

STANDING TALL, THE STILETTO HEEL AS MATERIAL MEMORY:
A CONTEMPORARY CROSS-CULTURAL LOOK AT PERCEPTIONS OF THE STILETTO HEEL

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To my sweetest thing, Sofia Negro, who I hope will never fear the things she chooses to wear, I dedicate this manifesto.

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ABSTRACT

Employing a material culture analysis, this dissertation functions as a general compendium on the stiletto heel, as it recounts the history of the stiletto from its introduction as a technological marvel in the post-WWII period to its present-day manifestations as a glamorous accessory. It surveys women's relations to stiletto heels and the reasons why women wear, and do not wear, them. Through a comparative cross-cultural analysis, the study examines a group of Canadian and Italian women's uses and perceptions of stiletto heels, and reveals cultural distinctions manifested in their uses and interpretations of stilettos. The women's personal relations to and cultural interpretations of the stiletto were measured through a phenomenological analysis of material collected through surveys, interviews and online forums. The study also considers the general sentiments stilettos engender in regard to the portrayal of women in society and the feminist discourses that the stiletto challenges and reinforces.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
ABSTRACT	6
Prologue: My Personal Ode To Heels	12
Introduction: Of All Things! Heels?!	20
Section 1: History	37
Chapter 1: The Origins of the Stiletto and the (Gendered) Making of Shoes	37
What's in a Name?	37
Other High Heels	44
Enter the Stiletto Heel	47
What Exactly Does A Stiletto Look Like?	53
The Stiletto in Ads	55
The Stiletto's Construction	65
Who Designed This Thing Anyway?	68
The Designer is Born: A "Male" Thing?	83
The French Dior.....	86
The Italian Ferragamo.....	89
Designers' Rights	91
Designer Bodies, or Women by Design	95
Women Shoemakers? Can There Be?!	105
Conclusion	112
Chapter 2: Modern Working Girls' Shoes	114
Conclusion	138
Section 2: A Phenomenological Analysis: Women Who Wear and Don't Wear Stilettos and the Reasons Why	139

Chapter 3: The Stiletto as Cultural Distinction: The Italian-Canadian Comparison..	139
Exotic/Elegant vs Sexy/Elegant.....	141
The Role of Labor	154
Class Strides – How Heels Leap Over Bounds.....	162
On Morality.....	164
On Class.....	166
Media Effects.....	167
Cultural Similarities: The Stiletto as Pain, as Habit... as Conformist!?.	170
It’s Not Always About Others.....	175
Research Challenges.....	183
Conclusion.....	185
Chapter 4: To Wear or Not to Wear Heels: An Academic Distinction	188
Discourse Analysis.....	191
A Feminist Discourse	198
Conclusion.....	216
Section 3: Debates and Controversies.....	218
Chapter 5: Dressing Up Tension: Philosophical, Religious, and Medical Objections to High Heels	218
Philosophical Objections to Heels.....	218
Religious Objections to Heels.....	225
Medical Objections to Heels.....	229
Towards a New Vindication of Women’s Rights.....	235
Chapter 6 : Feminist Responses to Sex and Sluts	240
Stiletto Feminists.....	244
Protesting in Stilettoes: The SlutWalk Toronto Example	248

Conclusion.....	254
Chapter 7: Who Can Walk the Walk? Male Responses from Misogyny to Mimicry....	256
The Femme Fatale.....	258
Pornography, Pinups and Stilettoes.....	261
Walk a Mile in Her Shoes.....	269
Conclusion	271
Appendix A.....	277
Works Cited.....	307

A Stiletto's Diary

They call me Stiletto, but do not fear,
I have no villainous cross blade to yield.
I'm neither wicked nor dangerous, but have been noted to be,
By friends, foes, fawners and all those in between.
I've been granted this name expressive of neither function nor value
But some women whisper to me "I love you, I love you!"

I have been known to bring many men to their mercy:
Though poison-tipped spears are not my thing anymore,
I still manage to drop men dead on the floor.

I have switched from proprietor to proprietress
And now live in a wonderfully warm cardboard fortress.

Cloaks and sleeves no longer cover me up
Instead feet are now my only stirrup
Now I roam widely leaving echoes in closed alleys my dust,
pounding the pavement at night I call out in lust

Serrated edges are fashionable no more
Some seem to suggest they made me look like a whore.
Now I much prefer scalloped trims, pretty bows
With a hint of pale rose
While some say nothing beats me in red
I confess, that's what drives me straight to bed

In men's pockets I would lie
But now by their beds I sometimes cry

Clickety clack down the street I go
But think twice before you call me a ho

I not only work the pavements at night
But I march through boardrooms as well in the light

As tall dark ladies or slim sweet gals
take me on and call me their best pals.

On whoever's foot I land
I help them take a stand

I'm definitely not shy
and I've been told I look good in cream pie.

Lined with soft nylon fibres that feel so smooth to my touch
Women love to show me off because I make them look all grown up
Yet, I walk slowly about trying to avoid the cracks
As I've been known to break a couple of backs

I clickety clack wherever I go,
but my value is also determined by the sound of my sole.
If the sound is hollow and wooden, I come from the far east
If sharp with bass, they love to say I was made in Italy

To some men a fetish I am
But women, too, keep me high on their shelves.
Even if they often cry out "what hells",

Women pay homage to me in their shoe closets
while some men use me to get out of their closets

I now act as a pedestal for all those who straddle me
When you catch a glimpse of me try to contain your envy.

I walk with stealth
While exuding wealth
But you still might want to complain
That I cause women unnecessary pain

For those who scream you'll damage your toes
Give it up and admit you are all dirty hoes

What am I, you ask? I am nothing more nothing less than a stiletto, I guess.
A shoe, a design, a man's dream I remain.

Prologue: My Personal Ode To Heels

My love of heels began at the very young age of three when I received my first pair of wooden clogs. At that young age I began to understand the transformative power of the heel, its power to lift you up in many ways. The little heels that I received as a gift from my aunt in Italy taught me that things, like shoes, have the power to shape your gait, your being in the world. They also bridged some important life themes that continue to pervade my thoughts and admiration for heels today: Italy, exotic, danger, forbidden pleasure, father and mother, gender, love, family, distance and ascension.

I begin, then, with the first memory I have of heels, ones sent to me as a gift from my aunt in Italy. I remember being so excited about the package that arrived, especially because it came from a distant place. It always amazed me that I had this large extended family that lived far off in a little country that was distinct from all the others on the big world map I would stare at in school, precisely because it was in the shape of a heeled boot. The fact that Italy is shaped like a boot always made sense to me because of my mother's constant concern over my footwear. "Always wear good shoes" continues to be her motto and reverberates in my own thoughts today, as I now dress my own child and am obsessed with finding her good shoes. So it just became natural for me to think that Italy's geographic shape was somehow determined by the concerns of its people (i.e. my mother).



My father opened the package to reveal a pair of tiny wooden clogs with little robust heels and a beautiful dark blue denim strap. Those little magnificent mules stood before me like some kind of apparition. Their shiny wooden lacquered soles glared back my awestruck reflection: mouth wide-open, arms outstretched ready to snatch them out from my father's hands. As he turned them around in his hands, I saw the dark blue denim strap that would act as the definitive detail that would affix my whole foot to that magnificent object. They were just what they were, precarious things that seemed to please all my senses. I loved the way they looked, the way their smell carried hints of wild fennel from back home, the rugged denim feel, and their possibility for reverberating clickety-clackety sounds that would definitely not go unnoticed. I sat myself down, lifted my leg, arched my foot, and pointed my toes towards my father. But, for some reason, he stepped back, took a firm stance, and turned towards my mother.

“ASSOLUTAMENTE NO!” That was it. That was what he had to say about the heels. The look on his face was not anything I could understand. I was a child, and all I knew was that they were gorgeous and I wanted them. However, something was evidently wrong with them even if I really could not make out what it could be. But at that moment, I started to understand that there was something forbidden, something special about heels. I knew it because I heard it in my father’s voice. These were not things to mess with. He declared that I would hurt myself wearing them, that I would get “una storta” and fall.¹ Excuses. Even at that young age, I think I sensed those were excuses.

I cried heaping bowls of tears, begging to wear my little beautiful jean heels. My mother pleaded with him to consider what darling little shoes they were, sent from his “cognata”;² she also begged him to be sensitive to Italian fashion, a sense she felt they had lost in the transition to North American culture. Luckily my mother won, and my father also ended up happy. He got to parade me around our neighbourhood complex in my full Italian regalia, including my Ciccibello,³ so that he could take pictures of me to send back home. “See?! She is like one of you, too.”

In the context of 1979, I still had a lot to learn about the power of those heels, and I had a number of obstacles to face while defending my girlhood. My mom recalls how every night was a struggle to get me out of the heels. I would cry because I feared my dad would take them away. Every night she had to wait until I fell asleep to slowly slip them off me. She remembers that not even the cold winter could not separate me from those shoes and that I committed my first, and biggest, fashion faux pas by pairing my beautiful little heels

¹ Twist your ankle. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Italian are mine.

² Sister-in-law.

³ *Ciccibello* (the doll in the picture) is an Italian doll produced by the Italian toy manufacturer *Giochi Preziosi*.

with bulky wool socks. Not even the inevitable growth of my foot deterred me until, finally, one day after my long walk home from the sitters and the swelling pain in the ball of my foot as it hung half way off the heel, I looked at my mom and said, “mi fanno male i piedi.”⁴ And so the shoes were put to rest. I still miss those shoes so very much, and I am not sure what I would do or pay to see and touch them again. That I still think about them indicates they were surely formative.

Once I outgrew my beloved little heels, I did not own a pair of heels again until my communion. Oh, that blessed celebration, where my most sacred revelation came when I donned the crisp white patent leather Italian shoes purchased from Tricolore Shoes on Islington and Steeles. The shoes, coupled with my beautiful white gown purchased at Gaby Importing, another Italian importer on Keele and St. Regis, transformed me into a pristine miniature bride. While parading down the altar at St. Wilfrid’s Catholic Church on Finch and Sentinel, making my vows to Jesus, I was also thinking to myself, “hope he (as well as everyone around) notices the nice bright shoes I have on for the occasion! They even have a little heel because I am big now!” I was also pretty relieved that when my communion festivities ended, I was able to take off my shoes without any effort. Unlike Andersen’s little red shoes, my wicked thoughts managed to go unpunished.

Shoes and communion have a long history in Italy, which as I detail in the first chapter of this study is deeply rooted in small-town Italy and the power of the Catholic religion. My communion in the Keele and Finch area of 1986, almost 50 years after the one of famed shoemaker Salvatore Ferragamo’s sisters, which as I relate in Chapter 1 motivated his entry into the shoe-making craft, was not so far from Ferragamo’s small-town reality.

⁴ “My feet hurt.”

Our little Italian enclave was also very much concerned with appearances. Our mothers ushered us off to Gaby Importing or Gino's Fashion on St. Clair and to Tricolore Shoes to make sure we looked our best. You had to have new clothes for this special occasion, and it also mattered where those new things came from. You did not just go buy a communion dress or communion shoes from some Canadian brandname store. You needed to go to an Italian supplier to get the 'real', quality goods. No mother resisted, during their afternoon meets at Nino D'Aversa, dropping the line, "Questi Canadesi non sanno niente di qualità."⁵ For this group of women, the best shoes were only at Tricolore, so anything less was shameful. Of course, nothing topped the ultimate place of importation: Italy itself. When communion day came, all the mothers waited for the inevitable question, "Che bel vestito e scarpe! Dove lo hai presi?,"⁶ and the mother who could boast that her daughter's gear came straight from Italy would not resist letting the word "Italia" slip off her tongue in a matter-of-fact way to have it ripple through the crowd of observers. Although my school was culturally mixed, and very much representative of Canada's diversity, none of the Italian mothers were actually interested in what the 'other' kids wore. They wanted to know what the other *Italian* kids wore.

Yet, once the celebration of the sacrament ended, so did my newfound love (and I don't mean Jesus). Another void coupled with yearly Easter presentations of *Grease* on TV made me so yearn for high heels that by the time I hit high school, I was itching to look like Sandy. That final scene plays out in my mind over and over again: the camera focuses in on the approaching shoes and pans to show the new "smoking" Sandy, who whips a cigarette

⁵ "These Canadians know nothing about quality."

⁶ "What a beautiful dress and shoes! Where did you get them?"

from her mouth, throws it to the ground and with the most evocative of movements, steps on it, swivels her foot to grind it into the ground, plants her heel on Danny Zucco's chest to push him away, while swinging her hips towards him singing, "You better shape up, cause I need a man," all with the power of her new, red, high-heeled clogs.

Madonna in the 1990s was another huge influence for me. Actually, it was not so much Madonna as her incredible knack for copying all things ultra-cool and for wearing funky Canadian footwear that caught my eye. At a particular moment in pop culture in the year 1990, when house music was all the rage, Lady Miss Kier popped up in the dance club scene with the one-hit-wonder band Deee-lite and their song, "Groove is in the Heart." For that brief moment in time, Kier surpassed even Madonna's cool, and in my mind, it has everything to do with a pair of Canadian-made platform heels: John Fluevog's Munster shoe. Kier appeared on the cover of her album wearing a bright red pair and then again in her music video. A year later, I watched Madonna's *Truth or Dare* documentary, and there was Madonna wearing the Munsters with a beautiful Daisy sundress alongside Warren Beatty at a film premiere. She looked like a doll. By the power of repetition, the idea (or meme) settled. I needed to get those shoes.

However, economic reality hit me hard when I realized I did not have the kind of spending power that would allow me to spend \$300.00 on a pair of shoes, and even if I did, my mom would have never allowed it. So, in one of my other life stints, I began modeling, and for my first gig, the designer asked me how I wanted to get paid. With all the resolve I could muster, I told him I wanted the Fluevogs along with a Pam Chorley catsuit. My mom loved the shoes (thankfully!), and on the next civvies day, I slapped them on my feet and plastered the catsuit to my body, and off to school I went.



The 1990s also marked the presence of a number of strong femme fatale characters that left their mark. Sharon Stone and Demi Moore come to mind. I remember at one point thinking that I could not wait to have a career as a lawyer partly because I would be able to buy the sharpest outfits and wear the spikiest heels, which would resonate throughout the courtroom as I paced to and fro, delivering brilliant orations while also, of course, protecting the innocent. I was definitely not thinking about “dressing for success,” but was rather leaning towards becoming a “power-dressing” femme.⁷

Fast forward to the life I have led in heels as an adult, and I find that the relationship has dwindled even if the desire has not. When I look at my shoe collection, I note that I have many more high heels than any other shoe type, but I wear them less. It might have

⁷ See John Molloy, *Dress for Success for Women*.

something to do with my desire to retain some sense of uniqueness. When I go shopping for everyday shoes, they never satisfy my desire. I always find myself drawn to towering heels and always ask the clerk to try on a pair, even after mentioning that I am in search of an everyday shoe. I will also most likely purchase the heels, which will sit in my closet waiting for a special occasion that never occurs.

Thinking back at the vivacious, quite possibly provocative little girl that pranced around wearing heels and thinking to herself that nothing in the world would have knocked her off her newfound pedestal I see her as merely a shadow of me. I walk around now in flats, am mainly computer-bound writing a dissertation that has turned me into a recluse, the last of whose concerns is what she is wearing on her feet. Yet heels are the main impetus of this (sacrifice/passion) research. While I sit here writing, I can hear faint noises drifting up from the distant street, the hum of Jennifer Lopez singing about “throwing on her Louboutins,” and I can only sit here dreaming of what it would be like to have the purpose, need and economic means to wear a pair of Louboutins.⁸

⁸ The shoe designer, Christian Louboutin, is famous for his red-soled heels and at one point even tried to copyright them. A pair of shoes range in price from \$500. His 2011 shoe “The Changing of the Guard” is priced at \$1,695.00.

Introduction: Of All Things! Heels?!

“Fascinating bit of our culture, this. I find high heels to be anything but emancipatory.” (Jen, Rutgers listserv respondent)⁹

Jen’s comments are far from atypical. Over the course of my study, I heard many remarks like the following:

“What’s the big deal about stilettos anyways? It’s just a type of shoe!”

“Really?! You are looking at stiletto heels?! Is there really that much to say about them? Is it that worthwhile to be taking time to study such a topic? It’s not even a topic, it’s just a piece of clothing – an object!”

“Who wears heels anyways? Not any bright and sensible creature!”

“Is that what you want to be remembered by – ‘the heel lady’? But, you are not even wearing heels?”

My personal connection to heels, coupled with comments and questions such as these, not to mention odd ogles at my feet, provoked my interest in pursuing research on the stiletto heel. They made me realize not only how much of what we do in our everyday lives is overlooked and taken for granted, but also how it is implicitly gendered. Many things are regarded frivolous and excessive, especially those we purchase.¹⁰ it is difficult to think of

⁹ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. The respondents from the Rutgers childlit listserv were responding to a question I posted to the group, asking for literary references that feature heels. Since the purpose of the listserv is to help researchers connect, to engage in critical discussions, and to locate pertinent research information, I have made legitimate use of their responses. I have incorporated their responses into my own research as evidence of the way professional formation can inform our ideals, which is what I will turn to later on in my discussion.

¹⁰ ‘Things’ here is not meant to deprecate the stiletto but instead is used to point to the personal value of the stiletto – for a discussion on ‘Thing Theory,’ see Bill Brown’s *Things*.

something more often accused of being frivolous or something coming in for more criticism precisely as a gendered item that reinforces gender divisions than the stiletto. Social forces have seen stilettos as exploiting women and sexuality, economic critiques have tied them to excessive consumption, political forces have used them as proof of female inadequacies, and medical professionals have rallied against their physically, and at times morally, damaging effects. Stilettos have been seen as morally denigrating due to their “obvious” display of female sexuality (Wright 198). The physical alteration they cause, with protruding chest and bottom and the development of calf muscles, prompted critiques pointing to the various health risks involved. These critiques mask the more imminent threat that the heel poses to social sensitivities regarding the display of female sexuality in general. While the heel has been accused of, and discredited for, being a device of deception, a form of artifice, and, as such, unnatural, this was not always the case. Men have worn heels in the past, and not necessarily as a demonstration of their sexuality.¹¹ Until the late 18th to early 19th century, heels were an object used to make class distinctions rather than gender distinctions (Semmelhack *Heights* 25). As Bata Shoe Museum curator, Elizabeth Semmelhack notes in *The Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe*, by the 19th century the conventional criteria of styling based on gender difference had been established in footwear. High heels became ‘female’ footwear and were disallowed in the male sartorial code (Semmelhack *Heights* 25). Today, the heel is the component of the shoe

¹¹ Consider here Glam Rock and other male musical performers of the 70’s and 80’s, such as Motley Crue, KISS, Van Halen, Prince, James Brown, and Poison, who performed in platform wedges and exhibited sexual prowess, as also visualized in the “Standing Tall: The Curious History of Men in High Heels” exhibition at the *Bata Shoe Museum* until June 2016 . As Lee Wright notes in her study of the stiletto heel, “even when worn by men it is with a view to constructing a female image” (Wright 197). Glam rockers wore full make-up, long hair (with the exception of Prince and James Brown), performed the splits, and would play on many female postures, such as Bret Michaels’ signature “duck pout” to appeal to their audiences (Kurennaya 95).

that has become the most visible expression of gender. Its dangerous nature continues to be perpetuated in the news with features on models “falling from grace,” as in Naomi Campbell’s spill on a Paris runway show in 1997 wearing a pair of 10” Vivienne Westwood heels. After their debut in the 1950s, stilettos were banned from spaces such as airplanes because the minute heel tip concentrated wearer’s weight so much that floors were damaged beyond repair. An engineer at Bombardier informed me that the search for tougher materials to withstand the pressure of the heel continues, as he himself is heading such a project.

Stilettos and the responses they generate raise a number of interesting and provocative research questions: Is it possible for a shoe, such as the stiletto heel, to tell us something about cultural values and desires? When exactly did the high heel begin to gain such notoriety and why? What makes educated people – feminist scholars, medical professionals – rally against their use today? Is it their overt sexuality that informs their infamy? How did the heel, particularly the stiletto heel, come to be a powerful signifier of female sexuality? What feelings do stiletto heels evoke, especially in women? Why do women wear them? Do all women wear them in the same way, or are there cultural differences, and if so what does that help reveal? Finally, can contrasting two groups of women – one Canadian, the other Italian – and their personal relations to and recollections of stilettos tell us something about cultural differences and similarities, as well as something about cultural perceptions of femininity? Such considerations guided my research for this dissertation.

In addition to these questions, my research was also motivated by a general question posed to my network of family, friends and colleagues primarily in Canada and

Italy on what they thought of stilettos, which immediately evolved into a cross-cultural comparative analysis. I then developed an online survey to test the validity of my findings and distributed it through friends, family, listservs, Twitter, Facebook and my blog. I also began conducting informal interviews with industry professionals, museum curators, and women from both sides of the Atlantic, and I also consulted various shoe retailer websites, such as Town Shoes and Aldo, which, in 2010, and for a few years subsequently, provided an outlet for shoe lovers to post their confessions of shoe-loving through a mix of personal narratives and video competitions. As a citizen of both Canada and Italy, often torn between the two identities and a barrage of stereotypes, such as “Italian women have a different style,” “Italians have better shoes,” “Canadians dress conservatively,” and “Canadian shoemakers?”, I saw an opportunity to dispel the myths and see what complex cultural conditions these stereotypes were pointing to.

From a methodological point of view, this dissertation should be firstly understood as a Humanities project and not a Social Science project even if I employ social scientific data, as in the quantitative data collected. As will become immediately apparent, this dissertation appears as a kaleidoscopic lens, incorporating a wide range of methodological angles that complement each other, to explore the stiletto heel and its importance to women and to the understanding of culture. While it would appear that a topic such as stiletto heels would definitely fit well with Women’s or Gender Studies, the aim of this dissertation is to not limit the stiletto’s meanings to any one particular framework, nor do I want it to only appear as a reflection of female experience but to appear as a more overarching anthropological effect. My aim is to draw close attention to the object itself in the way in which Merleau-Ponty highlights how objects themselves enjoy a life behind our

backs where he states, “If we abandon the empiricist postulate of the priority of contents, we are free to recognize the strange mode of existence enjoyed by the object behind our back” (Merleau-Ponty 29). I want to demonstrate how the object has a life of its own and one that closely informs our reactions to it, and so a material culture approach is used to highlight the object’s social value. A tenet of material culture studies is to draw the object itself into close scrutiny. This fits with my own aims as I do not want this research to be just about its gender even if this is also its feature but I want to closely trace the stiletto’s own trajectory and how it closely aligns itself and how it is informative of gender as well. Therefore, my analysis of the stiletto follows a material culture approach as described by Jules David Prown where one’s analysis of an object moves from descriptive analysis (a synchronic exercise where the object is described at a particular moment in time) to a deductive analysis (a look at how the object is used) that concludes with a speculative analysis (the application of theories and hypotheses gathered from “allied disciplines” using all forms of analysis such as quantitative, stylistic and employing theoretical frameworks such as structuralism, semiotics, determinism, etc.) (“Mind in Matter...” 6-10). My research follows the same form as it begins with a descriptive analysis of the stiletto, and progresses into both deductive and speculative analyses, as I consider quantitative data as well as incorporate various theoretical responses. I have made use of such theoretical angles as Marx’s historical materialism to highlight that “material production is the basis of all social life, and therefore of all real history” (*Capital* 194); as well as Barthes’ semiotic approach and Baudrillard’s post-structuralism to explore the iconography of the stiletto. An eclectic sample no doubt, and one meant to incorporate various techniques to

better understand “...our gaze [as it] runs from one [object] to another...” (Merleau-Ponty 81).

Over the course of three years, from 2010-2013, I compiled data on perceptions of high heels, while also looking at contemporary images of the heel in film, magazines, chic lit novels, etc. The guiding principle of my research was that things matter, and they matter because they act as a mirror through which our personal and cultural ideals are refracted. I cannot take credit for this metaphor. As Daniel Miller notes in his survey of the history of materiality, it was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, suggested that there can be no fundamental separation between humanity and materiality – everything that we are and do arises out of the reflection upon ourselves given by the mirror image of the process by which we create form and are in turn created (Miller, *Materiality* 12). Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in “The Genuine Article,” also plays with the metaphor of reflection, when she claims “reflection on objects leads us back to persons” (11).

In the quote at the outset of this chapter, Jen attributes to the heel a quality that is not its own. She finds high heels anything but emancipatory – she gives them a particular social value. As such, the heel leads us back to Jen’s own set of values, as she endows the heel with a particular use-value, and as Karl Marx notes in his opus on *Capital*, “if commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects” (176). When Marx spoke of use-value, he was describing the creation of commodities, how they obtain their value on the market, and how they are exchanged. He noted that commodities contain a dual aspect: a use-value and an exchange-value. In order to lay the groundwork for this study, I will consider more closely what he

meant by use-value even if this separation will not reflect the complexity of Marx's discussion. To describe this phenomenon we can look at his example, which I like to refer to as the linen-bible exchange. In this process of exchange, a weaver exchanges his linen, which is a commodity with no use-value for him, but which nonetheless bears value, for example £2, which is the *shape* of the linen's value – in gold. This is part of what Marx considers alienation: the weaver alienates himself from his labour in exchange for gold. However, the process of alienation does not end there because the gold is then alienated when it is taken out of this shape and exchanged for another commodity, the bible – an object of utility, a use-value, for the weaver. The end result: instead of being in possession of the linen, the weaver now has a bible; instead of his original commodity, he now possesses another of the same value but of different utility (199-200). In the case of the weaver, Marx notes that his newly exchanged bible “...is destined to enter the weaver's house as an object of utility and there to satisfy his family's need for edification” (200). The bible's use manifests itself as a tool to help the weaver's family engage in social pursuits: to inform intellectual and moral growth. Marx does not necessarily define what the *specific* use-value of commodities can be because, as he notes, “Value... does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic” (167). As commodities, objects contain meaning as defined by the social sphere in which they appear. As he notes, “...the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social” (165). He goes on to note “a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (163).

Therefore, in the case of the stiletto and Jen's response, to say the stiletto is not emancipatory is to say something of its social quality, and of the moral propriety of those who choose to wear them. We can relate this back to Marx's discussion of use-value as he tells us that if we look at the use-value there is nothing mysterious about the commodity; iron is iron, or in this case, a shoe is a shoe. By the very name we give it we recognize for it a particular use (163). The use is therefore tied to an understanding of the connotations associated with the commodity, so if I say corn, I mean a source of food, something we eat. By extension, if Jen says that stilettos are not emancipatory, she means that their use as a commodity may be used to oppress women. As such, by stating they are not emancipatory, Jen is able to highlight a particular use-value that she deems the heel carries in a larger social context. While this is a very simplified look at Marx's explanation of use-value, it nonetheless provides an introduction to the social nature of the things we purchase and own.

As well, by attributing this particular psychological meaning to the object, Jen pictures the stiletto as transcending its sensuousness – to again borrow from Marx, as he saw commodities as transcending their mere sensuous qualities (perceptible by the senses) for more abstract meanings - and becoming symbolic, in this case, symbolic of female oppression. Jen's statement, therefore, works to establish her position within the discourse on stiletto heels, rather than saying anything specifically about the heel itself.

I reflect here on Jen's comment because it resounds with general sentiments on the topic of stilettos, and due to this, I faced some personal doubts in the course of my research. Before fully embarking on this topic, I questioned the academic validity of conducting research on the stiletto heel. I struggled to think what kind of work on the stiletto shoe

could contribute to scholarship. Is it really worth subjecting to academic scrutiny, I wondered. A fashionable item like the stiletto? It is frivolous, a material thing that many feel does not belong in legitimate academic work. However, it was precisely the stiletto's material value that continued to arouse my interest, and after exploring the field of material culture studies, I found my theoretical cataract slowly clearing, as the theorists all seemed to be saying that material things did indeed matter. As we will see in the course of this study, there are also strong gender implications regarding how and to whom they matter.

The premise of the material culture studies to which this study is indebted is, as outlined by art historian Jules David Prown in his pivotal essay, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture and Theory" that

objects made or modified by man [sic] reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged. The term material culture thus refers quite directly and efficiently, if not elegantly, both to the subject matter of the study, material, and to its purpose, the understanding of culture. (1-2)

Objects enable researchers to peer into the beliefs of the cultures those objects belong to.

Traditionally, material culture studies made its home in the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology. However, as it gained prominence and popularity in the late 1800s, it began to be of interest to a number of disciplines. Daniel Miller notes in *Materiality* that a certain number of disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, phenomenology, social science and ethnography have been increasingly interested in

material culture studies, and today, it is recognized as an interdisciplinary field of study (Tilley). As a humanities scholar interested in interdisciplinary research, this method of study allows me to engage in a number of disciplines, like Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Philosophy, to help explore the larger context surrounding stilettos.

The original aim of material culture studies was to salvage what was perceived to remain of “primitive” culture, which was believed to have been lost due to Western colonial expansion (Tilley). The irony is that material culture studies were first developed in colonizing efforts, it is believed in 1843 (Buchli 4). In other words, it was colonization itself that instigated the onset of material culture studies – the exact forces that were pillaging and destroying the same “primitive cultures” colonialists hoped to preserve. It may have been a romantic cry for what proponents felt was being lost through the process of modernization.¹²

The trend for material culture research developed from what Buchli notes “was the European dominance in expansionist imperial affairs, but also due to Enlightenment thought, which advocated the universality of human experience and justice” (Buchli 4). New disciplines emerging at this point in time, such as archaeology and anthropology, were a further expression of European dominance. As Buchli goes on to note in his introduction to *The Material Culture Reader*, “The level of a society was intimately linked to its level of material culture. Thus objects were intimately connected with notions of progress – historically, technically and socially – in short, material culture as it was conceived in the nineteenth century was the modernist super-artefact and supreme signifier of universal

¹² It is not a coincidence that Romanticism as the intellectual sentiment of the times developed at the same time.

progress and modernity” (Buchli 4). Objects, therefore, from this “new” material culture stance were deliberately exhibited as symbols of such notions as civilization, progress, and modernity. The stiletto heel is such an object, symbolizing modernity with its state of the art technological design and new aluminum materials. Its value may be read from the efforts designers went to to apply for patents to protect their intellectual property rights and, as well, how nations themselves were also involved in protecting the intellectual property rights of the designers while also securing for themselves a global identity as a “modern nation,” as in the case of famed shoemaker Salvatore Ferragamo and his enormous list of patents and the promotion of the “Made in Italy” label, which will be taken up in the first chapter.

