

## 2 Renaissance female luxury garments on the move

When brides' silk brocades ended up dressing ecclesiastics (Florence, 14th–15th centuries)

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In a late 14th century inventory of liturgical garments found in the sacristy of the Franciscan convent of Pisa, there stands out a priestly robe of “red velvet” made from a horse’s saddle cloth which belonged to the Count Della Gherardesca. It had been recorded thus by the scribe who took care to recall who had been the illustrious owner and perhaps donor of that precious cloth, regardless of the fact that, before being worn by a priest, it had been draped over an animal (Balbarini, 2003: 124).

Generally, inventories of sacred furnishings of convents or cathedrals (Butzek, 2012 and Barsotti, 1959) are limited to describing the quality, colours of the materials and decorative motifs and, if anything, focus on recording the presence of family coats of arms sewn onto the liturgical garments and altar *palia* which recall how these objects, for the most part, came from bequests and donations from lay people. Maureen Miller has recently speculated how, by the 11th and 12th centuries in Rome, elite citizens were actively involved in the new luxury of the reformed Church, especially in the dressing of the clergy (Miller, 2014b and Miller, 2014a). Two centuries later, the cupboards of a sacristy like that of the Franciscan convent of Pisa were overflowing with luxurious priestly robes: the inventories (1368 to the beginning of the 15th century) list a truly remarkable number of liturgical garments and sacred furnishings, many of which bear the family coats of arms of the donors, a number giving rise to an increasingly complex stock-taking exercise. The “*registrum paramentorum*” – with inventories subdivided between “*paramenta solepnia*” (that is, the quarter-length vestments composed of chasuble, tunicle, dalmatic and cape), working robes, and robes *pro mortuis* – lists at least eighty-five chasubles including *solepnes* and *feriales*, made in an extraordinary variety of very valuable fabrics: shimmering silks like samite, catasciamiti, lampas, zetane, or else auroseric drapes like damask, brocade and jasper (Balbarini, 2003: 124–126 and Balbarini, 2001: 255–257). Meanwhile, in the “*Registrum de paliis altaris conventus*” there are listed the numerous altar frontals in figured fabrics like the “*paliu de drappo cum Annuntiata*”, namely a silk drape figuring an *Annunciation* apparently sewn with gold thread (Borgioli, 2016; Borgioli, 2006; Dell’Innocenti, 2000; Santoro, 1981).

In Pisa, in the second half of the 14th century, elite citizens appear to have contributed to the decoration of the Franciscan church and its ministers with an agreement in which “chalices, chasubles and a ‘*palia*’ for the main altar [...] were donated to the monks during the same years by some of the most important and rich Pisan families” (Balbarini, 2001: 255–257). The spread and concurrence of this secular “bourgeois” patronage, of sumptuous priestly robes, has yet to be investigated in all its complexity, not just from an art-historical point of view: it has been, rightly, compared with the great proliferation of silk, from the second half of the 14th century, with the increase in the use of fine silk fabrics by the most eminent families (Franceschi, 2021) and with the demand for luxury objects also by the Church (Goldthwaite, 1995: 69–148 and Francesco, 2021: 250–253).

In this chapter, I would like to look more closely at the transfer of this secular luxury to the clergy, starting from the assumption that the liturgical vestments, or the altar *palia* donated by the lay persons, are often, like the sacred jewellery, “converted” objects (Buc, 1997 and Feller, 2013) which have been transferred into the religious sphere from objects of secular use, such as coins, jewels, fabrics, clothing etc. We might say, if it were not already self-evident, that these luxurious vessels or sacred vestments have had another “life” (Appadurai, 1986), a social life, worldly in this case: they come, in fact, from a profound transformation, not just material but also semantic, of secular objects that had a use, a value, of very different social and symbolic functions before entering into the sacred space of the churches to decorate the altars or to clothe the celebrants. The saddle cloth of the Count Della Gherardesca’s horse had a fairly straightforward life: it was a banner cloth of very valuable silken fabric, one of the many luxurious investments made by that aristocrat who had increased its value magnificently in his military and worldly parades. Afterwards, it returned into being a piece of “red velvet” to be re-used when the Count – or more likely, one of his heirs – wished to make a valuable donation to the Franciscan church in Pisa: a simple and usual *remploi* of luxury material, which led to a change from one form to another and a profound metamorphosis from the secular to the sacred.

Some documentary evidence leads me to consider that, from the second half of the 14th century, and even more so in the following century, many of these priestly robes donated to the church are also transformed feminine garments. The sacristy inventories keep quiet about this secular origin although they do allow some precious indications to filter through, albeit unwittingly. We start with a fairly obvious observation: a great deal of material was required to make capes and chasubles and, because of their style, sumptuous feminine garments of the time were not only a resource of value, they were also stocks of fabric: quantities of reusable fabric. But, above all, the description itself of the liturgical garments, as well as the specimens still conserved in museums, clearly shows a unique transfer of secular decorations onto this sacred clothing. The sumptuous “parrot cape” made in the 13th century in a very rare red shamite, “probably in Palermo under the royal manufacture of

