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“LET THE GREAT EVIL OF THESE VANITIES BE KNOWN:” PREACHING AGAINST LUXURY AND FUTILITY. AN ANALYSIS OF ITALIAN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY SERMONS

“Let the great evil be known”

“How will we make the great evil of these vanities known?” (*Como faremo a far cognoscere el gran male de queste vanità?*). This is what Bernardino da Feltre asked rhetorically while preaching in Pavia in 1493.¹

In a somewhat provocative way, I would like to pose the same question. How can one understand how important and widespread sermons against vanity were within the wider fifteenth-century preaching campaign? How can it be understood that the numerous questions implied by those vanities must also be considered as a relevant part of a vast project of reform? Historiography has long treated this theme as minor and eccentric, and mostly as connected with the rather under-appreciated subject of dress or clothing. However, this was one of the key features of a program of moral, social and cultural intervention in late Medieval society.

Preachers addressed this topic in a systematic and coherent way to convince the crowds that expensive and unusual clothes were a real problem for citizens. Once the public had been sensitized to the problem, it became a question of shifting intervention, directly or indirectly, to the civic councils. The idea was to progress from sensitizing the masses to a concrete political normative that opposed and contained vanity. If the initial work was done in the town squares to create and develop a consciousness regarding consumption, the second phase

¹ *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, a cura di p. C. Varischi da Milano, Milano, 1964, 3 voll., vol. I, *sermo* 38, “De vanitatibus mulierum,” pp. 475–487, in partic. p. 476.

culminated in passing the sumptuary laws that were often the fruit of the preachers' work.² During the second half of the 15th century, these men not only inspired sumptuary laws, but in many cases operated also contextually to give life to an institution capable of narrowing down the vast distance between the vainglorious rich, who adorned their wives like trophies, and the poor, who had nothing. The institution they created was the Monte di Pietà.³ The struggle against vanity and the proposal to redistribute wealth, in a concrete if only partial way, were often different elements of a greater program of societal intervention.

In some cases, this program was limited to the criticism of vanity without any suggestion of contextual action to create or support the Monte. In other cases, from the struggle against vanity resources to support the action of the Monte derived. During the late 15th century, Observant friars made the passage from the criticism of usury to the proposal of a concrete initiative to reduce the distance between the wealth of the few and the poverty of the many. The Monte was a concrete initiative helping the less-poor among the poor by granting credit on favorable terms.

The exorbitant riches of the few were well represented by the costly and attractive clothing (dresses of crimson and fine linen) of wealthy women. These women dressed elegantly as a sort of proxy for showing the privilege of their families. They also did it to be more visible, releasing themselves from the 'social transparency' under which they suffered. In the words of preachers, expensive and eye-catching outfits became the emblems of a maldistribution of citizens' resources and a confluence of many vices. Therefore, such objects came to be one of the main targets of the preachers' moral and social program. Calling attention to long trains or wide and opulent sleeves was a way to reinforce social and political control over changing situations. This is because the length of the gown and the width of the sleeves corresponded to social position. However, in some cases, this could be a way of creating links between the rich and the poor by directing to the Monte Pio a portion of the fines paid by those wealthy citizens who did not obey the sumptuary restrictions.⁴

Sermons *de vanitate mulierum* (of the vanity of women) or *de vanitatibus et pompis* (of vanity and pomp) display the complex architecture applied to questions that — today just as much as in the late Middle Ages — were not

² M.G. MUZZARELLI, *Le leggi suntuarie*, in *La moda*, a cura di C.M. Belfanti, F. Giusberti, Torino: Einaudi, 2003 (Storia d'Italia, Annali 19), pp. 185–220.

³ M.G. MUZZARELLI, *Il denaro e la salvezza. L'invenzione del Monte di Pietà*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2001.

⁴ M.G. MUZZARELLI, *Il corpo spogliato. Multe, scomuniche e stratagemmi per il rispetto delle leggi suntuarie*, in *Le corps et sa parure. The Body and Its Adornment*, Micrologus XV, Firenze: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2007, pp. 399–423.

considered important by those who may not have fully understood the personal and collective implications and consequences of vanity. It was necessary to instill a new sensitivity to this topic, overcoming indifference. This approach is well-represented by a few lines of an imaginary dialog taken from one of Bernardino da Feltre's sermons on the subject. It would be good to say something about pomp and vanity, he stated at the beginning of his sermon. Yet he imagined that someone in the audience doubted the importance of this topic:

quia la brigata non se ne fa stima... Non sono cossi de pocha stima como pensi — O, est ne grave peccatum? Madesi... Quia offenditur Deus et totum celum, offenderis tu et propria persona, offenditur proximus et magna pars mundi.⁵

Once he had asserted the need for intervention, Bernardino dealt with the topic through examples and arguments that demonstrated “the great evil of these vanities,” with references only to the vanity of women. According to the preacher, these vanities revealed and determined a multiplicity of sins and behaviors. Their consequences could be social, economic and moral; all were very negative.

THE PREACHERS' ARGUMENTS

In this article I will consider the following texts: an unpublished sermon of Gregorio d'Alessandria, dating from the first half of the 15th century, which is not dedicated to the theme of vanity but has several references to it;⁶ another unpublished sermon from the same period from a Hermit of Saint Augustin who was familiar with the work of Bernardino da Siena;⁷ a sermon of Giacomo

⁵ *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, cit., sermo 38, p. 475.