No matter how many strides material culture studies has made in various academic disciplines, there are still some ‘things’ not considered worth discussing. Anthropologist Michael Rowlands makes note of this in “A Materialist Approach to Materiality,” when he states that “materiality is seen as a process of materialization, so that some people and things are perceived to be more material than others” (73). Rowlands is concerned “that we should not lose an understanding of the conditions of hierarchical materiality which defines how some may become more material than others and how exclusivity of access to material being may be a product of or an elimination from practical and intellectual activity” (80). To analyze the ways in which materiality is exhibited, Rowlands looks at materiality in the context of colonialism and reveals that “colonialism was a project that actually relied on either failure or success in the struggle to exhibit the materiality of persons” (81). He goes on to argue that colonialism’s project was successful in that it put forth “the notion that people were present only when named, indexed, censured, educated,

dressed, housed or otherwise materially demarcated, [which] illustrates the potential for a greater or lesser sense of materiality to define a presence or to confer a form of consciousness that was otherwise deemed not to exist” (81). Comments from other scholars who would ask me if stilettos were really worthy of attention underscored for me the validity of Rowlands’ argument.

Objects in material culture studies come to have value or only come into being when they are named, indexed and above all when they are deemed to carry intellectual capital. The way in which the object is classified determines whether it is worthy of attention. Some objects, such as literary texts, have traditionally been seen as having much more value in the academic setting than others, and whole departments are dedicated to them, and not to shoes, yet there are museums, private collections dedicated to them, like the Bata Shoe Museum.

As Prown notes, shoes tell us stories (“Mind in Matter” 4). While the study of artifacts is often relegated to pieces of art or archaeological relics, and not everyday objects, Prown suggests that certain mundane everyday things, such as shoes, can contain more veracity than more deliberate works of art because they are “less self-conscious” (“Mind in Matter” 4).¹³ Adopting a material culture approach as described by Prown in his “Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method” to the study of stilettos, I progress through three stages of analysis. I proceed from a historical descriptive analysis of the object to a deductive survey analysis of the relationship between the stiletto and those who

¹³ It must be admitted that the stiletto is a little more self-conscious than other shoe-types. Different from a sneaker or a loafer in the category of shoes, it appears as an exceptional item in no small part due to its complex and often conflicting history aligned, as will be detailed in this work, through its name with Renaissance mercenaries and through its image with the modern-day prostitute and power woman.

use and do not use them, employing a phenomenological approach in my survey analysis, where I delineate the themes that emerged from the responses. I then conclude with what Prown calls a speculative analysis, relating semiotic, philosophical, sociological and feminist theories to the stiletto and considering the controversies and debates that continue to persist regarding stilettos, while also trying to point towards a solution.

The history of the stiletto is the stuff of the first section of this study, which consists of two chapters. The first chapter delves into the power of its Italian name and reveals who enabled this manufacturing marvel to come to light. Here questions of intellectual property rights are discussed and questions regarding its originator(s) are outlined. The second chapter continues to examine the history of the stiletto and looks a little more closely at its distant relative the chopine to draw a historical parallel between the heels' relation to the world's oldest profession, prostitution.

In the second section, I take a phenomenological turn as I look at the reasons why women do or do not wear stilettos and undertake a cross-cultural comparison of Italian and Canadian women's uses and thoughts on stiletto use. The texts of 70 phenomenological surveys regarding women's perceptions and experiences of stilettos are interpreted through a hermeneutic process in which I tallied and interpreted a set of themes that emerged from the responses (Thompson and Haytko 15). In line with Thompson's "Method of Existential-Phenomenology," I sought in the survey analysis "to describe experience [of a thing like the stiletto] as it emerges in some context(s) or, to use phenomenological terms, as it is 'lived'" (Thompson 135). The research goal is "to give a *thematic description* of experience," which I do by organizing responses into recurring themes (Thompson 137). This section thus considers how cultural beliefs, norms, and conditions determine the

values of objects, such as the stiletto, as it negotiates and navigates distinct social realms. While the stiletto may be perceived as a cultural manifestation of femininity, I find in the survey responses also the obverse: that women do not necessarily wear them to impress others or to reflect social norms. As a challenge to sociological analyses of the communicative power of clothing, I highlight the women in my survey who wear heels for no communicative reason whatsoever but rather to explore themselves, who they are as women, and particularly women constructed on their own terms.

Chapter Three discusses my cross-cultural comparison between Italian and Canadian women's uses of stilettos. A very interesting difference between the two groups of women asks us to consider why a large percentage of Italian women feel elegant in stilettos and a large percentage of Canadian women feel sexy in them. A look at the structure of Italian society helps unpack this difference and also highlights the ways in which one's social conditions and cultural contexts shape one's actions, beliefs and relations to certain objects. The phenomenological analysis of the women's responses helped me extract the major themes that emerged from the discourse, and out of this comparative analysis, a further interesting finding emerged related to class distinction. Women employed in the fields of Education, Social Science, Government Services and Religion were less likely to wear stilettos and were more likely to critique their wear on moral, aesthetic and ideological grounds. Here class distinction surpassed cultural difference as a unifying factor in the women's responses and demonstrated how:

fashion discourses [can] represent a relevant community of interest that can transcend one's temporal and spatial setting. Hence, one can sustain a valued sense of social identity by dressing in accord with fashion norms and standards relevant to

a phenomenologically defined reference group that may be far removed from one's face-to-face peer group (Thompson and Haytko 28).

One's dedication to one's profession, to one's form of economic capital is demonstrated through personal association with the ideals that may be perceived to shape that profession, in part, due to one's desire to demonstrate their own value. Therefore, economic identity can be seen to transcend national and cultural boundaries.

In the next chapter, I advance this phenomenological inquiry by considering a specific group of academic women's take on the stiletto and what may have shaped their responses. Chapter Four begins by examining a controversial debate that ensued from a question I posted to the Rutgers listserv discussion regarding literary references of heels. Using Erving Goffman and the work of discourse analysts such as Michel Foucault and Judith Baxter, along with the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, I examine the way in which the participants' opinions on the stiletto heel reflect the contexts in which their utterances were made. One clear distinction that determined their opinions was the composition of their capital, their class sentiments. The women here used the fashion discourse on stilettos to inscribe their own consumption behaviours in a complex ideological system of theories about the nature of self and society (Thompson and Haytko 15).

A third and final section explores the implications of my investigation of gender. It brings to light the inherently misogynistic Judaeo-Christian image of the vilified, manipulative, seductive femme fatale, who not only instigates the fall of man but engages in devil worship as she indulges her shoe fetishes. Here the stiletto is seen as perpetuating existing cultural ideals about women as fashion consumers, and as a gendered item it

becomes the scapegoat to which all humankind's evils are affixed. I also look at the historical feminist positions that gave way to similar debates on the value of women's clothing and whether it should be seen as practicing debasement aesthetics or celebrating female identity. From Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of Women's Rights* to the suffragettes and the Girl Power movement of the 1990s, I consider the feminist debates on the question of wearing stilettos. The section culminates in a chapter on stiletto feminism and the more recent example of the SlutWalk movement and examines the struggle feminists continue to face over image politics. Is the new stiletto feminism that has emerged just an example of saccharine feminism, or does it have real potential to disrupt?

No other work on the stiletto heel incorporates a comparative analysis of the consumption patterns of women from Canada and Italy. While work has been done on heels, most notably Elizabeth Semmelhack's *Heights of Fashion: The History of the Elevated Shoe*, which very much influenced my own work, especially her look at the gendering of the high heel, there has been no combined material culture and phenomenological analysis of stiletto heels published thus far. The stiletto is a key component of the modern cultural construction of femininity, as it has tracked women's gender changes since the era of its birth. Since stilettos are not only personal items but collective objects as well, with a complex history and imaginary, they provide a rich field of cultural remnants to explore, and using the tools of material culture studies, this dissertation attempts to uncover the controversial gendered ground the stiletto has trampled upon. In relation to the women who don stilettos, like all things placed on pedestals, they enjoy the double standard of being revered while also rendered immobile in many senses. Here begins the tale of how the stiletto gained its notoriety, its appeal and its cultural resonance.

Section 1: History

Chapter 1: The Origins of the Stiletto and the (Gendered) Making of Shoes

What's in a Name?

“We already know ‘things’ in advance and must know them; otherwise we could not perceive them at all.” (Heidegger, *Thing* 72)

Wrapped up in the English-language name of the “stiletto” are remnants of a menacing Italian past. Originally, in the Renaissance, the stiletto was the name of a dangerous Italian weapon, and six centuries later, it re-entered the anglophone cultural imagination, in appropriately Cinderella-like fashion, transformed into a beautiful new high heel, brought about by the aspirations of many up-and-coming designers on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, designers such as Salvatore Ferragamo, André Perugia and Roger Vivier pursued the style, while American designers also dabbled with the form, such as shoe designers Daniel Palter and Vincent DeLiso, who founded DeLiso Debs (see Fig 1.1). From Italian mercenaries to American pinup artists, the stiletto heel has figured in the imagination of a number of sources both fictitious and actual, and in this chapter I delve into the name and try to build an intricate web around its Italian connotations – what they suggest and reveal about the heel and its historical roots.



Fig. 1.1 *Corsicana Daily Sun*.

August 15, 1952. Corsicana, Texas. 3. Newspapers.com.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/11745981>

Prior to its twentieth-century usage, the stiletto denoted in English “a short dagger with a blade thick in proportion to its breadth” (“Stiletto”)¹⁴. The Oxford English Dictionary records its first use in 1611, in the work of Thomas Coryate of Odcombe, who was an English traveller and writer in the court of Henry, Prince of Wales (Strachan). In his “vade-

¹⁴ At this juncture, I would like to add a brief discussion to foreground the peculiar rise and prevalent use of the name stiletto that persists in the North American imaginary which supplants the use of the more general term ‘dagger’. As will be seen, the name stiletto persists at the end of the nineteenth century predominantly to signify an “Italian” weapon used by Italian immigrants perceived as low class migrants. This particular convention has its roots in an Italophobia that arose during this period, as was made apparent to me by Professor Gabriele Scardellato, where protestant America was feeling threatened by the rise of the Italian Catholic presence. For a full discussion on this topic see Schiavo, Giovanni, *Four Centuries of Italian American History*, 5th ed., Vigo Press, New York, 1958 and Mangione, Jerre and Ben Morreale, *La Storia – Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*, Harper Perennial, 1992. The research presented here, the periodical finds will be seen to reflect these sentiments in very direct and indirect ways. While for the scope of this research I do not have the space to delve into this very rich history, I nonetheless am pleased to contribute this link to this area of Italian-American history.

mecum” *Coryat’s Crudities*, Coryate recounts his travels throughout Europe, which concluded in Venice (ibid). He describes a group of men known as the “Venetian Braves,” who “wander abroad very late in the night armed with a priuy coat of maile,.. and a little sharpe dagger called a stiletto” (“Stiletto”). A century later, in 1711, another English writer, James Puckle, in *The Club, or a Dialogue Between a Father and Son*, describes the way in which “some use their wits as Bravoes wear stelettoes, not for defence but mischief” (“Stiletto”).

“I bravi di Venezia,” as they are referred to in Italian literature, such as in Alessandro Manzoni’s novel *I Promessi Sposi*, were a group of mercenaries typically found in the Venetian region of the sixteenth century. They were hired by the powerful families in Venice to eliminate adversaries and enemies, such as the Querini-Stampalia family, a very rich and politically powerful Venetian family, who were themselves notably violent and who kept company with and used *I bravi* to kill or terrorize anyone they felt was a threat to their power and territories (Da Mosto). The bravo’s weapon of choice was the stiletto dagger. In its very name, then, the stiletto heel carries with it not only nefarious qualities but specifically Italian associations.

Since its initial stages as a weapon, the stiletto has been tightly tied in the North American imaginary to Italy. In the *Arkansas City Daily Traveller*, on October 2, 1888, there appears an article entitled “The Italian Stiletto: How It Is Made and Why Its Thrusts Are So Dangerous,” in which the stiletto is called “a distinctively Italian weapon” (7). The article is meant to shed light on “the recent fatal cutting affrays in the Italian quarter, that have called the attention of the police to the popularity of the stiletto among the lower order of migratory Italians and the peculiar dexterity with which this and other sharp-edged

weapons are used.” The same article appeared in the following two months in three other Kansas newspapers: the *Winfield Tribune*, the *Lawrence Daily Journal* and *The Kansas Times*.

However, the stiletto registered in the American imaginary prior to 1888 as an Italian “thing.” On May 4, 1838, in the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* there appears a note on “the infamous *stiletto* of Italy.” There are also references to a Spanish stiletto, but it is the Italian stiletto whose popularity was sustained over time, especially in American newspapers. A search on newspapers.com, a compendium of over 3200 newspapers across the US from the 1700s to 2000s, resulted in 241 matches for “Italian stiletto” and only 94 for “Spanish stiletto.”

The conflation of the stiletto as dagger and as heel type is very much linked to a notion of Italianness that permeated the North American imaginary at the turn of the twentieth century, as many late nineteenth century newspapers used the word simultaneously for all things Italian. On August 13, 1892, in the *Arkansas City Daily Traveler* an article appears entitled “When Tito Stabs Bianca, It is Usually With One of the Following Pleasing Weapons.” The opening states, “Much of the romance of Italy has been pinned on history’s page by a stiletto,” foreshadowing the links that would be made in the 1940s and 50s between Italian designers and the birth of the stiletto (6). It was an easy transference to make, since the Italian character was so closely tied to the stiletto’s characteristics: “The combination of an inflammable Italian and a small piece of hardware with a needle-like point is often a dangerous one. They are so apt to go off nearly together” (6), a description that appeared in numerous syndications that year. That Italians were associated with weapons can be seen in reports such as “Many People Go Armed. The Queer Weapons Used By Various Classes” on December 15, 1901, in the *Detroit Free Press*: “in proportion to their

numbers, the Italians carry more weapons than any other immigrant race” (Part 3, p.8) (see Fig. 1.2).

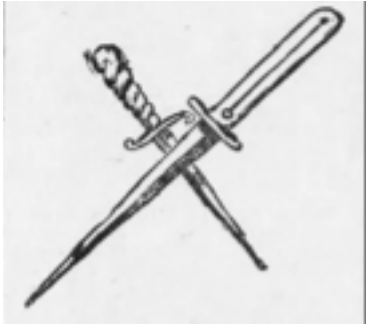


Fig. 1.2. *Arkansas City Daily Traveler*. Aug. 13, 1892.

Newspapers.com. 6.

The stiletto dagger was not only for use by men: “The Italian maiden uses her stiletto sometimes as a hairpin, and it has a highly decorative effect when stuck into the coils of blue-black hair at the back of her shapely head” (“When Tito Stabs Bianca”). Hatpins were, by the turn of the century, “the weapons of women today. They are used as stilettoes and with them men and women have been done to death” (“Woman’s Terrible New Weapon of Defence” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. Aug. 18, 1907, 7). This article discusses the use of the weapon by women and calls for “some legislative regulations of the size and construction of these dainty articles of feminine finery” (7) because the threats were very real, for example “in Chicago the hatpins were put to use by an organized group of girls” known as the “Hatpin Brigade.” Women on New York’s East Side also made use of them, at least figuratively, as one poster appeared that “represented two women engaged in a duel with stilettoes” (*The Times, Washington*, June 10, 1900).

North American women were not the only ones to duel with stilettoes. The practice was popular in Paris as well. Gabrielle Fisson, known on the stage as Nana, who was one of the Belgian King Leopold’s ballet girls, regularly fought a duel with her rival, Victorine Giot,

who called herself La Marquise. Both girls were in love with the same man, Leon Bournon. The two women met on one of the boulevards and addressed each other in about the same words: 'Thou lovest Leon. I love him also. He can belong only to one of us. Hence, we must fight.' Meeting place – a corner in the Bois, where Count Boni¹⁵ and other hot-heads usually exploit their 'affairs'. Weapons – stilettos. Dress – naked to the waist, save silk corset cover or linen shift. No corsets." ("Girls Fight a Duel." *The Washington Bee*. Dec. 6, 1902, 2) (see Fig. 1.3). The female duel was a reality on both sides of the Atlantic.



Fig. 1.3. "Thou Lovest Leon." *The Washington Bee*.

Dec. 6, 1902. Washington, District of Columbia. Newspapers.com. 2.

It thus became easy to conflate the stiletto as weapon with the stiletto as accessory, be it hatpins or shoes. The stiletto swiftly migrated from a woman's head to her feet while still retaining the original connotations. The sense of danger that permeated the stiletto as

15 I believe this refers to the French nobleman, Paul Ernest Boniface de Castellane (1867-1932).

a weapon continues to pervade the North American imaginary as my own research shows that women often describe their stilettos as sexual weapons.

However, the term was not only reserved for a dagger, a hatpin, or a heel. As Semmelhack notes, the term stiletto was used in the 1950s to connote a number of things tied to sleek modern elegance, such as the U.S Air Force's new research planes, the Y-3 Flying Stiletto, and a particular silhouette referred to as "stiletto slimness," which "contrasted with the more voluptuous New Look of a few years earlier" (Roger 18). As we have seen, the trend was also common earlier. I found a steam yacht called the Stiletto famed for her top speeds and "designed by Herreshoff, the blind boat builder of Bristol, R.I." on the cover of the *New York Times* on Thursday, June 11, 1885. The Stiletto yacht appeared in the press throughout the month of June, such as in *The Weekly Star* and *Kansan* on June 26, 1885, and in the *Olean Democrat*, out of New York on June 25, 1885. She is described as "95 feet long and 11 feet in beam – a perfect water knife." Those who first caught a glimpse of her "most of them were laughing at her for she rolled about in the water and looked generally awkward" (*New York Times*, Thursday, June 11, 1885, 1). The term 'stiletto' thus took on a new quality and became femininized, foreshadowing what was to come for the term itself and all its material and symbolic feminine connotations.

It also seems to have been a popular name amongst dog show enthusiasts. In April 1908 the names entered for the San Francisco Kennel Club dog show included: A.F Kindt's Stiletto Gleam, Robert Richard's Stiletto Tarquin and Mrs. C.R. Thornburn's Stiletto Keen, whose dog(s) appeared in the category for "puppies, bitches," another harbinger of the negative gendering to come.

However, the stiletto registered in the North American imagination predominantly as a weapon. Even after the stiletto shoe emerged, the meaning of dagger simultaneously existed, and the two coexisted from the early 1930s all the way up to 1981, when “Italian stilettos” as weapons appears in the *Indiana Gazette* on Saturday, December 26. “The stiletto seems to have prevailed at first because of its Italian association. ‘Italian-ness’ was a fashionable trend in the mid-fifties and, along with the acknowledged traditional skill of Italian footwear manufacture in general, this helped to sell the product” (Wright 200).¹⁶ So, the name stiletto seems to have drawn attention to both the Italian origins of the weapon as well as the possible manufacturing origins of the shoe. The meaning of stiletto as Italian dagger seems to have naturally transferred to the sharp, pointy heel that was also celebrated as an Italian design.

Other High Heels

Stilettos are, of course, not the only example of a high heel. Much higher shoes existed in the forms of Turkish qabqab, the English riding boots, the European chopines, and the Japanese geta (Koda 141). As opposed to the platform heel of the chopine, narrow heels arose during the late 1500s, in Europe, which “witnessed the introduction of shoes with high heels and a curved arch, but the style only became commonplace in the seventeenth century, when shoes reached as much as two-to-three inches at their highest...” (Koda 141). In fact, Semmelhack confirms, during the late sixteenth century the heel emerges as pieces of leather stacked together (“A Delicate...” 225). Jonathan Walford, a former curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, explains how heels came into fashion around the same time that the

¹⁶ Dick Hebdige notes this as well in his look at the Vespa culture among the British youth subculture of the 1960s in his famous study on subcultures.

chopine fell out of favour, in the 1590s, and, by a few centuries later, the heel had taken on various forms across Europe while the chopine had been abandoned. By the mid-seventeenth century, the profile of this new heel took on a waisted, or pinched, outline that was to predominate thereafter (Koda 141).

Another telling feature of the history of heels is that they were worn by men for functional reasons, to hold on to their stirrups and to confer status. Semmelhack points out in her look at *The Curious History of Men in Heels*, “many women were interested in heels during the seventeenth century due to the power they conferred on the men.... Thus, in the opening decades of the 1600s heels were seen on women as part of the larger fashion for borrowing from the male wardrobe, allowing the heel to insinuate itself into female dress while maintaining its masculine allure” (29). This is what Umberto Eco would describe as a trap of domination, where women adopt male clothing as a form of equality and liberation, but, on women, those items become a trap of domination where a masculine ideal is reinforced at the expense of a ‘feminine’ one. This foreshadows what heels would become in the centuries to come – a predominantly female gendered thing. So that, “by the early eighteenth century, the high heel was emerging as an exclusively feminine form of footwear and this shift reflected changes in notion of gender” (Semmelhack “A Delicate Balance” 227)

The popularity of heels was often tied to the fate of their wearers. By the late 1700s revolution was in the air, and high heels became objects of scorn throughout Europe and North America because of their aristocratic associations (Semmelhack *Heights* 27). High

heels carried a number of much-critiqued historical personages.¹⁷ Louis XIV notoriously wore high heels with red soles and only those who were admitted to his court were also allowed to wear heels; they were used as clear signs of privilege by the monarch who tried to rule over the unruly aristocratic class.¹⁸ In the popular mind, “the downfall of the *ancien régime* was directly linked to the power abused by scheming women who manipulated dissipated men into squandering the wealth of the state on promiscuous pleasures and decadent extravagances” (Semmelhack *Heights* 27). As the French monarchy fell, culminating in the execution of Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI, so did the heights of heels. By “the late 1790s the heel had been so dramatically reduced that it rarely rose to more than a few millimeters in height” (ibid.). Koda confirms that “the arched sole with elevated heel persisted through most of the eighteenth century but was replaced by a lower slipper-like style toward the end of the century” (Koda 141).

The high heel was not to return into vogue until the 1860s (Koda 141). Upon its return, it was coined the “Louis heel” in honor of Louis XVI, who had continued the tradition set forth by his grandfather Louis XIV, and symptomatic of the nostalgia for the *ancien régime* (Semmelhack *Heights* 32). By the end of the decade, new heels could already be seen that were over two inches high (Koda 141), and, as the 19th century came to a close, fashionable shoes were known to have heels approaching four or more inches (ibid).

The next elongation occurred towards the end of the interwar period: “although the rising hemlines of the mid-1920s created increased focus on the lower legs and feet, it was

17 Consider how this continues to be a contemporary reality, for example the notorious Imelda Marcos, critiqued also for squandering political resources for her own personal fashion vagaries.

18 This privilege carries on right up to the present day; even if heels may be worn by all, there are those who wear red leather-soled Louboutins, reminiscent of the French monarch’s penchant for distinction, and those who wear pleather Wal-Mart heels.

not until the 1930s that the high heel and dramatic arch reached notable extremes” (ibid). At this time we also begin to see the rise of the platform heel. By the end of World War II, a conflation of a high heel with a slight platform sole had developed, and the resulting appearance was of a much higher heel (ibid). This combination of platform sole with high heel recurred in the early 1970s, the mid-1980s, and the late 1990s (ibid). This type of configuration persists also up to present day, as many of the latest Louboutin designs attest, such as his “Lady Peep”, “Daffodile” and “Exagona” shoes (see Fig. 1.4).



Fig. 1.4. “Lady Peep”.

http://us.christianlouboutin.com/ca_en/shop/women/lady-peep-1.html

Enter the Stiletto Heel

The earliest use of “stiletto” to signify a new type of heel is attributed by the OED to April 20, 1931. In the “Style Chats” section of the *Vidette-Messenger*, a newspaper located in Valparaiso, Indiana, there appeared a description of a new shoe: “a shaved, modern stiletto heel that appears on trimmed opera pumps” (5). However, as Semmelhack cautions, “unravelling the history of the stiletto is complicated” (Roger 18). Everything from its actual form to its function has been, and continues to be, widely debated. Trying to determine who first designed the shoe, what names were used to describe it, what materials were used, and by whom are all intricate historical questions that rarely have a

definite answer, as what follows demonstrates. For example, as Semmelhack notes, Salvatore Ferragamo's heels, which accompanied Christian Dior's *New Look* in 1947, were far more attenuated than other heels, but they were still, like American shoe designer Andrew Geller's high heels, quite thick (*Roger* 18). They were not yet the slender stiletto that was to come.¹⁹

While the OED dates the first mention of the stiletto heel to 1931, I have found an earlier reference in a search on Newspapers.com dating back to 1926. An article entitled "Midsummer Night Frocks" in the *Oakland Tribune* of July 11, 1926, by Sally Milgrim, featured the following fashion advice: "New and extremely chic are flesh satin opera pumps with Spanish stiletto heels and toes flower tinted" (81) (Fig. 1.5).²⁰



Fig. 1.5 *Oakland Tribune*. July 11, 1926.

Oakland, California. Newspapers.com. 81.

The same article appeared a week earlier, on July 4, 1926, in several other syndications, such as *The Ogden Standard-Examiner* out of Ogden, Utah. Almost five years later, on

¹⁹ Because the purpose of my thesis is to determine how the stiletto circumnavigates its various cultural environments, this work does not promise to define precisely what the origins of the stiletto are, unlike a historian's penchant for diachronic analyses.

²⁰ I came across a Sally Milgrim in the Obituaries section of *The Detroit Free Press* on June 14, 1994, stating, "Sally Milgrim, 103, an internationally known fashion designer, died Saturday in Miami. She and her husband Charles, ran a chain of high-fashion clothing stores..." so she may be the Sally Milgrim who wrote this piece (4B).

Monday, April 20, 1931, in the “Style Chats” section of numerous syndicates, such as *The Vidette-Messenger* and the *Mount Carmel Item*, a syndicate from Pennsylvania, Alma Archer, a newspaper columnist who reported on style, also popular because of her later 1957 publication *Your Power as a Woman: How to Develop and Use It*, referred to the “Modern stiletto heel appears on trimmed opera pumps.” The column also appeared in the *Medford Mail Tribune* out of Medford, Oregon on April 26, 1931. No image was provided to illustrate the reference. While some may be inclined to insist that the early design is different than what comes to be understood in its later 1950s design and that we still to this day recognize as the stiletto heel, these references nonetheless point to the clear fact that the term “stiletto heel” was already in vogue in English by the late 1920s.

When the heel liberated itself from the male sartorial code, its design quickly changed and its shape took on conventional associations with femininity (Wright 204). The stiletto’s extreme thinness managed to, in a sense, conclude its break with its traditions of gender (204). The heel of the court shoe and other elevated footwear like the chopine were thicker, seemingly more stable, than the stiletto’s thin, precarious heel. Their material was also of a heavier cast: wood or leather. The new heel material was a lightweight aluminum. This material aspect of the heel seemed to symbolically reinforce gendered ideals: strong man, delicate woman.

The stiletto thus made its debut as the modern woman’s accessory. This was a heel that knew exactly to which gender it belonged, and this alliance brought with it social

anxieties over the shoe's overt sexuality.²¹ That the stiletto was immediately perceived as sexual and provocative is demonstrated in numerous ads of the times. A newspaper search in *The Globe and Mail* and *The Toronto Star* found that in Toronto the stiletto came into full bloom starting in the early 1950s. Numerous advertisements were found displaying the "exciting new" heel. From its onset, it was cloaked in mystique, appearing as a magical heel that transformed wearers into sexy women. Stilettos were naughty, daring shoes, as in a Town Shoes ad of 1953, in which a pair of stilettos was characterized as "A little naughty and daring, for your Christmas fun" (G&M 23) (see Figs. 1.6 and 1.7). The names granted to some of the stiletto styles also reflected this sense, as in the "Transparent Magic" high-heeled shoe or the "Black Magic" high-heeled shoe, and "Black Electricity" – all indicative as well of the way in which the stiletto design – as Semmelhack notes, "a new sleek modern design" – reflected the new twentieth century themes emerging: the new capacities of electric technological marvels that were perhaps in themselves perceived as having 'magical' powers (Roger 18). In fact, on Oct. 19, 1961, an article by Science Service appeared in the Waco, Texas, *The Waco News-Tribune* noting how "such 'non-educated' persons act as if the fruits of science, namely technology, are gathered by means of magic from the fairy tale and ghost story in which 'you get a big effect for a small effort'" ("Many Leaders Confuse Science With Magic" 2-B)

²¹ This is not to deny, as Semmelhack has noted, that there has always existed a gender distinction in heels: "the heels between the two genders were different, so that regardless, heels did mark gender differences as well" (21). For example, "women's heels were higher, were more delicate and tapered in shape" (21).

TOWN SHOES

di Milano
CANGEMI

EXCITING! NEW! For party capers, created exclusively for TOWN SHOES. A noted name acclaimed for superb craftsmanship, imaginative design. For YOU with an eye for style and fine good looks. A little naughty and daring. For your Christmas fun. COME. SEE. TRY THEM.

The BARE LOOK . . . black suede and vinyl with pretty pearl ornament. A springulator at \$14.95 . . . 3A to B widths.

WINNING COMBINATION. Black suede and crystal clear vinyl . . . the season's newest. Comes in high stiletto and medium illusion heels . . . 4A to B widths . . . \$16.95

TRANSPARENT MAGIC. Clear vinyl springulator with clear glass bow. High stiletto heel of clear glass to walk on clouds. \$18.95

BACK MAGIC springulator in high stiletto and medium illusion heels. Black suede \$14.95 . . . rhinestone buckle \$2.50. Also in copper patent and white shantung at our Lawrence Plaza store.

PEARLIZED WALNUT brown calf. Elegant amber jewelled buckle. Slim stiletto heel . . . \$18.95

Fig. 1.6. *Globe and Mail*. Dec. 7, 1953. 23.

THE MIRACLE PUMP BY DAQUERE

The shoe that really fits! So flexible, with their soft, boxed toes; so comfortable with their foam rubber insoles; and hygienic; chlorophyll-lined! In four different heel heights; widths AAAAA to D's, sizes 4 to 12 [except where noted]. Calf, suede, plain or gunmetal patent leathers.

F. Slim Spike ($1\frac{1}{2}$ " heel in Black Venise Satin. Also in French Louis heel ($2\frac{1}{8}$ ") . . . 14.95. Widths 4A to B. Sizes $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 10.