the Tiraz”, could be attributable to the emperor Frederick II: the iconography, with pairs of parrots embroidered with silver thread, refers in fact to royal symbolism and appears “to indicate an originally secular, rather than religious or liturgical, use” of the fabric (Conti, 2014).<sup>1</sup> As well as the changing colours of the silk, the intertwined weaving of the golden threads of the brocades and of the damasks, the late 14th century Pisan inventories describe a surprising variety of decorative motifs on the capes and chasubles: geometric patterns (“velluti schachati”), phytomorphic or zoomorphic (“dracones et griffones de auro”, “cum leopardis de auro”, “cum avibus croceis”), all motifs that were easily found on feminine outfits of the time. Reading a catalogue of a completely different type allows an immediate comparison: it is a painstaking, notarial record, dating between 1343 and 1345, of as many as 6,874 “labelled” garments, that is, marked with a lead seal with the fleur-de-lis of Florence which allowed 2,400 Florentine ladies to continue wearing luxury clothes and hairdos banned by a recent sumptuary law (Gérard-Marchant, 2013 and Klapisch-Zuber, 2013).<sup>2</sup> This extraordinary document, justifiably described as “the largest medieval inventory of its type”, lays out all the richness and variety of the fabrics, the motifs, the styles which already abounded in the middle of the 14th century in the wardrobes of elite Florentine ladies. Still in Florence, the exceptional private documentation which I have explored over the years – a wide *corpus* of family books and wills from the 14th and 15th centuries – throws even more light, unprecedented in fact, on the possible “double life” of women’s clothing.

On 24th December 1404, four months after the death of his wife, Raffaella Baroncelli, wool-merchant Niccolò di Buono Busini made a donation of a “velvet chasuble”, with its stole and maniple, to his parish church where his wife was buried. The precious liturgical garment, offered in suffrage of the soul of Raffaella and decorated with the coats of arms of the two families joined in matrimony, had been made from the most sumptuous robe from the wardrobe of the deceased:

I recall that on the 25th of August 1404, it pleased God to call Raffaella to Himself, and she suffered an illness of six months or more. I recall that, on the 24th of December 1404, I Niccolò sent to the church of San Iacopo tra le Fosse of Florence a velvet chasuble from a Raffaella’s gown, and then I sent the stole and the maniple with the said chasuble to the said church; and so I had it written in the inventory of the said church as a remedy for the soul of Raffaella: the said chasuble has our coat of arms on it and the arms of the Baroncelli.

(Archivio di Stato di Firenze, from now ASFi, Carte strozziane,  
IV serie, 564, fol. 30r, 63v)

Behind this metamorphosis, there is of course the *remploi* of a large quantity of one of the most luxurious fabrics, but the “biography” of this wedding gown, which became a priestly robe, cannot be reduced just to the continued

use of the fabric. From the formation of the matrimonial union and, again, at the moment of its dissolution because of the death of the wife, the Florentine ladies' ceremonial robes were, by custom, placed into the "gift" circuit and were part of a precise system of relations and exchanges between the two families of which we can follow the evolution between the 14th and 15th centuries.

In the following pages, I would like to reconstruct the complexity of these luxury objects, strongly invested with meaning, beginning with the piece of valuable material and following its path of conversion and resemantisation, where a wedding dress is made into a priestly robe: an outfit of a completely different 'gender'.

## 2.1 "Fare luxurie del vestire" (squandering in luxury garments)

In late medieval Florence, the robe that the new spouse wears for her public outing in the procession that leads her from her father's house to her new home is always provided by the husband: "Clothing" the spouse, in fact, is part of the set of customary gifts – jewellery and ceremonial garments – which are the responsibility of the bridegroom from the moment of the betrothal (the "giuramento") and for the whole year following the celebration of the nuptials. These wedding gifts represent, in custom, the necessary compensation for the imbalances that, since the middle of the 12th century, statutory law introduced with the dowry system, effectively shifting almost all the economic burden of the matrimonial alliance onto the bride's family (Klapisch-Zuber, 1985; Chabot, 2011 and Klapisch-Zuber, 2020).

In 1340, when he marries, Pepo degli Albizzi receives from Cianghella dell'Antella a large dowry of 1,074 florins (including the trousseau estimated at 74 florins) and is authorised by his father to spend no more than 400 florins, namely, 40% of the monetary part of the wife's dowry, "to spend on the nuptials and clothing and all other expenses" (Newberry Library, Chicago, Case MS 27, fol. xxxijv). Widowed after only a few months, Pepo remarries soon afterwards, between January and May 1342, Contessa Carucci: another prestigious marriage alliance which yields a dowry of 1,400 florins (including a trousseau valued at 100 florins). This time, in order to "pay for the nuptials and the chest with the jewels and in dressing her and in every other thing that it involves" (Newberry Library, Chicago, Case MS 27, fol. 1v.), Pepo spends a little less because he no longer has to fit out the bridal chamber: 400 florins, which represent 31% of the monetary part of the dowry. It is interesting to observe that, in furnishing the wardrobe of both the spouses, Pepo degli Albizzi, who belongs to the international merchant elite, does not spend more than around 100 florins, a little less for the "chest" containing the jewellery. We are in the 1340s: towards the end of the century, the cost of the marital gifts appears to have already undergone a real surge, especially the "dressing" of the bride, which falls increasingly within the nuptial budget (Klapisch-Zuber, 1985). In 1386, Iacopo di Rosso Stefani also has made a prestigious marriage alliance, the dowry being worth 1,230 florins (including a trousseau valued at