⁶ GREGORIO D'ALESSANDRIA, *Quaresimale*, Biblioteca Riccardiana, codice 1281, cc. 32vb–33rb. Sermon on the Transfiguration, in particular the part in which the preacher discusses the vanity that transforms the woman. This sermon has been transcribed by Oriana Visani that I warmly thank for her help and competence. On Gregorio d'Alessandria and his preaching see: O. VISANI – M.G. BISTONI, *La Bibbia nella predicazione degli agostiniani. Il caso di Gregorio d'Alessandria*, in: *Sotto il cielo delle scritture: Bibbia, retorica e letteratura religiosa (secc. 13–16)*. Atti del colloquio organizzato dal Dipartimento di Italianistica dell'Università di Bologna, Bologna 16–17 novembre 2007, a cura di C. Delcorno, G. Baffetti, Firenze: Olschki, 2009, pp. 115–137.

⁷ Biblioteca nazionale di Firenze, Codice Conventi Soppressi A.7.888, sermo *De vanitate mulierum*, cc. 31v–37v. See on this manuscript: C. DELCORNO – M.G. BISTONI – O. VISANI, *Il codice Conventi Soppressi A.7.888 della Biblioteca nazionale di Firenze*, in *Predicazione e società nel Medioevo: riflessione etica, valori e modelli di comportamento*, (Proceeding of the XII Medieval Sermon Studies Symposium, Padova 14–18 luglio 2000), a cura di L. Gaffuri, R. Quinto, Padova: Centro studi Antoniani, 2002, pp. 313–325 (see in particular the note by C. Delcorno on the sermon “De vanitate mulierum:” ivi, p. 327).

della Marca;⁸ two from Bernardino da Feltre;⁹ and — looking outside Italy — some passages from the sermon collection *Navicula sive speculum fatuorum* by Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg.¹⁰ These sources show the variety of themes, the originality of certain arguments, and the recurrence of others. Above all, these sermons demonstrate the wide range of social, economic, personal and collective consequences of those vanities illustrated by preachers. On the basis of these reasons, preachers sought to “root out” vanity through decisive and concrete intervention, to inspire people and support the legislation.

In the words of the anonymous Augustinian preacher, vanity covers all seven of the deadly sins, since from vanity comes pride, from pride envy, from envy wrath, from wrath sloth, which in turn makes a woman vain, “always melancholy and of a yellow color” (*semper melanconosa et deventa gialla*).¹¹ From sloth also comes gluttony, which prompts a person to eat and drink in order to have a beautiful color (*per avere bello colore magna e beve*). In turn, from gluttony comes lust and from lust greed.¹² In this sermon, all seven deadly sins seem concentrated in vanity, which is presented as the basic sin of women, as “cupiditas” is for men. Vanity is a typically, “naturally” feminine sin, which however — as its final outcome — drives husbands, families and even entire countries into sin.

As for the anonymous Hermit, so also to Gregorio d’Alessandria vanity is the typical sin of women and greed of men:

sono due peccati nell’uomo e nella donna naturali. Nell’uomo l’avarizzia, nella donna vanità.¹³

According to Gregorio, every creature seeks to be similar to its creator to some extent, and women want to imitate the creator’s beauty, taking the road of the body instead of the soul. Gregorio’s words point out both the complementary and contradictory nature of men’s greed and women’s vanity: one collects and accumulates, while the other disperses and wastes. Noteworthy, too, is the interpretation of vanity as a desire to increase one’s own beauty in order to achieve,

⁸ IACOBUS DE MARCHIA, *Sermones Dominicales*, introduzione, testo e note di R. Lioi, Falconara Marittima (Ancona), 1978, 3 voll., vol. I, sermo 4 “De vanitate mulierum,” pp. 107–126.

⁹ *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, cit., vol. I, sermo 38, “De vanitatibus mulierum,” pp. 475–487 e vol. II, sermo 100, “De vanitatibus et pompis,” pp. 121–131.

¹⁰ *Navicula sive speculum fatuorum* Prestantissimi sacrarum literarum doctoris Joannis Geiler Keysersbergij Concionatoris Argentinensis (Geiler von Kaydersberg), Strasburg, 1510, the sermon on “Novitatum presumptorum” (*Quarta turba stultorum: sunt novitatum presumptores*). I consulted the copy 4 P. lat. 728 a, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

See: R. VOLTMER, *Wie der Wächter auf dem Turm. Ein Prediger und seine Stadt. Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445–1510) und Strassburg*, Trier: Porta Alba Verlag, 2005.

¹¹ EREMITA DI S. AGOSTINO, *De vanitate mulierum*, cit., c. 35r.

¹² *Ibidem*

¹³ GREGORIO D’ALESSANDRIA, *Quaresimale*, cit., Sermon on the Transfiguration, c. 32v b.

albeit incorrectly, divine beauty. Beside this very original argument, Gregorio adopts several other less original *topoi*. For instance, as do many other preachers, he underlines that vanity causes a culpable waste of precious time. On the value of time, he affirms:

Mentre che avete il tenppo che Idio vi pressta aoperatelo in bene e in buone operazzionni. In mezza ora di tenppo si può aquisstare vita etterna.¹⁴

Beyond that, the anonymous Hermit mentioned above speaks of wasted time as the seventh and final reason for which God is displeased with the vanity of women. A woman, preparing her hair before she goes to church, takes so long to do so that she arrives when the Mass is already ended. Then, she returns home slowly, so to be seen by as many people as possible, and for this reason, back at home “her husband gets angry” (*lo marito se turba*). Therefore, she has lost three things: the time it took to do her hair, the Mass, and her husband’s love.¹⁵ Bernardino da Feltre also evokes, among the damage done by vanity, “the consumption of time” (*el tempo consumar*):

tante frache ...tanto tempo spende e consuma dreto a questo corpazo, che lo mangerà però li evrmi (et citius quam credis) che se mettessi tanto tempo a conzar e ornar l’anima tua, saresti più sancta quam Magdalena.¹⁶

According to the anonymous Hermit, vanity is not only a typically feminine sin, but also the path by which women brought humanity into sin: “vanity is the apple that Eve ate” (*la vanità è lo pomo che magnò Eva*).¹⁷ Before the anonymous Hermit, Bernardino da Siena had observed that in reality vanity is a sin even for men: “Woman, I too warn you not to wear more silk, but I note that now man wears it as well” (*Donna, anco t’ammonisco che tu non porti più seta, ma io ho inteso che egli la porta ora l’uomo...*).¹⁸

¹⁴ *Ivi*, c. 33ra.