G. **Parad Stiletto Heel** ($2\frac{3}{8}$ ") in same leathers and colors as H . . . 14.95 and 16.95.

H. French Louis Heel ($2\frac{1}{8}$ ") in black calf, patent or suede; in brown calf and brown suede; blue calf and blue suede and in white satin . . . 14.95. Also copper-tone or gunmetal patent . . . 16.95 [white satin included]. Widths 4A to B. Sizes $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 10.

J. **Stiletto Illusion Heel** ($1\frac{3}{4}$ ") in black suede or black calf . . . 16.95. Widths 4A to B. Sizes $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 10.

K. Flattering V-throat style with $2\frac{1}{8}$ " heel in black, brown or blue suede; and black, brown or blue calf . . . 14.95

Phone and mail orders filled — TRinity 8111

Simpson's — Second Floor

Dept. 276



Fig. 1.7. *Globe and Mail*. July 23, 1954. 12

In contrast, flats, which were also popular during this period, were perceived as much more jovial and childlike. For example, a Holt Renfrew ad from 1953 describes them as “Light-as-a-feather little shoes with all the witty charm a young heart could wish... these newest ‘Pappagallo’ variations of the casual theme ... with their tapered toes, their half-inch tapered heels ... their amusing detail!” (G&M 15). The associations drawn during this period to all things youthful, “young heart... casual... amusing”, echoed the sentiments that gave rise to the popularity of the flat-soled shoe during the “reformation of manners” movement in the late seventeenth century, during which the flat-soled shoe became emblematic of the domestic woman (Mowry 86). These sentiments resurged in the twentieth century, and flat-soled shoes continued to infantilize women, to symbolize female delicacy and to confirm the need for domestic confinement (Semmelhack *Heights* 27). The stiletto, on the other hand, during its onset in the 1950s, was the shoe of choice for “women” and not young girls. They were, as one *Town Shoes* ad from 1953 put it, “for party capers,” clearly targeting sexually-liberated women willing to engage in illicit, “caper-like” behaviour.

What Exactly Does A Stiletto Look Like?

The stiletto heel relies on a steep arch of the foot to sustain its heights. What is key to the stiletto, what makes a stiletto a stiletto, is the heel and, in particular, its pointed height.

Valerie Steele’s definition notes that:

High heels are not a type of shoe. They are a type of *heel*, which can be attached to a number of different shoes... But for many people the term ‘high heels’ means something a bit more extreme – more like the stiletto heel. The stiletto tends to be

both higher and thinner than the average high heel. It has the surface area of a thumbtack and is usually at least four inches (10 cm) high, sometimes as much as seven inches (Steele, Shoes 21).

While Steele's definition attempts to be more exact, she later on goes on to note that the width and shape of the shoe are also important, confirming that defining the stiletto is an ambiguous and difficult task, something my own research confirms (Steele, *Shoes* 37). In this, she agrees with Semmelhack, who notes, "It is impossible to give a specific measurement that can be used to identify when a heel becomes a high heel. Whether or not a heel is high is completely subjective and dependent of the context of the period" (Semmelhack *Heights* 68). Indeed, a precise definition of the stiletto and its specific features, such as height, style, etc. proved difficult to obtain as many of the women, industry professionals, museum curators and academics I consulted and interviewed had varying ways of describing a stiletto.

Most often, the stiletto is depicted as pointy-toed. A few of the shoe retailers I interviewed in Italy were more persistent in identifying the pointy-toed style as the bona fide stiletto shoe.²² In "Objectifying Gender: The Stiletto Heel," Lee Wright insists that "in contemporary language the term 'stiletto' is often used to describe a type of heel *and* the type of shoe to which it is attached – the court shoe" (199):

In retrospect, we think of the stiletto as being of one type – a thin, tapering heel. In fact, this is the stiletto as it ultimately became rather than the one invented in the 1950s... From 1953 the heel and toe took priority. The heel began as a two-inch

²² I believe this relates to the professional jargon tradesmen and women use to accurately identify their product. As every discipline has particular terms for describing phenomena, every shoe, for the industry professional, also has a particular name to distinguish it.

thick but tapered shape, which, by 1957, was gradually refined to the slender form we now recognize as a stiletto heel. The toe of the shoe underwent similar stylistic changes. The rounded toe of 1953 and before became sharper and eventually developed into an arrow-like point (200).

Given that the winkle-picker style reminiscent of the court shoe is not currently fashionable, does that mean the stiletto is dead? No, it has merely undergone a 'toe-lift.' Wright notes that the stiletto, even at its onset, "...was not a static design but a whole series of variations over a ten-year period" (200).

The Stiletto in Ads

By early fall 1952, ads surfaced across U.S. syndications featuring the "new 'stiletto' heel *Vogue* raves about." For example, during the week of September 7th, 1952, one hearkening in the new fall fashion appeared in the Iowa *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times* in Texas, *The Fresno Bee*, *The Republican*, and *Independent Press-Telegram* in California, *The Index-Journal* from South Carolina, the *Arizona Republic*, *The Bee* in Virginia, and *The Pantagraph* out of Illinois (see Fig. 1.8).

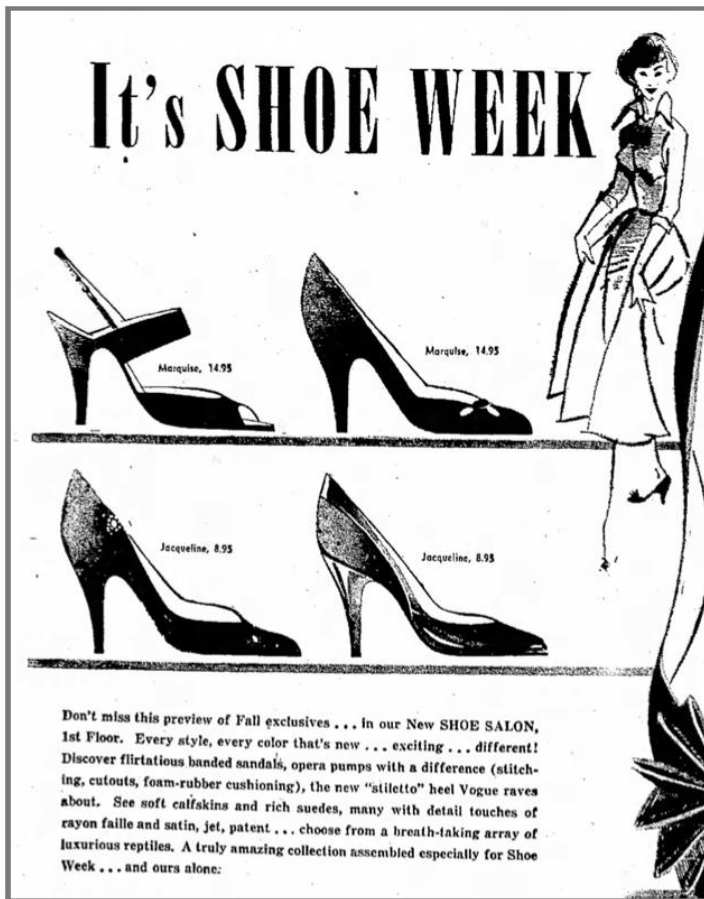


Fig. 1.8. *The Bee*. "It's Shoe

Week." Sept. 8, 1952 (15) Newspapers.com

In *The Toronto Star*, the stiletto heel first appeared in an ad on October 21, 1953, where it is described as "The new tiny 'Spanish tapered toe' and stiletto heel" (41). A year later, on September 23, 1954, a fashion piece in *The Toronto Star*, entitled "Let's Be Smarter" by Margot, notes that "the stiletto heel is the thing for the afternoon." It was considered very much a diurnal shoe and not merely reserved for elegant nocturnal evenings, as some of the ads of the times pointed to, such as "for the party capers" in the 1953 *Towns Shoes* ad.

Another interesting finding was the proliferation of American designers linked to the design, who were predominantly featured in newspaper ads, such as DeLiso Debs

stiletto in Fig. 1.1. There were also many ads that mentioned the *Marquise shoes'* stiletto. Interestingly, my newspaper search did not turn up many advertisements of the notable European designers to whom much of the scholarly literature pays heed, perhaps because of the high cost of their shoes. As noted in an article which featured the Perugia heel in 1951, "these fantastic shoe creations would cost from \$150 to \$400" (Walker 18), yet you could find them "in a Pittsburgh store... with high or medium heel. For further information, call Atlantic 1-6100, Line 333" (18). An advertisement for I. Miller's shoes featuring Perugia's designs first appeared in 1956, five years after its launch (see Fig. 1.9). I also found a Christian Dior and Roger Vivier ad in *The Tennessean* of August 28, 1960, but this was almost ten years after the shoe emerged and was already starting to see its decline (see Fig. 1.10).

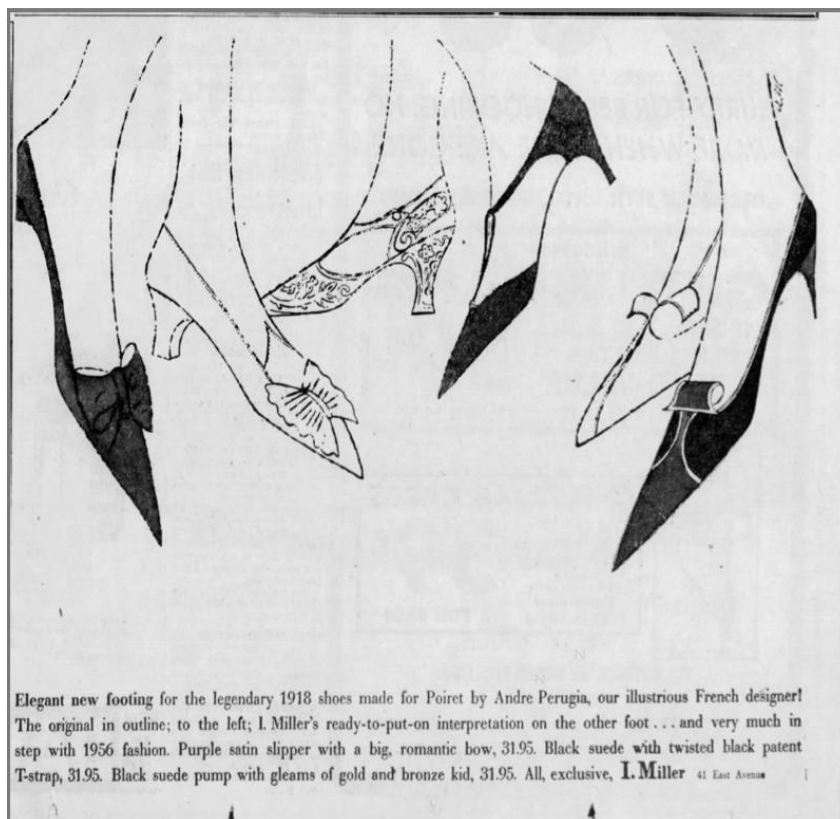


Fig. 1.9. *Democrat and*

Chronicle. Dec. 16, 1956. 7E.

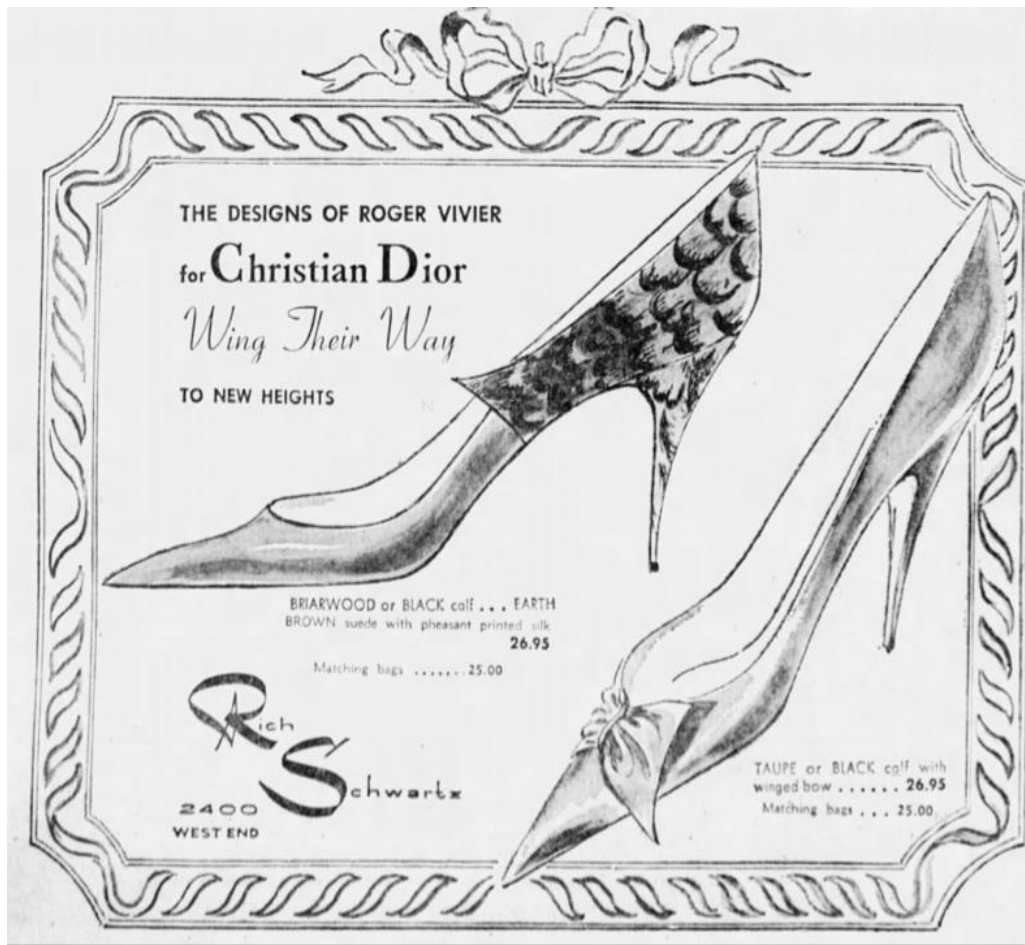


Fig.

1.10. *The Nashville Tennessean*. Aug. 28.1960. Newspapers.com. 4-G.

Throughout the 1950s the stiletto heel was often attributed to Italian design. An Associated Press story appearing in the *Newport Daily News* out of Newport, Rhode Island on September 12, 1958, as well as other syndications, attributed the design of the shoe to an “Italian style.” However, this same article credits Mitchell M. Segal of Lawrence, Massachusetts, “who has been in the heel business for 40 years with creating the plastic heel with a steel spike down the middle and a steel tap on the bottom” (AP Newsfeatures.

Newport Daily News, “Those Heel Woes Get the Cure” 12 sep. 1958, 6), and not the famed European designers often associated with its invention.²³ The article notes that:

American women have been wringing their hands and shoe repair men have been gnashing their teeth ever since the *Italian style* stiletto heels came into style. So fragile were they that showmakers found it almost impossible to apply new lifts without splitting the heels... Mitchell M. Segal ..., decided to solve the problem. He experimented with a new type of plastic heel with a steel spike down the middle and a steel tap on the bottom (6, italics added).

On August 23rd, 1959, in the Nashville paper, *The Tennessean*, an article appeared entitled “Italians Modify Extreme” which suggested that “the extreme styles of the last few years started *in Italy*, and American shoe designers were forced to follow the trend toward needle toes and heels” and that all modifications were being made by “The master shoemakers of Italy [who] have modified the extreme pointed toes and stiletto heels of the last few years” (87, italics added). Here, however, no direct reference to a specific designer is made.

During the 1950s, another name was used to refer to a high heel: the pedestal heel. While unclear if it was similar to the stiletto, the heights of the pedestal heel seemed to parallel those of the stiletto’s, as seen in one ad that featured *Marquise* pedestal heels (see Fig. 1.11). By the end of the decade, however, the name pedestal broke its ties with the stiletto and came to mean a completely different type of shoe with a much stalkier heel. During the 1950s, the stiletto was also referred to as a shaved opera pump.

²³ At this point, to mention whether this meant an Italian or French designer is a mute point to make since the sources consulted here make no mention of either, although they do make in more than one example reference to an Italian style as shown.



Fig. 1.11. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Mar. 24, 1957. 83, Newspapers.com

By the 1960s, everyone and their grandmothers were wearing spiked heels “from teen-agers to grandmothers,” as Hal Boyle puts it in his September 16, 1961, article, “Spike Heels Problem,” in which he claims to favour the heels because “it enables a fellow to become a knight errant and prove that male gallantry isn’t quite as dead as vaudeville” (8). Heels here act as a testament to men’s virtue demonstrating their ability to help the “damsels,” even the “fat lady shopper loaded with bundles [who] stood in the street,

perspiring in the 90-plus degree heat as she waited for a traffic light to change... but did not move because both her spike heels had become caught in the asphalt, and she was slowly sinking into the street” (8). This article appeared in numerous syndications: *The Advocate-Messenger*, *The Mexia Daily News*, *The La Crosse Tribune*, *Janesville Daily Gazette*, etc.

The newfound popularity of the heels came with much backlash. As more women were drawn to wearing them, the warnings and censoring intensified. An Australian reporter for the *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported, on April 10, 1960, in an article entitled, “High Heels Peril on Job: UK Move,” that an “ ‘anti-stiletto campaign’ ” organized by the British Safety Council in the UK was already well underway: “They ...distributed 10,000 posters to factories in Britain warning of the dangers of stiletto heels.... The ‘anti-stiletto campaign’ has been approved by other safety organizations and by Britain’s chiropodists.... A council spokesman noted, ‘We are all for women looking glamorous and keeping in step with fashion, but in the proper place and at the proper time’... The national director of the British Safety Council, Mr. L.D. Hodge, said all working shoes should have a solid heel with a height of 1 ½ - 2 inches as the limit” (36)

On November 11, 1960, an article in the “Business and Industry” section of *The Indianapolis Star* by Business Editor, Don G. Campbell, entitled, “Tripped Up By a Heel” discusses the “curious malady known as ‘Stiletto Bends’ ” (32). He reported that “The stiletto heel on women’s shoes came into vogue about two years ago in partnership with the needle-like toe formation and, while it cut down on the ladies’ vertical stability somewhat, it made them deadly in a game of touch football.” He also refers to the shoes as pinpoint heels and highlights that “despite 285,000 cases of sprained ankles since that time (unofficial figures), the pinpoint heels show no evidence yet of losing their popularity.” He

describes the height of the shoe, by referencing industry officials, the buying staff of the Marott Shoe store, "...averages out at three inches in height and only about 3/8th of an inch across at the hoof level" (32). Noting the increasing institutional and corporate concerns for all the flooring issues that had arisen in schools, on Boeing 707 Jetliners, in the US Senate corridors due to their use, he sardonically notes that "How to keep women on their toes is a problem that is always with us" (32), a clear tone that it was up to the business world to find a solution to reform women.

By 1963 the stilettos' star was clearly starting to fade. In an article entitled "New Designs Soften Womanly Impressions Says Gerald Snyder" in *The Call-Leader*, an Indiana newspaper, notes that "Women are finally coming down to earth. And manufacturers of floor coverings couldn't be happier. According to fashion experts, the reign of the lofty – and lethal – stiletto heel is over and the 'sportive' (that's the word this year) look of lower stacked heel is 'in.' Not since 1956, when the spike first made its appearance, has the heel come in for so much change – or attention" (3). By October 1969, it appeared as though the stiletto as a popular heel type had entirely faded from mainstream culture and made way for "the nailhead heel," "the axe heel," and "the pedestal heel." As reported in *The Southern Illinoisan* on October 4th, 1969, in an article for "Fall Fashion" entitled "Footwear Freedom," some changes were occurring to heel heights:

There is more interest in footwear than there has been for many seasons. Footwear has been designed for the 'woman on the go'. Shoes and boots are designed to be easy to move in, and to compliment today's fashion. Heels vary in height, with the most popular style being from 1 ¾ to 2 ½ inches high. Heels are not only to be worn with dresses, but with the flared or bellbottom slacks. There are many heel

variations. The nailhead heel is very thick, but is more narrow at the bottom than at the top. The axe heel is taller than the nailhead, usually about $2\frac{5}{8}$ inches high, and is not as thick as the nailhead. The pedestal heel is slightly S-curved on the back, and the inside of the heel is scooped out. The pinched-in high heel is thicker at the bottom of the heel than at the top. The square heel is the same size at the top and the bottom (6).

These heels were not reaching skyscraping heights, the average being between 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " to 2 $\frac{1}{8}$ ", a significant drop from the purported 4" of stilettos, as reported on September 2, 1962, by Gaile Dugas of the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* (32).

By 1969, another new trend began: to wear the lower pedestal heel, which had become a popular fashion item, both day and night. As noted in various newspapers describing the new fashions, "A new idea arises in fall shoes similar to the apparel trends, the use of the same silhouetted for daytime and evening achieved with a change of materials. Sample: a polished calf pump untrimmed with emphasis on a pedestal heel is done for day in an off-white leather...for evening in satin and jewels" seen in *The Palm Beach Post*, Florida, Pennsylvania's *The Daily Notes*, and *Simpson's Leader-Times*. This seems to hearken in a more versatile shoe, and one that favoured female comfort over sacrificing oneself in the name of fashion – the culmination of the sentiment fostered throughout the 60s. The stiletto in fact was often used to pit one "type" of woman with another. For example, on August 5, 1967, an article featured in the "Woman's Notebook" of the *Charleston Daily Mail* by fashion editor Ann Griffith, entitled "Pointy-Toed Shoe Dissertation Mistaken as Foot-In-Mouth, Not Tongue-In-Cheek," decided "the time had come to throw up a fashion roadblock," as she felt "disheartened by the futility of it all," ie.

designer fashions. Griffith pokes fun at the use of heels, contrasting “those smugly in step with the blunt-toed, low-heeled trend of the past several seasons... with those who have sworn to be true to their pointy, spiky opera pumps until their toes grow into peaks and their metatarsals calcify at a 30-degree angle... shoes with rapier toes and stiletto heels”(5).

I conclude reporting on my periodical search at this juncture because this historical snapshot demonstrates the cyclical pattern the stiletto undergoes in the decades that followed, which will be further reviewed in the next chapter. Its appearance and disappearance, its comings and goings, reflect the more general cultural sentiments surrounding women’s comportment and presence, where the stilettos’ meaning wavers between folly and powerful tool.²⁴ This historical snapshot is not meant to demonstrate either the clear beginnings nor the clear end of the stiletto. Rather, the stiletto itself, as idea, thing, shoe, word, name, dagger exists on a continuum, or to echo Barthes, “both start and finish of a fashion (in its general sense) always occur over a period of time. In any case, if it is possible to date the appearance of a garment to within one year by finding its circumstantial origins, it is a distortion to confuse the invention of a fashion with its adoption and even more so to assign a rigorous end-date to any garment” (Barthes “History” 5). As my findings show, the stiletto registered in the North American imaginary in beguiling ways that ebbed and flowed over time. While the features that gave rise to the popularity of this name, as a shoe type, a design, and a construction of this particular heel may be argued, what seems to be the case from the evidence I have gathered, especially with regard to earlier references is that the stiletto may not just be a specific type of heel.

²⁴ In an ironic twist, ‘stiletto’ here is meant to be easily replaced with ‘woman’, as the one clearly stands for the other and vice versa, as demonstrated in the numerous examples provided, especially in the case where the two-types of women are pitted against each other.

Rather in comparison with its contemporaries, that is, other heel types, it is always the one that reigns most slender and highest. I found this to be true in my phenomenological interviews, in which women would attribute the name stiletto to their highest heel. This may in part be due to its historical affiliation with another more illicit object: the dagger known as the stiletto.

The Stiletto's Construction

The curious thing to note is that the exotic allure of the name stiletto did not register in Italy itself, where the stiletto is simply called “tacco a spillo” – pin heel. However, the names stiletto and “tacco a spillo” both conjure up images of fragility as well as of danger.²⁵ The construction of the heel brought with it not only a number of interesting ethical questions but also ones about technical manufacturing that were not resolved until after the name “stiletto” had already been popularized. As Wright notes, the name “stiletto” actually foreshadowed its later construction:

The choice of ‘stiletto,’ the thin-bladed knife, to christen the heel is often thought to have originated from the invention of its metal core... The stiletto was one of the many terms that denoted the *stylistic* characteristics and not an aspect of its manufacture. The metal ‘backbone’ of the heel had not yet been invented! The heel of 1953 still used wood, the traditional material for heel construction. The ‘spike’, ‘needle’ and ‘spindle’ were all attempts to conjure up a name for a heel, which was more tapered than ever before (200).

²⁵ In Italian, tacco a spillo refers to a pin. Therefore, the Italian name for the heel is a literal reference, while the English name is a figurative one.

She confirms that the name of the heel referred to the heel type, adding that “the naming of a shoe from the style of heel was perhaps partly due to the fact that the shoe itself was very plain and the heel was therefore the focus of interest” (200). In fact, this curious new heel, which promised the rebirth of femininity after the Second World War, seemed to also demand a new exotic name. As Wright notes, “the stiletto was one of several objects created in the aftermath of the Second World War as deliberately feminine” (198).

It also helped to call into being the actual material that would be able to sustain such fragile heights. How to create a heel that could sustain weight, be slim and not too heavy and clumsy, the way the utility fashion that preceded it was (Wright 201)? Up until the birth of the 1950 stiletto, heels were created using wood, the traditional material for heel construction, while around 1909, women’s shoes were made by layering stacked leather (Ferragamo 23). It took ten years for the stiletto to finally meet a manufacturing solution (Wright 201). Wright notes that “It was four years since the shape had been created as the perfect solution to interpreting the feminine in shoe design, and ten years since the image had been drawn on paper” (201). The heel changed shape and construction in 1947, but by 1953 it had managed to establish a degree of resolution in its design (Wright 200).

A 1984 travelling exhibition of the Charles Jourdan Collection in Paris, on display in Houston, noted another limitation brought on by the war years. The exhibit noted the leather limitations Perugia encountered during “the war years of the ‘40s” (“Take It In Stride” Jun. 18, 1984 A2). “Since Perugia could not get leather in the war years of the ‘40s, he turned to such exotic materials as the skins of sharks, stingrays and toads” (ibid.). The other interesting point raised in this article was that “women who wore the shoes designed in the 1920s and later by French shoemaker Andre Perugia certainly were well-heeled – up

to six inches worth,” suggesting that while not yet perhaps considered the stiletto, the stiletto’s heights were already seen in the 1920s even if the materials used were different.²⁶

It was only in the 1950s that the technology for stilettos was perfected, which occurred, as Steele notes, “when Italian shoemakers inserted a metal stick which extended almost the full length of the heel to prevent it from breaking” (Steele, *Shoes* 21). By mid-1950, construction of the heel was not unlike that for a skyscraper, requiring a metal spigot encased in a spindly plastic shell as a girder-like support for a woman’s weight (O’Keeffe 120-1). In 1956, “a plastic version with a metal strengthening core was shown at an Italian Trade Fair... which was based on the technique of injection moulding” (Wright 201). Due to this new technique, the reference to a “stiletto” heel was directly pertinent because the pointed shape could now be achieved thanks to the internal metal pin, which sustained the heel’s height (Wright 201). Semmelhack also notes that “wartime technology enabled the fantasy shoes that pinups had been wearing since the Depression to finally be available to real, flesh-and-blood women. ... A strong metal rod enabled needle-thin heels to support the carefully balanced weight of a woman without breaking” (*Heights* 49).

In his autobiography, Salvatore Ferragamo considers the limitations of the stiletto design. He notes that his idea of the stiletto had to, in fact, be put on hold for quite some time until the means were available to construct them (212): “A volte, per mettere in pratica un’idea occorre attendere la scoperta o l’invenzione di nuovi materiali, come è

²⁶ In addition, some of the reported heights for a stiletto throughout its inception has been 4”, which suggests that Perugia’s 1920 shoe may have been taller than any stiletto heel we see today, especially since they may not have had the platform support we have today on stilettos that high.

accaduto per i tacchi di metallo e le soles di vetro” (217).²⁷ He also points out that it was not only technological limitations that held back the appearance of the stiletto – wartime efforts also played a role. Ferragamo recounts that during times of war, the first industry to be devastated is the luxury market. Prime materials go missing fairly quickly due to economic sanctions and blockades brought on by the war (131). Ferragamo recalls that he could not get quality aluminum to produce the heel because the best aluminum was reserved for the Ethiopian war of 1936, so in response to this lack he proposed the platform heel instead²⁸ (132). So the lack of materials brought on by war efforts delayed the appearance of the stiletto on the fashion scene. However, as my periodical search has shown, the stiletto was already a notable heel type in the U.S. from roughly mid 1920s to early 1930s and then a gap appears until 1951. Perhaps the onset of the Second World War disrupted its further development, that when the war ended, the new materials founded were able to give a new ‘lift’ to the stiletto, as such making a break from its earlier version.

Who Designed This Thing Anyway?

The controversy surrounding the stiletto heel includes a debate over its maker. In the scholarly literature, I found the origins often rested in the hands of a “holy shoe trinity”²⁹ consisting of André Perugia, Roger Vivier and Salvatore Ferragamo. The three were a popular trio, leaving behind a legacy that was resurrected in 2001 when the trinity

²⁷ At times, to put an idea in practice, you must wait for the discovery or the invention of new materials, as happened with metal heels and glass soles.

²⁸ Aluminum is a lighter weight metal as opposed to steel, and was used in the construction of airplanes during World War II.

²⁹ I add this epithet as my additional contribution to the literature.

reappeared as affirmation of Manolo Blahnik's contribution to the art of shoemaking.³⁰ On January 10, 2001, an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on "Passionate Soles" noted that "Manolo Blahnik follows in the tradition of famous *bottiers* André Perugia, Salvatore Ferragamo and Roger Vivier" (Sheehan 2). Each designer contributed in some way to both the construction of the stiletto and the platform sole, and over the decades each would be celebrated as originator, a salient point that I will pick up on when I consider the role of invention and patents in Ferragamo's case and the role of the designer in the following section on "The Designer is Born." For example, on October 4, 1987, in an article recounting Ferragamo's legacy by Georgia Sauer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Ferragamo's daughter, Fiamma Ferragamo, is quoted saying, "He invented the stiletto heel made famous by Marilyn Monroe" ("A Ferragamo Steps Into Town To Explain Comfort of Shoes" 3S). In the same paper, earlier that same year, Roger Vivier was also credited with its invention: "Roger Vivier, the French footwear designer who popularized the platform sole, the stiletto heel and the transparent shoe, has set up shop in the United States" (Connoisseur, "French Footwear Designer Hits U.S." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Jan. 4. 1987. 6LS).