130 florins). However, the nuptial expenses are almost double. In fact, Iacopo spends 795 florins, or rather, 72.3% of the monetary part of the dowry: 190 florins to fit out the bridal chamber (17.3%), 247 florins on jewellery (22.5%), 283 florins on the wardrobe (25.7%) and only 75 florins (6.8%) on the wedding banquet. The “dressing” of the new bride is still the most significant item of expenditure. When, in 1410, Lapozzo Ciurianni marries Margherita Cavalcanti with a dowry of 700 florins (including a trousseau of 120 florins), the nuptial budget of 478 florins consumes 82% of the monetary worth of the dowry and, proportionately, the cost of the wardrobe is further increased: Lapozzo, in fact, spends 276 florins (at least 47.6% of the monetary part of the dowry) on eight items of clothing, including a “chotta di zetani vermiglio” (surplice of vermillion silk) worth 50 florins and “una roba di domaschino alessandrino fu braccia 27, fornita col vaio” (a robe of Alexandrian damask about 10 and a half feet long and lined with sable), which costs 97 florins; he spends only 109 florins on a pearl necklace, three silver belts and four rings (Chabot, 2012: 183–184). In the summer of 1439, Giovanni di Iacopo Venturi squanders more than three-quarters of his wife’s dowry (1,300 florins): the set of clothes and jewellery, which he lists in his account book, amounts to 993 florins. Again, the wardrobe costs even more: in total, Giovanni spends 750 florins, of which at least 180 florins go on just the “roba di zettani foderata di vaio” (robe of silk lined with sable), which the new bride will wear to make her public “exit” on the day of the *ductio* (ASFi, Manoscritti, 86, fol. 4r-5r). There are numerous examples which could be listed: I would consider that, primarily, much more than the jewellery, it is clearly the sumptuous fabrics of the clothes the new bride wears that are the best way of flaunting in public the wealth, status and honour of the husband. In the summer of 1447, the splendour of the dress that Caterina Strozzi will wear in the wedding procession arouses ecstatic comments from her mother, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, in a famous letter to her son, Filippo, sent three weeks after the betrothal (the “giuramento”):

Oh! I do not say about Marco, the husband, who always says to her: “Ask me what you want”. When she became engaged he cut her a crimson gown made of silk velvet and a matching dress: it is the most beautiful cloth available in the city and he had made it in his shop. And a garland of plumes and pearls made that cost 80 florins, and the hairdressing underneath, consisting of two strands of pearls costing 60 florins or more, so that when she leaves the house, she will have more than 400 florins on her back. And he is ordering [a] crimson velvet [dress] to be made with large sleeves and lined with marten for [her to wear in the wedding parade] when she goes to her husband’s house. And he is also having a rose-coloured gown made and embroidered with pearls. He is never satisfied having things made for her, for she is beautiful and he wants her to look even more so.

(Macinghi Strozzi, 1877: 465–466; Bestor, 1999: 6–7; Klapisch-Zuber, 1985)

For its style, the size of the sleeves and the train, the wedding gown is made, first of all, with a large quantity of fabric. Everyone also dwells on the quality, the variety and the colour (usually red) of these precious silks, of which the scribes know the various names (zetane, Alessandrian damask, turquoise, velvet zetane), and which expert eyes, not just the mother of the bride, know how to measure the significant economic worth of; then there are the fur lining, the accessories, the ornaments and all the luxury finishes – embroidery, pearls, silver belts and buttons etc. – that contribute to the splendour of the new bride on the day of the *ductio*. The husbands of the elite Florentine women therefore spend hundreds and hundreds of florins on luxury fabrics, reifying in this way significant funds on a real sumptuary investment. The Comune tries in vain to limit these excesses with sumptuary laws, the continual repetition of which, between the 13th and 14th centuries, has been interpreted as proof of its substantial inefficiency (Muzzarelli, 1996). The Church entrusts to the invective of its preachers the condemnation without appeal of this feminine luxury, which it does not hesitate to equate to lust. Thus, when San Bernardino, in 1424, addresses the crowd of believers in Piazza del Campo in Siena, he rails in particular against the obligation of the “clothing” of the bride, which, because it eats up “all” the dowry received by the groom, has the harmful consequence of dissuading men from matrimony: “There would be thousands of young men who would take a wife were it not for the fact that, in clothing the women, they have to spend all their dowry and sometimes more!” (San Bernardino, 1934–1958: V, I, 246) The observation of the preacher is, as always, very sharp but it ignores an important detail: these wedding “gifts” are, in fact, reversible. Let’s see why.

## 2.2 For a pair of oxen: recycled gifts

Between the 13th and 14th centuries, lawyers are becoming increasingly interested in this *sponsalitia largitas* of the husband between the *sponsalia* and the *ductio* of the bride. Bartolo makes an important distinction between, on the one hand, the linen and everyday clothes that belong to the wife and, on the other hand, the precious clothes that

are not made for the woman, and the man does not give with the intention of giving, but he makes them for himself, so that his wife may go around more ornate [...] and therefore it seems that such ornaments are not the wife’s, if this is not expressly said in the will.

(Bestor, 1997: 143)

The legislators endeavour to reclassify the nuptial ornaments and clothes, like the jewellery: they no longer fall within the category of free gift (*liberalitas*), but should be considered as a *commodatum*, a loan granted to the wife “for a particular use”, in this case *propter honorem viri*. Unlike a *donatio*, this *commodatum* can be revoked at any time and terminates with the death of



the husband, unless he has left the clothes (almost never the jewellery) to the future widow in his will (Chabot, 1994: 436–440 and Chabot, 2011: 240–243).

