a means to artistically render the tragic nature of her romantic love (as evidenced in her death), illustrious readers such as Caterina Percoto (who herself had written about the problem of forced cloistering in some of her short stories) and Francesco Dall'Ongaro -- and, with them, many an average reader -- interpreted the novel as a document of its time and as an overt accusation of the plight of those women forced by their family to enter the convent. In a letter to Verga, Percoto thanks him for having tackled "con tanto cuore una delle piú dolorose piaghe che affliggono nel mio sesso la nostra società," beseeching him to become a defender of women's condition (De Roberto 168).³

Maria is an unwilling nun in love: but while Verga focuses on her being in love, his readers concentrated on her unwillingness. These two readings can be reconciled if we interpret Maria's plight as an "allegory" of the entrance into womanhood (in this case, unsuccessful): as the

readers rightly guessed, Maria's adventure is indeed symbolic of woman's condition in general, yet, as Verga maintained, *Storia di una capinera* is not primarily a criticism of convent life nor of women's social subordination. According to this "third" interpretation, then, the habit Maria must wear constitutes the vestimentary obstacle to her attainment of femininity, and Maria is ultimately undone ("disfatta") by it. A study of the representation of needlework and clothing, images which pervade the novel as ostensibly insignificant details, makes it clear that what is thematized is not only, and perhaps not even primarily, the condition of that minority of women forced to take the veil, but also that of all other women as they must follow the sartorial imperative to wear a dress in order to gain access to full womanhood as defined by their culture.

Dresses are crucial for the story as well as for the history of the novel, and the disagreements between author and readers about the subject of the novel mirror the confusion about the novel's first edition. As I mentioned above, *Storia di una capinera* first appeared in installments in a women's magazine, *Il corriere delle dame*. Nevertheless, most critics mistakenly write that the novel was first published in the magazine *La Ricamatrice*.⁴ This misunderstanding follows that of the writer, critic, and friend of Giovanni Verga, Federico De Roberto, who wrote in a famous 1922 essay about *Storia di una capinera* that in the summer of 1870 "il giornale di mode, 'La Ricamatrice,' pubblicava l'opera a puntate" ("*Storia della Storia di una capinera*" 165); De Roberto also cites from an interesting letter to Verga in which the publisher Lampugnani promises the author fifty copies of the book "e piú comprendendo nel contratto anche *La Ricamatrice* 1871 per le Sue sorelle" (De Roberto 166). No one bothered to look at the first edition and the mistake went unnoticed until 1985, when Maura Brusadin discovered that *Storia di una capinera* originally appeared in the magazine *Il Corriere delle dame: Giornale di mode ed amena letteratura*.⁵

I would like to pursue the possible implications evoked by this confusion, which seems to stem from a misreading not unanalogous to that which played such a large part in the book's success. Both apparent misreadings can be loosely gendered as "female": in the first instance, the private misfortunes of one woman are identified by the reader with the public plight of Everywoman, for what is at stake, as it turns out, is the access to femininity itself; in the second instance one women's magazine -- *La Ricamatrice*, unequivocally defined by the strictly feminine activity of embroidery -- is confused for another, with a more generally feminine title, *Il corriere delle dame*, and a subtitle which evokes the issue of clothing in the guise of fashion and specifically in its relation to literature -- *Giornale di mode ed amena letteratura*. This link between literature and fashion is subtly thematized in a novel which confirms its readers' identification of elegance with marriageability and, more importantly, the conflation of dresses with womanhood. Furthermore, both misreadings invoke the question of fetishism: the woman's dress, largely ignored in both the author's reading and the readers' misreading, provokes desire and possession, while the comparable status as commodity of the novel is underlined by its publication in the pages of a fashion magazine, an icon of female consumerism (and, for example, in the recycling by Lampugnani of *La Ricamatrice* as part of the author's compensation for his literary efforts: a "gift" for his sisters).

We can then see how the story told in the book intersects at various points with the history of the novel's publication and reception, in a node of text and context which is articulated primarily through the continuous thematization, in both novel and magazine, of needlework and clothing as characteristically womanly activities and concerns -- as signs, indeed, of womanhood. And it is in a magazine dedicated to fashion -- a magazine described by a critic as "il termometro piú sensibile delle opinioni e delle ideologie dominanti circa la donna e i suoi interessi" in nineteenth-century Italian society (De Donato 87) -- that we find the construction of woman as dress, as well as, not surprisingly, the fetish-like representation of womanly attire.