Scholarship also reveals conflicting findings. Semmelhack, for example, attributes the invention to Roger Vivier: "It should be no surprise that the quintessential high heel, the stiletto, was invented in the early years of the 1950s by Roger Vivier, Christian Dior's shoemaker" (Semmelhack *Heights* 49). Other curators and fashion historians, such as Oliver Saillard, curator of Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode, also claims that "Vivier had so supremely invented" the stiletto, and Colombe Pringle, former Chief Editor of *Vogue* Paris,

30 All three – Vivier, Ferragamo and Perugia – were credited with the invention of the stiletto *and* the platform sole. As one newspaper article in 1953 notes: "Andre Perugia, once an aviation engineer, who is credited with inventing the platform sole" ("Heels Object of Shoe Attention" *The Troy Record* Dec. 3, 1953. 10).

in his series look at Roger Vivier, confirms that, “this is the man who created the stiletto heel which, ‘punctuated the silhouette with a decisive pencil stroke.’” However, both Semmelhack and Saillard note the ambiguities of the origins. Semmelhack acknowledges it in a footnote, “Salvatore Ferragamo has also been suggested as the inventor of the stiletto” (*Heights* 69), while Saillard notes that it was just a product of the times.

Valerie Steele, on the other hand, credits Italian shoemakers of the 1950s, in general, but not any specific designers, with the invention of the stiletto heel (Steele, *Shoes* 21). Linda O’Keeffe, for her part, adds André Courrèges to the list of credits alongside Roger Vivier as those who proliferated the stiletto and notes in *Shoes* that Ferragamo invented the metal arch support, so that heeled shoes no longer needed toecaps to act as brakes on the feet (24). However, she must confess that it is “not clear who came up with the idea: Ferragamo, Albanese of Rome, and Dal Co’ produced needle heels around 1953 in Italy about the same time as Vivier’s (120).

The primary source search I conducted revealed several points that also contradict published findings on its contested origins and design. In this section, I trace the primary American source references I found for the first two decades of its existence. In my periodical search, the invention of the plastic heel with metal spigot insert was actually credited to an American, Mitchell Segal. However, Caroline Cox notes that in “1956, in Italy, at an Italian trade fair the stiletto solution was showcased – the metal spigot enclosed in plastic heel shell through injection-moulding” (45), which had the consequence that: “After that, Italy became the established center of directional shoe design, with the ‘Made in Italy’ image” (45). Cox also notes that from 1945 to 1965 Italy underwent massive economic and cultural change after receiving economic aid from the United States, such as the Marshall

Plan (56). This resulted in a large number of small firms specializing in luxury leather goods, with a high level of expertise (ibid).

Semmelhack also credits the birth of the steel heel to Perugia, in 1951 when he “created an evening sandal which featured only two very thin straps and a high slender metal heel” featured in a newspaper article titled “Steel Heel Holds up New Shoe” (Roger 19). The article by Frances Walker that Semmelhack refers to appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* on November 8, 1951. The interesting thing to draw from this finding is that the shoe that is featured is not called a stiletto but is instead referred to as a “pedestal heel”: “Pedestal heels that are a mere sliver of steel and blade thin soles encrusted with glitter have put in their startling appearance on ‘dream shoes’ which are the latest creations of master-shoe designer Perugia...the most sensational shoes just created by Perugia are the steel-heeled sandals that may or may not be trendsetters” (Walker 18) (see Figs. 1.12 and 1.13). This particular heel of Perugia’s actually appeared seventeen years earlier, in 1934, (see Fig. 1.14 which looks very similar to the shoe in the women’s right hand in Fig. 1.13).



Fig. 1.12. Walker, Frances.

Pittsburgh Post Gazette. November 8, 1951. Newspapers.com. 18.



DREAM SHOES—These shoes with slender heels of steel or pompons of metal to hold them up are some of the shoes that Perugia, world famous shoe designer, dreams up and then modifies for women to wear. At right, a dancing slipper of green satin has rhinestones outlining the turned-up toe. The at-home mule at right is white

satin with pompons of gilded metal. The shoes the model is wearing, called Beau a la Mode, stopped the style shows at Dior's opening in Paris. These "wearable" shoes with crushed bows will be available in a Pittsburgh store in suede, with high or medium heel. For further information, call Atlantic 1-6100, Line 333.

Fig. 1.13

Something New Is On Foot



Perhaps Madam soon will be wearing something like this on the boulevards—and then again, perhaps not. This somewhat radical design in feminine footwear is a recent creation of Andre Perugia, director of Padova, Paris, and a famous artist-designer, who displayed the model on his arrival in New York.

Fig. 1.14 *The DeKale Daily Chronicle*.

Mar. 19, 1934. 7.

From the images shown, what seems to have been a novelty was that the heel was actually an exposed piece of steel, which is different than what was to become the defining feature of the stiletto, which was a plastic heel with an internal metal spigot used as support. The history around this point is quite murky, especially if one is relying on mainly North American syndications, but those publications, which are incredibly numerous, also contain many clues.

The pedestal heel's evolution is also really interesting in the search I conducted. While it refers to a high heel, it does not always retain this meaning, as the stiletto does over time. Up until 1957, the pedestal heel referred to a stiletto-like heel, as seen in the ad for the Pittsburgh department store *Kline's* (see Fig. 1.15).



(Fig. 1.15) *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Mar. 24,

1957. St. Louis, Missouri. 4F.

Yet, the term “pedestal heel” from the 1940s to the 1970s seems more often to have referred to a lower, often stalker heel, with a good support, like a pedestal. Only for the 1950s did I find references to a pedestal heel as a high stiletto-like heel. An article in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* of November 16, 1941, by Sylvia Blythe, “If the Shoe Fits...”, describes which shoes will help women “feel better and look better.” The “clever, young Mr. and Mrs. Team” of Charles and Mabel Julianelli, the designers, offer advice on “choosing shoes for comfort,” and here they clearly distinguish between pedestal heels, which are described as a “shoe that mounts your whole foot, not merely your heels on thick slab soles as well as pedestal heels” and “the more usual high-heeled opera pumps” which, at the time, were considered “a more conventional type of shoe” (11). Their suggestions were as follows:

But now suppose you are a half-pint who wants to tower. Then you can wear shoes that build up your height several inches. Very successful at this is the kind of shoe that mounts your whole foot, not merely your heels, on thick slab soles as well as pedestal heels. But if you want a more conventional type of shoe, then look for the more usual high-heeled opera pumps (Blythe 11).

Here the pedestal heel is a much more supportive heel and not as high as the opera pumps – another term used to refer to stiletto type heels. But by 1963, the pedestal heel comes to mean something completely different; it comes to be seen as a low platform heel and signals a return to comfort as evidenced in the parenthetical reference of the following ad (see Fig. 1.18), and the numerous ads that emerge (see Figs. 1.16 and 1.17). So the meaning of the pedestal heel shifts drastically from how it was perceived in the 1951 image of Perugia’s pedestal heel.

DOWNTOWN, FASHION SQUARE, OPEN LATE TONIGHT

KICKY IMPORTS FROM AMALFI OF ITALY Charming and very Go-Go . . . for dress-a-bit dancing dates. We see them flashing below short skirts of rippling, twisting pleats, ultra-feminine in effect. Both styles have a beguiling ovaled toe, lightly boxed, and a tiny pedestal heel that's the innest! Lower, taupe or black suede with bow, perforations. Top, walnut-tone calfskin with black suede. Each 20.00. On Third Downtown; in Fashion Square. **FROST BROS.**

Fig. 1.16. *San Antonio*

Express. August 12, 1965. San Antonio, Texas. 8-F.

Save! Patent T-strap on a pedestal heel

Greet spring in a blunted toe T-strap patent set on an Italian pedestal heel. White, black trim. nougat-bone, all black. 5½ to 9.

6⁸⁸
Reg. 9.99

Fig. 1.17 *Asbury Park Press*. Mar 22, 1967. Asbury Park, New

Jersey.5.

Edwards

"GO CASUAL"

It's the light-hearted, gay way to enjoy life! And what could be snappier (or more comfortable), than these four fun-filled casuals? We've imported them especially for gals with an eye for style and footies that love to be pampered!

EDWARDS—Shoes—Third Floor;
Ridgemen & Pittsford

A—10.99

B—12.99

C—7.99

D—9.99

A—Here's honest-to-goodness style. Genuine stacked leather mules... cushioned insole for that light, gay prancing. Available in natural tone only. Sizes 5 to 9; Widths, N & M **10.99**

B—Little stacks and snip toes accent these cool and beautiful open shoes with eyelet vamp and sides, interwoven with cross-stitch straw. Beige with white straw, smart buckle strap at throat. Sizes 5 to 9, N & M **12.99**

C—It's cool inside... soft supple calfain sandal has white-trimmed vented cutout, low cork wedge heel. This Coralli creation does marvelous things for sportswear. Natural sizes 5 to 9, N & M **7.99**

D—Coralli shapes supple strips of Tiberian glove leather into the softest basket-weave uppers, underscores them with cream-smooth leather, Gladiator Black with pedestal heel; White the cowboy heel. Sizes 5 to 10, AAA to C, **9.99**

EDWARDS—Shoes—Third Floor;
Ridgemen & Pittsford

Fig. 1.18. *Rochester Democrat and*

Chronicle. May 5, 1963. Rochester, New York. 8E.

While the debate over this point appears subtle in the North American literature that I reviewed, the Italian sources I consulted told another story. Giuseppe Di Somma notes in his look at “Salvatore Ferragamo: The Object of Design” that “in 1955, using a special metal pin Ferragamo propped women up on incredibly slim high heels” (see Figs. 1.19 & 1.20) (56). He suggests that “after studying a special support ‘pillar,’ Ferragamo

invented the stiletto heel” and that the “heel patent no. 14390 of 1956 is reminiscent of an iron architecture for a universal exhibition, which looked like an upside down Eiffel tower” (56). In defence of this position, Di Somma notes that “Ferragamo in 1943 was already making shoes with a heel of 7.5cm in height; and that in 1938 his patent 17187 produced a heel of 8.5 cm” (58). However, when reviewing the images of his patents, I found that even earlier, in 1930, Ferragamo’s patent number 7813 already had 7.5 cm high heels (see Fig. 1.21). DiSomma also adds, “His 1938, ‘Cortina’ model was 9.5cm,” which is the standard for today’s stilettos, as also reported by the women I surveyed (58).

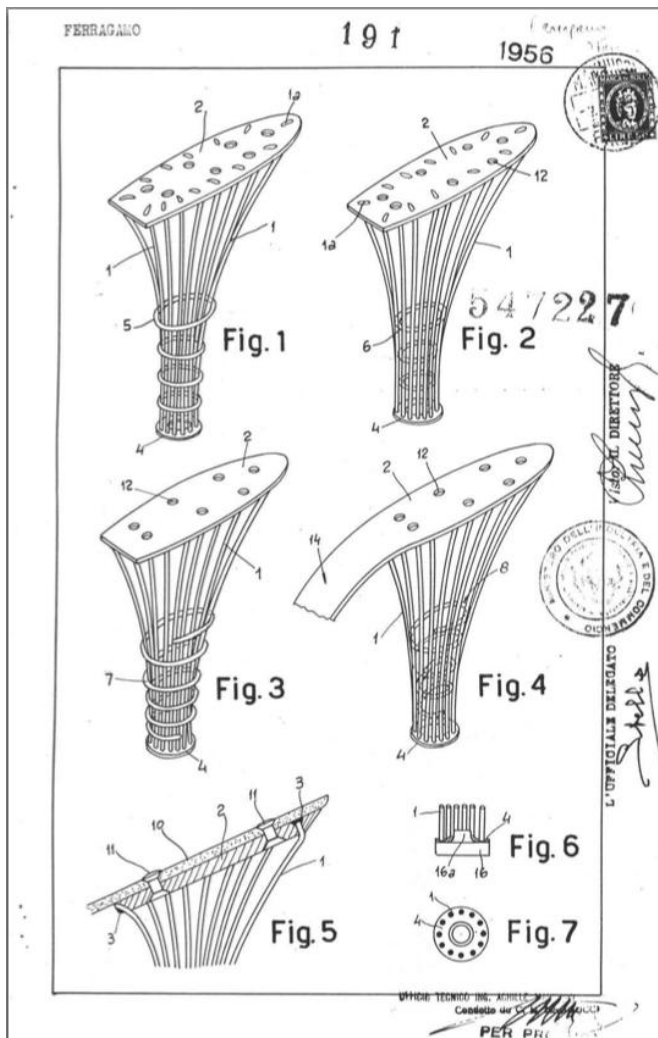


Fig. 1.19 Courtesy Museo Salvatore

Ferragamo (Florence) and Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome)

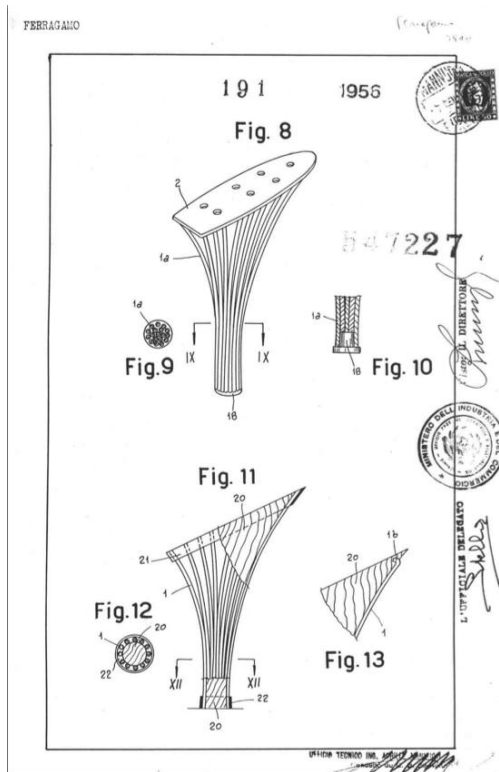


Fig. 1.20

Courtesy Museo Salvatore Ferragamo (Florence) and Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome)



Fig. 1.21

Courtesy Museo Salvatore Ferragamo (Florence) and Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome)

Consultation with the Museo Salvatore Ferragamo's correspondent, Francesca Piani, revealed another matter of debate. While I found evidence to suggest Ferragamo may have originated the design of the metal heel, as his numerous patents demonstrate, the Museo Ferragamo has confirmed: "Unfortunately we don't have the absolute certainty that Ferragamo was the first shoemaker who invented the stiletto heel. We have found this picture of shoe (made by another craftsman who worked for Roger Vivier) showing a metal heel dated in 1951" (Piani). The craftsman they were referring to in the image featured in *Life* Magazine was André Perugia, the designer Christian Dior would often also turn to for his shoes. However, I have not been able to locate the origin of this image and so this remains questionable.³¹

After returning to Italy in 1927, Ferragamo helped cope with American demand by making use of all the small firms that he could contract out to in Italy. Italy burgeoned on the global export scene: "Italian shoemakers no longer produced imitations of French couture styles, but were defining a look that was all their own" (ibid). By the 1960s, Italian design had caught up with the French competition. Ferragamo, with the help of the Italian government, consolidated Italian style with the 'Made in Italy' insignia and a global campaign, similar to the one that resurfaced in 2009 (ibid). In his autobiography, Ferragamo notes that he was already creating heels using aluminum in 1936. However, because the best aluminum was retained for the Ethiopian war and what his suppliers sent him was of such very bad quality, women were soon flocking in the store complaining about the instability of the shoe as well as their tendency to break (132). To combat this

31 I have searched the edition to no avail, and I have yet to hear back from Getty Images.

decline in quality, he invented the wedge heel, which he considered his most notable invention (ibid).

However, Ferragamo's newfound metal heel, or Vivier's, or whoever is in vogue at the moment, was not all that new. In the fairy-tale world, women were often depicted wearing metal shoes and heels, often as a form of punishment for wrongful doings. So this newfound heel, exciting as it may have been at the time, also reawakened age-old anxieties of the trap of women's clothing. Many women decried these "New Fashions" as proposed by Dior and the French-Italian gang. As Hilary Davidson notes in her essay, "Shoes As Magical Objects" "Iron, the stuff of swords and violence, often metes out punishment in the form of footwear that must be worn... Iron shoes, then, are reminiscent of prisoners' shackles, bound with the weight and sorrow of wrongdoing" (26, 28). The stiletto is no stranger to this, as it comes to fully be recognized as a stiletto in contemporary accounts precisely when it undergoes its alloyed incarnation as in the acclaimed 1951 metal Vivier heel.

While it may not be entirely clear who invented the stiletto, who popularized it, or who distributed it, it is clear that the ambiguities and controversies surrounding the stiletto are many. As with many controversies related to the stiletto, the debate over who is responsible for its inception also involves a gendered component, in which a group of men seem to be the early protagonists. It may have been the archeological retrieval of the chopine in the 1950s that summoned the birth of the stiletto (Ferragamo himself notes how

this finding influenced his own designs),³² or maybe it was the not so distant court shoe that instigated its arrival, or it may have been the copious images of pinup girls in towering heels, or the disappearance of war-rationing efforts. Whatever may have influenced the rise of the stiletto, one thing is for certain: it was a feeling in the air, captured by a number of designers who made their names and fortunes promoting this “new look.”

The Designer is Born: A “Male” Thing?

“At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials” (Marx, *Capital* 284).

It was in some senses the liberation of the leg that enabled the stiletto to come to light. The French museum curator Pierre Provoyeur notes in his biographical look at the designer Roger Vivier’s life that the tailored clothes that revealed calves, or dresses that revealed the knee gave, in 1925, a new importance to shoes (12).³³ The shoe became an essential ornament to dress up one’s legs (12).³⁴ Out of this new liberation of women’s legs, shoes also gained new status. They were now seen as “...a functional accessory to [a woman’s] total look rather than a simple ornament” (Pochna 220). As such, the much coveted shoe designer emerged, who could distinguish a woman’s look by adding that touch of design to her wardrobe that would also render her unique and more beautiful.

32 In 1950, a group of workers in the archaeological site of Villa di Boccaccio, in the outskirts of Florence, discovered some shoes probably used by Boccaccio’s female friends. They were shoes with a wedge (Ferragamo 134). They were chopines.

33 -“les tailleurs aux mollets ou les robes decouvrant le genou donnent des 1925 une importance nouvelle a soulier”

34 “seul avec les bas a habiller la jambe, il constitue desormais un ornement essentiel de la toilette”

Historically, men have been the cobblers, cordwainers, shoemakers or *calzolari* in both North America and Europe. For example, The Worshipful Company of Cordwainers in England began as a fraternity in the Middle Ages, then formed a guild, and is still operational today, but with different aims: they are now more a charitable organization rather than their origin as a regulatory trade body (www.cordwainers.org). In America, there was the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin founded on September 1st, 1867, by Newell Daniels, whose membership grew to 50,000 within the first two years; their aim was to dissuade young men from learning the business because they attributed the cause of the bad condition of their trade to the surplus of workmen over and above what was required to supply the demand for boots and shoes (“Knights of St. Crispin”).

With shoe construction also came shoe design. The rise of the designer, as celebrated personality, was an idea already well under way by the end of the nineteenth century (Hamilton 58). In his look at the “Aesthetics of Design,” Andy Hamilton notes how the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s and early 1800s gave rise to the birth of the ‘designer.’ Industrial production saw a move from craft to mass production, where the design process separated from the making stage (58). The separation effectuated by industrial production created a new specialization, that of the designer, who was seen as improving economic competitiveness of commercial goods through their appearance (59). What the ‘designed object did was to render certain functional objects ‘unique.’ By extension, these ‘designed’ objects made people feel like they too could express their own uniqueness as well, which became a saleable feature (Hamilton 60).

The rise of the designer’s popularity coincided with another pivotal social sentiment: the general rise of modernist aesthetics. Provoyeur considers Vivier’s

eclecticism and how it was rooted in a time when the great movements – the decorative arts in France, the Bauhaus in Germany, the Wiener Werkstätten in Austria – were multidisciplinary and based on a principle of promotion of minor arts (15).³⁵ Provoyeur notes that Vivier’s shoes reflected in their design the modern esprit that emerged in the 1920s based on the French decorative arts that translated notably as kinetic motifs: very fluid lines, for example, curly-cued toes (22).³⁶

So le dessinateur de modeles, the shoe designer, became a reality in this milieu as his work also came to reside in a realm of privilege where shoes cost an enormous amount to produce, and their potential for design was acknowledged (Provoyeur 14). All of a sudden the shoe was envisioned as a further canvas on which to express one’s creativity. Its value as artistic object was found in collaborative artistic moments, for example, when Elsa Schiaparelli, who very much represented a surrealist aesthetic, included Vivier’s platform shoe in her 1938 collection (Provoyeur 24). Women’s bodies/fashions became the impetus to explore new design forms in a new era which defined new forms of art.

However, designers were also subject to social regulation, and much of their design potential depended on the social manufacturing and production limitations. Also dependent on the times was the question of what was permissible by statute. In the United States there was

“the War Production Board, a wartime committee entrusted with the task of limiting the new fashions to appear each season, in an attempt to discourage people from

35 “son eclectisme prend la ses racines, a la faveur d'une epoque ou les grands mouvements - les arts decoratif en france, le bauhaus en allemagne, les wiener werkstatten en autriche - sont pluridisciplinaires et fondes sur un principe de promotion des arts mineurs” (15).

36 “reflete dans leur dessin l’esprit modern qui soufflé depuis le debut des annees 20 sur les arts decoratifs francais et se traduit notamment dans des motifs cinetiques tres frequents dans le premier album” (22).

updating their wardrobes too frequently. The board laid down strict guidelines for the garment industry under L-85, a ruling that banned evening dresses, three-piece suits, pleated skirts, and puffed sleeves. The New Look appeared just as L-85 was being repealed” (Pochna 181).

Once the limitations had been lifted for the fashion industry, people such as Dior, Ferragamo and Neiman Marcus, who sat on the Board, saw the potential of this burgeoning consumer society. As Pochna notes, “the consumer society was not yet even in its infancy but Dior had already seen the potential of the luxury goods market” in America (187).

The French Dior

Christian Dior is another prominent designer, whose role in the emergence of the design of the stiletto seems to be pivotal. Piecing together the puzzle of Dior’s influence is essential because it was Dior’s New Look coupled with the new high heel that was to become the stiletto that won over the American and European audiences in the late 1940s. Dior needed a shoe to complete his look, and the new heel, as an accessory, needed a look to affix itself to. This happy marriage of clothing designer and shoe designer culminated in the Neiman Marcus Award granted to both Dior and Ferragamo in December 1947, solidifying the aesthetic appeal of Parisian couture and Italian shoe making in the American imaginary. Ferragamo fondly recalls Dior’s collection, noting that his shoes were paired with Dior’s collection because they matched perfectly (208). They appeared to be a symbol of the times.

Pochna notes that, “For his first collections, Dior had gone to the two big names in the pantheon of ready-to-wear footwear, Salvatore Ferragamo and Andrea Perugia,... their

stiletto heels went perfectly with the New Look” (220). Pochna’s account complicates the designer debate on two fronts. As she notes, both Ferragamo and Perugia were designing stiletto heels, and they were doing so prior to Vivier joining the Dior forces in 1953. So it becomes questionable whether Vivier designed the first ‘aiguille’ heel. However, whether Dior used Ferragamo’s or Perugia’s stilettos is unclear, as both Provoyeur in his biographical look at Vivier and Pochna note, Dior “balked at some of their more daring styles” and was not keen on Ferragamo’s futurism (Pochna 220; Provoyeur 46). As with Ferragamo’s or Vivier’s and Perugia’s heels, Dior’s New Look was not after all such a new thing. It seems to have been a clear feeling in the air that brought about the rise of heels, coupled with an overall desire for the ‘New Look’ as provoked by the quintessential Parisian designer, Christian Dior. Dior’s own ultra-feminine design seemed to fuel “an American fascination with tiny waists” (Pochna 185).

The “New Look” appears to have been a misnomer. The dresses that gave rise to Dior’s celebrity were reminiscent of the Belle Epoque, the period prior to the world wars, during which France had emerged as the leader in luxury goods. As Pochna notes, “If fashion à la Dior brought the erotica clothes of the Belle Epoque back into vogue, with its laced corsets, fitted waists and bodices, plunging necklines, fine lingerie, petticoats, and frills, then clearly this method of packaging sexual desirability touched on something quite universal” (Pochna 185).

However, this sexualization of women was not wholly accepted by all women. While the media applauded the New Look, many American women riled against it. As Pochna recounts in her Dior biography, American women who had fought for the right to vote, to drive automobiles, and to go to work, were suddenly expected to go back fifty years in time

to dresses with twenty yards of fabric in the skirts, whalebone in the corsets, hats so wide they barely fit through doorways, long gloves and strings of pearls – all far more suitable for an outing in a carriage than for sitting at the wheel of a motorcar... a resolute return to the past (180). An anti-Dior petition took off in America led by a group of women who called themselves the Just Below the Knee Club, who noted that “long skirts are dangerous. With today’s speed, you can’t even catch a streetcar in a long skirt” (178). As Pochna notes, “A former Dallas model, a Mrs. Woodward, also took up the fight, saying, ‘Whoever dreamed up this fall’s gruesome styles has been reading too many historical novels’” (178). During his American tour, Dior met adversaries when he arrived in Chicago, where he was met by “...a mass of threatening placards and screaming suffragettes...” all calling for Dior to go home (183). Nonetheless, despite all the controversy “By the end of his stay, the New Look had definitely won the day” (184).

Dior himself admitted that his New Look was not new at all: “He had simply followed his instincts, trying to revive a forgotten vision of beauty. If the role of fashion is to create a fantasy world, where else to turn, when the present is depressing and the future uncertain, but to the past?” (ibid.). All Dior had done was reinforce or reintroduce what had been lost during the war: the prominence of French design, but more importantly, the role of women as seductresses. There was nothing really new in his ‘new’ designs; in fact, an article dated March 12, 1947, in *Life* magazine, entitled “The House of Dior,” chronicled the rise of Dior’s success, which was deemed not to be particularly revolutionary.³⁷

³⁷ According to James Laver, “No fashion is ever successful unless it can be used as an instrument of seduction.’ Christian Dior’s designs are all founded on that premise. His ‘Figure 8’ and ‘Inverted Flower’ silhouettes are both designed to show off the womanly woman and this philosophy,... seems to assure Dior a

Dior was not the only one with nostalgic longing. Ferragamo recounts how he too lamented the loss of femininity, confessing that he had started to design sandals because he desperately wanted to liberate the female foot (58). He acknowledges that he developed something of a foot fetish: “a Santa Barbara li osservavo (i piedi) con una passione che rasentava il feticismo... Adoro i piedi, ho la sensazione che mi parlino” (62, 67).³⁸ Immediately after WWII, having had enough of utility style shoes, he wrote a plea for a return to fashionable shoes in the November 1945 issue of the magazine *Bellezza*, (p. 63, 177), in which he is clearly asking, or possibly begging women to put on fancy shoes. Alongside Dior’s ultra-feminine dress designs, then, the acceptance of high heels also fossilized and came to pass as the definitive “New Look” as it swept through the magazines, augmenting both designers’ fame.

The Italian Ferragamo

In little Italian towns at the beginning of the twentieth century, as Salvatore Ferragamo testifies to in his autobiography, lower class men either became tailors, carpenters or cobblers (20). He also points out that to be a cobbler was not a respectable trade – it was considered the lowest of the three choices (21). Saillard, in his “Introduction” to the *Roger Vivier* compendium, confirms that shoemaking was considered “...a lowly medium” (7). This may have been in part due to the fact that it was hard labour that left very visible marks on the body – dye-stained hands that were dry, cracked and black, and with calluses. The most distinguished trade at the time for a male was to be a tailor (Ferragamo 21). This

secure place in the fashion hierarchy” (“House of Dior”65). So what made Dior’s fashions so accepted and celebrated was its very evident emphasis of the female form with all its seductive powers.

³⁸ In Santa Barbara, I would observe them (feet) with a passion that resembled a fetish. I adore feet, I have the sensation that they speak to me.

parallel may reveal another socio-psychological reason why the shoe trade was considered lowly in Ferragamo's time. While cobblers attended to feet, those things that treaded the ground, tailors worked on refining the presence of the body. It appears that that which is farthest away from the head – the seat of all reason – did not warrant serious sartorial consideration. However, that the shoemaker also held some sway in the public imagination, as shoes were understood as potential social leverage, can be seen in what Ferragamo recounts in his autobiography.

Ferragamo's desire to produce shoes came from a number of influences: his family, especially his mother and sisters, the Church, and the small southern Italian town of Bonito, Avellino, in the Campania region. It was the mix of provincialism and the Church's influence on civilian behaviour that provoked Ferragamo's passion for shoemaking. As he recounts, it was his two sisters' communion that "brought forth," to borrow a Heideggerian concept, his shoemaking dreams. Ferragamo relates his first memory of his mother's dread over not having "scarpette bianche" for his two sisters' communion (17). Overnight, at the age of nine, he designed them shoes (ibid.). As he recalls, it would have been a terrible thing for them not to have white shoes to wear to Church for their communion, but his family was poor, and shoes for them were a real luxury. Ferragamo's mother went to many of the townspeople to ask if they could lend her shoes for the girls' communion.³⁹ When no one obliged, Ferragamo decided, the night prior to the communion, to make the shoes himself. So his first vision of shoemaking was tied up in small village ideas of shoes being symbols of status, of appearances, and of respect for the Church.

³⁹ Borrowing shoes amongst townspeople for special occasions was a common practice, unless you were part of the caste of 'signori' - the landowners (Ferragamo 18).

For Ferragamo, shoes were a means to demonstrate a family's worth, a point discussed in Thorstein Veblen's look at conspicuous consumption in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In this economic treatise, Veblen examines the leisure class that arose during the American industrial revolution of the late 1800s and explores the phenomenon of consumption made purposefully visible as a sign of status, which he terms conspicuous consumption (Veblen 42), noting that "men work so that their worth can be exhibited through the conspicuous consumption of their wives' spending" (ibid.). Indeed, Ferragamo describes how men wore functional shoes in the small towns he knew, and it was the women who wore the splendour of their husbands' worth. They were the ones who would buy shoes from him. Ferragamo himself went barefoot, even when he started making shoes on his own, at the age of 12 (23). Ferragamo's motivations and successes were tied up to a passion for shoemaking, a love for his family, and dreams of prosperity. Ironically, his vocational choice and his desire to prosper directly reflected the general belief of his fellow townspeople that shoes had the ability to literally improve your social status.