Because of their special legal nature, these “gifts” (which they are not) remain under the husband’s control. Francesco Sassetti devotes an entire page of a small notebook where he records among “the secret valuable things” the “clothes to dress my wife Nera”, which in 1462 are estimated at 346 florins (ASFi, Carte strozziane, II serie, 20, f. 7r.). The “precious clothes” are, in fact, accumulated goods, a valuable resource of which an accurate inventory must be kept. After the first year of marriage, during which the parading of the new bride on family or public occasions obliges the husband to spend “a considerable amount on luxurious clothes” (ASFi, Catasto, 21, f. 304r.), the valuable ceremonial outfits, like the jewellery, can be put on sale again (Klapisch-Zuber, 1985 and Bestor, 1999). Where necessary, these reified assets are pawned or resold to obtain a bit of cash quickly. The account book of Tribaldo de’ Rossi sets out some ways of circulating and reusing these luxury objects (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze – BNCF, Fondo principale, II, ii, f. 3v, 8v, 10v).

Barely a year after his marriage to Nannina, which was celebrated in 1481, Tribaldo, who was always short of money, did not delay in getting rid of his wife’s wardrobe. In August 1482, with the help of a tailor, he begins selling to a second-hand shop “a purple gown of cloth adorned on the edges”, explaining that it was “new, worn around twenty times”. On 25th May 1484, a week after the death of his father-in-law, given that, now, Nannina “has to dress in mourning clothes for her father”, Tribaldo immediately charges his brother-in-law with reselling “a white damask robe”. The 25 florins obtained from the two sales are not sufficient to purchase the pair of oxen he needs for one of his farms, but the missing sum soon arrives from the sale of the most beautiful item in Nannina’s wardrobe: a “surplice” of a fine green silk velvet “in two furs”, “chole maniche di tragittato a penne di paghone” (with the sleeves embroidered with peacocks feathers). As the social occasions for wearing this valuable garment were not very frequent, it was not worth leaving it in the chest.

Some Florentine husbands thus feed a market of used luxury goods, run by tailors and specialised second-hand dealers (Meneghin, 2015: 333–334 and Collier Frick, 2004), where other bridegrooms can stock up at a good price. When, in June 1490, Piero Rapetti marries Alessandra, the young sister of Tribaldo de’ Rossi, it is his second marriage and he is unwilling to spend a great deal on “clothing” his bride. Along with his future brother-in-law, Piero goes on a prospecting tour of the workshops of second-hand dealers looking for a second-hand wedding outfit: together they discuss the quality of the fabric (velvet or satin?), weighing up various used clothes on offer, without finding anything satisfactory. However, at a certain point, the mother and wife of Tribaldo intervene in the discussion and demand – perhaps because for Alessandra it is her first marriage – that the wedding dress is “brand new, of purple velvet, with new sleeves made of rag and yellow silk brocade” (BNCF, Fondo principale, II, ii, f. 55v.; Klapisch-Zuber 2020); and Piero Rapetti is forced to accommodate them.

Niccolò Busini, however, whose second marriage is to a widow, does not appear to be obliged to offer his wife a brand-new wardrobe: double second marriages are usually more low-key (Chabot, 2011: 330–335). Thus, in “clothing” his second wife, Sandra Strozzi (ASFi, Carte strozziane, IV serie, 564, f. 30r-v), Niccolò does not hesitate in drawing on the wardrobe of his first wife, Raffaella Baroncelli. His account book illustrates well the complexity of circulating the donated clothes of a deceased wife: as a gift to the Church in suffrage of her soul but also as wedding “gifts” to the second wife and for other members of the family to reuse. Widowed at the end of August 1404, Niccolò Busini has already remarried by Christmas: on 22nd December 1404, he draws up an inventory of Raffaella’s ceremonial outfits – eleven items including gowns (*cioppe*), surplice (*cotte*) and a mantle – and indicates in the line spacing of the text what their reuse has been. He records how he has had transformed the most luxurious gown “of velvet lined with silver” into a liturgical garment (“I had a chasuble made for Santo Iacopo tra le Fosse”), while he gifted the “gown of pinkish grain decorated with ermine” to his second wife when they married. Later, Sandra chooses for herself and has other clothes belonging to Raffaella altered (“Rifecesela la Sandra; Feciene la Sandra per sè”). Mea Busini, sister-in-law of the deceased wife, takes for herself an old, black gown. Finally, transformed, altered, dyed into another colour, the clothes Raffaella wore most are used for other members of the family: with a “gown of peach blossom decorated with ermine”, Niccolò has made two covers for his children, whilst the fabric of a “sad, old light blue gown” is used to make clothes for the children (ASFi, Carte strozziane, IV serie, 564, f. 30r, 63v). None of the eleven items from Raffaella’s wardrobe dropped out of the gift circuit.

### **2.3 “Per l’anima e rinmembrança” (for the soul and memory) of the deceased wife**

The legacy of the clothes of the deceased wife plays a prominent role in her commemoration, in the suffrage of her soul, and involves both the widower and the woman’s family of origin. The presence or not of the couple’s children is a decisive variant in putting back into circulation the wedding “gifts”.