"All women," Freud proclaimed in 1909, "are clothes fetishists" (Rose 156). The economy of Verga's novel conforms--*ante litteram*--to this statement, through the implication that for woman, as Freud continues, "clothes take the place of parts of the body" (incidentally, no physical description of either Maria or Giuditta is ever given except for that of their clothes), "and to wear the same clothes means only to be able to show what the others can show, means only that one can find in her everything that one can expect from women" (Rose 156). This is precisely what Maria is unable to show: in *Storia di una capinera* the woman defined and constrained by vestimentary signs is a marriageable one, and Maria's inability to wear a dress or to sew is inseparable from her predestination to the cloister and from her position as outsider with respect to the world of women's dresses, as a sort of transvestite. Maria jokingly describes herself as a "Sant'Agostino in gonnella" (25), an appellation which she uses to refer to herself as a moralizer in skirts, but which we can also read as describing Maria's transvestite-like wearing of the wrong clothes (the sexless habit instead of the sexy dress), and as an allusion to the author's disguise of his voice as that of a woman.

In the form of the woman's dress and the nun's habit, clothing in *Storia di una capinera* is represented respectively as a means of access to marriage and motherhood and as a carapace that stifles any such aspiration. At the same time, ironically, it is the otherwise stifling habit that allows a freedom unavailable to the marriageable woman -- whose dress reflects and determines that physical and social immobility and brittleness which goes with her role. One can clearly begin this exploration with the title itself, which the author explains in the brief preface. Here, he tells the story of a caged blackcap, owned by two children, that silently dies in spite of the fact that it was given plenty of food. It is the mother of these same children, an unnamed storyteller (could she be Maria's correspondent Marianna, the only person to know first-hand all the details of Maria's letters?) who tells the author the story of a cloistered woman who silently dies because, like the blackcap, she was imprisoned -- hence the comparison. But it is not just any bird that is chosen, for the blackcap and the unwilling nun have in common a most striking physical feature that is intrinsic to their very name: their "clothing." The nun's black habit, metonymized by the veil that covers her head (in the novel as well as in everyday language, to become a nun is referred to as "taking the veil"), is for the writer and the reader the human correlative of the bird's plumage. Ironically, however, it is the male blackcap that dons a black head, while the female plumage is a less striking and visible brown. This gendered plumage positions Maria again outside the realm of femininity: even in the metaphor of the title, Maria is not allowed to

wear the clothes of her own sex, and as I will discuss below, she is going to long in vain for a brown dress.

But before delving into the representation of clothing, we should analyze the activity that brings clothing into being. Needlework, metonymically linked to clothing, replaces for the late nineteenth-century Sicilian woman the earlier activity of weaving, that recurrent literary image which was so cleverly exploited by Penelope and by her Christian counterpart, the Sicilian Saint Agatha (the patron saint of weavers). Like weaving, needlework was in the nineteenth-century an index of femininity -- i.e., of marriageability and motherhood -- and it is indicative of Maria's destiny that, much to her stepmother's dismay, she does not know to sew (an ignorance which Maria significantly blames on the convent, 27). Her stepmother, on the other hand, "non fa che agucchiare e accarezzare i suoi figli, beati loro!" (27), in a description which links the act of sewing with the joys of motherhood. We can redouble the link between sewing and marriage/motherhood if we hypothesize that what Maria's stepmother is sewing or embroidering is her daughter Giuditta's trousseau (indeed, as Jane Schneider points out in her study of the trousseau in late-nineteenth century Sicily, "Dopo il matrimonio il compito principale delle donne era quello di organizzare il corredo delle loro figlie," 38). Maria, on the other hand, has no mother to do the same for her, and the mysterious storytelling mother of the preface becomes the emblem of that motherhood (as the culmination, it is implied, of femininity) from which Maria is precluded, both as subject and as object. All that she holds from her mother, like a host of other nineteenth-century female literary characters, is the hereditary taint of a sickly nature and death at a young age: "la mia salute è delicata. Anche mia madre, poverina! era di salute delicata, ed è morta giovane" (54).

As she experiences life outside the convent, Maria somehow learns how to use the needle, since she is later described in the process of "agucchiare." The choice of this verb itself underlines the tedious nature of the task: while "cucire" is the relatively neutral term, "agucchiare" is defined as "lavorare con l'ago, stancamente, senza particolare cura" (Zingarelli 48). "Agucchio, agucchio alla mia finestrella" (41), "Agucchio, agucchio, gli intieri giorni presso la finestra di cui le tende sono accuratamente chiuse" (51), Maria writes to her friend. The anaphoric use of the verb "agucchio," in addition to the lexical choice itself, points to its tediousness, to that drawn-out repetitiveness which makes it such a well-suited task for keeping woman in the house (also an important function of weaving in the past) and to thus preserve her virtue and her family's honor -- but at a cost. For example, as Freud points out in *Studies on Hysteria*, needlework is a privileged path to neurosis for women: it is to the "dispositional hypnoid states" that precede and lead to hysteria that "needlework and similar occupations render women especially prone" (13). Thus goes the psychologist's perspective. From a sociological or ethnographic viewpoint, as Schneider writes, "il ricamo, per quanto bello è fonte di prestigio, era anche lavoro 'artificiale,' che valeva altrettanto o più della tessitura a tenere lontane dai guai le ragazze nubili e le donne che le sorvegliavano. L'osservazione etnografica conferma l'associazione simbolica tra il ricamo e la repressione sessuale" (47).