Designers' Rights

If the stiletto was a feeling in the air, how much of it can be attributed to one designer? With designers' newfound prestige came a concern over intellectual property rights, as demonstrated by Ferragamo's own incessant drive to patent his designs. In her introduction to *Museo Salvatore. Idee, Modelli, Invenzioni*, Stefania Ricci notes that she was able to trace 368 patents that Ferragamo registered from the period of 1929-1964 (10). Quite a few heel patents were registered in 1956 (Di Somma 56), which was "something quite unusual in the world of fashion, where the previous season's creations tend to be

viewed as passé and therefore not worth patenting” (Ricci 10). Ferragamo was very keen on preserving his designs despite noting in his autobiography, “fashion is a sense in the air, it does not emerge from one creator, it is an expression of what the world desires” (208). This explanation was meant to explain, or justify, why his and Dior’s designs complemented each other in 1947, when they were both granted the Neiman Marcus Award.

Ferragamo’s autobiography is a testament to the value Ferragamo saw in himself as an artist rather than simply a shoe producer. He vehemently critiqued the mass production he encountered in America, for example, at Queen Company, the shoe company he first worked for when he arrived in America around 1914. He declares that Queen Company was not a place for ‘calzolari’: “Io ero un calzaiolo, non un rifinitore o un tagliatore o un orlatore, né avrei mai lavorato così, a pezzi e bocconi come esigevano i metodi di produzione di massa” (42).⁴⁰ He insists that he must see his creations from beginning to end and that they should not be produced en masse.

Ferragamo’s experience as a cobbler and his commitment to his creations echo Heidegger’s notion of “bringing forth” a thing (318). In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger uses the example of a silversmith to explore how a chalice comes to be. The silversmith is responsible for the chalice inasmuch as he is able to bring it out of concealment into unconcealment (318). The silversmith is responsible for pondering ‘that’ which is to appear and the ‘how’ - a process of causality (316). Ferragamo’s confession reflects this sense. Ferragamo speaks of an innate capacity to be a cobbler. He says he was

⁴⁰ “I was a cobbler, not a finisher, or a cutter, or a trimmer, nor would I ever work in that manner, in pieces and small bites like the methods of mass production demanded.”

born for it. It came naturally to him: “Ricordo con esattezza la prima esperienza di questo ‘ritorno della memoria.’”⁴¹ He considers the fact that he can create so many styles “a return of memory” and claims that he does not have to search for models – they resided within him (61) so that his shoe creations were a direct revelation of ideas of shoes that he already possessed in memory. As he notes, it was his desire to liberate the female foot after having been in concealment for a long period of time during the war years that led him to design heels (58).

On an individual level, patents held another value for Ferragamo. While it may appear as though Ferragamo was trying to protect his invention on moral grounds, for acknowledgment purposes, there was also an economic advantage to being considered sole inventor. As Margherita Martelli notes in her look at patents in the central archives of Italy:

in generale il brevetto, qualunque sia la sua natura, modello, marchio, invenzione, e un titolo in relazione al quale e conferito un “monopolio temporaneo di sfruttamento sul trovato oggetto del brevetto stesso, consistente nel diritto esclusivo di realizzarlo, di disporne, e di farne oggetto di commercio, non che di vietarne a terzi di riprodurlo, usarlo, metterlo in commercio, venderlo o importarlo (20).⁴²

As Ferragamo notes in his autobiography, he returned from California to open up shop in Italy, where he asks, “where if not in Italy would I find good shoemakers?” (96). While design ingenuity may have been Ferragamo’s sole reason for returning, the cost efficiency

⁴¹ “Remembers with exactness the first experience of this return to memory.”

⁴² “Generally, the patent, of whatever nature, model, brand, invention, is a title in relation to which a ‘temporary monopoly of usage of the so found object of the patent itself, consisting in the exclusive right of manufacturing, utilization, and commerce, as well as the prohibition to third parties of its reproduction, use, commercing, selling or importing.’”

of his return to Italy may have also played an important role, as he himself notes, but does not directly attribute as a reason for his return: “In Italia i salari sono più bassi che in America, il che significa che, anche con le spese di trasporto, il costo della produzione sarà uguale se non inferiore a quello che affrontiamo qui. E comunque le scarpe fatte a mano pagano una tassa di importazione più bassa di quelle fatte a macchina” (97).⁴³ Therefore, it was clearly profitable for an object to be made by a prestigious designer, but also to note the fashionable object’s provenance: made in Italy or France.

It is here that questions of intellectual property rights come into play. If it is a general sentiment, can there really be an originator of an idea? Ferragamo’s incessant efforts at patenting every one of his shoe ideas, models, and modifications highlighted his desire to be recognized and remembered as the sole creator of his designs. In her look at Ferragamo’s patents and the function of patents in general, Giovanna Ricci notes, “patents play an objective, fundamental role in a historical reconstruction of a period or a product” (Ricci 11). However, regardless of Ferragamo’s persistent attempts at protecting his designs, controversy exists over who the stiletto’s exact creator was. Yet, “thanks to [patents] we can re-interpret and sometimes even rewrite a story which we thought we knew completely” (Ricci 11) simply by being able to revisit these “‘contracts’ between the inventor and the community” (Roncaglia 26).

The rise of the designer and his patents holds a dual function. While it acknowledges individual creativity, it also promotes national development. As Manetti notes, a patent not only recognizes an author’s ingenuity but also acts as a measure of the innovative activity

⁴³ In Italy, salaries are much lower than in America, which signifies that even with the cost of shipment, the cost of production would be equal if not inferior to those we pay here. And, besides, handmade shoes pay less import taxes than those machine produced”.

of the country in which the patent is granted (Manetti 31).⁴⁴ Therefore, we get comments such as Steele's "Italian shoemakers invented the stiletto heel." "Some scholars have highlighted the fact that [through patents] the State encourages inventiveness" (Manetti 30), so that, for example, "form was considered the distinctive feature of Italian design during the decade commencing in the mid-1930s and following the next two" decades as "trademarks emerged bearing such names as 'Pompeiano' a name given to a line of shoes (Ricci 50). Ferragamo's designs and collaborations with Italian artisans "highlighted the fact that Italian design never forgets the ornamental wealth and decorative repertoire of its past culture" (Ricci 53). The designer's efforts were not only indicative of personal prowess but of collective ingenuity as well.

As we have seen, designers became cultural devotees aimed at preserving nationalistic sentiments. They also became nationalistic fodder, as seen in Dior's incessant desire to preserve French fashion and designers by supporting Vivier. Pochna notes how Dior had "a strong sense of patriotism and his memories of the way in which French couture had almost gone under forever because of the war, he felt like a man on a mission" (Pochna 175). Dior, in fact, "became something of a public speaker" as he felt himself a link to France's artistic and cultural legacy, and he aimed to preserve and promote "the supremacy of French quality and the talents of our designers" (Pochna 223).

Designer Bodies, or Women by Design

"Thus there exists an education in walking, too."
(Mauss 72)

⁴⁴ So here too, one might be inclined to ask why the country should be acknowledged. Does this not complicate the issue of individual designer? Are we not then saying it is the author of the work and his country that are responsible for the idea?

“It is not hard to see that the struggle for gay male liberation and women’s liberation is a common struggle: both mean freedom from the stigma of being female” (Dworkin, Woman Hating 90).

“The fantasies (indicative of structural mental sets) which oppress male homosexuals and women are very much alike. Women and male homosexuals are united in their queerness, a union which is real and verifiable – ..., which contributes to the cultural oppression of both” (Dworkin, Woman Hating 90).

The perceived uniqueness of the new designer object fit well with the growing sense of individual taste and a growing awareness of fashion, as Hamilton as well as Provoyeur note (Hamilton 60). There was a clear recognition that possession of consumer goods could be a statement of personality and individuality, and it was here that women became the new fashion’s biggest proponents. Writing in 1905 on “Fashion,” Simmel noted how fashion managed to give women a place to express their own individuality, which had been historically denied them: “the fact that fashion expresses and at the same time emphasizes the tendency towards equalization and individualization, and the desire for imitation and conspicuousness, perhaps explains why it is that women, broadly speaking, are its staunchest adherents... due to her lack of differentiation... and the weakness of her social position” (143). Simmel sees fashion as “...the valve through which woman’s craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields” (144). Fashion becomes women’s outlet for individualization. As women purchase things to make them distinct, to differentiate themselves, and to express their own individuality, the ‘designed’ object enters the cultural discourse as a desirable object.

In this milieu, women's individuality came at a price. In regard to their desire for luxury goods, it was a price they themselves could usually not afford but which required their patron, husbands to pay for. Therefore, women were not necessarily freed from the institution of ownership, of previous generations, as Veblen reminds us (30-1). This new leisure or vicarious class, Veblen explained, found its best illustration in women, who exhibited their husband's worth through the conspicuous consumption of their spending (42). He concludes his look at the role of women in this new class by stating, "she becomes the ceremonial consumer of goods which [her husband] produces. But she still remains chattel, for habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is abiding mark of the unfree servant" (57). While women appear to be free to purchase what they desire, to help mark their difference, it nonetheless inadvertently reflects their husband's worth rather than their own, at least for married women. Dior noted the potential of this newly burgeoning consumer society in America by the mid 40s (187). However, many American husbands also disapproved of Dior's New Look: "They declared their outrage at the exorbitant bills they would be forced to run up if their wives followed the new fashion, with its decadent use of copious fabric. They formed a group known as the League of Broke Husbands and claimed a membership 30,000 strong" (178).

Nonetheless, designers such as Dior, Ferragamo, and Vivier enjoyed much success, as they tapped into this new outlet to design for the new modern woman. Provoyeur notes that for women, the 1920s was "la période de ces 'années folles,'" the crazy years, where they could explore all audacity. The rise of a fashion-conscious market was best manifested through women perceived as the expression of eccentricity, which reflected this new

burgeoning consumer culture, as well as the search for new forms, as reflected in the aesthetic modernist movements of the day (12).⁴⁵

At the same time as women's bodies were being used as expressive canvases, something else was happening to those bodies. The designer now took hold of them and had a role to play in how they were constructed and how they moved in the new social sphere women had entered. These designer bodies were just that: bodies designed by designers, who mostly happened to be men. In 1934, Marcel Mauss published his look at the techniques of the body, and he noted how actions such as "...walking or swimming, for example, and all sorts of things of the same type, are specific to determinate societies" (70), in that particular ways of walking, gesturing, or as he terms it, 'habits' are acquired, learned (73). Mauss notes the social impact on our individual bodies, and he suggests even our walking styles vary from society to society and from various times: "This was an acquired, not a natural way of walking. To sum up, there is perhaps no 'natural way' for the adult" (74). In relation to shoes in particular, he notes, "A fortiori when other technical facts intervene: to take ourselves, the fact that we wear shoes to walk transforms the positions of our feet: we feel it sure enough when we walk without them" (74). A shoe designer, who designs something like the stiletto, can therefore be understood as having an impact on how women conduct their bodies, instructing their comportment, and as such also informing the meanings of those bodies. Male designers' fantasies literally come to be embodied in the female body. As such, designers played a direct role in the general perception of femininity perpetuated by their designs. Women, perceived as canvases, were

45 "Ils sont l'expression de l'excentricite' autant que l'occasion de la recherché de formes nouvelle... acquiert ainsi, peu a peu, une conscience de mode avertie du moment propice ou le culte du corps naturel prend le pas sur un ideal d'elegance fonde sur l'ornament" (Provoyeur 12).

meant to reflect the fluidity of design that was the aesthetic norm of the times. As Provoyeur notes, women themselves were to reflect an arabesque fluidity from the hip to the thigh, knee, calf, neck of the foot, to the tip of the fingers (50).⁴⁶ Designers worked to accentuate this saleable feature. A woman's foot was to stand on its tip like that of a dancer's, at the price of its comfort and its balance – this was the ideal of the era (Provoyeur 50).⁴⁷ Saillard makes note of this as well, as he also reiterates Provoyeur's conclusions:

Lifting the foot onto the toes and aligning the woman more closely with the dancer – despite the cost to her comfort and equilibrium – was the ideal of the time. The spirit of the stiletto heel comes out of this preoccupation with giving the leg a fluid, arabesque profile that sweeps from the hip to the thigh, from the knee to the calf, from the instep to the extremity of the toes (8).

Along these lines, the tendency to uncover the foot as much as possible led to plunging neck lines and also to the heightened heel that put the female foot further on display (Provoyeur 46).

More recently, Bruno Frisoni, a shoe designer for Vivier, noted in an interview for a *Roger Vivier* tribute, how designing shoes for women is closely tied to the opportunity to explore one's creativity: "As a designer, I love the extremes between the two [high and low heels]. Naturally, when you have higher heels, you can express more. With the lower heel

46 "arabesque fluide allant de la hanche a la cuisse, du genou au mollet, du cou-de-pied a l'extremite des doigts" (50)

47 "dresser le pied sur sa pointe, rapprocher la femme de la danseuse au prix de son confort et de son equilibre, constitue l'ideal de l'epoque" (50)

it's very difficult..." (169).⁴⁸ When probed as to "Why can you 'express more' with the high heel?," Frisoni answered, "You have more space to work with. When designing a lower heel, it's very difficult not to make it look ungainly. If you put a shoe on a table or a stage, it will always look beautiful but when you wear it, it's on the floor" (169). There is simply more room for 'designing' with a high heel, and the designer who uses the woman's body to express his own creativity seems to embark on a relation of exploitation for his own gains.

Women are not only subject to designer's whims, but also to those of the marketplace. Reflecting on a Naturalizer ad of the 1970s, whose caption read: "We can assume that the majority of women's pumps were designed by men who had domineering mothers and unhappy childhoods" (*Shoes* 63), Valerie Steele aptly points out that the "advertisement implies that women have long been oppressed by male designers" (Steele, *Shoes* 63). When considering all the shoe-a-holic forums that exist, not to mention the success of the syndicated show *Sex and The City*, it appears as if women *do* have a say in their choices, even if heel fashion is dictated by male fantasy, as suggested by the Naturalizer advertisement, the pinup pictures, and the nose art on Second World War military planes (Semmelhack *Heights* 44). However, that choice is subject to consumerist fantasies, which are born out of, in many cases, the male imagination.

To understand this relation further, we can consider how making men and women's shoes is perceived differently from a designer's point of view. When asked about women's and men's shoes, Frisoni replied, "The concept of men's and women's shoes is totally different; as is the approach. Men's shoes are meant to be comfortable whereas women's shoes are designed to be beautiful but are less concerned with comfort. Men's shoes should

⁴⁸ Bruno Frisoni is also an independent shoe designer, with his own eponymous brand.

be allowed to age and be viewed as an investment” (170). As Cate Blanchett notes in the same interview alongside Frisoni, “A woman constantly needs to change her shoes whereas a man can grow into a pair of shoes. It’s accepted that his shoes have a longer history” (172). She prefaces this thought by acknowledging her own envy of men’s shoes: “I envy the weight [of men’s shoes]. There’s something about men’s shoes, which feels planted. With women, you can flout this; you don’t have to adhere to it” (172). What exactly can women flout, not being planted in her shoes or supplanting the idea that women have history at all? Blanchett’s comment points to a conflicted sentiment, which reflects the contradictory power of the heel.

Through the male designer’s eyes women are viewed as pillars of beauty, and all their objects accompany them on that pedestal or in that caricature. When Catherine Deneuve was asked why she didn’t want high heels, and why most of the women of her generation, Ava Gardner, Monica Vitti, Brigitte Bardot, Marilyn Monroe,⁴⁹ “the women who

⁴⁹ The reference to Marilyn Monroe in this list is somewhat unclear since she was known for wearing high heels and for her infamous quote, “I don’t know who invented high heels, but all women owe him a lot.” See also the following picture of a tribute to her devotion to Ferragamo shoes in the Museo Ferragamo (Fig. 22),

have left their mark on the history of cinematic eroticism – never wore high heels. How do you explain that?” Deneuve replied:

It wouldn't have even occurred to us. What we were all seeking, the actresses as well as the filmmakers, was to create a movement. That is what cinema is all about. And one cannot walk properly in very high heels. But also, we believed in an idea that no longer means anything for people today: that having a natural allure was the most important thing. That's what counted most for all of us (143).

When Ines de la Fressange interjects: “What happened to make women suddenly want to hoist themselves up on their heels like that?,” Deneuve replies:

It doesn't come from what women want. It's something that comes out of a slightly twisted desire, which, for that matter, makes for a twisted way of walking. I suspect

which are predominantly high heels.



Fig. 22. Courtesy Museo Salvatore Ferragamo (Florence) and Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome)

that it has its origins in the minds of designers – designers who have pushed the limits – who were imagining an extreme woman; everyone has fallen for it, women’s magazines first and foremost. Nowadays, a silhouette must be strong; it must create an effect, make an impact... all these powerful words (143).

The female body is interpreted through powerful words, which become a caricature of those concepts. As Deneuve later adds in her interview:

You must remember that in the 1960s, high-heeled shoes were for women of ill-repute. They were reserved for those who were obliged by their profession to live up to a caricature. Do women today really want to make caricatures of themselves? (143).

The concept of caricature that Deneuve brings up echoes feminist writer Andrea Dworkin’s look at women as caricatures of a romantic ethos of what it means to be a woman. In *Woman Hating*, Dworkin reflects on the role transvestites play in helping define what it means to be feminine. She notes, “It is commonly and wrongly said that male transvestites through the use of makeup and costuming caricature the women they would become, but any real knowledge of the romantic ethos makes clear that these men have penetrated to the core experience of being a woman, a romanticized construct” (114). What the transvestite brings to light in all his/her caricatured glory is that while they may be perceived as poking fun of women, it is that, being woman *IS* to be a caricature, to be a farce – they merely reiterate (promote, advance) what is already figured to be woman in society – a manipulated caricature, a construct often devised by male designers.⁵⁰

50 Dworkin’s argument here is also pertinent to the French trio example discussed in Chapter 5.

One point that the transvestite brings to our attention, in regard to the effects of the stiletto as female object, is what Virginie Mouzat, French fashion critic for *Le Figaro*, considers “the power of high heels – their intrinsic power, to detach themselves from the female body” (42). Here the heel is seen as having a life of its own regardless of being a female object. Its power lies in its ability to actually be removed from the female body and can be used to tease her in a sense – that while woman is stuck in her body, the heel – as object – can nonetheless be removed from her body and used to taunt her, to suggest, I can leave your body you can’t. The heel becomes free to attach itself to others, to other meanings, to play with meanings, and can be used against women, to poke fun of them, etc. Mouzat goes on to note, which closely reflects Dworkin’s point:

A dialogue ensues between heels and men, to whom the principle [sic.] interlocutor [woman] seems quite strange by virtue of a passive participation. The pounding of heels on the pavement is not the echo of women’s walking; rather, it is the sound of the pages of a book that the stilettos promise. Stiletto: a word whose root recalls the stylus, the pen. (44)

Here, she hints at the stiletto as a story drawn up by men for men, as she ties the stiletto back to its roots as stylus, to that which *penned* ‘her’ in the first place. To play with this pun on penning, I would conclude by asking the question Mouzat also raises: “Are heels the bars on the prison of the ‘weaker sex’? Perhaps” (43).

The stiletto was, therefore, born as an functional yet artistic object, a ‘designer’ object, which grants value to the ‘designer(s)’ that envisioned it, and it comes to demonstrate how even functional objects can be valued artistically. However, this value attributed mainly to male designers was born on the bodies of women. So the stiletto

emerges as an object demonstrating the ingenuity of male design at the same time as it turns the woman's foot into a sexualized object – a fetish. Women, who, as Simmel notes, were eager to demonstrate their own worth, their own value, turned to fashion as one of the only outlets available for them to express themselves, and the stiletto was an object that enabled women to define themselves – consider, for example, Marilyn Monroe and her collection of Ferragamo heels that lent her her particularly memorable wiggly walk.⁵¹ Yet, their own expression depended on the celebrated expression, first and foremost of the men who designed the clothes and accessories she wore, who imagined her in the first place.

Women Shoemakers? Can There Be?!

I was not able to find historical examples of women shoemakers. While many famous female dressmakers and milliners exist, such as the famous French dressmaker to Queen Marie Antoinette, Marie-Jeanne Rose Bertin, there were no notable female shoemakers. The Pompadour heel may have been named after Madame Pompadour, the favourite mistress of King Louis XV, but she did not design the heel, and it is more commonly known as the “Louis heel.” The famous designer of this shoe was Nicholas Lestage, French shoemaker to Louis XIV. While Elsa Schiaparelli was a prominent female designer of the early twentieth century, her shoes, were created by André Perugia.

One reference I was able to find, in the New Orleans *The Times-Picayune*, on the 31st of August 1879, noted, “The commencement of the present century found amateur shoemaking quite a passion among the ladies” (3). I found further evidence of this practice in the work of Noreen McGuire from the Victoria and Albert Museum, who notes in her

⁵¹ Rumour has it that Monroe had cut off part of her heel to gain that wiggly walk. I came across this in my search, but cannot, at present, relocate the quote.

essay “The Genteel Craft of Subversion: Amateur Female Shoemaking in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries” for the Bloomsbury material culture collection on *Love Objects*: “female amateur shoemaking in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a leisure activity of the upper and middle ranks of society that is almost completely absent from the history of shoemaking and the history of women’s craft” (53). McGuire notes how, for example, in September 1814, Jane Austen wrote to her niece to inform her “that your Grandmama desires me to say that she will have finished your shoes tomorrow & thinks they will look very well” (55). This was a common fashionable practice for upper-class women, who would exchange goods as a sign of devotion, love, and friendship (53). McGuire attributes the lack of recognition of shoemaking as a women’s craft to the controversial distinction that “low-status male-gendered work was taken up by high-status women,” a point, McGuire finds, was highly controversial for upper-class sensibilities, as many “linked female shoemaking with sexual misconduct and intrusion into the male world of business” (62). She concludes that the reason this women’s craft is absent from the historical literature is due to the fact that it does not fit with “clear-cut portrayals of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women’s behaviour” (62). Alas, here as well women are censured for their relationship with shoes, this time not for wearing the wrong shoe, or perhaps it is precisely for wearing or mixing with the wrong shoes – that of the cobbler.

While the lack of female shoemakers may be a historical reality, it no longer holds true, as the twenty-first century has seen a marked increase in the number of female shoe designers. In *Shoes*, Linda O’Keeffe makes note of prominent and influential female shoe designers, such as Beth Levine, Vivienne Westwood and also includes Elsa Schiaparelli

(404). Already in the twentieth century, women began to concern themselves with designing shoes as a profession, such as Levine in the 1950s, an early American pioneer. As the decades passed, more women have come on the scene.

It is important to note that most of the main shoe designers today, both male and female, merely design shoes but are not actual cobblers. This divide between craftsman and designer is due, as Andy Hamilton notes, to the rise of industrial production that brought a division between the two tasks, and the severing gave rise to the designer as celebrity figure (58). The task of creating shoes, as shown in the CBC documentary *High Heel Confidential*, is reserved for a small group of artisans, some of whom work in Italy, particularly in the Emilia Romagna region, where they create the lasts for designer shoes. Particularly in Forli, at the *Formificio Romagnolo*, a number of high-end shoe designers, such as Patrick Cox, have their shoes formed.⁵² But these craftsmen remain the silent voices behind the shoes themselves.

Currently, there are a number of women who design shoes. In 2009, the publisher daab media gmbh, which specializes in art books, published a catalogue entitled *Shoe Design*. This beautifully illustrated book, presented in five languages (English, German, Spanish, French and Italian), highlights 49 creative/artistic shoe designers from around the world, with the aim of showing “the great variety of creativity found in footwear design today” (8). Many of these designers not only design but also produce their shoes. Of the 49 artists featured, 22 are female. I list them here as their works are worth noting both for their historical value as well as their creative ingenuity.

⁵² <http://www.formificioromagnolo.it/index.html>

A number of the female shoe designers started off either collaborating or designing for a famed male designer but at some point decided to break off on their own; for example, Nicole Brundage from Houston (TX), USA, first studied art history, then moved into shoe designing, soon collaborating with Blahnik to create Zac Posen's autumn/winter 2004 and presenting her first collection in Paris in 2006 (52). She has also designed capsule collections for Salvatore Ferragamo (52).⁵³ Then there is the case of Julia Hederus, a London designer, who approached k-swiss to develop a collection of innovative sneakers to complement her MA menswear collection for Central St. Martin's and designed the Hederus line for K-Swiss in 2006 (114).⁵⁴ Chie Mihara is based in Alicante, Spain. She was born in Brasil of Japanese parents and worked for Charles Jourdan before launching her own extremely successful brand in 2001 (220).

A number of prominent female shoe designers are based in London, UK, due in part to the recognized training facility, linked to the Cordwainer College, the famous London College of Fashion. Other training sources are also emerging in London, such as the Prescott & Mackay School of Fashion and Accessory Design, which offers short courses in shoemaking. These schools seemed to be responding to the new need in the market, after the 1990s brand craze, to have items that are unique and that are produced in an environmentally sound manner. As consciousness grows and a desire to protect the environment, so too does the desire for small-scale artisanal production, which also encourages a do-it-yourself desire, promoted by quick clothing and accessory design retreats. Here we see a number of women working from this conscious position. For

⁵³ See: <http://www.nicolebrundage.com/>

⁵⁴ For an example of her block collection see: <http://juliahederus.com/blocks/>

example, the UK designer Caroline Groves deals in exotic and vintage 1930s styles. She is a member of the London College of Fashion Advisory Board and a freeman of the *Worshipful Company of Cordwainers* (98). Another UK designer Meher Kakalia, originally from Pakistan, established her own factory in London, where she employs local craftspeople to do embroidery that cannot be done with machines (134). Many of her designs contain embroidered elements, making them appear very feminine;⁵⁵ she works both with flat and mid-height heels that have a sense of exoticism due to the Indian details, such as the “Ryu” inspired by the Moghul Court of King Jehangir.⁵⁶ Natacha Marro also works in London, UK, where she designs pornographic-like fetish shoes, of which Gwen Stefani happens to be a big fan (190). Tracey Neuls, also based in London, UK, but born in Canada, launched her own women’s footwear brand TN_29 in 2000 but now is TRACEY NEULS (250). She designs low-heeled, sensible but unique shoes. Another student of the Cordwainers, Charlotte Olympia, is in London, UK and designs platform styled heels. Beatrix Ong, also in London, UK, launched her luxury shoe brand in September 2002. She too began her career working for a famed male designer, Jimmy Choo. Marlos Ten Bhömer, a Royal College of Art Product Design graduate, pushes the boundaries of design as she mixes materials to create very artistic pieces rather than wearable shoes (322). Atalanta Weller also studied at Cordwainers and worked for Clarks and Bruno Magli before setting out on her own (344).

While there happen to be many female shoe designers based in London, there are also a number of women in other parts of the world, albeit not as a large representation as in the London female shoemaker/designer scene. Laya Rahman, a Parisian designer,

⁵⁵ Practices popular in the eighteenth century where many of the velvet shoes and boots were replete with flower designs.

⁵⁶ See: <http://meherkakalia.com/>

started her career as a photographer, actress, and filmmaker. She started Cindy Glass in 2005 and opened her first Paris shop in 2007 (92). The shoes shown in the text are all stilettos, and her Summer 2011 continues that trend: many stilettos, high wedge soles, and a few sandals.⁵⁷ Another Parisian designer, Estelle Yomeda, designs for and from her unique world. A truly Parisian spirit, her faithful followers include Bjork (360). Her styles vary: very romantic, colourful and playful, many flats, and she mixes materials and colours. Susan Dimasi and Chantal McDonald, who launched their brand in 2003, head the team Materialbyproduct from Victoria, Australia. They have also made commissions for Bjork (206). Julia Lundsten is a Finnish-born London designer who launched her own label, FINSK, in 2004. She combines references to Nordic architectural elements with an intellectual, yet humorous point of view (180). Her shoes are examples par excellence of the avant-garde object, although they are said to be “wearable.” Her shoes are imbued with architectural details in the heel and platform while the uppers remain clean and devoid of embellishment.⁵⁸ A fellow Finn, Minna Parikka from Helsinki, Finland studied footwear design at De Montfort University in Leicester. Her designs are inspired by vintage styles from the fin-de-siecle (272). The Swiss designer Anita Moser launched her footwear collection in 2003. Her shoes feature strong, robust heels, platforms and stilettos (242). From Pontedera, Italy – the shoe last producing capital of the world – Gianna Meliani launched her own brand in 1985. She was born into a shoe-producing family, and her family’s factory produced shoes for many international brands; she fondly remembers Manolo Blahnik working closely with makers on the factory floor to produce lasts (214).

⁵⁷ See: <http://www.cindyglass.net/>

⁵⁸ See: <http://www.finsk.com/>

There is also Canadian born Tanya Heath who works and lives in Paris. In 2009, Heath came up with a multi-height heel with removable heels, and since then TANYA HEATH Paris has opened up shops worldwide, including in Toronto's Yorkville area (www.tanyaheath.com).

In a complete reversal of roles, some female shoe designers have also crossed over into challenging terrain by solely producing shoes for men. Bespoke shoemakers Deborah Carre and James Ducker, who are located in London, UK, united to form Carréducker (56). They seem to focus mainly on male shoes, which seems to me quite interesting because we have an example of a woman not only designing but also making men's shoes.⁵⁹ And she is not the only one. Marsu homme, an all-girl design team, Chrissy Hammond and Amy Low, from Sydney, Australia produce shoes for "the well traveled man"(196). Their shoes are also made from interesting, non-traditional materials, such as kangaroo leather, and the shoes are made in Italy and Brazil (196).⁶⁰ German-born Saskia Wittmer, who now resides in Florence, Italy, is one of the few female made-to-measure men's shoemakers in the world (350). She also has a shop in the heart of Florence, where she focuses on the men's bespoke market (350).

Having tapped into an area of design once reserved for men, these female shoe designers have expanded to play with all the various shoe forms, creating styles that range from the comfort shoe, the classic pump, the feminine stiletto, the fetish shoe to the avant-garde artistic object, and exploring their own potential as designers, while lending their own interpretation of the female and in some instances male form as well.