¹⁵ EREMITA DI S. AGOSTINO, *De vanitate mulierum*, cit., c. 35v.

¹⁶ *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, cit., vol. II, *sermo* 38, p. 483.

¹⁷ EREMITA DI S. AGOSTINO, *De vanitate mulierum*, cit., c. 31v. If preachers pointed out vanity as mainly a women’s vice, there was also a long-standing tradition of sermons against the vanity of men. This had its reference point — at least since Gregory the Great — in the purple clothes of the Rich Man who did not succumb to the poor Lazarus, and which became symbol of a luxury stile of life completely closed to the necessity of the other people. See J. HANSKA, *And the Rich Man also died and was buried in Hell: The Social Ethos in Mendicant Sermons*, Helsinki, 1997, pp. 46–50 and P. DELCORNO, *Lazzaro e il ricco epulone: Metamorfosi di una parabola fra Quattro e Cinquecento*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2014, pp. 147–155.

¹⁸ BERNARDINO DA SIENA, *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena. 1427*, a cura di C. Delcorno, Milano: Rusconi, 1989, predica XXXVII, “Come ogni cosa di questo mondo è vanità,” pp. 1068–1098, in partic. p. 1075.

“Oh — he says — I thought it was something at which to laugh” (*O dicit ille, me pensava fusse una cosa da ridere*): these are the words that Bernardino da Feltre put in the mouth of an imaginary interlocutor during one of his sermons on vanity.¹⁹ Bernardino da Feltre responds that this is not one of the less important faults; on the contrary, it is “something at which to weep” (*cosse da piangere*) and adds that vanity is a sin committed by both women by men:

Cogita quod homo et mulier vana volunt: Dio emendare, cum Dio non se acordare, Dio adulterare, li Angeli et Sancti vituperare, lo tempio de Dio brusare, la lege de Dio annichilire.²⁰

Even the anonymous Hermit, as almost all contemporary preachers, refers to women’s vanity and asserts that “God hates vanity, or rather a vain woman, for three reasons: consumption, deception, offense” (*Et a Dio in odio la vanità o vero la dopna vana per tre razione ciò è per razione della consuxione, per razione della deceptione, per razione della offensione*).²¹ Next, he presents some distinctions and clarifications for each of these three reasons. On “offense,” he says that a vain woman offends her husband, women and young men in general, her family, her country and herself. She offends her country since, if money were spent on clothing, it would result in damage to the general economy. In fact:

Selli denari li quali se mictè nelle vestiementa se mectessero in aconciare le vigne et le posexioni serria maiore abundantia de pane et de vino Nello ornamenta de una dompna expenderay cinquecento ducati: stanno in casa senza utilità. Selli denari mectexi in qualche arte ne averà utilità et altri. Chi è da notare che, chi po ponere remedio che non se faciano queste spese grande et non cello pone, che luy è tenuto ad restitutione de omne guadagno che se farria con quelli denari in ornamenta de vanità despesi.²²

Similar arguments were common among preachers and were used to move the hearts of listeners and of civic authorities.

According to the anonymous Hermit, the offense to a country “which does not have so many people” (*che non abunda in sì grande populo*) also derives from a lack of weddings: “I don’t want to marry” — says a young man — “because the vanities of women are so expensive.” This young man does not want to get married because of the expense, so he goes to other men’s wives, with the risk of being killed. Alternatively, he might become a sodomite.²³ Analogous arguments recur in the sermons of Bernardino da Siena, Giacomo della Marca and

¹⁹ *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, cit., vol. II, *sermo* 38, p. 476.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ EREMITA DI S. AGOSTINO, *De vanitate mulierum*, cit., c. 31v.

²² *Ivi*, cc. 33v–34r.

²³ *Ivi*, c. 34r.

Bernardino da Feltre. Yet one thing that does not appear in the words of other preachers is the idea that authorities who do not endeavor to limit luxury are compelled to “restitution.”²⁴ The Hermit is also original in what he has to say about the consequences of vanity for the administration. Only he speaks of a wife who mixes substances obtained from witches into her husband’s food in order to soften his resistance to her vanity. The topic of restlessness also can be found in the sermons of Giacomo della Marca, who speaks about the passion of women for dress and ornaments as a disease. The discovery of quicksilver (*argento vivo*) in the head of a dead woman is proof that it is a genuine sickness, he says.²⁵ This topic emerges regarding the various losses caused by the illness: the vain woman loses her humility (and from pride come envy, wrath, sloth, gluttony, lust and greed); she also loses her health. This is witnessed by the few children she has. She “becomes sick” (*deventa inferma*), suffering above all from headaches and “in the head of a dead woman a portion of quicksilver was found” (*in una testa de dompna morta fu trovato uno pugno de argento vivo*).²⁶ According to the anonymous Hermit, this woman also lost her good reputation and wasted her time.