Furthermore, the use of the needle, whether to sew or to embroider, is a metonymy of marriageability in another sense: the trousseau was an indispensable prerequisite for the bride-to-

be, and it was the future bride herself who did much of the sewing and embroidering that was to make up that "riserva di ricchezza" which the trousseau represented and which Maria could not possess (Schneider 47). Giuditta, on the other hand, is skilled at embroidery, and for her stepfather's birthday she presents him, as Maria narrates not without a touch of envy, with "un bel berretto di seta, che avea ricamato di nascosto per fargliene una sorpresa; io non potei far altro che recargli un bel mazzo di fiori di campo" (35). It is in Giuditta that the readers of *La Ricamatrice* and *Il corriere delle dame* would have recognized themselves, and Maria's lack of skill in the use of the needle, as much as her inability to wear a dress, removes her from the circuit of marriage exchange to which knowledge derived from *La Ricamatrice* and *Il Corriere delle dame* constituted a means of entry.

The fact that Maria's "agucchiare," her needlework, takes place both times near a window, if practically dictated by the need for sunlight, underscores its role as the activity of those that are physically confined; it is therefore significant that in the second quotation the curtains are shut. The window of Maria's tiny room, through which pass both the sun and, later in the text, Nino's hands and words of love, will find its somber equivalent in the impermeable grate of the convent, and both apertures indicate the inmate's obstructed view of and only contact with a world that is otherwise forbidden: in Monte Ilice Maria observes with envy the daily family life of the "castalda" through the latter's window, just as from the convent garden she will spy Nino and Giuditta through the window of their house.

The curtain and the grate are to the window what the habit is to the body: they are the equivalent of the veil and therefore they constitute an additional layer of imprisonment. In the convent, curtain and grate are even superimposed, thus forming, together with the opaque glass of the windows, three impenetrable layers which prevent a symbolic and personified sunlight from seeping in: "il sole che tenta invano [di] oltrepassare i vetri opachi delle finestre, le grate di ferro, le cortine di saia bruna" (62). And it is no coincidence that the material used for the curtains, the "saia" (mentioned time and again), is the same material out of which Maria's religious habit is made. A few days before dying, as she fears she will go insane like suor Agata (the mad nun shut in the cell where Maria will in fact die), the protagonist exclaims: "Perché m'hanno chiusa qui? che ho fatto? che ho fatto? perché quelle grate, questi veli, quei clavistelli?" (87). These words reveal an identification, in Maria's and thus the reader's perception, between the convent grates -- a perverse form of windows clearly reminiscent of the blackcap's cage in the preface -- the veils that the nuns must don -- a perverse form of clothing -- and the keys that lock them all in, through the arch-metaphor of the convent as prison or cage. Indeed, when Maria is finally allowed to step outside of the Monte Ilice house after an illness that is obviously psychosomatic (because of her stepmother's founded suspicions, Maria is not allowed to ever see Nino again), she is characteristically bundled up with multiple layers of clothes that prevent her from enjoying the sun: "mi sopraccaricarono ["imbacuccavano," reads the first edition, 47] di scialli e mantelli, e il babbo mi sorreggeva" (54). Both the veil and the grate (and, in this last case, shawls and capes), symbolically linked through their common function of alleged protection and actual impediment, are limits that need to be crossed in order to gain access to femininity.

It seems ironic that the naive and short-sighted Maria of the beginning of the novel sees her habit as conducive to freedom because of that very sexlessness which will later prevent her from realizing her dream of marriage: if the habit allows physical freedom, it does so at the price of affective and social immobility. In the *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, Anne Higonnet explains that "Male and female clothes have never been as different as in the nineteenth century, nor have vestimentary transgressions ever been as attentively watched and as willingly utilised in order to illustrate conformity or subversion" (294).⁶ In its sharp divergence from the woman's dress, with its enormous and very heavy crinolines, the nun's habit could function subversively as a peculiar form of transvestism when it was worn outside the convent, so that during her outings with the other young people at Monte Ilice, as Maria proudly writes to Marianna, "Giuditta ed Annetta ad ogni passo restavano impigliate per le loro lunghe vesti a qualche sterpo; ma io no, ti assicuro! io corro, saltello, ma non inciampo mai, né le siepi lasciano i segni sulla mia tonaca" (30).⁷ Thanks to its sexless construction, dark, simple, short, and sturdy, the habit allows Maria -- a self-styled "Sant'Agostino in gonnella" -- a sort of liberating transvestism (at one point Maria even wishes she were a man so as to be a male friend to Nino: "avrei desiderato essere un uomo come lui," 41), and a contempt for that feminine weakness which finds an accurate reflection in the cumbersome trappings of Annetta's and Giuditta's dresses -- dresses which literally as well as metaphorically entangle their wearers to every obstacle in their path.⁸ The absence of movement imposed by nineteenth-century crinolines is one with the physical immobility expected of woman. Thus Maria writes to her friend that, during an outing, "Il signor Nino mi veniva appresso, mi raccomandava di badare che non cadessi, temeva per me, poverino! Se non fosse per la vergogna, quasi quasi lo sfiderei a correre, quel signorino! Giuditta si lamentava ad ogni momento di sentirsi stanca. Che donne sono quelle, Marianna? non sanno fare dieci passi senza aver bisogno del braccio di un uomo, e senza lasciare qualche brandello della veste ad ogni cespuglio! Benedetta la mia tonaca!" (30-31).⁹