⁵⁹ See: <http://www.carreducker.com/>

⁶⁰ For examples see: <http://www.marsuhomme.com/about.html>

Conclusion

The stiletto has had a long and distinguished history. From its name's infamous beginnings as a dagger used by mercenaries during the Renaissance to its inception in the modern imaginary as a sexy shoe through its representation on WWII military planes, the stiletto has managed to bridge a large expanse of historical time while retaining its mystique and element of danger. Much like the Italian Renaissance villains, I Bravi, the stiletto's transformation into a woman's shoe has remained elusive and contested, manifested also in Ferragamo's persistent patent fight to affirm the shoe's cultural origins.

With the rise of the designer came many debates over the question of who was responsible for particular designs, and this tradition continues today as curators, critics, and scholars all vie to attribute the origins of particularly nineteenth- and twentieth-century designs to particular innovators. The stiletto, as a designer object, is subject to the same debate. While the debate over who invented the stiletto remains a mystery, some things can be seen to have heralded the object's appearance: the appeal of European design, in general, but more specifically, Parisian couture; the aesthetic sentiments of the time; the intellectual fervour; and the rise of design.

However, to attribute the heel to one particular designer foregoes the more important point that things emerge from a set of conditions, which reflect the perceived notions of gender in a culture. With the case of the stiletto, its most contested meanings are those related to the way in which it has shaped the representation of female bodies and the transformation of the female body into a sexualized thing. Not only did the term transform in meaning from an illicit weapon to the modern woman's heel, it has transformed the meaning of women's bodies as well, as a demonstration of the economization and

“universalization of their sexual desirability,” to which I turn in the next chapter (Pochna 185).

Chapter 2: Modern Working Girls' Shoes

“Woman as whore exists within the objective and real system of male sexual domination” (Dworkin, *Pornography* 200).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, heels have been a marker or sign of contentious and gendered economic relations since the early modern period. Historically, women have been no strangers to the exploitation of their bodies, whether in sex-work or in cases where their bodies become a tool to sell their labour.⁶¹ The heel has accompanied both the emancipated and exploited woman, not just to dress her as a figure of conspicuous consumption, parading her husband's wealth and upper-class standing, but also those women who had to stand on their own feet, who were economically disadvantaged and had to provide for themselves and in some cases their husbands as well. The stiletto has managed, in the span of its twentieth and twenty-first century life to literally help raise women out of, and often placed them back into, difficult lots. This chapter traces the ways stilettos have vanished and reappeared throughout the decades after their decline in the 1960s and the representations that ensued, as well as the way in which they provided women with a means to obtain and sustain economic stability, by means perceived as illicit and legitimate.

⁶¹ While I am more closely examining women who have taken their own steps at securing economic independence for themselves, I want to acknowledge those women who were/are exploited by others and who never see the fruits of their labour returned to them, as in the more common cases of prostitution and the very prevalent cases of human trafficking that exist throughout the world. Their stories need desperately to be told, as in the example of Amos Gitai's *Promised Land*, which displays the complex interactions that a globalized capitalist world gives way to, seen through the abhorrent practice of human trafficking. The film features the lives of Eastern European women who have been kidnapped by French traffickers, transported through the Bedouin desert by the Bedouins, and sold to the Israelis to be used by the Palestinians. The film made a lasting impression on me.

Designers of the 1950s recognized that it was a time of great change in North America. They realized money was to be made from the new urban fashion consumer, and an important democratization of fashion emerged with the development of ready to wear lines, first by Vivier in 1955 and followed by Charles Jourdan (Cox 40). Fashion was more readily available to a greater range of consumers, most predominantly the American stay-at-home mother and wife, who enjoyed conspicuous consumption as a sign of the middle-class family's well being and whom 1950s propaganda tried to position in a domestic frame, coaxing them to leave the workforce and return home.

The stiletto was one of the most indicative manifestations of these post-war realities, both in its commercial success and in the ways women used it to say something about themselves in the postwar world (40). As Cox underlines, "women were drawn to believe they needed to regain power at home, after having lost power in the workforce" (44), something the stiletto was well designed to help with. At the same time, the stiletto quickly became associated with the "bad girl," rather than the domesticated femme. The stiletto was understood as anti-maternal, and the riskiest of stars wore them (Cox 75). They were closely aligned with the 'sweater girl look,' which was popularized by the most provocative of Hollywood starlets and used as a clear sign of open resistance by women who were challenging predetermined domestic roles.

The stiletto helped challenge notions of proper femininity bound up as in the previous century with visions of competent motherhood. Louise Collins writes about the rise of the Barbie in the late 50s, noting how Barbie was perceived as a revolutionary idea, as she invited girls to imagine themselves in careers other than motherhood, she also taught girls to define themselves principally in relation to their looks (157). Collins notes

that Barbie was the material personification of this shift in gendered norms attributed as part of the “body project” (157). Quoting feminist historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Collins reiterates that “over the course of the twentieth century American girls came to define their identities largely in terms of external physical appearance, rather than, as in the nineteenth century, in relation to inward traits of moral character” (157). So, “self-definition for girls [during the twentieth century] becomes centrally a ‘body project,’ where a fashionable look and corporeal style are cultivated as constitutive of one’s identity” (ibid.). The stiletto played a role in this ‘body project’ as it too enabled women to imagine themselves as other than mothers, but it appears as a double-edged sword as it also encouraged women to present themselves as a “sexually appealing body” (157).

However, the stiletto did meet its challenges. As demonstrated, by the 1960s the stiletto had lost favour amongst women, but something else was ushered in to replace it. In one of its multitude of transformations in the 1960s it underwent a toe lift. As opposed to the metal spigot of the 50s, the pointy-toed winkle pickers were introduced in the late 1950s and early 1960s a fad that began in London, “when teenagers began to long for long-toed shoes – and each wanted hers to be longer than anyone else’s” (*Akron Beacon Journal* 14). On July 10, 1960, the Akron, Ohio, *The Akron Beacon Journal*, reported “Watch These Winkle-Pickers: They Point the Way to a New Shoe Style.” While not yet available, they quickly became a favourite among young American women, who wore them in an attempt to break away from the style popular with their mothers (Wright 202). The winkle-picker stiletto also seemed to challenge the notion of the dainty female foot, as smallness was not an actual virtue of this style shoe, as it worked to elongate the foot (Cox 84). As reported in the *Akron Beacon Journal*, “Their toes stick out as much as two inches beyond your real

toes, and a girl wearing them has to walk up a staircase one foot at a time – and sideways. Any man watching this waddle will immediately ask why any woman would want to make her feet look big” (14) (see Fig. 2.1). Already within one generation, the children of mothers who donned stilettos had altered the toe to stand apart from what they felt their mothers represented: “domesticity”.



Fig. 2.1. *The Akron Beacon Journal*, Akron,

Ohio. July 10, 1960. 14

The stiletto may have entered the domestic sphere to domesticate women, but instead many young women used it to escape from domestic duties and to stand apart from all things ‘maternal’. They even became symbols of super heroic power, as in the cases of the “American maid on the TV show *The Tick* [who] would use her stiletto as a lethal weapon to capture enemies” (O’Keeffe 130); Diana Riggs, who left her mark as Emma Peel in the British TV show *The Avengers* (Blanchard 40), and Lynda Carter, who as “Wonder

Woman” in the 1980s, also represented powerful female figures donning high heel boots, if not exactly stilettos.

With the sexual liberation of the 1960s, a new trend of eroticism developed. Sadomasochism became the language of revolt, and female oppression became sexualized (Cox 85)⁶². In fact, Britain’s example demonstrated this as vaudeville-like entertainment was on the rise, and the subversive 1960s heel found itself on another foot.

In England in the early 1970s, an interesting trend began. While some women had shed their stilettos for more sensible shoes during the 60s, men picked them up and began wearing them in the new sophisticated pubs, as reported in “Sophistication Hits the Pubs” by London correspondent David Lancashire for *Express and News* out of San Antonio, Texas: “what’s going on inside the *Crown and Anchor* – and hundreds of other taverns – is a revolution in British drinking habits, where one patron states, “Life’s getting more sophisticated an [sic.] pubs should be entertaining.” Lancashire states that while “the jugs of foaming beer haven’t changed... more and more pubs are going pop. It’s vaudeville, 1970” (79). Meanwhile, in the factory neighbourhood of Vauxhall

The Vauxhall Tavern, huddled beside a railway bridge near the Thames, is packed so full that the bartenders stand atop the bar... Half the crowd seems to be wearing lipstick and false eyelashes, but most of them are men. ‘Please clear the bar for cabaret time, boys and girls,’ minces the master of ceremonies, and out wriggles Lil, a young man in net stockings..., and even the heterosexuals applaud the professionalism of the act (79).

⁶² A further example of the advancement of the ‘body project’ as discussed by Louise Collins.

Lancashire describes the Vauxhall as “one of the headquarters of the drag fad that packs them in at about a dozen London pubs.” Another he notes is the *Black Cap* located in Camden Town, where London’s predominantly Irish construction workers resided, and where the feature attraction was “all alluring blonde singer Shane. In the daytime Shane is a bricklayer. He makes his own evening gowns and he even built the stage on which he dances in his stiletto heels” (79, from Mar. 29, 1970).

The trend of men wearing stilettos seemed to be a popular 1970s theme. One Mr. J.K. Windsor wrote to “Action Line” of the *Detroit Free Press* on August 25th, 1970, which also featured on the front page of the paper, “My men’s club is throwing a roaring ‘50s party, and I need a 1950-style women’s shoe for a skit I am in. If that’s not bad enough, they have to be a man’s size 12 ½ -C, please help” (1). To which Action Line replies, “We found a pair at the Hollywood Costume Shop in Dearborn... Shop owner Dick Nadeau told Action Line the shoes were made specially for a female impersonator” (1). The response was also accompanied by the following caricature (see Fig. 2.2):



Fig. 2.2. *Detroit Free Press*. Aug. 25 1970, 1.

While many North American and European women during the early part of the 1970s were still refusing stilettos, Russian women in 1970 “still teeter on stiletto heels and pointed toes” because, as Holger Jensen notes “In Russia, Shoes Make the Man” in *The Rockland County Journal News* on May 18, 1970, “Russian women seldom find the latest style.” As “one frustrated miss” put it, “I know square toes and low heels are in style but I can’t find any.” This news on Russian women’s use of stilettos seems to have spread, as it also appeared in a commentary in *The Ottawa Journal* on July 31, 1970 (6).

On August 17, 1970, in *The Corpus-Caller Times*, designer Victor Joris recalled how “in 1947 there were waist pinchers, girdles, stiletto heels. Now there’s none of that.” He attributes this to the rise of diet and exercise, which Fred Davis in turn attributes to a rising anti-fashion sentiment based on a health and fitness naturalism attitude popular in the 70s. As Davis notes, “the post 1960s physical fitness vogue swept North America and parts of Europe with its associated life-style emphases on jogging, non-smoking, weight reduction, exercising and nutritional asceticism” (92). As Joris notes of 1970s fashions, “Diet and exercise have replaced girdles, bras are soft and rounded, shoes have wider supportive heels. ‘everything is much freer’ he said” (16).

By 1971, stilettos were hard to find because stores did not stock them since they were not popular. Nonetheless, some girls still donned them: beauty contestants. Writing for *The Sydney Morning Herald* Lynne Bell asked on August 29th, 1971, “where, oh where, do the world’s beauty contestants get those terrible stiletto heeled shoes?” (156). Bell wryly commented, “So the stiletto heel went out of fashion five years ago? So what? It’s still a girl’s best friend if she wants to win a crown and a sash pronouncing her ‘Miss Something-or-other’” (156). Contestants reported stocking up on pairs from shops that had been selling them off in past years and that they were very careful not to ruin them. One contestant also noted, “modern shoes don’t give that certain shape to your legs” (ibid.).

By 1976, the stiletto was celebrating its comeback. While not entirely a welcomed return by all, “young girls who have worn only heavy clumpy shoes till now” were its main supporters and buyers, as noted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* by Fashion editor, Mary Wilkinson (1). As one shoe store owner, Mrs. Raymond Castles, put it, “The stiletto is a stupid fashion, but if the young kids want it there’s nothing you can do about it” (1). With

that came vehement concerns, criticisms and warnings: “With the imminent return of the stiletto heel – I counted seven pairs at a recent gala in Atlanta – chiropodists and podiatrists are obviously going to be working over time again... I’m told the stiletto heel was also responsible for the huge increase in varicose veins seen around town... even on some of the most fashion-conscious girls” (Shirley Lord, Nov. 27, 1977, “Stiletto Heel: Teetering Trap is Back” *Clovis News Journal*).

By the late 1970s, punk girls, such as Blondie, had reclaimed stilettos as an explicitly sexualized and fetishized item (Cox 85). The stiletto continued to appear as a fetish-like thing in cult films such as the 1975 *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, based on the musical, where the protagonist is a flamboyant transvestite who dons platform-stilettos, carrying forward the popular British vaudeville pub trend. The stiletto also appeared as a fetish in the art world, where British pop artist Allen Jones is credited for “most famously fetishizing the stiletto heel” (Blanchard 15) (see Fig.2.3). By the next decade, the fetish had crossed over completely into the mainstream while retaining this dark undertone (Cox 120). Once the stiletto had crossed over into the mainstream as a fetish, it was ready to become a female “power tool.”



Fig. 2.3. Allen

Jones, "Table", "Hatstand", "Chair", 1969, Phinnweb.org.

The 1980s were all about "tight skirts and stiletto heels" and "the Lana Turner look," as one M. Elliott noted in a "Letter to the Editor" dated June 10, 1980, in the Melbourne paper, *The Age* (12). Elliott lamented that, "the fiend who advocates a return to the Lana Turner look ('The Age', 4/6) is undoubtedly a male." This was in reference to an article that appeared on June 4, where fashion editor Cecile Poncet was calling 1980 "the year of the sweater" suggesting, "The sweater is sexy and fun and affordable to every woman. It puts back the curves and puts back the clock... to the 1940s Lana Turner look" (21). The Lana Turner look happened to be a popular reference in the 1980s because besides the return of the stiletto, the sweater dress rose to popularity as well from at least 1980 to 1984, where in *The Age* on March 17, 1984, they were also calling 1984 the "year of the sweater for ultimate chic." Elliott concludes her letter by stating, "No woman could possibly wish to

return to the dual enslavement of tight skirts and stiletto heels” (10). It appears that Elliott’s prediction was wrong. Perhaps hearkened by the rise of the sweater dress and its links to the sexy Lana Turner, whatever associations it drew from, the stiletto heel and tight skirts remained a mainstay in the 1980s.

The 80s also saw popular interest rise in another Hollywood starlet: Marilyn Monroe. As the Ohio *Akron Beacon Journal* reported in “Marilyn, My Marilyn,” on March 20, 1983, “some are calling it flirting with nostalgia: This rekindled fascination with Marilyn Monroe and her movies – *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Bus Stop*, *The Seven-Year Itch*, *Some Like It Hot...* Marilyn madness has kicked over into fashion. It’s been translated in a variety of ways for spring and summer: In off-the-shoulder evening gowns in white and cotton-candy pink netting and chiffon, stiletto heels, and painted-on, oversized moles at the corner of the mouth” (26).

The sexual commodification of women was a prevalent theme in the 1980s. The popularity of the “Avenging Angel” film series prompted a film review in *The Pittsburgh Press* on April 27, 1985, in which the protagonist, Angel, is described as “Honor student by day, prostitute by night... Molly dusts off her tank tops, miniskirts and stiletto heels and becomes – ta da – Avenging Angel, taking to the streets to learn who killed her man” (B9). *Flashdance*, the 1983 American romantic drama film directed by Adrian Lyne, featured a young girl who was trying to follow her dreams to be a famed dancer, by welding during the day and stripping at night. The theme also spilt over into non-fiction. In *The Eastern Herald* in Sydney, Australia, on August 22, 1985, Roberta Perkins discussed her book *Being a Prostitute*, “which was the result of several hundred of the 1,000 or so prostitutes that the authors estimate to be working in Sydney” (14).

Following this trajectory of the commodification of female sexuality, the 1980s also saw the rise of “Intimate Treasures,” an example of the newspaper advertisements that appeared featuring sexy lingerie (see Fig. 2.4). Semmelhack notes how “the American lingerie giant, Victoria’s Secret, decorated its stores to suggest nineteenth century bordellos... and published soft porn catalogs showing lingerie-clad, stiletto-wearing women” (“A Delicate Balance 242). She attributes the rise of luxury lingerie to the linkage between female success and sexual commodification and suggests that “The romanticization of late nineteenth century sexual commodification reflected tensions concerning female social and economic advances; these mirrored the mid-nineteenth century cultural focus on the courtesan, which also arose at a time when many women were calling for greater equality (Semmelhack, “A Delicate Balance” 242). In fact, in the 1980s “the successful businesswoman was depicted as aggressive, even predatory, both economically and sexually; she wore ‘killer’ shoes with toweringly high stiletto heels. Dominatrix references edged their way into fashion; insinuating professional women were ‘pros’ of a different sort ” (Semmelhack, “A Delicate Balance” 237).

Intimate Treasures



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Venus swimwear has an exciting new 1996 line of swimwear just for you! Our dazzling collection of over 100 styles has everything from exciting prints to colorful solids in all styles from 1-piece to bikinis and longer. With Venus you can mix sizes for a perfect bikini fit from size 3 to 15! Catalog **\$2.00**

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11 CAMELOT London Collection
Full-size color catalog features Europe's most provocatively alluring lingerie, swimwear and dresses. The finest quality garments brought to you direct from London at remarkable savings with a money-back guarantee. Features over \$130 worth of FREE goods. Catalog only **\$2.99**

19 GREETING CARD FANTASIES
Erotic art by OLIVIA, the High Priestess of Pin-Up. Over 100 images ranging from sensual to sophisticated sexuality. Communicate with your lover in this unique, exciting way. **0 CARDS** Catalog **\$2.00**

20 EXOTIC LINGERIE
ADD to your own collection or sell for full-pay time income. Finest, most extensive lingerie line worldwide. Lowest wholesale prices, no min. order. Confidential price lists, selling instructions (parties, etc.) and 60-p. glossy color live-modeled catalog. (S) Sizes S-M-L **\$16.00**
(L) Large Sizes 40-42-44 **\$18.00**

3 UJENA SWIMWEAR
Sizzling-hot swimwear all over on the most exclusive beaches around the world! We specialize in bringing you unique, high-quality swimwear and afterwear at very affordable prices. Sexy one-pieces, tops & bikinis, and much more! Catalog **\$2.00**

12 LACE & LOTIONS LINGERIE
Create those desirable moments with our exciting sexy lingerie, erotic lotions, and sensual games. Beautiful full size color catalog from Cosmopolitan House. Price of catalog refunded with 1st order. Catalog **\$5.00**

22 SEXY LINGERIE COMBO
2 for 1 Special. Enjoy being on the leading list of TWO of America's Premier Sexy Lingerie Catalogs. Get TWO full size, full color catalogs. Over 70 pages of hot, exciting men & women in the most up-to-date lingerie in America. Neither catalog offered elsewhere in this program. Each only **\$5.00**

4 SUNUP/SUNDOWN
HOT, SEXY SWIMSUITS THONGS & MORE THONGS - MEN'S TOO! For only \$2, Sunup/Sundown will send you their sexy swimsuit brochures for one whole year PLUS a \$2 SAVINGS CERTIFICATE good on your first order! And then you have an indefinite subscription! **\$2.00**

13 J. ROBERT LEATHERS
For today's fashion-conscious men and women. The J. Robert Leathers collection includes below-the-knee and mini-skirts, men's and women's jackets, dresses and button-styled tops in all the hottest colors. Enjoy the luxury of leather. Catalog **\$3.00**

23 DREAM DRESSER
Fashion fetish fantasy clothing. The most elite catalog available to the erotic shopper. Lingerie of leather, rubber, skin-tight stretch patent, 5" & 6" stiletto heel shoes and boots, open breast costumes, corsets, seductive dresses, unique bathwear unavailable anywhere. Catalog price refunded with 1st purchase. **\$19.00**

5 BEAU GESTE (for men)
6 BARE ESSENCE (for women)
Phenomenes - nature's very own sex attractant. Phenomenes are the silent language of love, sending out signals to the opposite sex. Use intimately or in concert with your favorite fragrance. It's dangerous, but worth the risk! (M) BEAU GESTE (S) BARE ESSENCE **\$19.95** each

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The most fashionable and functional clothing for your active lifestyle. Sensational dresses, skirts, tops, jackets and pants at very affordable prices. All these styles wash and wear beautifully and come in a host of exciting colors for fall or spring. Catalog **\$2.00**

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Exciting new catalog will be your passport to the sensual adventure of a lifetime. Packed with luscious lingerie, fabulous girths and lotions and much more. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Exclusive 50% discount on your first order. Catalog **\$2.00**

7 THE INTERNATIONAL MALE
A great place to shop for the man in your life. Over 52 color pages of cutting-edge fashions. Contemporary European and American sportswear. The latest and greatest, the hottest, most happening designers, plus a unique selection of international underwear. \$2 subscription, refundable with order **\$2.00**

15 THE UNDERGEAR CATALOG
Whether your man prefers the exciting or the traditional, you'll find it all here. Over 34 colorful pages of the absolute hottest underwear from Spain, France, Denmark and Milan. American classics too! Plus the latest in workout gear and contemporary loungewear. \$2 subscription refundable with order **\$2.00**

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Sensationally sexy high-heeled shoes and high-top boots. Specializing in spiced silks & heels. All sizes available up to 14. Wide & double wide too. 800# phone ordering available. Catalog **\$2.00**

9 BODY PRO
A revolutionary concept in exercise wear - Body Pro by Ujena. Body Pro's Special "Calorie-Burning Support Panels" actually help burn extra calories when you exercise. Special silhouette styling makes you look slimmer instantly. Find out how Body Pro's eight advantages can work for you. Catalog **\$2.00**

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Fig. 2.4.

The emphasis in the 1980s on pursuing economic success brought about the image of “power dressing,” with the stiletto as its emblem. Semmelhack recalls a *New York Times*’ proclamation in the 1980s that heels were the new female “power tools” to be used, like lingerie, by professional women to manipulate people through the power of sex appeal. As she drily notes, “Unfortunately, pay equity did not seem to be one of the things achievable by exploiting the ‘power’ of sex appeal” (*Heights* 62). Women newly entering the workforce were instructed by John T. Molloy’s controversial style manual *The Woman’s Dress For Success* “to dress conservatively if they wished to be taken seriously” (Semmelhack *Heights* 167). As women started to succeed in the business world, “the rhetoric questioning their attractiveness... escalated” (*ibid.*). Even in “sensible shoes,” women were ridiculed for “wearing sneakers and socks in their dowdy ‘dress-for-success’ suits” (*ibid.*). No matter how they wore suits, women were subject to criticism because, as Semmelhack notes, “success made women undesirable” (*Heights* 61).

However, many women paid no heed to the advice that career women adopt “a feminized version of masculine business suit, with modest heels, not to accentuate erotic femininity” (*ibid.*). Instead, as the decade progressed, a new type of businesswoman emerged: one with big hair, a short skirt and spiked heels – the office dominatrix (Miller 167). Some professional career women chose this option, the 1980s alternative to “dressing for success” (Semmelhack *Heights* 61). This look matched killer heels with mini skirts. As journalist Tamsin Blanchard notes in *The Shoe: Best Foot Forward*, “white stilettos and a clutch bag became the symbol of a generation of high-powered women” (15). This fashionable businesswoman “was represented as domineering, even predatory” (Semmelhack *Heights* 59). As Semmelhack notes, “The sexual suggestiveness of fashion’s

version of 'power dressing' revived the spectre of the sexually manipulative woman and insinuated that the corner office had not been attained through business acumen alone" (ibid.). The 80s working girl was seen "wearing high heels in the boardroom as well as the bedroom" (Blanchard 15).

During times of economic instability, objects with clearly marked gender differences, such as the stiletto, cycle back into discourses to help remediate gender anxieties, as both genders vie for their own economic stability. In the 1980s, as job market competition intensified and there was a sharp increase of women in the workplace, both sides of the gender divide seemed to favour more conservative dress (Semmelhack *Heights* 58). However, since women did not have a "comparable tradition of authoritative dress, much debate swirled around which modes of dress would earn them workplace security" (ibid.). As Cox notes, women could not wear clothes that made them seem frilly and ineffective; just as men do not go to work in Hawaiian tops, women also had to don a new uniform (118). The heel was adopted as a new form of this conservative attire, and the business Amazon was born (ibid).

The image of the office dominatrix held sway well into the 1990s in glamorous TV soap operas such as *Dallas*, which ran from 1978 to 1991, and *Dynasty*, which ran from 1981 to 1989 (Miller 167); in TV shows such as *Designing Women* (1986-1993), about a group of women who work together in an interior design firm; *Who's the Boss?* (1984-1992), which featured the divorced advertising executive, Angela Carter, who hires a former baseball player, Toni Micelli, as a nanny for her son; and *Moonlighting*, with Cybil Shepherd as part owner of the Blue Moon Detective Agency.

The backlash against women who chose to “power dress” was enormous. A number of iconic powerful female Hollywood figures donned stilettos to play erotic, dangerously seductive roles, beginning with Glenn Close, the obsessed stalker in the 1987 Adrian Lyne film *Fatal Attraction*, followed by Melanie Griffith in the 1988 *The Working Girl* all dressed up in her power suits and shoes, Sharon Stone in the 1992 Paul Verhoeven film, *Basic Instinct*, and Demi Moore in the 1994 Barry Levinson film, *Disclosure*. As Semmelhack notes, “the reclamation of female power – through suggestive dress and distinctly non-sensible shoes also served to revive age-old concerns about women’s propensity for economic folly” (*Heights* 63), undermining any attempt at economic independence or demonstration of worker’s skill. That this trend has continued can be seen in a commercial for the fall 2014 television show *Canada’s Smartest Person*, which depicted a woman crossing rocky terrain in high heels with the caption “this is not Canada’s smartest person.” The only escape from demonization is, ironically, via a willingness to conform to traditional gender roles, as in the 1990 Cinderella fairytale, *Pretty Woman*, featuring Julia Roberts and directed by Garry Marshall, where Cinderella is not the poor motherless girl at the mercy of the whims of an evil stepmother and her daughters, but rather a poor Hollywood hooker, who is only too happy to allow herself to be swept off her feet by a Prince Charming, in this case a very successful businessman played by Richard Gere.

Despite this backlash, by the 1990s the tensions seemed to slightly subside and the stiletto was more readily accepted, and rather than being perceived as a weight for women’s consciences, it came to “represent a fantasy of weightlessness, both for those who design them and the women who covet them” (Patricia McLaughlin, “The Unbearable Lightness of Spike Heels” June 12, 1997 *St.Louis Post-Dispatch*, 121). By the late 1990s,

fashion journalist Kathy Hung was reporting that stilettos were in vogue, in an article entitled “Sexual Heel-ing” in *The Indianapolis Star* from September 1997, calling it “fall’s neo-80s, tough-chic look.” Steele appears in this article offering an explanation for the appeal: “The stiletto puts women on a pedestal, yet holds them in bondage because of the precarious position it puts them in. Women in stilettos are endowed with sexual power to dominate, a concept that appeals to both sexes.” The woman in the stiletto was perhaps no longer to be feared.

The presence of the stiletto solidified in 1990s popular culture, where they were also seen to symbolize “girl power,” such as in the case of the all-girl band The Spice Girls, who appeared on the music scene in 1996 in raging high stiletto platforms (Cox 137). The Spice Girls, Madonna, Courtney Love, and a number of others helped usher in a new image of the fashionable, economically and sexually independent woman, who could support herself by performing on a stage that wasn’t a boardroom or a bedroom. In the process, “fashion became fashionable again” (Cox 138). All eyes turned to the glamorous world of fashion filled with lavish branded displays of excess sexuality and beauty. In Canada, *Fashion Television*, hosted by Jeanne Beker, made it to a major cable station, drawing viewers’ attention, including my own, every Sunday afternoon.

Another factor in the fashion world that helped the stiletto gain and maintain prominence was the rise of branding. As Blanchard notes, the 1980s was “the main era of status dressing, when the cult of the designer really exploded,” which ushered in an overall cultural brand name obsession (37). Numerous brands invested in rebranding themselves:

Two of the biggest influences on shoes, and fashion itself, have been the phenomenon that is Prada and the rejuvenation of the Gucci label. When Tom Ford

rekindled the Gucci flame, he did it with high heels. Ford took the idea of the stiletto one step further by designing metal heels – adding a dangerous frisson by implying that stilettos could really be used as a weapon (Blanchard 16).

Through the stiletto and its manifest connotations, Ford appended Gucci's appeal and reawakened a dying brand. The stiletto had clearly become a fashion icon, signalling that women had gained particular economic clout and there were increasingly more women able to afford the fashion.

In the world of fashion, a number of important characters helped to solidify the potency of the stiletto. Anna Wintour, who was appointed editor of *Vogue* in 1988, came to be known for wearing “limo heels,” which implied “women on the move, who were not just walking but were even too busy to do so, or too leisured” (Cox 138). The 1990s also saw the rise of the supermodel, with branding meeting modelling in the big six so defined by the magazine *Marie Claire*: Kate Moss, Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Stephanie Seymour, Helena Christensen and Claudia Schiffer (Valenti). Their presence permeated the pop culture world, often in the role of the bad girl. Seymour appeared in Guns N' Roses music videos as well as posing in *Playboy*, Christensen appeared topless in Chris Isaak's music video “Wicked Game,” while Campbell and Evangelista appeared in the music video for George Michael's hit “Freedom '90” alongside other famed supermodels, Christy Turlington and Cindy Crawford.

The image of the economically independent and sexually assertive '90s femme culminated in the television series *Sex and the City*, which followed four smart, professional and sexualized women as they navigated their lives in New York, one of the most symbolic and competitive cities to work in (Cox 137). The show was “a celebration of hypersexual

female single status,” as *Globe and Mail* reporter Sarah Hampson notes in her confession, “Kick My High Heel Habit? I’d Rather You Stab Me With A Stiletto!” (*Globe and Mail*). These strong, sexually assertive females came marching on the scene wearing stilettos, and through these women, the stiletto came to represent the assertive, economically independent and sexually liberated female, an image whose success can be measured by the show’s own success, both on screen and in its chick lit success.

The stilettos’ popularity is also evidenced in its co-optation by commerce. Stilettos appear on everything from umbrellas to t-shirts to bracelet charms to napkins (Hampson). As the target for these items are most often women consumers, their existence seems to allude to women’s own economic proclivities: to earn money independently and to shop for herself. The new millennium popularized retail therapy (Cox 150), and lucrative job careers enabled this practice. The stiletto motif that today adorns commodities such as tote bags, scarves, and key chains, seems to also give aging boomers the ability to still participate in the culture of desirable femininity by wearing high heels, only not on their feet, as Semmelhack notes in her interview with Hampson (Hampson *Globe & Mail*). This helps to explain why we are seeing more of such items (Hampson).