In the 14th century, when a wife dies, Florentine custom stipulates that the widower sends back immediately to her family of origin one of the two wedding chests, containing her trousseau, thus separating it from the monetary part of the dowry, which is, instead, earmarked for her children and heirs. On 11th September 1374, two days after the death of his first wife, messer Niccolò Baldovinetti sends to his sister-in-law “a chest that once belonged to monna Samaritana, with cloths in it for the use of the said monna Samaritana, that she might give them where she pleased for the soul and remembrance of the said monna Samaritana, dearest woman” (BNCF, Codice Palatino Baldovinetti, 37, f. 22v). The return of the dowry, at least the non-monetary part of the dowry, to her family of origin, is presented as a “gift” from the



widower in suffrage of the soul of the deceased wife. However, the execution of it is entrusted to his in-laws: the everyday clothes, the linen and the small objects will be redistributed to some relative or to the poor, or perhaps sold for charity. However, in the 1370s, this gesture, which is presented as a “gift and custom”, seems to have been called into question by the widowers (ASFi, Carte strozziane, II serie, 2, f. 34v and Chabot, 2011: 230–232). It is significant that, by 1386, when the same messer Niccolò Baldovinetti is widowed for the second time, he does not send anything back to the family of the deceased. In the 15th century, the “custom” was permanently lost: where the items from the dowry and the everyday clothes continue to be donated in suffrage of the wife, it is by now clear that it is the widower himself, no longer the family of the deceased, who takes care of their distribution. In 1428, after the death of his second wife, Caterina degli Alberti, Valorino Ciurianni reports that “veils and many of her woollen and linen clothes were given for her soul. May God grant them to her soul” (Chabot, 2012: 188). Clothing alms are always made in suffrage of the deceased woman.

Throughout the 14th century, widowers *without* children also have another customary obligation: not only do they return the *corredo* (trousseau) of the deceased wife, but they are obliged to donate the “*contro-corredo*”, that is, the wardrobe established at the time of the nuptials (excluding the jewellery). Between 1340 and 1343, the behaviour of Pepo degli Albizzi, who was widowed twice in the space of three years without having had any children, demonstrates this unequivocally: in both cases, this merchant sends back to his in-laws the two wedding chests with the trousseau of the deceased and all her occasion outfits. On 7th July 1340, on the death of Cianghella Dell’Antella, Pepo sends 100 florins to his father-in-law for her soul, a chest with “all the gifts that she had brought” (the trousseau was worth 74 florins), and the other with “all her clothes and everything else except the jewelry box”, namely the marital gifts apart from the jewellery, which he values at around 75 florins; and concludes: “In all, *I sent for her soul* 250 florins of gold” (Newberry Library, Chicago, Case MS 27, fol. xxxiijr; Chabot, 1994 and Chabot, 2011: 224–225). On the death of his second wife, Contessa Carucci, in February 1343, Pepo sends his mother-in-law: 100 florins for her soul, the first chest with “all her gifts” (the trousseau was valued at 100 florins) and the second with “all her clothes and everything else except the jewelry box”, worth the same as the trousseau; a total of 300 florins in money and clothing (Newberry Library, Chicago, Case MS 27, fol. xxxiijv).

There is a precise reason why this widower had to display greater generosity: despite not having any children, Pepo is not obliged to return the dowry of the deceased to her family, or at least the monetary part of the dowry (1,000 florins for the first wife, 1,300 for the second). In Florence, widowers without children enjoy this inheritance privilege, which can be found in the first conserved citizen statutes (1325) but was certainly already written into citizen law by the 13th century (we do not know exactly from when) (Chabot, 2011: 16–17). This provision is part of a total derogation from Roman legal tradition which did not include any hereditary succession between spouses

and that, in the absence of children and heirs, obliged the widower to return all the assets of the deceased to her family of origin. Such an exorbitant privilege of succession required some form of compensation: in Florence, as well as returning the trousseau (which all widowers did), the obligation of the definitive gift of the “*contro-corredo*” to the family of the deceased seems to have been integrated into the custom, although we do not know when. However, this gift, which clearly obeyed the logic of the compensation, is presented as an offering in suffrage of the soul of the deceased wife. The exceptional private Florentine documentation enables the customary “gift” of the wedding clothes to be placed within the relationship agreement between the two allied families and to grasp all its semantic complexity. At the end of the 14th century, the oral provisions of one wife, Margherita Scodellai, set out in the margin of her will and transcribed by her husband, Paliano di Falco, in his *book of memories*, described the two different uses which were intended for the ceremonial garments left to her family of origin.

On 30th September 1399, Margherita died without having given any heirs to her husband. The day before, in the will dictated to a notary at her bedside, as well as choosing where to be buried and making some godly bequests, she designated her husband as overall heir of all her dotal and non dotal assets. Margherita was, in fact, an heiress; an only child, whose father had already died by the time of her marriage (1390), she had been richly endowed; then, in 1398, she had also received her maternal inheritance. In the margin of her written will, Margherita added orally an unusual codicil in which, to all intents and purposes, she disposed at least of three or four ceremonial garments in her wardrobe which did not legally belong to her.

she bequeathed to me, Paliano, on words, that I should transform her gown of the drape of faded damask and her surplice of the canopy drape into two chasubles and give them to those churches which I choose; and she begged me to give to Caterina, her niece, one or two of her gowns, as I liked.