The theme of a city’s responsibility in the face of the phenomenon of vanity is at the base of the direct connection between preaching and legislative action. The Hermit states that if the one who could offer a solution does not, he “è tenuto ad restituzione de omne guadagno che se farria con quelli denari in ornamenti de vanità despesi.”²⁷ This was an argument similar to that adopted by Bernardino da Feltre concerning the Jews’ usury, which was intended to cause civic authorities to break off all ties with them. If the civic authorities refused to do that, they would be required to return the interest the Jews demanded.²⁸ This is what Bernardino da Feltre asserted about usury, and so analogously theorized the anonymous Hermit about vanity — asking civic authorities to take action to limit it.

The first sumptuary laws were passed by civic councils in the second half of the thirteenth century, ostensibly on the suggestions of preachers. From the thirteenth century onwards, the regulation of luxury was an integral part of all civil statutes.²⁹ The need to keep attention focused on this subject as well as

²⁴ *Ivi*, c. 34r

²⁵ *Ivi*, c. 35r.

²⁶ *Ivi*, c. 34v.

²⁷ *Ibidem*

²⁸ BERNARDINO GUSLINO, *La vita del beato Bernardino da Feltre*, a cura di I. Checcoli, Bologna: Editrice Compositori, 2008, p. 108. See: M.G. MUZZARELLI, *The Effects of Bernardino da Feltre’s Preaching on the Jews*, in *The Jewish-Christian Encounter in Medieval Preaching*, edited by J. Adams, J. Hanska, New York – London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 170–194.

²⁹ A. HUNT, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: a History of Sumptuary Laws*, New York:

to spread and deepen knowledge of it was an important part in the struggle against vanity. This was the basis of an intense initiative undertaken by late fifteenth century preachers. For instance, in 1460 in a sermon on St. Bernardino da Siena, though he was preaching on entirely different matters, Giacomo della Marca dedicated a great deal of space to the theme of vanity and the regulation of luxury. This demonstrates the relevance of the topic. Giacomo della Marca is pleased with the Paduans, who:

Con grande diligentia [hanno] otenuto nel Consiglio... quello che zà gran tempo ve ho predicado, zoè che queste manege de pano d'oro che portano le vostre done, e tanti zuponi de arzeno e manege da done fodrate de arzeno e dui e tri vestimenti de seda ha la dona de talle, che non ha pan a manzare, che zerto è una cossa da ruinare e rivare de impoverire e far lo zodio molto ben richo.³⁰

Giacomo had evidently preached on this subject before, with intensity, and took great satisfaction from the results achieved. Next, he repeated his concerns about the distance between the wealth of a few and the poverty of many as well as those about the impoverishment of Christians and the enrichment of Jews.

A few years later, on the same theme, Bernardino da Feltre said that a desire to dress in a “prideful” (*superbia*) manner, beyond inducing sin, exposed one to the risk of not being able to maintain a high level of expenditure:

Facta veste pro inverno, bisogna portar quella da estate ad hebreum, ad usuram, e mai più non vederla. Aut si vis habere illam de estate, oportet portare ei illam de inverno.³¹

In this way, Jews could get rich and grow in number while the Christians were ever poorer and fewer. This was due among other things to their being fewer Christian weddings, since such were discouraged by the high cost of dowries and a wife’s vanity.

With arguments of this type, preachers induced crowds to see vanity as the center of a series of vices and a web of overlapping moral responsibilities: from a woman herself to her family and in particular her mother, from the tailor who invented new styles in his shop³² to the civic authorities who failed to pass proper laws. Without effective measures, the risk of “sinking” (*affondare*) presented itself to the individual and the community:

St. Martin’s Press, 1996, C. KOWESY KILLERBY, *Sumptuary Laws in Italy 1200–1500*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.

³⁰ GIACOMO DELLA MARCA, *Sermone e predica ad honore e laude de Santo Bernardino*, in C. DELCORNO, *Quasi quidam cantus. Studi sulla predicazione medievale*, a cura di G. Baffetti, G. Forni, S. Serventi, O. Visani, Firenze: Olschki, 2009, pp. 356–377, in partic. p. 366.

³¹ *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, cit, vol. II, sermo 100, p. 125.

³² *Ivi*, vol. I, sermo 38, p. 485.

Scio civitatem que ibat al fundo propter istas vanitates, et fecit statutum ut non possent etc. A far bene non se trova dinari, sed bene a pampezar. Te so dire che dai materia a qualchuno de farte dar una spenazata. Quedam civica unius domini, quia fecerat tot vanitates dixit: Si isti non haberent denarios non facerent tot etc. Et tantum auxit tributum che voluissent, etc.³³

The topic of the obligation to return borrowed money, even if in a different sense from that of the anonymous Hermit, comes up in Bernardino da Feltre's sermons. According to him, a vain woman is "obliged to satisfy" (*obligata a satisfar*).³⁴ Her spending on clothes and ornaments kept money effectively frozen in these goods while the poor were dying of hunger, so she was in fact guilty of their suffering and had to answer for it before God.³⁵ Still on the theme of returning borrowed money, Bernardino da Feltre responded to a hypothetical interlocutor who asserted that he was simply spending in vanity the money that came to him from his ancestors and so was not keeping it from anyone:

Qualiter lucrati sunt? Per viam licitam vel illicitam? bene acquisitum vel male...
Qualiter è fatto questa roba? qua arte, qua industria, quo officio? Per assassina-
menti, robamenti, stochi e bistocho, di ruf e di raf?³⁶

The words of Bernardino da Feltre were quite similar to those of Bernardino da Siena who, in 1427, questioned the wealth accumulated personally or from one's ancestors, saying that it was an unjust acquisition which required restitution; Bernardino da Feltre added that this was also a moral and civil obligation: "*de regulis juris*."³⁷ This applied to authorities and rich, vain individuals, men and women. All were required by moral and civil obligation to help those who had less. This obligation was made less compelling with the foundation of a Monte Pio: you may always say to one who asks, suggests Bernardino da Feltre preaching in favor of the Monte, to go to the Monte di Pietà.³⁸ This institution could be supported not only by significant deposits from the more generous but also through modest donations. These arguments predefined conditions by which the obligation of solidarity was satisfied, even for those who had been less willing to make sacrifices.