The gesture with which Maria blesses her habit is at odds with her attitude towards that garment in the rest of the novel. On one occasion Nino mistakenly reads Maria's habit as a dress, seeing beyond its function as the mask of femininity, and much to her surprise he compliments her on it ("Un'altra volta mi disse: 'Come vi sta bene cotesta tonaca!.' Mi ha detto questo! . . . La mia brutta tonaca nera!" 39), but this isolated statement is not enough to distract Maria from her self-perception of unattractive sexlessness which inscribes her celibate destiny on her shapeless surface: "mi rattristo non trovando in me che un fagotto di saja nera, dei capelli tirati sgarbatamente all'indietro, maniere rozze, timidità che potrebbe sembrare goffaggine . . . e mi veggo accanto altre ragazze eleganti, graziose, che non fanno peccato se amano come me . . ." (46). To be elegant, to have fashionable and flattering dresses and hairdos, is to be able to love without transgressing, for such things mediate desire and commodify the wearers by signaling their availability for exchange. On the other hand, for the nineteenth-century nun, as Odile Arnold explains, "to forbid any peculiarity in this exterior which envelops her means to bury the body and the internal being in oblivion and anonymity" (59).¹⁰ Maria rightly identifies the habit as incompatible with womanhood itself, when she states: "io sono meno di una donna, io sono

una povera monaca" (45). If "clothing and other kinds of ornamentation make the human body culturally visible" (Silverman 145), the religious habit makes Maria sexually invisible. Yet from her position as less-than-woman, Maria necessarily mediates a critical reading of the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood, and her habit constitutes a transvestite critique of the metonymic dress -- which nevertheless takes on the status of a sort of fetish for Maria.

In fact, on one occasion she confesses to her friend Marianna her transgressive desire -- "un gran peccataccio," she calls it (28) -- to partly follow the "sartorial imperative" by owning a simple brown dress instead of her black habit: "Se mi facessero una bella vestina color caffè! senza crinoline, veh! Oh! questo poi no! . . . Ma una vestina che non fosse nera, con la quale potessi correre e scavalcare i muriccioli, che non rammentasse ad ogni momento, come questa brutta tonaca, che laggiù a Catania, quando sarà finito il colera, mi attende il convento! . . ." (28). What Maria desires, however, is not just a feminine dress (she vehemently rejects the addition of a crinoline to this "vestina"), but rather a garment halfway between her stepsister's ornate dress and her own habit, an ideal (and impossible) piece of clothing that would grant her the physical freedom of the habit and the affective freedom of the dress. (It is perhaps significant that in the first edition the "vestina" which Maria desires was "color cannella,"¹² a lighter but also a more exotic hue of brown, which is later changed to the more quotidian "color caffè" of the edition in volume.) Indeed, what Maria dreads about the convent are its "volti austeri . . . tonache nere . . . corridoi oscuri" (28), while the "vestina color caffè," because of its color and its symbolic status, is reminiscent of the Brown Scapular to which Maria alludes later in the novel, as well as of the gendered plumage of the female blackcap.