(ASFi, Carte strozziane, II serie, 7, fol. 35r)

Margherita would have undoubtedly been aware that she was leaving her husband a large fortune and, at the end of the 14th century, she also knew that a widower without children was still bound to that customary form of compensation that consisted in returning the deceased’s “*contro-corredo*” to her family. Margherita’s unusual request is explained in the light of her family situation: with both her parents dead, she did not have any other close kin likely to receive this “gift” and to dispose of it in the usual customary way. It would have been Paliano who would personally have taken on the burden of what the parents of the deceased would usually have done, so Margherita was begging him to follow her precise provisions. This specific situation offers us an important clarification on the use that was made of the deceased wife’s wedding garments. Margherita chose the most sumptuous of her ceremonial

outfits, consisting of a gown and its surplice of precious silken fabrics, which were to be transformed into “two chasubles” to be given to two churches. Meanwhile, she left to her husband the choice of one or two gowns to give to her **h**is niece, the daughter of **h**is sister. It seems, therefore, that, once they had been gifted to the family of origin, the ceremonial outfits of a deceased wife were subtracted from the financial arrangements and remained as gifts. Unlike the everyday “panni lini e lanii” (woollen and linen clothes), these luxury objects could not be turned into clothing alms for the poor: they were earmarked for the closest relatives – sisters, nieces etc. – so that when wearing again – “*rivestendo*” – the clothes of the deceased they would keep her memory alive; or else, after being converted into equally luxurious liturgical garments, they were donated to the Church, in suffrage of the soul of the deceased.

From this testimony, I draw three considerations: at the end of the 14th century, widowers without children still had to compensate for their privilege of succession by donating their wife’s luxurious clothes to their families; in doing this, the widowers were delegating the performance of these legacies *pro anima* of the dead wife; lastly, the conversion of at least one of these garments into a liturgical vestment, donated in suffrage of the deceased, was a well-established custom.

During the 1380s, however, I note some significant changes in the first-person involvement of the widowers, with or without children, in caring for the soul of their wife. Although, on the one hand, the custom of the “gift” of the trousseau to the family of the deceased had by now disappeared, on the other hand, we see that it is now the widowers that are carrying out the legacies in suffrage, especially in the wife’s place of burial (usually the parish where she lived). In the Ciurianni family, of which a multi-generational family book is conserved, between 1362 and 1382, at a distance of one generation, we can see how the attitude of the widowers was evolving towards a better recognition of conjugality.

In 1362, the “ricordanza” (record) that Barna Ciurianni dedicated to the death of his first wife was strictly accounted for: in her last wishes, Agnese left her children heirs to her dowry, she asked to be buried in the Franciscan church of Santa Croce (not in the Ciurianni tomb) and asked her husband to donate 30 florins “for her soul”, according to the instructions left to her confessor and her stepmother. As was the custom of merchants, Barna gave his written consent – and closed the brief record with a final statement of the expenses: 100 florins for medical and funeral costs and this legacy of 30 florins (which represented less than 5% of the dowry), entrusted by Agnese, not to him but to two people she trusts.

Twenty years later, on 14th October 1382, Barna’s son, Valorino, much more emotionally, announced the death of his wife as a result of a miscarriage: messer Iacopo dei Belforti’s wife Tessa was, in his eyes “the best, most honest and virtuous woman there could ever be”. At her bedside, Valorino heard and transcribed the last wishes in which we can see a new structure of the legacies *pro anima* for a deceased wife and mother: Tessa left “for God

and for the good of her soul” only a modest sum of money – two florins “for masses and for God”. However, she donated “some of her woollen and linen clothes”, in other words, items from her trousseau and everyday clothes, entrusting to her confessor their distribution to the poor. For his part, “to cleanse her soul”, Valorino had a ceremonial outfit transformed into “a chasuble of white drape in relief”, which he donated to the parish church of Santo Stefano where Tessa was buried (Chabot, 2012: 158).

The first attestation of such a bequest in a will (within a corpus of more than 280 male documents, 1350–1440) dates to the same period. In 1389, Francesco di Leonardo Adimari left “a dress embroidered in gold that belonged to his wife Pippa to make a vestment out of it” (ASFi, Notarile antecosimiano, 13948, f. 9v, 17th September 1389). The widower gave this gift to the parish church of Santa Maria Nepotecosa where his wife was buried and where he himself would be buried, in the family tomb. The testator had already chosen the garment because of its special value but, unlike Valorino Ciurianni, he left the task of taking care of its transformation into a priestly robe to the executors; perhaps he had only been a widower for a short time and had not yet had time to do it himself.

In 1404, the donation made by the aforementioned wool merchant Niccolò di Buono Busini explains even more clearly the intentions of the donor behind the conversion of the most beautiful item in the “*contro-corredo*” (probably the wedding gown) into a priestly robe: “I had it written in the inventory of the said church for cleansing the soul of the above-mentioned Raffaella: the said chasuble has our coat of arms and the arms of the Baroncelli”. The gift was made in suffrage of the soul of the deceased but it was also linked with the commemoration of the conjugal couple at the moment in which death separated them: the chasuble, with stole and maniple, was marked with the embroidered coats of arms of the two families who had been united in matrimony. The record of the donation in the inventory of the furnishings of the church of San Iacopo tra i Fossi inscribed the object in the collective memory of the parish.