³³ *Ivi*, vol. I, *sermo* 38, p. 480.

³⁴ *Ivi*, vol. I, *sermo* 38, p. 483.

³⁵ *Ivi*, vol. I, *sermo* 38, p. 484. Here the preacher was adapting old preaching topoi, which dates back to authors such as Costantino d'Orvieto, François de Meyrones and — as a closer reference — Bernardino da Siena. See J. HANSKA, *And the Rich Man also died and was buried in Hell*, cit., p. 47 and P. DELCORNO, *Lazzaro e il ricco epulone*, cit., p. 152.

³⁶ *Ivi*, vol. II, *sermo* 100, p. 122.

³⁷ *Ivi*, vol. II, *sermo* 100, p. 123.

³⁸ *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, cit., vol. I, *sermo* 55, 56, 57; vol II, *sermo* 73.

Preachers had no intention of attacking the right to dress according to one's social condition; rather, they supported it, recognizing the opportunity presented by this differentiation. Bernardino da Feltre recalled that a precise hierarchy existed and taught that that order was to be observed in concordance with civil and divine laws.³⁹ However, one imaginary interlocutor asked the preacher whether women, who do not have laws, could wear what they want (*"Or mulieres non habent legem; possunt portare quecumque volunt?"*).⁴⁰ The answer was that, if the garments of the Empress must be moderate, then those of other women had to be even more so. Bernardino da Feltre seems to allude to the non-involvement of women in public life (in this sense women "do not have laws," *mulieres non habent legem*) and perhaps to the pretext that dress was the only way for women to feel that they were actors in their own stories. He removed any illusions that may have made them feel deserving of luxurious dresses. In any case, all sumptuary laws concern, almost exclusively, women. We know that women represented the social position of their family through their clothing. Thus it was acceptable, even required, that women dress in a way appropriate to their status. This became formalized in all sumptuary laws. One particular case, requiring that dress and social status conform, can be found in the Statutes of Cuneo of 1380, which state:

Quod aliqua persona de Cuneo que habeat domum propriam in qua habitat cooptam de covis sive de paleis, quod uxor eius non possit portare super nec in capite nec in vestimentis perlas aliquas, argentum sive vairum sub pena solidorum sexaginta...⁴¹

Conformity, yes; excess, no. Excess meant that which went beyond what was allowed for a given social level. Excess was to be condemned morally and limited legally. Bernardino da Feltre says:

Prodigus et furiosus equiparantur, et sicut furiosis dantur curatores quia habent ministrare eius bona, ita et prodigo.⁴²

Laws were supposed to contain the damage provoked by vanity and to do so by monitoring the provenience of wealth, limiting the cost of dowries and tempering sumptuary expenses. In doing so, not only could the number of weddings be increased, but business could grow, as preachers regularly asserted. They seemed to be completely unaware that, behind the luxurious clothing prompted by vanity, lay the work of many people gainfully employed in its manufacture.

³⁹ *Ivi*, vol. II, *sermo* 100, pp. 124–5

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 125.

⁴¹ *Corpus Statutorum Communis Cuneo 1380*, a cura di P. Camilla, Cuneo: Biblioteca della società per gli studi storici, archeologici ed artistici della provincia di Cuneo, 1970, p. 106.

⁴² *Sermoni del b. Bernardino Tomitano da Feltre*, cit., vol. II, *sermo* 100, p. 126

OBJECTS OF VANITY AND THEIR MAKERS

Sumptuary laws also concerned artisans: the disciplining of luxury obliged them, against their own interest, to refuse to make garments unsuited to a client's social status. Artisans were hit hard by these sumptuary laws, which accused them of fermenting desire with the new styles they turned out (the evidence of which shows that they were not mere workmen but creative people.)⁴³

During the last section of his sermon, Giacomo della Marca refers to artisans to underline these points: they should not dress themselves above their own social condition, and civic authorities should eradicate "superfluous arts and bad habits" (*artes superflue et male consuetudines*)⁴⁴ after having considered their "intention." For example, paintings or embroidery made as "holy ornaments" (*ad ornamenta ecclesie*) were permitted.

Gregorio di Alessandria's position concerning artisans was equally severe. In an unpublished sermon on the subject of a "council" (*Consiglio*), he considers the need for a council to define what is just and unjust within the city. He states that this is necessary so that food and clothing are not lacking, and that makers of prohibited and useless things should be eliminated.⁴⁵ Among these things were different sorts of makeup (*nbrattarsi*), strange head coverings (*fiasschi in chapo, capegli altrui*) and high-soled shoes (*tranppoli in piede*).⁴⁶ He also refers to the trains to which Bernardino da Siena dedicated pages and pages of writing and ample time in his preaching.⁴⁷ Legislators went so far as to define the various lengths of trains based on social class, and — in some cases — determined that those trains that exceeded the legal limits must be given to the Monti.⁴⁸

Preachers knew well the objects they spoke against, breaking down their discourses into many segments corresponding to the various parts of a woman's body "so as to make the great evil of these vanities known" (*far conoscere el gran male de queste vanità*). From head to toe — and so from "dead-hair wigs" (*capelli morti*) to trains, there were all kinds of sin that could be committed out of

⁴³ On tailors as inventors of new styles see: P. DELCORNO, *Lazzaro e il ricco epulone*, cit., pp. 148–150 with references to Johan Herolt (Dominican of XVth century) whose sermons were very popular outside of Italy. In one of his sermons Herolt traces a sort of short fashion history following the "Summa de virtutibus et vitiis" (1479) by William Peraldo, starting from "curiositas humana" as stimulus for the evolution of shapes.