The woman's dress can indeed be seen as a sort of fetish for Maria, and her obsession with re-fashioning the clothing of her gender, embodied in her quest for an idealized garment that would not strip her of her womanhood nor of her freedom of movement, can be seen in a letter to Marianna dating from the time when she knows that Nino loves her back but her stepmother forbids her from seeing him. In order to gain spiritual strength, she asks her friend to send her "l'abitino della Madonna del Carmine che fu benedetto a Roma," for she decides: "voglio preparare la Madonna che mi protegga, che mi nasconda sotto il suo manto misericordioso agli occhi del mondo, a me stessa, alla mia vergogna, alla mia colpa, al castigo di Dio!" (52). In this sequence, the blessed garment -- the Virgin Mary's dress, a "Maria" with whom, thanks to her name and to her destiny as a virginal bride of God, the protagonist can identify -- possesses a distinctly supernatural power, both physically and metaphorically. Physically, the dress evoked by Maria in the passage quoted above consists of a talisman, a consecrated object with apparently magical powers: the blessed and relic-like dress of the Madonna del Carmine, which supposedly originated in the vision of the Carmelite Saint Simon Stock (who in 1251 was told by the Virgin Mary that "whosoever dies clothed in this shall never suffer eternal fire," Warner 328). This is the ancestor of the Brown Scapular, believed to possess prophylactic powers against death and evil alike (Warner 328), and the brown color of which (the brown of the Carmelite order) would be imitated by the "vestina color caffè" for which the protagonist longs. Hence the evocation of Mary's dress as a physical amulet against evil, as a fetish in its etymological, religious sense. Metaphorically, moreover, Maria in this same passage longs to be sheltered under Mary's

maternal "manto misericordioso" which enfolds and protects the faithful huddled at her feet, as in many pictorial representations (such as Piero della Francesca's "Madonna della Misericordia").

The Virgin Mary's power, materialized in her dress, depends on her status as mother, and more specifically as mother of Christ, and thus the evocation of her dress on the part of Maria reconfirms the rule that the ability to own and wear a dress is written and read throughout the novel as the ability to be married and to become a mother -- fulfilments of the bourgeois feminine ideal. Because of its connection to the Virgin Mary, the dress is represented as a fetish in its original, religious acceptation, and, being an article of clothing, it evokes the sexual fetish (Maria the virginal nun cannot own one, while Giuditta the young bride turns into one), as well as the economic fetish represented throughout the pages of *Il Corriere delle dame* and *La Ricamatrice*. Perrot claims that, "More than any fabricated object, clothing has meanings that are not exhausted by a study of its explicit uses and its traditionally admitted functions of protection, modesty, and adornment. Basically, it is first through dress that groups and individuals give themselves meaning. Mutual recognition, through which one exists in the eyes of others, is an omnipresent function" (8). In her habit, Maria exists in everyone's eyes as a future nun and as "meno di una donna," to quote her own words, and she cannot hope to change her state without a change of clothes -- an impossible change. So Maria curiously asks Marianna to tell her about her new dress (and, specifically, about its color) because that is what defines her former convent companion as free from the constraints of the cloister and its habit: "dimmi il colore della tua veste, perché già so che hai una veste, tu, come una signorina!" (26). Marianna is for Maria "una signorina," namely someone on her way to becoming "una signora."

Maria's stepsister Giuditta is also a "signorina," whose dresses, headgear and ribbons are so cumbersome as to take up an entire room and Giuditta's whole time. Maria is naively content with her "scatolino" of a room (which, ironically enough, used to be a walk-in closet for Giuditta's dresses, 11), and says that she would not trade it with Giuditta's large room: "ella ha bisogno di molto spazio per tutte le sue vesti e i suoi cappellini" ("le sue vesti e le sue scatole," reads with a slightly more contemptuous tone the first edition, 7), "mentre io, allorché ho piegato la mia tonaca su di una sedia ai piedi del letto, ho fatto tutto" (24). Maria appears at first happy to be free from the constraints of womanly attire, but at the beginning of the novel she underestimates the price one has to pay for such freedom. Giuditta is a "signorina" and has time for little else other than her clothes: "Giuditta è una signorina, e per altro ella è troppo occupata tutto il giorno fra i suoi abiti e le sue acconciature, ed ha ragione di occuparsene tanto, perché le belle vesti, i bei nastri, le stanno così bene che sembrano fatti apposta per lei" (27). Again, being a "signorina" is one with female consumerism, with owning and wearing dresses -- though it is little more than that, in Maria's opinion which, in spite of her goodly naiveté, we cannot help but read as critical of such superficiality: "A che dovrebbe pensare ella dunque alla sua età?" (27). This identification of woman with her dress is novel for the protagonist, who before a ball wants to embrace Giuditta because she is looking so beautiful in her fancy clothes, but is rejected "per non gualcire la stoffa." She then explains: "Quanto sono sciocca, Marianna! Come se si fosse trattato della mia meschina tonaca di saia che non corre mai il rischio di gualcirsi!" (27). Fancy

dresses are not only unattainable for Maria: they are downright untouchable, for they metonymize a relationship that is forbidden for her; it is no coincidence that Giuditta, with her dresses, is the one who will marry Nino, and after this, as we will see, she will in a sense metamorphose into nothing but a dress.