Linguistically, “stiletto” has also evolved and gained precedence as not only a type of heel, but as a type, creating new meanings and buzzwords, such as “stiletto pounce” and the more vulgar “stiletto pussy.”⁶³ As a prefix, “stiletto-“ forms numerous neologisms, such as stiletto-stoner, that draw on an image of the assertive, powerful, sexual, and in some cases economically independent femme while also playing on the femme fatale quality conjured

⁶³ Both terms were located in urban dictionary.com. Stiletto pounce suggests a fellow who has been attacked by a female in stilettos. Stiletto pussy means to have sex with a girl wearing stilettos.

up by women in stilettos, as in the “stiletto pounce” example. One thing is certain: none of the neologisms signal a good girl.

The term stiletto-stoner emerged to signify a particular type of woman who has gained economic independence and moved on to breaking other female conventions, such as smoking drugs – typically associated with male recreational activity. In the October 1st, 2009 issue of *Marie Claire*, there appeared an online article on “Stiletto Stoners,” a week after the moniker appeared in UrbanDictionary.com. The magazine describes these women as having “killer careers and enviable social lives... Among them is the upper-middle-class Pottery Barn set: One in five women who admitted to indulging in the previous month lives in a household earning of more than \$75,000 a year.” Kohen notes that these women “cut a wide swath across the professional spectrum, including lawyers, editors, insurance agents, TV producers, and financial biggies, looking nothing like the blotto hippie teens of *Dazed and Confused* or the unemployed, out-of-shape schlubsters who are a staple of the Judd Apatow canon” (Kohen). These “major potheads” are no hippy chicks. Rather, they are up-and-coming members of society, who have high-end jobs that come with numerous responsibilities. On Urban dictionary.com, stiletto stoner has two entries: the first states that they are “fairly young women (who can afford stilettos in the first place) with reputable jobs and families who smoke weed”, while the second reads:

These are smart, successful women who light up in their off-hours. These women are the balls-to-the-wall career animals whose idea of decompressing after a gruelling day isn't a glass of Chardonnay but a toke (or three) of marijuana—not just every now and again, but on a regular basis—the type who stashes a pack of E-Z Wider rolling paper in the silverware drawer or keeps a pipe at the ready next to a

pile of bills. By all outward appearances, they are card-carrying, type A workaholic who just happen to prefer kicking back with a blunt instead of a bottle.

The *Marie Claire* article describes one woman kicking off her black 'Marc Jacobs' pumps, slipping out of her trim 'Theory' blazer, and collapsing on the couch: "The 29-year-old corporate attorney for one of Manhattan's top law firms has just clocked another 12-hour day, and though it's over, she's having a hard time shaking off her frustrations." These women are dealing with major work stresses, and so to recover from a gruelling day at work:

Pelham insists that pot is the ideal antidote to a hairy workday: It never induces a post-happy-hour hangover and, unlike the Xanax a doctor once prescribed for her anxiety, never leaves her groggy or numb. 'Look, every female attorney I know has *some* vice or another,' Pelham shrugs, tucking her long brown hair behind her ears, her 3-carat cushion-cut engagement ring catching the light. 'It's really not a big deal'.

Despite the popularity of marijuana, a number of working women still prefer indulging in alcohol as a work-stress reliever. A manager at the Liquor Control Board of Ontario informed me that professional women form a large part of his wine purchasing clientele, something one can see in a new phenomenon in the wine world: wines targeted specifically to women. One now finds wine labels that feature woman in heels and female silhouettes. They may simply be an epithet that hearkens to a female experience, such as "Girls Night Out" wines, or their name may suggest some favoured feminine quality, such as "Skinnygirl" and "Skinnygrape," both of which have enjoyed considerable success (LCBO): "Calorie-reduced products continue to be a trend in the WINES category, particularly with women between the ages of 25 and 35" (LCBO).

There is even the eponymous wine brand “STLTO,” from the Abruzzo region in Italy, which attempts to retain all the stiletto’s connotations. The logo is a red stiletto heel for its red wines and a blonde stiletto heel for its whites. The heel in the logo appears to be bleeding through and is interrupted only by the brand name, which offers a subtle hint of the stiletto’s dangerous past, while embracing its new frontier as wine label geared to young women (see fig. 2.5).



Fig. 2.5. Stlto wine logo.

The effect of this label is to draw on two of Italy's substantial resources: winemaking and shoemaking, in order to establish the new brand's prestige as a new wine. The company story emphasizes that "STLTO is a seriously stylish wine from Italy, where both fashion and wine making are world-renowned... With its sleek bottles and stunning glitter cap closures, the STLTO collection is playful, seductive and versatile—just like a pair of fabulous stilettos."⁶⁴

This new wine not only revealed for me the gendered exclusivity of particular social activities, such as winemaking and drinking, the most fascinating and personally reassuring finding for me was that I am not the only Italian-Canadian that thinks a great deal about stilettos. Sarah Liberatore, the founder of STLTO, is also an Italian-Canadian, who, while completing a degree in commerce with a marketing major, at Ryerson University, and while drinking a glass of wine to get her through the trudge of a final assignment, thought to herself, "I could make this" and set out, with the help of her family's exporting and importing business, to create a wine geared to women "25-35" years of age.

Examining this young woman's initiative, I discovered a possible clue that may help explain part of the cultural differences that exist between Canadian and Italian women, which will be further explored in the phenomenological survey section of this study: "[Sarah] did some research and realized that although 80 per cent of women in North America purchase wine, Italy had no wines targeted specifically to them" (Moore). When Sarah confronted friends and family in Italy with this initiative, they thought she was crazy. It didn't make sense to them to make a concept brand of wine geared to women, and to place a shoe on the wine label seemed absurd. So she set out to change that: "She used her

⁶⁴ See: <http://stltowine.com/the-stlto-story/> for the full story.

savings to buy half of the friends' winery, worked with a winemaker and owns her brand outright" (Moore). As she noted in an interview for iVillage.ca, an online "content-driven community for women," "This was a challenge in Italy where men tend to dominate the industry, but I was adamant that the production of STLTO was a completely female process—from picking the grapes to bottling the wine" (Moore).

Liberatore's family's and friend's reservations seem to be a clear indication that the Italian wine market does not envision women as a possible target market. I investigated a little further by going to ask local enotecas in Bologna who their main consumer was, and the unanimous response was, "men." This type of leisure activity, which works to inhibit the senses, seems to be strictly reserved for men. From my own experiences living in Italy, I have found that women are expected to drink in moderation. It is therefore not surprising that Liberatore's wines have not broken into the European market. They are only sold to the North American market, where now in the new millennium, a new transgressive femme has come out of hiding wearing stilettos, one who takes part in other masculine-type leisure activities, such as drinking, toking, and winemaking⁶⁵. This new femme in stilettos has managed to quash gender conventions surrounding who gets to have fun, at least on her side of the Atlantic.

Unlike in the 1940s, when female shoe fetishists were seen as perverse, today this inclination has come to define the modern, young, urban, independent North American femme. This is why, as Semmelhack notes, we are seeing many items with high-heel motifs: "They give aging boomers the ability to participate in the culture of desirable femininity by

⁶⁵ In fact, on Thursday, February 25th, CBC aired a documentary entitled "Girls Night Out" that "tackles the prevalent and often dangerous culture of binge drinking and young women."

still wearing high heels, only not on their feet” (Hampson). Elin Brockman has also noted the stiletto motif craze, which she calls: “a major shoe moment. There are shoe refrigerator magnets, charm bracelets, earrings, key rings and cards – and that’s in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s gift shops alone” (2). The motif can also be found on women’s hands with the resurgence of the ‘stiletto nail’ shape, as seen on YouTube DIY videos, Pinterest, Instagram, and a host of other social media forums.

Conclusion

The high heel today can be perceived as a tool through which women position themselves in the labour force in order to achieve economic independence and social standing, something noted in many of the testimonies I collected, which will be discussed in the following section. The stiletto’s ability to physically elevate women acts as a metaphor for the literal economic elevation of women who choose to wear them. As such, women in stilettos have often been depicted as instrumentalizing their shoes in order to secure their economic positions, either by landing a job or a man, or both.

Section 2: A Phenomenological Analysis: Women Who Wear and Don't Wear Stilettos and the Reasons Why

Chapter 3: The Stiletto as Cultural Distinction: The Italian-Canadian Comparison

“Generalmente il tacco a spillo è considerato più femminile, elegante e sensuale” (37-I)⁶⁶

“They are sexy and promiscuous. Every man wants a woman to wear stilettos to bed... and nothing else” (21-C)

After spending much time researching the history, meaning and nature of stilettos, I turned to consider, and now present as the apex of my study, what it was that others thought about them. From the stories I recorded and interviews I had with women and men, I found that someone always had a stiletto story to share with me. It never failed that when I mentioned my research topic, with hesitation on my part, I would always meet with great curiosity. I remember one particular story from a woman I met while at a wedding in Rome. She thought my research was very interesting and added that while doing relief work in Kosovo in the dead of winter she had found it amazing that:

nonostante la neve e il ghiaccio le giovani kossovare portavano stivali con tacchi a spillo e riuscivano a camminare sul ghiaccio con grande disinvoltura e a non cadere.

⁶⁶ Generally, the stiletto is considered more feminine, elegant and sensual.

Io invece... dovevo portare le scarpe da trekking e anche con quelle sono caduta svariate volte! (Italian respondent, CM)⁶⁷

Even the men I told were curious to know what statistics my research had generated, and like women, they often had some predetermined ideas about the difference between Canadian and Italian women's relations with their shoes. The majority of both the Italian and Canadian men I spoke with felt that Italian women were more likely to wear stilettos more often than Canadian women. I didn't find this response incredibly startling because I had also held that position when I first started my research.

In the cross-cultural comparison in this chapter, I examine Italian and Canadian women's responses to stilettos. While there were similarities between the two groups, found in relation to economic activity, there were also poignant differences that confirmed the role culture plays in shaping ideas, rituals, etc. The one most striking finding related to how heels were experienced: more Canadian women felt sexy wearing stilettos, while the Italian women claimed feeling elegant. As seen in the previous chapter, the North American relation to the stiletto as related to sex and all forms of illicit behaviour runs a long historical course. The Italian women's responses did not register the same sentiments.

For both groups I found that the stiletto embodied distinct qualities tied to a notion of social distinction. In the majority of responses, the stiletto came across as an extraordinary object, definitely not a mundane thing, but rather most often worn during leisure for special occasions. My cross-cultural analysis of Canadian and Italian women's attitudes towards stilettos reveals that while the reasons for wearing stilettos may be

⁶⁷ Despite the snow and ice, the young Kosovans wore stiletto-heeled boots and they were able to walk on the ice with great ease and without falling. I, instead, had to wear trekking boots and even with those I fell numerous times!

largely socially and culturally driven, there are a number of equally important reasons that stem from personal desires and motivations. I found that the forces that most influence the wearing of stilettos are cultural imperatives, professional formation, social mobility and power, generational influences, the media, and gendered stereotypes. To challenge these social pressures, the women who wear stilettos often do so in response to their own personal desires, to gain control of their bodies, to alter them for personal pleasure and to be something 'other' than their physical limitations. The women's relation to stilettos made apparent the conflict between female individual autonomy and social pressures, where the women at times found themselves re-enacting social scripts while also celebrating individual fulfillment in those very perceived notions and pressures to be feminine. The following analysis examines the role that the exotic, class, taste, the body, the labour market, and the media play in mediating the relation of Canadian and Italian women and their stilettos.

Exotic/Elegant vs Sexy/Elegant

To begin this comparative analysis, I want to briefly consider the gesture of the collector. Susan Stewart notes that the gesture of the collector works through metonymic displacement, where the part comes to represent the whole (162). Like a process of contagious magic, coming in contact with the stiletto (a part), for example, the body (the whole) assimilates its qualities, becomes the stiletto. Whatever qualities one attributes to the stiletto, those qualities will then be possessed by the wearer.

Stewart looks at exotic objects to examine how this works in practice and finds that the collecting of exotic objects creates an exoticism of the self, so that by wearing exotic

shoes one inherits or becomes exotic (Stewart 148). While she is specifically talking about souvenir collections, this may be extended to all things exotic. Collecting or buying expensive or exotic shoes from Italy, for example, as numerous North American women put it, was the best investment to make (9-C). However, it is not necessary to have travelled to Italy. By being able to purchase Italian shoes, you inherit the exoticism enabled by the import – you have literally made an exotic *investment*.⁶⁸ As one respondent noted, “My mom once told me that the reason why she insisted on buying pricier, Italian-made leather shoes was because they were made better and therefore would not ruin our tendons, toes, knees, and backs, and would not injure our spinal cords and then our brains – which we both need, as we love to read and learn” (26-LS). Buying quality shoes is understood here as reflecting quality thinking.

If we consider that expensive shoes are also luxury items, then in an extension of Stewart’s argument, the woman who wears expensive shoes sees herself as luxurious as well. In one woman’s response, the discourse of luxury shoes was extended and paralleled with other luxury items. As she put it: “Through the years of wearing heels, in the past ten years I have flirted with good quality designer brand heels and although they will put a large dent in your bank account, your feet feel like they are in a Ferrari as opposed to a Fiat! (you like the Italian reference...lol)” (9-C).

In contrast, the Italian women never mentioned in the survey responses that Italian shoes were the best shoes to buy. The stiletto did not hold the potential to transform them into exotic persons. What did lend the Italian women an air of high repute was being made more “elegant.” This was one of the greatest disparities found between the Canadian and

⁶⁸ ‘Invest’ here refers to its origins as meaning to be in one’s vestments, in one’s clothes.

Italian women's responses: 31% of the Italian women noted that stilettos made them feel more elegant, and only 17% of the Canadian women noted this feature.

In line with Stewart's argument on the exoticism of the self, Thorstein Veblen in his work on *Conspicuous Consumption* notes how using "elegant diction" acts as a sign of reputability (Veblen 101). By extension, through owning things perceived as elegant, one becomes reputable. Elegance etymologically comes from the elect, and elegant is synonymous with other words which form a lexicon related to a sense of selectivity as well as exclusivity, such as refined, classy, delicate, graceful, sophisticated, stylish, all terms to be found in the Italian women's responses, which were also paralleled with their counterparts vulgar, unrefined, excessive, ridiculous, awkward. As quoted above, "Vanno saputi indossare, con eleganza accostandolo di volta in volta ai giusti capi senza cadere nella volgarità!" (15-I).⁶⁹ Since elegance itself is an abstract qualitative concept, the Italian woman in elegant heels then absorbs its abstraction. She becomes an abstraction, an untouchable, elect, and idealized woman, and comes to be admired as such.

Dress has often been called to distinguish boundaries around the elect while excluding the non-elect. The heel has also throughout the centuries been called on to perform the task of socially dividing groups. The elegant Italian woman in *tacchi a spillo*⁷⁰ is a woman of class, and along with that, a woman who demonstrates taste, as the concept of elegant is very closely tied to notions of style and taste. Consider how Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* noted that taste is something refined and develops when you are clear

⁶⁹ One must know how to wear them, with elegance accompanying them each time with the right clothes without falling into vulgarity!

⁷⁰ I use the Italian translation of stiletto as it has less of the sexual connotations of stiletto, which aligns more closely to its association, for Italian women, to elegance.

headed. For example, hunger makes you eat anything, but this is not taste. Taste develops when there is choice (42). The Italian women in stilettos signal their good taste by suggesting they feel elegant when they choose to wear heels. The Italian woman quoted above demonstrates this when she notes that if one chooses to wear stilettos, they should be prepared to *know* how to wear them. She also advises that while stilettos are quite versatile, to be worn with a dress or jeans, for example, one must always combine them within the parameters of good taste.

Sono molto versatili, poichè si possono indossare con ogni tipo di abbigliamento (ovviamente accostando ogni accessorio con il dovuto "buon gusto"!), dall'abito ai jeans. In particolare li trovo molto "raffinati" con il tailleur, con il tubino e in modo meno rigoroso, ma al contempo molto intrigante ed elegante, con un bel paio di jeans. Personalmente li indosso spesso, in ogni momento della giornata, sia in ufficio sia di sera indifferentemente (ma sempre guardando in primis al "buon gusto", all'eleganza!) dipende dall'occasione (convegni, riunioni, pranzi di lavoro, cene..) (15-I).⁷¹

This emphasis on taste hearkens to Bourdieu as well, who notes that taste is a marker of class (*Distinction* 1-2). According to Bourdieu, the amount of capital a person has is what includes or excludes them from certain groups, and which, in turn, manifests itself through one's personal opinions and tastes. Capital, for Bourdieu, is not necessarily the

⁷¹ They are very versatile since they can be worn with any type of apparel (obviously approaching all accessories with a sense of "good taste") from dress to jeans. In particular I find them very 'refined' with a two-piece, with a tube dress, and in a less rigorous way but at the same time very intriguing and elegant, with a nice pair of jeans. Personally I wear them often, in every moment of the day, both in the office and in the evening indifferently (but always first considering 'good taste' and elegance!) it depends on the occasion (conferences, reunions, work lunches, dinners..).

accumulation of wealth or things but instead includes the mode in which those things are acquired. The composition of one's capital is what, therefore, marks the differences within the dominant class (Bourdieu 69). Capital, Bourdieu notes, takes on a number of shapes and forms: there is economic capital, cultural capital, academic capital, even body capital etc., and it is what positions one in "the game."

Taste comes into play here, as the demonstration of one's position in the game. Tastes (i.e. manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others (56). One demonstrates one's good sense of taste, so suggests Bourdieu, by refuting the tastes of others. In the case of the women who reject the use of heels, they are in a sense negating, and not so indirectly either, "those women" who choose to be tasteless – or more precisely for the group of academic women which will be discussed in chapter four, unintelligent – by wearing heels.

Bourdieu concludes that one's tastes and opinions are strongly influenced by the class one belongs to, and he looks at the way in which one's lifestyle, properties (things), and ideas form a synthetic unity, which he calls habitus (173). Habitus is shaped by the particular space(s) a person inhabits, the particular time one is situated in, and one's social trajectory (170). It reflects the conditions by which we classify and judge things, and it also generates and perpetuates those conditions and judgments (170). A habitus is a particular internalized disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions (170). For example, social identity is defined and asserted through difference, and the most fundamental oppositions in the structure (high/ low, rich/ poor, educated/

non-educated, etc.) tend to establish themselves as the fundamental structuring principles of practices and the perception of practices, so that the differences come to be perceived as objective and natural (172). One's particular social position, although learned, becomes internalized and perceived as a natural disposition, and all things, ideas come to be measured through that acquired disposition. So, in the case of objects, they are never entirely objective or independent of the interest and tastes of those who perceive them, but instead come to reveal the dispositions of an agent or class of agents, by revealing their schemes of perception, that is, how they perceive the world (Bourdieu 100).

While he does suggest there are limitations to this deterministic view, Bourdieu demonstrated how people in 1960s France were arranged in classes and that these classes maintained their distinction through individual displays of particular tastes related to each class. He concludes that a person's social trajectory is influenced by the amount of capital one accumulates. Academic capital is one such parameter, and he describes the various ways one achieves and tries to maintain it. Simply put, for example, the *petit bourgeois*, as defined by Bourdieu, obtain their cultural capital transmitted by the schools in which they were trained. In that, their cultural capital is shaped as academic capital, which comes to define their moral outlook on the world, which, in turn, defines their particular social value.

Distinctions based on class are manifested in discussions on, for example, one's "manner." For Bourdieu, "'manner' is a symbolic manifestation whose meaning and value depends as much on the perceivers as on the producer, so becomes one of the key markers of 'class' and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction" (66). Taste underpins the Italian woman who responds that there is a "right way" to wear stilettos, which distinguishes the elegant from the vulgar woman. That this relates directly to class

distinctions can be seen if we consider that “vulgar” derives from the Latin *vulgus*, which signified the common people (OED).

In relation to elegant, Bourdieu notes that the difference between, for example, scholars and gentlemen is marked in their “manner” and the mode in which they acquire their mannerisms, which places them either in a superior or inferior position within the dominant class. Elegance for the “gentleman” is signified in his effortless, the overall presence of ease he feels in his skin, because, as Bourdieu notes, these qualities are most evident in the body. He notes, “It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways...which reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus... the body, a social product which is the only tangible manifestation of the ‘person’ is commonly perceived as the most natural expression of innermost nature” (190, 192).

In *Female Sexualization*, Frigga Haug examines how the idea of ‘naturalness’ is tied to presentations of the body that we do not question. She asks:

How precisely do we know how we are to move – neither too much nor too little –, what is the correct posture to adopt – never exaggerated, affected or artificial, but at the same time never stiff or uncontrolled, or any-old-how? It is, we contend, the idea of ‘naturalness’ that helps us out when we’re stuck. It functions as a point of orientation in our search for a yardstick of appropriateness; countless activities are organized around this one concept (Haug 161).

The more “natural” we appear in our bodies, the more we are convincing, or more so, by extension, “our forms of social intercourse will appear natural” as well (Haug 161). Many of the women criticized those who appeared ridiculous in high heels because they did not

know how to wear them. As one older woman noted, “Today women’s clothes is much more casual, women are more confident of themselves and so they do not put themselves on display in such a fashion, they are also much more practical so girls are not used to wearing high heeled shoes so when they do don them, they seem awkward, forced, they can’t walk properly, they are not capable of holding themselves up on them” (20-1). For this elderly woman, the women of today are less natural in heels, and therefore, less elegant.

Claiming to be elegant then is to internalize or naturalize one’s distinction, but also to place oneself in a superior position within that distinction, as the acquisition of manner here is seen as being more natural, or as Haug would contend, must become second nature rather than learned (161). The notion of elegance, therefore, appears in a society very much invested in its class distinctions. The Italian women’s responses point to another fundamental cultural reality: that class distinctions have a distinct function in Italian culture.

In their collaborative essay “Approaches to Material: The Sociology of Fashion and Clothing,” Diana Crane and Laura Bovone consider Italy “an excellent illustration of how the characteristics of fashion and of the fashion industry are shaped by a country’s history and culture” (324). In their analysis of the Italian fashion system, they note that from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth-century Italy’s fragmented small city-states meant numerous courts, so people were exposed to displays of aristocracy, which they emulated (324). Crane and Bovone also found that most Italians believed that sartorial elegance was attainable to anyone who cultivated taste, regardless of economic resources (324-5). Clothes, in themselves, came to signify cultivation. They also note the value placed on conformity in Italian fashion styles, which is still visible in Italian culture today: “Italians

favoured an orientation toward using clothing as a form of personal expression that expressed adhesion and conformity to codes of taste of the dominant classes rather than opposition or resistance to the dominant culture” (325). The fashion system in Italy can thus be attributed “to Italy’s cultural history and to the aesthetic values of the consumer which includes ‘a pervasive cultural commitment to the aesthetics of style which is a longstanding feature of Italian society” (Crane and Bovone 325).

Another feature of Italian society that highlights class distinctions is the use of honorifics in social exchanges. Using honorifics works to demarcate one’s place in the social hierarchy, as well as reinforce or reaffirm those social distinctions. Even if the Italian constitution absolved the use of aristocratic titles in 1948, the practice of attributing titles to people persists. Bourdieu looks at the way in which the continued use of titles, for example *dottore*,⁷² hearkens back to the aristocratic past and noted how the acquisition of education worked to both devalue, but also to alter the meaning of certain titles, so a new cultural nobility formed (Bourdieu 142). While titles may have been abolished, they nonetheless continue to inform social relations in people’s daily lives, as it is common practice, for example, to use formal grammar and to address someone by their title if they are considered a superior.⁷³ The women’s stress on the elegance the stiletto lends them can be understood as an extension of this class-based understanding. The stiletto’s elegance ensures for them a particular place in the social hierarchical frame of Italian culture that is influenced by class distinctions.

⁷² The title of doctor is applied to any laureate regardless of degree or discipline.

⁷³ This information was gathered from my own personal experiences from living and having a large extended family in Italy.

I am not suggesting that class distinctions are completely absent in the Canadian women's responses. However, I did not find the same evidence. The most prevalent response for the Canadian women was that 51% felt "sexy" in stilettos. While my research results show there are other relevant terms to analyze, I point out the two terms "elegant" and "sexy" because my close reading of the responses converges on this particular contrast, as many of the adjectives used fit within these two poles.

What could the difference between these two terms be? They both seem to suggest a desire to appear a certain way. However, the motives differ. In the one case, to appear elegant is to appear almost untouchable; it is quite literally to be part of the elect, inactive, as movements should be graceful and calculated. To appear sexy, on the other hand, is to call others' attention unto oneself, in some cases for illicit reasons, very touchable, very accessible. Digging deeper into the survey responses revealed that Canadian women were more willing to express their sexual prowess and promiscuity. One woman openly discussed her boudoir behaviour: "Any piece of lingerie looks ten times sexier with heels on, as a matter of fact, I wore in my wedding shoes by wearing them in the bedroom just to break them in" (9-C). Another direct sexual reference was (1-C): "I wear them when I am on going to a club and am 'on the prowl.'" Other women noted (47-C) "I love to see eye to eye with taller MEN!!!(which I love!); (6-C) "Men always tell me that I'm looking sexy and so thin in heels"; and (35-C) "they make you turn heads more... [and] I feel like I can have more *fun* while wearing them." The Canadian quote which opened this chapter also defines stilettos as a promiscuous tool, as they were perceived to be sexually alluring to men.

This sense of sexual play was not present in the responses of the Italian women, who were more interested in discussing the aesthetic value of the shoe and how it

enhanced style by making them appear elegant, feminine, delicate, refined, classy, etc. They were much more concerned with overall presentation and appearance. One respondent used the stiletto to address this issue, particularly the appearance of others:

Se una donna se li può permettere (fisico longilineo, abiti eleganti), tanto di cappello, ha la mia approvazione e anche un po' di invidia forse; se la persona in questione è bassa e grassoccia forse penserei che avrebbe potuto scegliere scarpe diverse ma altrettanto femminili. Ma non si può mai dire, non mi piacciono i giudizi assoluti. (29-I)⁷⁴

The suggestion that only particular women should wear heels, thin and tall ones, contrasts with one Canadian response in particular, that “A great shoe can make you feel five pounds lighter since you are walking taller and your posture is different but also, you will never go to a shoe store and have to go up a size because you could not squeeze your behind into a size 6 skirt!” (9-C). Another Italian woman (3-I) noted that she “likes stilettos, but not too high because they are not to make her seem taller... than she is.” Here she is suggesting she doesn’t mean to wear them as deceptive contraptions – meant to emphasize that which she is not. This awareness of the deceptive or superficial aspect of heels does not come up in the Canadian responses.

Italian women may not have used the word sexy due to its connotations of vulgar.

Vulgar in Italian refers to anything that makes explicit reference to sex or bodily functions.

As noted, stilettos for the Italian group of women were aligned more closely with a sense of

⁷⁴ If a woman can be allowed to wear them (tall physique, elegant clothing), hats off to her, she has my approval and perhaps also my envy; if the woman in question is short and chubby, I might think she would have been better off choosing other shoes, but equally feminine. But one can never fully say, I don’t like absolute judgments.

refinement. Bourdieu considers how this “denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment, which constitutes the *sacred* sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the *profane*” (7, italics in the original). For these women, setting themselves up against the perceived vulgar aspect of the heel – its sexy factor – enables her to pronounce her “elegant” distinction.

While questions of judgment or taste are not missing in the Canadian responses, they take on a different aim. These women are not as concerned with false appearances or aesthetic judgments as with the physical effects of wearing heels and how “unintelligent” it is to wear such painful devices. As one teacher put it, “I feel that others that wear stilettos are not intelligent due to the injuries that they can sustain from wearing them. They are not good for your feet and back therefore I don't wear them” (17-C). The critique of other women in the Canadian group is grounded in the health and naturalist discourse outlined by Davis rather than in the aesthetic value of a woman who knows how to wear them, as for example in one Italian woman’s response, “A mio avviso i tacchi a spillo sono l'accessorio femminile per eccellenza e, se saputi indossare (ovvero se si sanno portare con eleganza, classe, raffinatezza e anche disinvoltura) esaltano al meglio la figura femminile” (15-I).⁷⁵

The Canadian women were much more concerned with the heels’ effect on the physical body rather than on their appearance. Some critiqued the wearing of heels on the grounds of the bodily disfiguration they cause, and many made comments on the pain they

⁷⁵ In my opinion, stiletto heels are the feminine accessory par excellence and if known how to wear (that is if they are worn with elegance, class, refinement and also with ease) they can exalt the feminine figure most aptly.

cause. However, some did note that women who wear heels but do not walk well in them appear ridiculous (29-C; 9-C).

The responses reveal that gender was connoted differently in these two groups. The Italian women were more inclined to appeal to notions of femininity that were tied to ideas of elegance. As one woman put it (22-I), “le rare volte in cui indosso i tacchi a spillo è per sentirmi più femminile, solitamente tali occasioni sono associate ad un evento importante che richiede un abbigliamento elegante.”⁷⁶ They were also perceived as something of a delicate nature (15-I): “Sono un accessorio molto particolare e “delicato.”⁷⁷ If we consider Frazer, we can understand how this sense of delicacy transposes onto the wearer herself, as a kind of contagious magic, turning her as well into something delicate. As the respondent 15-I above points out, the stiletto is “l’accessorio femminile per eccellenza.” Also a kind of self-objectification happens, as one woman noted (20-I) “Li portavo anche in casa perche mi sembravano di riflettere meglio l’eleganza delle nostre case di stato.”⁷⁸ Many expressed that the stiletto makes them feel feminine.

In the Canadian women’s responses, on the other hand, the idea of the delicate femme was not as apparent. Instead, there was a sense of being a “woman” or “womanly,” which was tied to such terms as mature, womanhood, and in one case contrasted with motherhood: (10-C) “I feel womanly, like they bring out my womanhood. Funny others would say that it’s motherhood that does that.” This response echoes the “body project” of the twentieth century as discussed by Louise Collins, where self-definition for North

76 I wear them to feel more feminine, usually these moments are tied to an important formal event that demands elegant clothing.

77 they are a very particular and “delicate” accessory.

78 I used to even wear my heels indoors where no one could see me because they seemed to reflect for me the stately interiors we lived in.