Ivi, vol. I, sermo 38, p. 480.

⁴⁴ IACOBUS DE MARCHIA, *Sermones Dominicales*, cit., sermo 4, p. 123.

⁴⁵ GREGORIO D'ALESSANDRIA, *Quaresimale*, cit., *Predica sul Consiglio*, c. 99r a.

⁴⁶ GREGORIO D'ALESSANDRIA, *Quaresimale*, cit., *Predica sulla Trasfigurazione*, c. 33ra.

⁴⁷ BERNARDINO DA SIENA, *Quadragesimale de christiana religione, Opera omnia*, Quaracchi — Firenze, 1950, t. II, sermo XLVII, *Contra se fardantes et capillos adulterinos portantes, atque contra feminas caudatas*, pp. 86–99.

⁴⁸ M.G. MUZZARELLI, *Il corpo spogliato*, cit., p. 413.

vanity. That those women, ornately dressed, who acted as display windows of the social position of their families and who wore a wig made from the hair of a dead person did so for motives other than penitence or the love of God, was observed by Johannes Geiler. This proves that such ideas were also circulating also outside Italy.⁴⁹ He states that rather than wearing the hair of a dead woman for reasons of vanity, women should have kept the hand of a dead person in their beds for penitence, as a reminder of death. Moreover, Geiler denounced a series of new vanities, among them trains, the male beard and “checkered, multi-colored, open shoes” (*caligas scacatas, divisas et scissas*) as well as hats inspired by the styles of the Jews, Hungarians, Bohemians, French or Italians.⁵⁰ He attests, during his time, to the diffusion of national fashions outside of their native countries, a sort of international world of luxury and vanity. If he mentions a characteristic element of the phenomenon of fashion, Giacomo della Marca attests to the change in the various styles of head coverings, something that actually took place in the fifteenth century. He does so in the 1460 sermon mentioned above, attributing this to the devil:

Diverse sise (mode) e mainiere de tempo in tempo...che a quel tempo de San Bernardino...le dreze vostre parevano grande zeste piene de zeliexe e lo diavolo non potea tropro bene sentire a destro suo. Et lui se conzignò de farvele fare per altra mainiera, in modo de selle todesche, azò che lui possa megliuo repossare.⁵¹

Giacomo is satisfied with the measures taken in Padova following his preaching, but notes with desolation that, in a year, in a city “cossì grande” (so large) as Padua, there had been only three marriages, while there should have been at least fifty: “Do you not see, citizen, that the city becomes poor and that the decision that you made upon my suggestion was a holy initiative?” (*Non vidi tu cittadino, che tu te impoverissi, dove che questa parte, la qualle io ho preposto et avete prexa, è stata una santa cossa.*)⁵²

The lords of Venice, who care about your good and the good of the city, says Giacomo, confirmed the provisions that had been taken. I will remain in Padova some days more, adds Giacomo, in recognition of the fruits obtained which I will *praise* everywhere: I will make them known to all and will hold you as an example.⁵³ He then adds:

⁴⁹ JOANNES GEILER, *Navicula sive speculum fatuorum*, cit., Novitatum presumptorum, c. IIII v.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, c. V v.

⁵¹ GIACOMO DELLA MARCA, *Sermone e predica ad honore e laude de Santo Bernardino*, cit., p. 363.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 367.

⁵³ On the topic of the fruits of preaching see: *From Words to Deeds. The Effectiveness of Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, edited by M.G. Muzzarelli, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.

A compimento resta, doppo che avete comenzado, proseguidi. E metete anche parte a leze a li artexani, che non è onesto che loro dibiano vestire egualmente, et homeni e donne, a paro di vuoi cittadini. Ancora provvedere a le dote grande... Provvedere che non siano gran dote. Poi finalmente de le code e de le dreze non dico altro, perché prove dando a una, come hè homeni sapientissimi, provvederete anche ad altro.⁵⁴

“I will say no more,” declares Giacomo, though he had already said enough. Beyond having inspired a body of legislation,⁵⁵ he indicated further measures to limit dowries, to respect the hierarchy, and to allow or forbid this or that piece of clothing. In effect, there was little left to add, beyond altering the laws themselves. However, there was one thing to add: a prophecy of the horrible consequences that would befall them if the path he had indicated was not followed:

Che Dio onnipotente monstrerà chru del miracolo sopra e lui e sopra de caxa soa. Io serò anchora morto, che cuo’ ne vedrete expressa experientia.⁵⁶

To know what Giacomo della Marca said to the crowd of Paduans to induce them to “know the great evil of these vanities” (*conoscere el gran male de queste vanità*) and to take the appropriate measures against them, it is useful to turn to his sermon in which he defines, in the first place, when it is that one may say that a person’s exterior appearance is depraved. It is so when a person (he does not specify man or woman) does not want to live according to the honest customs of city and country. It is so when he or she manifests an “uncontrolled attachment” (*inordinatus affectus*) in the use of things, as when a woman wants to dress “beyond what her status permits” (*ultra condecenciam sui status*) or when a man “propter superfluum cultum vestimentorum querit mollitiem corporis” — spends too much on vain things — and refuses to provide the necessary help to the poor (“et abstringit manum ne det unum panem pro amore Dei”).⁵⁷ Numerous examples follow. Arguments such as the similarity between a female

⁵⁴ GIACOMO DELLA MARCA, *Sermone e predica ad honore e laude de Santo Bernardino*, cit., p. 367.