The womanly dress which Maria had despised in the country outings later becomes an indispensable instrument in the path to love and marriage, the vehicle to femininity. Maria will then realize that "dress is one of the most important cultural supplements for articulating and territorializing human corporeality -- for mapping its erogenous zones and for affixing a sexual identity" (Silverman 146). When Maria sees Giuditta with Nino for the first time, on their way to a party from which she is excluded, it is upon her stepsister's blue dress that her gaze fixates, thus repressing the realization that the two form a couple: "Come era bella Giuditta col suo bell'abito cilestre, appoggiata al braccio di lui, ridendo, chiacchierando con lui!" (48). It is upon seeing the unattainable -- the blue dress as the metonymy of courtship and eventually marriage -- that Maria is struck, since, as Barthes writes and as experience tells us, "In the field of love, the most painful wounds come more from what one sees than from what one knows" (157). So also when the couple goes to visit Maria at the convent before getting married, she notes the color of her stepsister's outfit: "Mia sorella aveva una veste e un cappellino color di rosa, sembrava felice" (66).¹¹

The ultimate representation of the dress as the key to the bourgeois ideal of fulfilled womanhood is that of the wedding dress. The protagonist imagines Giuditta as she would appear on her wedding day: "Ho veduto Giuditta così bella col suo abito da sposa, col suo velo bianco, e la sua corona di fiori d'arancio!" (68). Ironically, this is the same outfit that Maria herself will briefly wear on the day she takes her vows and becomes a "spos[a] del Signore" (23), because the white dress and veil, in addition to signifying respectively innocence and modesty, underline the body's ritual state, exalting its virginity about to be, in one way or another, sacrificed (through deflowering or celibacy): "Mi hanno portato il velo, i fiori, la veste nuova; e una bella veste da sposa" (68); "M'avevano abbigliata da sposa, col velo, la corona, i fiori" (70). But Maria does not keep this white attire for long, as it is symbolically stripped away from her and it is replaced by the black religious habit which, as Jean-Pierre Peter describes, "redoubles, then, in the realm of the visible, the asceticism of silence and reclusion. Nakedness, obliteration. It is necessary to no longer be anything" (10). Indeed, the religious habit is invested with precise semiotic functions, and in the convent "clothes are a mystical symbol, every piece expresses the spirit of penance. In a period when so many women are unable to read, the habit still delivers, beyond words, a very strong instruction: it speaks the body, its duties, its destiny" (Knibiehler 355).¹² Thus Maria writes to her friend: "Poi chiusero la cortina, mi spogliarono di quel begli abiti, mi tolsero il velo, i fiori, mi vestirono della tonaca senza che me ne avvedessi" (70). It is as the curtain closes -- a piece of "saia" cloth, just like the habit and, like the habit, a symbol of imprisonment -- that Maria's fleeting moment of feminine clothing vanishes, and as this happens she longingly thinks of her sister's less ephemeral dress: "Pensavo alla bella veste da sposa di mia sorella" (70). Nakedness punctuates the passage from dress to habit ("mi spogliarono . . . mi vestirono"), a nakedness which marks Maria's death to the world and which will return at the end

of the novel as physical death. The passage from dress to habit takes place right before Maria's hair is cut with a ceremony perceived and represented like an execution (though one may speak of castration) carried out by the screeching blades of the scissors: "Tutto ciò significava che io morivo!" (70). Maria's defacement is a "castration" that deprives her of her femininity and thus of her very life, as the "envelope" necessary in order to contain both her body and her ego is of the wrong sort and her self will spill out of it into an unsustainable nakedness.¹³

The sartorial imperative must be heeded if one is to attain and display one's femininity and show that, as Freud put it, "one can find in her everything that one can expect from women" (in Rose 156). Giuditta's dress, one with her sexualized, bridal body, makes its final appearance when Maria, by now quite ill, spies Nino through the window of his house which is visible from the garden of the convent. First Maria states that Nino should have been able to see her spying him because of the sharply contrasting colors and the outstretched posture of her habit -- with which she is one: "eppure avrebbe dovuto vedermi, col mio vestito nero, il mio velo bianco, le braccia distese. . ." (84). The vestimentary part -- the habit, the veil -- takes precedence over the living body, the whole, and it is as a habit that Maria expects to be seen. This same synecdoche is also applied to Giuditta: after Maria repeatedly asks God not to let her see her stepsister, she sees "un'ombra dietro di lui. . . una veste . . ." (84, though the first edition reads "un'ombra, una veste . . .," 87, an even more explicit association). The dress obviously metonymizes Giuditta by being, quite literally, her shadow.¹⁴ By now, Maria has successfully distorted her field of vision, and it is a synecdochic dress alone that comes to her (and the reader's) view, while the perception of the rest of the scene is blocked out.