#### 2.4 “Paramenti e limosine” (vestments and alms)

At the beginning of the 15th century, the ceremonial outfits of the dead wives (sometimes also mothers) appear to have been converted by the widower for the purposes of “usanze” (customs), but as this becomes more commonplace, meanings and functions also change. I note two significant changes. First of all, widowers without children are no longer obliged to donate the “*contro-corredo*” to the dead wife’s family of origin: the ceremonial outfits are thus removed from being part of the compensation which they had clearly been in the 14th century. However, this customary compensation, which the families of the women evidently considered to be essential for the loss of the dowry, was transferred in another register, onto other feminine clothes: during the 1430s, and at the end of that century, two precious documents tell us that

widowers without children were now obliged to dress in mourning all the women of the family of the deceased wife (mothers, sisters), and possibly her children from her first marriage (Chabot, 2011: 228–229). Secondly, the gift of liturgical garments is extended: feminine clothes are converted into tools of salvation, no longer only of the soul of the dead wife but also of other members of the family and of the husbands themselves who owned the clothes to be converted. In 1470, after the death of Alessandra Macinghi, her son, Filippo Strozzi, had her garment transformed into “a chasuble of white damask with gold brocade embroidered with a frieze with the coat of arms of the Strozzi and Macigni, for the soul of my mother, Alessandra” (ASFi, Carte strozziane, V serie, 15, fol. Lxxxxviiiij<sup>o</sup>v, Cv, Cvr). Whilst the double family coats of arms recorded the marriage alliance and commemorated the conjugal couple, the choice of the church of Santa Maria a Ughi, the true sanctuary of the Strozzi, as the recipient of the precious gift, placed the emphasis on the commemoration of the Strozzi house, dissociating it from the memory of Alessandra, who had chosen to be buried elsewhere, in the church of the Dominican convent of Santa Maria Novella.

The Florentine testators who knew that they could count on their future widow continuing to live in the house, together with her dowry, were more inclined to give them definitively the ceremonial wardrobe – around a third of married testators made this legacy (Chabot, 2011: 241–242) – and to entrust to them the conversion of one or more wedding robes in suffrage of their soul. The widows were thus executors of marital provisions and this is why, in the “Registrum de pivialibus” of the sacristy of the convent of San Francesco di Pisa (Balbarini, 2003: 124–126), we find

a solemn cape of white jasper brocaded with fine gold with rich fringes that made monna Bandeta, widow of Bartolomeo de’ Malpigli, *pro anima* of the said Bartolomeo and of his son Bartolomeo, with a beautiful silver enamel for the said cape.

(Balbarini, 2003: 124)

The silk merchant Stagio di Leonardo was still a married man when, on 25th November 1429, he dictated his testament in which he asked the executors of his last wills to make, for the church of Santo Spirito where he wished to be buried, “a chasuble for the deacons and subdeacons with gold friezes and had it made from a dress or gown of green and black velvety silk, which at the present time is in use by the wife of the said testator” (ASFi, Notarile antecosimiano, 2546, fol. 97v.). The testator did not only carefully choose from the wife’s wardrobe the gown of green and black zetane for the particular value of the fabric, but he also indicated the precious trim with a fringe of gold threads which had to finish the chasuble. In this case, the wife was not one of the executors of the will because, in all likelihood, she was still young and would remarry. The executors of Paliano di Falco, who died in December 1410, waited until his widow, Gianna dei Pazzi, remarried in 1412,

to go ahead with transforming a red silk garment from her wardrobe into a sumptuous chasuble “with gold embroidery telling the story of the Passion of Christ”, to donate to the sacristy of Santa Croce in Florence. Paliano had chosen to be buried in that Franciscan church but, as his will did not provide for this legacy, the executors justified it in this way: “we have done this for the soul of Paliano di Falcho and the executors were in agreement that it should be done in this way” (ASFi, Carte strozziane, IV serie, 366, f. 246r and Chabot, 2011: 244). The commissions of married women were rarer as they could not dispose of their wardrobe. In 1472, in her will, Angelozza *de Fucsis*, wife of a doctor in law from Rome, made three bequests which presupposed the conversion of luxury objects owned by her, presumably items from her trousseau: two silver belts which had to be sold to purchase a chalice to be donated to her parish church; her figured crimson robe to be transformed into an altar antependium and given to the Roman church of Santi Apostoli (the testator asked that the pearls on the robe be embroidered with the name of Christ); and, lastly, another robe of Alessandrian velvet with which a chasuble would be made (Lombardo, 1986: 332). I shall dwell briefly on two donations made by Ginevra di Niccolò di Ugo degli Alessandri, wife of Giovanni di Cosimo dei Medici, to the convent of Santa Verdiana. In 1455, after the birth of her first child, Cosimino, Ginevra gave the nuns a piece of silk velvet to make clothes for a statuette of Baby Jesus (Strocchia, 2014: 16). With this gesture, Ginevra was repositing the gift of a precious fabric, something a young mother traditionally received from a father or from siblings on the birth of the first child (Chabot, 2020: 649), and establishing a strong relationship, a symbolic parent–child bond with the “convent child” (as that holy doll was called). A few years later, Ginevra made a similar significant gesture when she gave Piera dei Medici, the abbess of Santa Verdiana, one of her garments of white damask so that the nuns could make an altar antependium embroidered with gold thread and silk to adorn the main altar of the convent church on the day of the feast of Santa Verdiana (Strocchia, 2014: 16). In both cases, through the language of cloth, Ginevra spoke of the *matronage* that she intended to exercise over the religious institution during her life.