⁵⁵ A. BONARDI, *Il lusso di altri tempi in Padova: studio storico con documenti inediti*, Venezia 1909, p. 30. In 1460 it was re-proposed in the City Council limitations and prohibitions already conceived before but, unlike before, a few days after approval of Consiglio (May 21, 1460) came the ducal confirmation (26 May 1460). The May 20, 1460 Giovanni della Marca held in Padua a sermon on Bernard of Siena in which large space was devoted to criticism of the Vanities: see *supra* n.30.

⁵⁶ GIACOMO DELLA MARCA, *Sermone e predica ad honore e laude de Santo Bernardino*, cit., p. 368

⁵⁷ IACOBUS DE MARCHIA, *Sermones Dominicales*, cit., vol. I, 4, pp. 108–112. On the contrast between rich and poor in preaching, see J. HANSKA, *And the Rich Man also died and was buried in Hell: The Social Ethos in Mendicant Sermons*, Helsinki, 1997 and P. DELCORNO, *Lazzaro e il ricco epulone: Metamorfosi di una parabola fra Quattro e Cinquecento*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2014.

headdress such as the “*balzo*” and the so-called “*sceptra herbarum*” that was used to indicate horses for sale (as “*signum venditionis*”) or the discovery of quicksilver in the head of a vain woman after her death are the same as those adopted by the anonymous Hermit. It is exclusively in Giacomo’s writings, however, that one sees references to the use of earrings similar to those of the Jewish women, “who wear them instead of being circumcised [as Jewish men are], so that they may be recognizable to other women” (*in loco circumcisionis ut cognoscentur ab aliis mulieribus*).⁵⁸ He justifies the use of ornaments only to hide illness.

In another sermon, Giacomo concentrates on feminine vanity by referring to the high cost of dowries and the fact that money spent on ornaments and jewelry prevented investment: “in mercantiis et in artibus ad lucrandum et inde venirent multe divitie et lucra et e contrario multe paupertates et mala.”⁵⁹

The heavy cost of vanity caused financially-strapped people to pawn what they owned for low prices, though the goods were worth much more. “And, in this way, the Jews became richer and the Christians poorer” (*Et inde iudei efficiuntur pingues et cristiani pauperes*).⁶⁰ These expenses prevented people from dealing with important issues and needs, such as the payment of a “*gravamina communitatis*” or the purchase of goods necessary for the family. The unnecessary expenses caused a constant obsession with the question of how to acquire more money.⁶¹ Giacomo invites people not to fall into the habit of defending vanity; he recalls that vanity, according to human and divine laws, corrupts the soul, brings scandal and multiplies sins. Vanity must be eradicated.⁶² To achieve this, the help of laymen was needed.

FROM THE SQUARE TO THE CITY COUNCIL

In order to obtain the enactment of civil measures against vanity, preachers did not hesitate to participate in city councils and to advise and collaborate in the drafting of regulations. This is attested in areas under the direct papal control in central Italy. In Acquapendente, near Orvieto, two preachers, Angelo da Bolsena and Francesco da Viterbo, personally presided over the drafting of legal provisions: the source states that “on behalf of friar Angelo da Bolsena” (*ex parte et mandato frati Angeli da Bolsena*), the excommunication of transgressors

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 113.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 116.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 119

⁶² *Ivi*, p. 120

was introduced.⁶³ References to the need to appease God and his wrath suggest the direct intervention of the preachers Angelo da Bolsena or Francesco da Viterbo, who lamented the tardiness of the legislators' intervention. In *Acquapendente*, this intervention took the form of twenty-three chapters of a law that, among other things, declared that one could not spend more than a third of a dowry on clothing and ornaments. On wedding dresses, one could spend one florin for every ten in the dowry. The law clarified who could wear various fabrics, colors and types of ornaments. Anyone could denounce transgressors, being then entitled to one third of the fine paid. Anonymous denunciations were also permitted. The excommunication of offenders from the Church was a possible additional punishment. In this case, in recognition of his contribution, the preacher-consultant was compensated by the city council with a pair of chickens, a flask of wine, a *lira* and nine *soldi*.⁶⁴

In Umbria, the intervention of preachers in the passing of laws was regular and recognized: Cherubino da Spoleto, in 1451, proposed various reforms relative to women's dress.⁶⁵ In 1467, another preacher, the Augustinian Domenico Travisini, suggested laws relative to women's dress.⁶⁶ In Terni, in 1548, Francesco di Suriano, a Capuchin friar and author of innumerable (*abundantissime*) sermons, induced "a devotional reform to better Christian life" (*a devotione di reformarce in miglior vita cristiana*).⁶⁷ Among other things, his actions were aimed at the re-founding of the Monte di Pietà, the reduction of dowries, the suppression of usury, and — again — the regulation of women's clothing. Further, in Terni, in 1554, laws were enacted at the request ("*super petitione*") of friar Giovanni da Pontremoli concerning women's dowries and ornaments.⁶⁸ In Orvieto, in April of 1468, the general council passed a reform "for peace [...] for the good of the citizens [...] and to honor the reverend father Francesco di Viterbo" (*pro conservatione pacis [...] pro bono ipsius civitatis [...] ac etiam pro honore reverendus frater Franciscus de Viterbio*).⁶⁹ This Franciscan preacher had asked to take steps to support the poor, to avoid dangers to the soul for those who had relations with the Jews, to eliminate the unjust profits of the Jews, to

⁶³ L. ANDREANI, *Il contributo dei Francescani alla regolamentazione degli ornamenti femminili ad Acquapendente*, in "Archivum Franciscanum Historicum," 81 (1988), fasc. 1–2, pp. 72–86, in partic. p. 75.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, .80.