Immediately after she sees the dress that embodies her stepsister, Maria runs to her cell "come una belva ferita" (85). For if the nun's habit is represented throughout the novel as the opposite of the "signorina's" dress, still once Maria goes mad the reversal of clothing that awaits her is not the dress (an impossible target), but rather, as during the ceremony of the vows, a disintegrating nakedness. This reversal is hinted at through the animal imagery (inseparable from the metaphor of captivity) that pervades the entire novel. Maria's story is mirrored by that of the captive Carino, the sparrow she saves, and by that of the leashed family dog Vigilante -- with both of whom she feels a bond of solidarity. And Maria is not only the caged blackcap of the preface, of which after all it is the plumage (hence a sort of clothing) that is stressed: the mad Maria undergoes a transformation from feathered family pet into a naked wild beast, and, more precisely, into a she-wolf and a tiger, metaphors of passion (two animals also exploited by Verga in the short story "La lupa" and the novel *Tigre reale*). For example, Maria writes that she hides her sinful love in her heart "Come una lupa nasconde i suoi figli nell'antro" (78), again using the metaphor of a motherhood to which she is painfully denied access. She also expresses a desire for self-destruction by exclaiming: "Ah! vorrei essere tigre! vorrei essere demonio! vorrei strapparmi a brani queste carni!" (80), in an extreme version of stripping off her "clothes" by ripping apart her flesh. Her body is indeed a sort of clothing which imprisons her soul and determines her domestication, and as wild animal and/or as madwoman she is at least entitled to take off the habit with its implications of captivity. Indeed suor Agata, the mad nun whose destiny Maria sees as a preview of her own (she will in fact be placed the same cell), and who is

continuously compared to a wild beast, is half-naked in her cell-cage: suor Agata, with her "braccia nude," "abbranca le sbarre di ferro e si affaccia alla grata come una bestia feroce, seminuda, urlando, ringhiando! . . ." (79).

Nakedness and madness -- and, eventually, death -- are the inescapable consequences of the refusal (or, as in this case, the impossibility) to play the role of what Silvia Vegetti Finzi has called "the female animal" (in her homonymous essay). Philippe Perrot briefly alludes to a similarly dehumanizing effect of nakedness when he states that "every group has a historically and culturally determined minimum of body covering, without which the individual disintegrates socially and even biologically" (8). Perrot himself in this context equates hair and clothing, just as Maria's haircut and the stripping off of her wedding gown at the moment when she takes the vows are part of the same experience of death, of a social disintegration soon to be followed by a psychic and physical disintegration.¹⁵ Both of these are consequences of Maria's inability to wear the clothes that would in turn allow her to enter womanhood through marriage: as Kaja Silverman writes, female clothes "construct female subjectivity and female sexuality" (148). *Storia di una capinera* is the story of a failure to gain access to such subjectivity and sexuality through the dress, and of a woman's disintegration caused by the lack of what she perceives as her "minimum of body covering": the religious habit is seen as a totally inappropriate expression of the protagonist's human and womanly essence. Thus the nuns are described throughout the novel as black-clad ghosts rather than as women, "i fantasmi avvolti nel velo nero" (71), because in the empty "envelope" (the term "avvolti" evokes exactly this metaphor) of their ghostly garment Maria sees her own impending disintegration. Once again, we could quote proverbial and commercial wisdom: "l'abito non fa la monaca," and yet, "non si nasce donna, si diventa." The habit does not make a nun out of Maria, nor does it allow her to become a woman by obeying the sartorial imperatives of femininity. For the habit is but a prelude to a defacing nakedness, and Maria can wear no other clothes.

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¹This claim is considerably softened in the small print of the ad, which, by beginning with the question "Qual è la linea che separa la bambina che eri dalla donna che sei diventata?" shifts the focus away from the thorny issue of the social construction of gender towards a more straightforward process of "coming of age."

²The theme of the forced cloistering, made famous by Diderot's *La religieuse* almost a century earlier and quite fashionable by the late nineteenth century, had antecedents in Italian texts as diverse as the episode of "la monaca di Monza" in Manzoni's *I Promessi sposi*, and the memoirs of the escaped benedictine nun Enrichetta Caracciolo, *I misteri del chiostro napoletano* (1864).

As Sergio Pautasso writes: "Il libro ottiene subito un grande successo di pubblico, ma non per le ragioni intrinseche che Verga aveva inteso infondere nella sua opera, bensì perché fu considerato come una rappresentazione della condizione femminile dell'epoca" (37); so also Muscariello explains that "quello che, nelle intenzioni dell'autore, doveva essere un racconto intimo . . . fu invece letto come romanzo sociale e di costume" (Muscariello 32). On Percoto's reading of *Storia di una capinera*, see Pautasso 40. Another "misreading" of the novel, according to Muscariello, was the "proleptic" interpretation which saw in *Storia di una capinera* an anticipation of Verga's *verismo* -- because, for example, of the country setting (Muscariello 97). It is important to note that an opposite misreading was carried out, at around the same time period, with respect to the texts of women writers such as Matilde Serao -- texts that are now seen, thanks to a feminist re-reading, as indicting documents of women's condition and that for a long time were read as sentimental or downright flaky stories. On this subject, see for example Nancy Harrowitz's book *Antisemitism, Misogyny, & the Logic of Cultural Difference: Cesare*

Lombroso and Matilde Serao, and Darby Tench's "Gutting the Belly of Naples: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Auscultatory Imperative in Serao's City of Pietà."