In the 15th century, there were at least three female Florentine monasteries that specialised in the production of sacred garments and furnishings and it is very likely that the workshops of tailors, embroiderers and gold-beaters would have faced competition with the nuns (Borgioli, 2011 and Borgioli, 2016). As early as 1420, the same Vallombrosian monastery of Santa Verdiana (founded in 1400) had established one of the first textile art *ateliers*, specialised, on the one hand, in spinning gold threads (with laminated silver gilt thread coiled on a silk core of a natural colour) and, on the other hand, embroidery figured in gold. The nuns did not weave silk drapes but embellished with sumptuous embroidery the precious fabrics supplied by their clients, to create liturgical garments and altar antependia in woven and embroidered fabrics, clothes for statuettes and holy dolls, and also secular objects (Strocchia, 2015: 44–48 and Borgioli, 2017). The gift of Ginevra Alessandri allows us to surmise



easily that these cloths could have come from feminine clothes, chosen for their fineness and, naturally, for the colour, which had to correspond with one of the colours of the liturgical seasons (white, red, green, black),<sup>3</sup> and that, not only the embroidery but all the procedures of transformation into other clothes, priestly ones, were entrusted to the nuns. For figured fabrics with decoration embroidered with gold thread (usually, figures or scenes from the holy scriptures), the nuns also collaborated with artists: the tondo placed at the centre of an altar frontal with the *Coronation of the Virgin*, designed by Paolo Schiavo using the *or nué* technique, is a masterpiece from this *atelier*, now conserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Strocchia, 2015: 45–46, photos: 279–280). Between 1451 and 1511, the accounts books of another important textile *atelier* – that of the Santa Brigida del Paradiso in Pian di Ripoli, which too specialised in embroidering priestly garments and altar frontals – allow us to analyse from close up the production and not indifferent costs of crafting these holy objects and reveal the variety of clientele: from private citizens such as Francesco Sassetti who, in 1477, had some liturgical clothes and an altar frontal embroidered for the church of Santa Maria Novella (spending 48 florins); religious figures like the Florentine Dominican friars who, in 1466, commissioned an altar frontal embroidered with fifteen stories on the *Life of the Virgin*; and even senior ecclesiastical figures like the Archbishop of Florence or Pope Paul II (Strocchia, 2009: 135–138 and Strocchia, 2015: 40–41).

In his holographic will (conserved in the archives of the monastery of Ss. Annunziata), which is not dated but can be placed between the death of his only son Cosimino (1459) and his own death (on 1st November 1463), Giovanni di Cosimo dei Medici left to his future widow, Ginevra Alessandri, the task of emptying the chests and transforming *all* their clothes into “garments and charity donations”, in suffrage of his soul: “I leave all the cloths and clothes, for whatever purpose she and I wore them, reminding her that she makes liturgical vestments and alms of them for my soul” (Lillie, 2007: 48). Garments and alms (“paramenti e limosine”): Giovanni dei Medici suggested that, at the time of death, a sinner should undress before God. The undressing was, on the one hand, an extreme act of humility which was accompanied by the traditional clothing alms for the poor; on the other hand, by renouncing the pomp of appearances and transferring this secular luxury to the Church, these riches were changed into an instrument of salvation. The display of these sparkling silks embroidered with gold and silver, of these sumptuous fabrics often bearing family coats of arms – which were converted into liturgical vestments or altar *palia* – brought the lay donors closer to the holy places or saints: embellishing the most visible façade of the altar, or else clothing the body of the priest who was celebrating the rite of the mass close to the altar itself, in the immediate proximity of the sacrifice of the Eucharist (Magnani, 2009).

During the Renaissance, the clothes of Florentine wives had only one owner: the husbands. In this article, I have tried to follow the circulation

and the material and symbolic transformation of these secular objects in a complex gift circuit controlled by the husbands themselves, searching for the reasons for the gift and the intentions of the donors. In the first half of the 14th century, the widower without children acknowledged that financial compensation was owed to the family who were losing the entire dowry, for the ceremonial garments “given” to the wife when they married, but presented this “gift” as an instrument of redemption of the soul of the deceased. It was a legacy *pro anima*, the execution of which was, however, delegated to the in-laws, who had these clothes transformed into liturgical garments. I believe I have detected a perceptible evolution when, towards the end of the century, even the widowed fathers began to make this type of donation to the Church, causing it to take on a new meaning: still in suffrage of the soul of the deceased, but now also in memory of the couple, with the family coats of arms leaving a visible trace of the marriage alliance and of the donor. When, at the beginning of the 15th century, it was the owners of the ceremonial garments who donated them in suffrage of their soul, possibly charging their future widow with their material transformation into sacred clothes or furnishings, we sense that, in the significant reversal of roles, the initial reasons for this gesture had been lost and that we are now more simply in the presence of a *remploi* of sumptuous silks.

Converted into pious donations to enter into the church space, bringing them close to the altars, these secular objects, symbol of luxury or even of female lust, underwent a radical metamorphosis which changed their gender identity and spiritual value, before being elevated to a higher status of sacred objects. It was only through a profound semantic change that the drape of red silk of the wedding gown of Gianna dei Pazzi, wife of Paliano di Falco, could become the backdrop of a precious chasuble on which was embroidered, with gold and silver thread, the *Story of the Passion of Christ*, a consecrated object worn by the celebrant, an instrument of the redemption of the soul of the donor.

## Notes

- 1 [www.restituzioni.com/opere/piviale-dei-pappagalli/](http://www.restituzioni.com/opere/piviale-dei-pappagalli/)
- 2 For a similar Bolognese inventory of 211 garments (1401): Muzzarelli (2003: 33–57).
- 3 The liturgical colours were described at the end of the 12th century by Lotario di Segni, the future pope Innocent III, in the treatise *De sacro altaris mysterio*, Lib. I, chapter 65 of 1198.

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