⁶⁵ *La legislazione suntuaria. Umbria*, a cura di M.G. Nico Ottaviani, Roma, 2005 (Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Dipartimento per i Beni archivistici e librari. Direzione generale per gli Archivi), p. 634.

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 635

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, Terni, 1548, gennaio 9, *Riformanze*, p. 854.

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, Terni, 1554, marzo 2, *Riformanze*, pp. 855–856.

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, Orvieto, 1468, aprile 24, *Riformanze*, p. 1026.

support the Monte, as well as to fight against superfluous spending. Also in Orvieto, one month later, in May 1468,⁷⁰ the council passed laws at the request of Francesco da Viterbo. These concerned the Monte Pio, which was to be reformed and supported, and also sought to contain excessive spending. A portion of the fines levied against transgressors would go to the Monte, in an interesting connection between the limitation of the luxuries of the rich and support for slightly better-to-do people among the poor. These folks were, by definition, the “customers” of the Monte. Once again in Orvieto, in April 1473, the same preacher, in order to contain luxury, spoke to the city council about vanity as represented by trains, pearls, and the wearing of gold and silver: luxury objects that were in use despite the fact that the poor did not have the means on which to live. It was decided in this case that twenty people would make the necessary provisions.⁷¹ It is also worth noting that additional measures taken in Orvieto in July 1496 refer again to the preacher who inspired them, in this instance a certain Francesco da Firenze.⁷²

The passing of sumptuary laws was but one of the aims of the preachers, who were keenly aware of the limits of legislation. Bernardino da Siena observed how “with difficulty” (*con fatica*) and with an uncertain outcome the legislators tried to contain excess:

Vuoi vedere come la cosa andarà? Tu farai l'ordine che non si possa fare se non tal cosa e tale; e questo se intendarà per colui che è ricco. Dirà el povaro: ‘Oh, io posso fare la tal spesa, che non ne va pena niuna! Lo Statuto concede che si metta tanti taglieri, e io così vo’ fare. Dice che si metta tanto panno in uno vestire, e io così voi fare. Dice anco di tanto ariento; così vo’ fare. E però questa legge non vi farà regolare, chè così vorrà fare uno come un altro. Unde io vi dico, ch’io non vi saprei già dar modo io: datevelo voi; fate da voi.’⁷³

“This law will not bring you moderation,” (*Questa legge non vi farà regolare*) observed Bernardino da Siena. He explained that what was really needed was for people to moderate themselves once they became aware of the terrible consequences of vanity.

More than a century later, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) analogously stated that:

La façon dequoy nos loix essayent à regler les foles et vaines despences des tables et vestements, semble estre contraire à sa fin. Le vray moyen, ce seroit

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, Orvieto, 1468, maggio, 5, *Riformanze*, pp. 1028–1033, in partic. p. 1031.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, Orvieto, 1473, aprile 21, *Riformanze*, pp. 1040–1041.

⁷² *Ivi*, Orvieto, 1496, luglio 3, *Riformanze*, p. 1046.

⁷³ BERNARDINO DA SIENA, *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena*, cit., predica XXXVII, pp. 1087–1088

d'engendrer aux hommes le mespris de l'or et de la soye, comme de choses vaines et inutiles...⁷⁴

Thus the moral rather than the legal side of this project came first. The preachers carried out their work so as to “make the great evil of these vanities known.”

“LET THE GREAT EVIL OF THESE VANITIES BE KNOWN:”
PREACHING AGAINST LUXURY AND FUTILITY.
ANALYSIS OF ITALIAN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY SERMONS

S U M M A R Y

In this paper I pose some questions and try to answer them: how important and how widely diffused were sermons against vanity within the general fifteenth-century preaching campaign? How did the numerous questions implied by those vanities fit into a larger project of reform? I will consider the following texts: an unpublished sermon by Gregorio d'Alessandria dating from the first half of the 15th century, which does not focus on the theme of vanity but has several references to it; another unpublished sermon from the same period by a hermit of Saint Augustine who was familiar with the work of Bernardino of Siena; a sermon by Giacomo della Marca; two sermons from Bernardino of Feltre; and — looking outside Italy — some passages from a collection of sermons called *Navicula sive speculum fatuorum* by Johannes Geiler of Kaysersberg. These sources show a variety of themes, the originality of certain arguments, and the recurrence of others. Above all, the sermons demonstrate the wide range of social, economic, personal and collective consequences of vanities shown by the different preachers. Preachers sought to “root out” vanities through decisive and concrete intervention, to inspire people and to support new legislation.

KEYWORDS: Medieval preachers; Italian sermons; Luxuries and vanities

SŁOWA KLUCZE: średniowieczni kaznodzieje, włoskie kazania, rozpusta, próżność

⁷⁴MICHEL EYQUEM DE MONTAIGNE, *Les Essais*, I, XLIII, ed. Villey e Saulnier, PUF, 1988, p. 268.