⁴ Like *La ricamatrice, Il corriere delle dame* was produced by the Milanese publisher Alessandro Lampugnani.

⁵ *Il corriere delle dame* fused with *La Ricamatrice* in 1874. Gianluigi Berardi, in his introduction to Maura Brusadin's edition of *Storia di una capinera*, recounts the vicissitudes of the novel's publication and its ensuing misunderstandings, while De Roberto writes at length about the critical reception of the novel in "Storia della *Storia di una capinera*." When I specifically mention the first edition of the novel throughout my essay, it is to Brusadin's edition of 1985 that I refer to, otherwise, all references to *Storia di una capinera* are taken from Spartà's edition.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are mine.

⁷ One can get a better idea of the very real physical problems caused to woman by her dress by looking at R. Broby-Johansen's chapter 1830-1870: Crinolines and Stovepipes" (in *Body and Clothes*).

⁸ In her study on Rosa Bonheur, Gretchen Van Slyke has discussed cross-dressing as self-affirmation for nineteenth-century women (see "Ad-dressing the Self: Costume, Gender and Autobiographical Discourse in l'Abbé de Choisy and Rosa Bonheur"). Matlock also discusses the cases of women who "appropriated the guise of men not to play at sexual appeal but simply to enjoy the ease of movement it afforded" (50). Indeed, as Philippe Perrot aptly puts it, "Clothing always affects the body, and the body always affects dress. The functions of clothing condition its forms, and these forms in turn condition behavior, posture, gait, and gestures, which in turn sometimes condition clothing and its functions in a kind of circular causality" (12). Silverman similarly notes the influence of clothing on the body, "affecting contour, weight, muscle development, posture, movement, and libidinal circulation" (146).

⁹ I can't resist mentioning an amusing episode of Lara Cardella's novel *Volevo i pantaloni*, in which the protagonist as a child wants to enter the convent because she wants to wear trousers and believes that nuns, like priests, wear trousers under their habit: "Ma voi, sotto la tonaca, non li portate i pantaloni? Io ho visto che padre Domenico ce li ha i pantaloni, sotto la tonaca . . . 'Ma lui è un uomo . . . No, Annetta, noi non li portiamo i pantaloni, credimi' . . . 'Ma allora, una si deve fare prete per portarli' 'Non è necessario essere un prete . . . basta essere un uomo . . .' (18).

¹⁰ Although it focuses on France, Odile Arnold's book, *Le corps et l'âme. La vie des religieuses au XIXe siècle*, is an excellent source for the history of nuns in the nineteenth century. A shorter discussion of nuns in nineteenth-century Italy can be found in Michela De Giorgio's "La bonne catholique."

¹¹ In the first edition, Giuditta has "una veste color di rosa e un cappellino bianco" (63), underlining the fact that the author thought the representation of Giuditta's outfit important enough to deserve a correction, albeit a minor one.

¹² In *La prima estasi* (1985), a novel that is a psychoanalytic portrait of Saint Teresa of Lisieux, Elisabetta Rasy lets the religious habit speak the body just as Knibiehler suggests: "L'abito, ogni abito, ha una sua adamantina geometria, aperture e chiusure certe e stabilite, descrive una mappa affidabile . . . L'abito monacale, inoltre, agli occhi di Teresa ha qualcosa di più. Per un attimo . . . quell'abito la trasformò in puro sguardo, lei, che i sensi aveva appresi e disimparati in brevissimo tempo. . . La rigidità del corpetto, la sua piatta estensione, il candore del collare, qualcosa di duro di liscio d'insormontabile. Poi le ampie maniche, rifugio ospitale delle mani, e voragine o semplice fessura pronta a dilatarsi per un contatto ignoto. Dopo, la sottana. Le pieghe non illudono e assecondano l'ampiezza, un campo sterminato dell'immaginazione, grempo e sepolcro" (50).

¹³ I am here borrowing the concept of "envelope" from Laplanche (80-81).

¹⁴ Jane Gaines claims in fact that "in popular discourse, there is often no distinction made between a woman and her attire. She is what she wears" (1).

¹⁵ Perrot continues his argument as follows: "For women in our society, good grooming and modish hairstyles can function as a sign of identity and become indispensable for psychic survival. It has been suggested that some deported women died on arrival at the concentration camps from having their hair sheared, an outrage that they experienced as the final spoliation" (8).

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