American girls became invested in a fashionable look and body style, which then came to constitute and define one's identity. As Collins describes this new feminine movement, which found its manifestation in numerous media outlets but in particular fashion dolls like Barbie "no longer was proper femininity bound up with preparation for a pious, self-sacrificial motherhood [a la Rousseau], rather, femininity came to be increasingly defined in terms of physical self-presentation as a sexually appealing body" (157). What came to define a woman's identity was her ability to appear as sexy as possible, which parallels 10-C's response. Another woman noted, "I feel like a woman in stiletto heels" (12-C).

I thought this discrepancy between the Canadian and Italian women on the issue of delicate femme and sexy woman may have been due to an issue of terminology, but *donna* never comes up in the Italian responses, whereas terms associated to femininity abound in 72% of the Italian responses (5-I; 6-I; 1-I; 12-I; 15-I; 17-I; 18-I; 22-I; 25-I; 26-I; 28-I; 29-I; 30-I). In the Canadian responses, the sense of delicate femme came up in only 23% of the responses.

The Role of Labor

In the Canadian responses, references to feeling "womanly" were often tied to another set of terms that expressed confidence, authority, success, credibility, empowerment and sophistication. Many of the Canadian women conflated wearing stilettos with professional success, success they felt the heels in some way helped them obtain. One woman (9-C) noted "even in the workplace, flats are to be worn after you've secured a position and feel comfortable but until then, suffer with heels." The same woman went on to suggest that she thought "stilettos are perceived as sexy and the women who wear them as powerful" (9-C).

Another woman noted, “stilettos make me feel more mature more powerful and successful. When I wear them to work I feel like I have authority because I am stylish and fashionable when I wear them” (35-C). This woman correlates key terms such as power, success and authority. Another also remarked on stiletto heels’ relation to power: “One thing is certain, though: they speak strongly of one's desire to radiate femaleness (in many, but not all, cases this means female power)” (39-C). In regard to displays of strength, one woman noted, “When wearing stiletto heels, I feel stronger and more in charge” (22-C). Confidence came up as another marker of female strength, as one woman noted, “they make woman carry themselves differently-exuding more confidence” (6-C).

This sense of empowerment gained through the stiletto was not clearly present in the Italian responses. Only one Italian response, in which the woman describing what she believes is the cultural response to stiletto heels, notes, “Penso che la donna coi tacchi a spillo venga identificata come una persona indipendente, molto forte e seducente, capace di esercitare il suo fascino sia sugli uomini che sulle donne” (29-I).⁷⁹

In order to determine whether the lack of a sense of empowerment in stilettos for Italian women may be due in part to the lack of representation of women in the labour force in higher sector jobs, such as management positions, I conducted a comparative analysis of Italian and Canadian occupational structures as defined by the National Occupational Classification of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. In my survey, one Italian woman and three Canadian women were in a management position; in business, finance and administrative there were four Italian and five Canadian women; one

⁷⁹ I think the woman with stilettos is identified as an independent person, very strong and seductive, able to exercise her allure both on men and women.

Italian woman was employed in the natural and applied sciences and related occupations, while no Canadian women interviewed represented this sector; one Canadian woman worked in a health-related occupation, while no Italian women interviewed were from this sector. The largest group represented was in social science, educative government service and religion related occupations with 21 women from the Canadian group, and nine in the Italian surveys. Occupations in art, culture and sport had five Italian and three Canadian respondents; sales and service had an equal one representative for both groups; and there were five Italian and three Canadian women who identified as either homeworkers, students or were unemployed.

	Italian	Canadian
0 - Management Occupations	1	3
1 - Business, finance and administrative occupations	4	5
2- Natural and Applied Sciences and related occupations	1	-
3 - Health Occupations	-	1
4 - Occupations in social science, education, government service and religion	9	21
5 - Occupations in art, culture, recreation and sport	5	3
6 - Sales and service occupations	1	1
7 - Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations	-	-
8 - Occupation unknown/ unemployed	2	3
9 - Secondary Student	3	-

In my survey, the one Italian woman who was in a management position was in retail, which, in Canadian classifications, is the sixth category in that sector. There were, on the

other hand, three Canadian women who were employed in management occupations: two administrators (part of the first sector in management occupations) and one retail manager. All three of the Canadian women working in this sector noted that they wear heels, as did the Italian woman. However, only the Canadian women noted the assertive quality of the stiletto. One of the Canadian store managers noted that they make her feel “more mature more powerful and successful. When I wear them to work I feel like I have authority because I am stylish and fashionable when I wear them” (Can35). The Italian women did not express the same feeling, while noting that she too has to wear heels to work.

Interestingly, my sample of women represents a microcosm of the actual female distribution of labour in both the Canadian and Italian labour market (see chart below). Canada’s population in 2010, the period in which this survey was taken, was circa 34 million. Of that total, 54.5% of the population made up the labour force. 47% of the labour force was made up of women, but fewer women were unemployed than men: 3%. Of the total of unemployed people, women made up only 43% whereas men made up 57%, suggesting a more volatile job market for men than women (StatsCan).

According to the data retrieved from Istat, Italy’s National Institute of Statistics, women make up only 40% of the labour force in Italy, whereas, in Canada, women make up 47%. The occupations identified in Italy are in the following economic sectors: Agriculture; Industry, which includes product manufacturing and construction; and, Services, which includes the subcategories Commerce, Hotels and Restaurants, and other social services. Women’s labour representation is far greater in the Services sector, making up 50% of it, with a majority employed in social service jobs, but they also have an equally strong

representation in the manufacturing sector, making up almost 20%, not comparable to the Canadian representation of only 3%. The large representation in industry is due to the large economic power of the textile industry, whose primary producers are women and most often women employed to do work from home. Since no other sector was outlined, I was not able to distinguish whether women make up management positions, but the Istat analysis of women's occupations in public administration reports that women's role in public administration has grown, but their representation in high power positions, such as executive business positions, law enforcement, management positions, judiciary roles, diplomatic positions, the military, research and the university is still very limited (Istat, "L'occupazione femminile nella Pubblica amministrazione: un'analisi dei dati della Ragioneria Generale dello Stato") (see table below).

Tavola 1: Dipendenti della PA per sesso e comparto - Anni 1994 e 2006 (valori assoluti)

Comparti	1994			2006		
	Maschi	Femmine	Totale	Maschi	Femmine	Totale
Aziende Autonome	34.909	4.439	39.348	33.599	2.410	36.009
Corpi di Polizia	296.599	12.978	309.577	311.319	20.379	331.698
Diplomatici e Prefetti	1.938	786	2.724	1.643	901	2.544
Enti di ricerca	12.089	6.297	18.386	11.454	8.466	19.920
Enti pubblici non economici	38.505	31.472	69.977	29.723	34.034	63.757
Forze Armate	126.341	0	126.341	136.432	910	137.342
Magistratura	7.228	2.510	9.738	6.442	3.987	10.429
Ministeri, Agenzie, Presidenza	163.838	127.669	291.507	128.176	128.502	256.678
Regioni ed Autonomie Locali	389.887	295.455	685.342	337.350	343.086	680.436
Scuola e A.F.A.M.	288.949	749.513	1.038.462	270.996	886.956	1.157.952
Servizio Sanitario Nazionale	309.320	380.892	690.212	275.701	449.584	725.285
Universita'	65.874	41.782	107.656	79.870	62.281	142.151
Totale	1.735.477	1.653.793	3.389.270	1.622.705	1.941.496	3.564.201

Fonte: elaborazione sul Conto annuale della Ragioneria Generale dello Stato

80

⁸⁰ Divisions: Independent Businesses; Police Force; Diplomats and Prefects; Research Institutes; Public Institutions; Armed Forces; Justice System; Government Ministries, Agencies and Presidencies; Regional and Local Administration; Schools and Music and Arts; Health Care System; University.

In a recent article on the difficulties of regulating gendered representation on the boards of Italian companies, “Ci Metteremo I Tacchi a Spillo: La (difficile) Regolazione Della Rappresentanza di Genere nei CdA Delle Imprese Italiane,”⁸¹ Joselle Dagnes, from the Department of Culture, Politics and Society at the University of Turin, comments that gender issues in the labour market are far from new: “Il divario esistente in Italia tra uomini e donne in termini di accesso al mercato del lavoro, livello delle retribuzioni e opportunità di carriera è noto” (73).⁸² Her study looks at the reception of, reactions to and consequences of the Golfo-Mosca law of August 12, 2011, which introduced “le quote di genere negli organi di amministrazione e di controllo delle società quotate” (74),⁸³ which is also referred to as “le quote rosa.” The law came into full effect in 2012, and while 2012 saw an increase in female representation on Italian boards from 7.2% in 2010 to 11.9% in 2012, it still fell short of Northern European standards, where female administrators occupy well above a third of the positions (75). Dagnes found that the imposed law created much tension within the boards. While many agreed it was a necessary measure “per porre rimedio a ingiustizie strutturali che, in assenza di un intervento concreto, si riproducono nel tempo” (79),⁸⁴ it met with much scorn as well. Respondents made the following points: that women made choices that naturally prevented and excluded them from taking on leadership roles, such as maternity; that men were more likely to hire other men since they don't want to be governed by a woman; that men were seen as already subject to so much

⁸¹ “We will wear stilettos. The (difficult) regulation of gendered representation on the Boards of Italian Companies.”

⁸² “The existing difference in Italy between men and women in terms of access to the labour market, level of retribution and career opportunities are well known.”

⁸³ That introduces the gender quota in administrative and control bodies of traded companies.

⁸⁴ To remedy structural injustices that, in absence of a concrete intervention, would continue to be reproduced over time (my translation).

competition that they shouldn't now have to compete with women too; that one can't impose such things top down as it is a limitation of freedom to choose who should run a company and does not value meritocracy;⁸⁵ and that it could not be sustained over time as it is too much of an imposition, and besides, where would one find such women, or would one have to train them?

This last point becomes key among the potential consequences of the new legislation that Dagnes outlines. To meet the quota, Dagnes found that a disparity was possibly emerging among women, and an elitism was being confirmed. Rather than creating a new generation of independent female administrators, a “*corporate élite italiana*” was forming, whereby a small group of women seen to be representative would take their place on numerous boards as representatives of the “quote rosa” but usually just acting as “silent” presences (85). As Dagnes puts it:

il risultato non sarà, come auspicato, un'apertura dei centri decisionali e gestionali delle aziende a una nuova e indipendente generazione di amministratrici. Piuttosto, si verificherà l'ingresso nei consigli di donne – qualificate e non – che vantano relazioni personali (e eventualmente professionali) molto strette con i membri della *corporate élite italiana*, ovvero esse stesse parte di una cerchia esclusiva (86, italics in original).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ This is an interesting position since it is common knowledge that meritocracy is not necessarily the governing principle of Italian businesses. Rather nepotism is a much more accurate example of labour movement. This becomes clear in Dagnes' article when she considers the women who eventually do come on board, who are often family members of the company's owner.

⁸⁶ The result will not be as wished, an opening up of decision-making and managerial roles to a new and independent generation of female administrators. Rather, what will be verified is the entrance of women in CdA – qualified or not – who boast very tight personal (and eventually professional) relations with members of the Italian corporate elite, who belong to an exclusive circle.

Therefore, Dagnes' study makes clear that while the new law is an initial and promising step, women are still very marginal in managerial positions in Italy's labour market, and there are still many stages to pass through before all women can participate.

In the Canadian example, on the other hand, women dominate a number of sectors in the job market, such as administrative positions and social sector jobs. Although there continues to be a gender gap in management occupations, that gap is thinning as 8% of women in the labour force hold management positions, which comes close to the 12% of men in the labour force who hold these positions (statscan). As Statistics Canada reports in "Women in Non-Traditional Occupations and Fields of Study," these newly gained positions bring with them excitement as well as numerous tensions involving fitting in, gendered rivalries, and jealousies. These tensions can be played out even in the way women dress (StatsCan, "Women.."). Interestingly, while Dagnes never specifically addresses the role of stilettos in boardrooms, she mentions stilettos in the title. I believe she was being coy as she does note one method women could be recruited by businesses, namely, through self promotion and networking. As she puts it, "Infine, sempre nell'ambito dell'auto-candidatura vi sono quelle che abbiamo definito *consigliere improvvisate*, donne prive di un profilo professionale appetibile per le aziende ma che, ciò nonostante, si segnalano in vista del rinnovo degli organi di gestione societaria" (85, italics in original).⁸⁷ Exactly how these women present themselves is not detailed in the article and so is left up to our imaginations. One consigliere noted, "Io lo dico perché lo vedo, nelle riunioni che facciamo noi vengono delle signore molto improbabili che danno in giro a tutti i bigliettini da visita,

⁸⁷ On a final note, always within the realm of self-appointment there are those whom we've defined as *improvised councilwomen*, women without a professional profile attractive for companies looking to hire, but that nonetheless present themselves during the re-election of the governing bodies.

secondo me queste signore magari otterranno qualcosa” (85).⁸⁸ The question of why they would achieve something if they are not capable is left unanswered; could it have something to do with how they present themselves? The stiletto in any case plays a role as women navigate high-powered management positions.

Class Strides – How Heels Leap Over Bounds

An interesting cross-cultural parallel emerged in the field of social science, education, government service and religion (sector 4). Both the Italian and Canadian women working in this sector were more likely not to wear stilettos in contrast with the other groups and were also most likely to critique their wear on moral, aesthetic, and ideological grounds. Within the Canadian group this difference may have been more decipherable compared to the other sector sizes due to the large sample size, which made up 55% of the respondents, and so subtleties became more evident; but, within the Italian group, where representation was roughly evenly distributed amongst three sectors – with sector 6, sales and services having the most representation, followed by sector 4 and then sector 5, culture, recreation and sport –, the small representation from sector 4 was, nonetheless, like their Canadian counterparts, more likely to express criticism.

To quantify the results, 19 of the Canadian respondents work in sector 4, out of the 35 women surveyed. Out of those 19, 12 answered that they did not wear stilettos, 37%. In the Italian group, 9 women worked in this field, and 5 of them reported not wearing stilettos, 56%. Yet, although the Italian group of women working in this sector were less likely than the Canadian group of women to wear heels and they were as likely to be critical

⁸⁸ I say it because I see. In the reunions we have, improbable women come who hand out to everyone their business cards, and in my opinion these women may obtain something.

of those who choose to wear heels, they were also more willing to admit their own personal admiration, a sentiment not shared in the Canadian criticisms from this sector.

I measured the critique and commentary from all of the women by categorizing them according to the following themes, which were given the following operational definitions. Theories of morality were noted when comments on ‘proper’ or appropriate appearance were made – anything good or right – such as “women should not subject themselves to this torture” or “you must dress for success.” Self-worth was signaled in comments that favour one’s opinion of oneself, or not, as in “I like the way they make me look” or “I prefer me in flats.” Comments that pointed to individuality were considered those who set themselves apart, where difference was signaled, “I would never wear such a thing” or “other women are jealous of me.” Superficiality was noted in responses that mention a lack of character, “anyone who wears them must be unintelligent,” or that pointed to false appearances as in one Italian response, “Non amo i tacchi troppo alti perchè non devono servire a farmi sembrare alta... ciò che non sono” (26-I).⁸⁹ Sexuality referred to any comments that outright pointed to the accentuation of sexual gender and activity. Standards of taste comments referred to comments that made note of style, such as “wearing a skirt with flats is a no no.” This category is very closely linked to the morality category: words associated include taste, casual wear, etc. The gender or economic equality category related to comments that particularly highlighted the unequal distribution of the labour market and authority gained from wearing heels. Social class standing refers to comments that help identify class, such as the use of elegant, leisure, social climber, etc.

⁸⁹ “I don’t like wearing heels that make me appear too tall because they don’t have to make me appear taller – that which I am not.”

Finally, societal effects of media were measured in comments that made direct reference to the media.

While in sector 4 both Canadian and Italian women were less likely to wear stilettos and more likely to critique their wear, their particular critiques were divergent. More prevalent in sector 4 in both groups were appeals to reason, on the basis of taste judgments and morality. Where the two did not compare was in their moral tone, their quest for individuality, their class consciousness, their evaluation of their self-worth, their concern over the body, and their sexuality.

On Morality

Overall, the Italian responses were more concerned with style and proper taste, and proper wear, while the Canadian women responses were more concerned with the stilettos' relation to the body. All the critiques surrounded these two major themes. Italian women were more inclined to critique those who could not properly wear the shoe or those who appeared vulgar wearing them, or envy those who could, while the Canadian women were more concerned with critiquing the physical and intellectual sensibility of the wearer. In the Canadian group, the women made appeals to reason by questioning the use of an item that potentially damages your body, for example, as one respondent put it (17-C), "I feel that others that wear stilettos are not intelligent due to the injuries they can sustain from wearing them." In the Italian group, their use was critiqued because of the way in which it

vulgarizes appearance, as one Italian respondent put it (19-I), “Ho una particolare antipatia per quel genere di tacchi, mi sembrano troppo esagerati e particolarmente volgari.”⁹⁰

The next most interesting thing to note was that the women in sector 4, in the Canadian group, when compared to all the other groups, were the ones most likely to be pro- and prescriptive. They were the ones most likely to pass judgments on those who wear stilettos, such as the teacher who commented, “I feel that others that wear stilettos are not intelligent due to the injuries they can sustain.” The Italian women in this sector also asserted opinions based on appeals to reason, for example, expressing the unreasonable height of heels, as in 12-I’s response, “Lately, however, I have the feeling that heights are being exaggerated... we can’t, in fact, pretend that such heights be worn.”

In fact, 66% of the Italian respondents in this group critiqued the use of stilettos, attacking them on grounds of irrational behaviour, supporting too many stereotypes, etc. However, although they have a high incidence of moral commentary in the Italian responses, 50% of their comments were not moral critiques but demonstrated their own sense of personal envy or admiration for those who can wear stilettos even if it was unclear why they felt they could not wear them, for example, as one respondent put it, “Guardo chi indossa i tacchi a spillo con un briciolo di invidia e ammirazione, rendono la figura più femminile e longilinea” (18-I).⁹¹

⁹⁰ I have a particular dislike towards that sort of heel, they seem to be exaggerated and particularly vulgar

⁹¹ I look at women who wear heels with a sprinkle of envy and admiration, they render the figure more feminine and slim.

On Class

In the Italian responses, issues surrounding social class were evident, whereas it never came up in the Canadian responses. One Italian woman suggested when asked what she thinks people in general think of heels that “tacchi a spillo = prostituta / femme fatale / arrivista” (17-I).⁹² Here the heel is directly related to class and social mobility. The complexities of my survey analysis abound in ways I may not be entirely aware of, but I have found that for both the Italians and Canadians the stiletto was equally not worn across one particular sector, something I follow up on in the next chapter when I consider academics’ responses to stilettos. This is an interesting parallel that attests more to Marxist theories of class structure than highlighting cultural difference⁹³. However, when we look closer, the motives are different for the two cultural groups. As we’ve seen, the Canadian women were more concerned with physical and intellectual sensibility, while the Italian women were more concerned with questions of taste, but in both instances they were the moral upholders in their respective cultures.

Bourdieu’s theory of taste is useful to consider in relation to this particular sector of society, which Bourdieu would describe as those expressly conditioned to uphold social mores, “who are trained in an educational system (which by its very nature is conservative)” (56), and as such are “enforcers of normality, as in teachers, doctors, diet experts, sex experts, psychologists, professors, etc.”(153). He further describes this group as “those who try to circumvent dominant order by introducing other forms of play and

⁹² Others equate stilettos with prostitutes, femme fatales, and a social climber.

⁹³ See Ch.4 for a more complete look at Marx. But, in brief, Marx notes how our thoughts are shaped by the labour we do - the way we obtain the means to make a living, pursue comfort and security – these factors determine our thoughts.

taste that allows them to partake of dominant ideology by challenging that authority – with the desire to have their ascetic necessity... promoted” (170). While this definition might not speak to the complexities of the group dynamics at play here, a definite pro and/or prescriptive attitude was demonstrated by the women in this sector in both cultures. Yet, it is important to reiterate that the mode of critique differs depending on the cultural group, and peering further into this question can give us some important cultural and gendered insights into these two cultures, as already begun in the first section of the chapter.

Media Effects

Continuing my cultural analysis, I consider what set of conditions may affect the women’s responses in general, and I begin with looking at possible media effects and where that may have been most manifested. I found that the Canadian women were more willing to assert their sexual promiscuity or prowess and their overall sense of power in heels, while the Italian women were more inclined to assert their elegance, their femininity, their sense of good taste and judgment through the stiletto. What does this difference tell us? In their analysis of consumer fashion discourses, Thompson and Haytko note the influence of mass media on the discourses of their participants’ fashion practices (15), and indeed certain media references point to clear differences between the two groups of women. For example, *Sex and the City* came up more than once in the Canadian responses, suggesting that the show itself had a particular influence on the Canadian women (42-C; 36-C). The show became a symbol or a sort of licence for women to feel comfortable in asserting their sexuality or sexual prowess. Carrie, the protagonist of the show, spends numerous episodes searching for the right guy, all the while making much play with sexual innuendos and one

night stands, as she also relays to the audience through her confessional journalism her explicit sexual behaviour. One of the Canadian women surveyed made direct reference to Carrie's appearance in stilettos: "Many women wear them out of a personal sense of esthetics, because they are in fashion (by the way, I think Sara Jessica Parker looks extremely uncomfortable and unesthetic in them)" (36-C).

In the Italian responses, catwalks and *la moda* (fashion) came up instead. The female protagonists here, models, are far from active participants but rather appear as inactive, untouchable figures, far removed from any reality as they act as the backdrop to display conspicuous consumption. As Baudrillard notes, the model's body is sexually disenchanted and the world of fashion is a most efficient neutralizer of sexuality. As he states, one never touches a woman in make-up precisely because it is not complicitous, but in competition with sex (470). This places more emphasis on the body as display, just as a 'mannequin' displays its costume as a form of conspicuous consumption.⁹⁴

I further considered the popularity of *Sex and the City* in both contexts and noted some differences. Since the late 1990s, a number of Anglophone literary texts have been published in a genre that has often been referred to as "chick lit." Chick-lit refers to the humorous adventures of a young female protagonist, in her mid-20's to 30's, living in an urban setting, such as New York or London. This genre made itself known both on the big and the small screen with *Bridget Jones' Diary* and the HBO *Sex and the City* series. This confessional type writing has recently been co-opted by leading shoe companies, such as

⁹⁴ Etymologically, 'costume' is closely aligned to 'custom', which relates to Elizabeth Rouse's argument on the way in which clothes are the embodiment of custom, and the inherent shame involved in not wearing the 'right' clothes fits here as well, as another distinction between Italian and Canadian women - their adherence to custom, for example.

Town Shoes, who in 2012 launched a “Hello, My Name is ___, I’m a Shoe-Aholic” campaign to reward women with shoe shopping sprees for their shared confessions, creating a forum for women to come out of the shoe closet as it were and confess or share their love of shoes online.

In Italy, while large shoe retailers have not gone to the same lengths, there exist numerous blogs and forums on the subject of *tacchi a spillo*. While the *Sex and the City* series has had some success in Italy, it only aired for two years and has not had the same impact as in the North American context. There are a number of chick-lit writers in Italy, and the genre is referred to as *letteratura rosa shocking*, but in the examples I reviewed – Rossella Canevari and Virginia Fiume’s *Voglio un Mondo Rosa Shocking*, Federica Bosco’s, *Mi Piaci Da Morire*, and Francesca Lancini’s *Senza Tacchi* –, the protagonists were less economically fortunate than the *Bridget Jones’* and *Sex and the City’s* protagonists. They struggled economically as single women and had to constantly rely on their parents for support. While there are only a very small number of Canadian chick-lit authors, the genre enjoys success through the novels of predominantly British or American writers.

I further analyzed the disparity between the two groups by conducting a media comparison of *Elle Canada* and *Elle Italy*. I took two random monthly editions, June 2012 and January 2013, and compared the advertisements of the first ten pages of the magazine.⁹⁵ In the Canadian version, the ads were more geared to beauty products, especially anti-age serums, whereas the Italian *Elle* featured more luxury brand ads, such as purses, sunglasses, and Rolex watches. It also featured more celebrities, for example,

⁹⁵ I took the first ten pages because in both countries the first ten pages prior to hitting the table of contents are reserved for advertisements.

Julia Roberts and Brad Pitt, as well as top models. For example, Daphne Groeneveld, Sung Hee Kim, Caroline Trentini, Hilary Rhoda and Candice Swanepoel were featured, with their names listed, in a MiuMiu ad. The Canadian *Elle's* ads seem to promote youth and beauty while the Italian *Elle* promotes a luxurious lifestyle, or as Veblen would term it a life of "conspicuous consumption." The Italian *Elle* seemed to be in line with the responses of the Italian women, who feel 'elegant' in stilettos, because this sense of elegance is reflected in the *Elle* ads' representation of luxury items. As well, the Italian women expressed a keen interest in all things related to *la moda*. The Canadian response of feeling sexy similarly relates to the ads that call attention to the body. To appear sexy, one has to have the right type of disciplined body, a body that is seen as young and well cared for.

One can see in these ads, therefore, the distinction between the Canadian women's sense of appearing sexy and the Italian women's feeling of elegance, which is a result of how the body functions and is perceived in each context. While I remain unsure as to why Canadian women tend to feel sexy and Italian women elegant, I may conclude for the moment that the Italian women's response points to a culture that places more emphasis on class distinctions, whereas Canadian women seem to have absorbed the North American "body project" as described by Collins. Their femininity has been packaged as a display of a sexy independent woman.⁹⁶

Cultural Similarities: The Stiletto as Pain, as Habit... as Conformist!?

"How can you walk in those things?" (Answer = carefully and with difficulty)" (38-C)

⁹⁶ There was more I would have liked to add here about the representation of women in general in each culture, but that is a whole other dissertation in itself. I believe it suffices to say that a distinction does hold.

“Husband is same height as I am, therefore wearing stiletto heels will make me taller (looks awkward)” (16-C).

“No pain, no gain” (1-C) was one of the resounding messages in the responses I gathered about wearing stilettos. “It’s worth the pain” was a parallel response (35-C). Most interestingly, while pain definitely ensues after prolonged use of stilettos, the gains noted were most often tied to a sense of propriety, which enabled the women to feel a sense of authority, of femininity, of appeal, of confidence, and of beauty. Stilettos enabled the women to conform to standard perceptions of authority, femininity, etc, and, in that, the pain became worth it. However, these motives are not as shallow as they may at first appear. As Quentin Bell noted and as will be discussed in Chapter 5, conforming does not necessarily entail superficial gains.

Stilettos perform a social function. For example, many of both the Canadian and Italian women confirmed this sentiment as many noted how attending a formal event calls for the wearing of high heels and that it is entirely inappropriate not to wear heels. As one respondent put it, “I wear them on special occasions because in my mind, high heels are part of a woman's formal attire.... I do feel that certain garments 'require' heels to complete the look, even though I know that this is social conditioning; still, I find cork-soled sandals with party clothes somehow tasteless; tacky, even” (38-C). Stilettos, therefore, function by adhering to customary practices and values, which helps women who wear them feel comfortable and to avoid embarrassment in particular social settings – to fit in.

Many of the women in the study discussed how they felt it is inappropriate to wear stilettos in particular settings, and this response differed depending on their own personal, professional identities rather than on cultural difference: a manager I interviewed noted

she is nothing without heels at work, whereas a teacher noted it is totally inappropriate to wear them to work (9-C; 12-C). Both responses suggest that potential embarrassment may be lurking if one disregarded customary practice. Consider how others noted formal occasions, like a wedding, require heels (28-C; 29-C; 38-C; 43-C; 13-C): “It is inappropriate to wear flats at a wedding so I would feel “underdressed” going to a wedding without stilettos” (28-C). Others also confirmed the contextual relativity of the heel: “I think there is a time and place for heels... I would wear heels for a special occasion (like a wedding)” (29-C).

This sense of cultural ritual works to highlight, as Bell notes, the spiritual aims of the self, in that we are not merely self-absorbed but are concerned with others. We have what he terms a sartorial conscience. While clothes might not form part of our most heroic aspects, they do demonstrate our “direct relationship between aesthetic and social feelings” (17). Concern for personal appearance, Bell explains is directly tied to our sense of morality (19). While Bell as well as Rouse demonstrate how the things we wear are informed by customary practices and are rooted in our Judaeo-Christian sense of guilt and shame, so that the stiletto comes to represent formal female wear for a woman of a particular age, they do not acknowledge how these formal contexts may be providing women with the backdrop from which to experiment with their bodies, to test their own physical limits. Rather than interpreting women who wear stilettos to formal events as conforming to beauty standards, we may instead interpret the formal context as the backdrop from which women may experiment with the positioning of their own bodies, for example as an exploration of their uprightness.

While I would like to conclude by demonstrating the positive social worth of the stiletto, I must also mention how it sexualizes women. According to Flugel, the modern female body has been moving away from the body as a capsule for maternity to accentuate other elements of selfhood, such as the erogenous breast, which promote the ideal of a sexualized rather than maternal femme (Flugel 160)⁹⁷. One of my Canadian respondents actually compared the two female phenomena, womanhood versus motherhood, to suggest that it is not children that make you feel like a woman but one's appearance: "I feel pretty, womanly, like they bring out my womanhood. Funny, others would say that it's motherhood that does that" (10-C). Others noted that "You instantly become a woman in them" (9-C); "Stilettos make me feel more mature more powerful and successful" (35-C); and "Wearing flats is the opposite of that – more casual, I feel small and childish, whereas stilettos make me feel more grown up and visible" (22-C). The femme Flugel describes does things that will promote her as a sexualized being. He notes that, due to this, the high heel remains a cultural phenomenon, as it stems from "the desire to increase [one's] apparent height (without increase of breadth) in pursuance of the youthful ideal" (Flugel 160). This feature of the heel is what has been most fetishized in various social settings and discourses as a depiction or naturalization of self-transformation or advancement. While there are cultural differences regarding the use, interpretation and experience of heels, as my study has shown, what seems to be equal across cultures is an inclination towards vertical rather than horizontal growth. In both the Canadian and Italian print media I analyzed, the ideal woman appears tall, but not wide.

⁹⁷ Which fits closely in line with the "Body Project" as discussed by Louise Collins.

I came across the correlation between height and youth on at least one occasion in my research, but in my quantitative research it never came up.⁹⁸ What I found was the reverse. Many of my respondents noted that they felt more mature, more like women, like adults, when wearing heels. I found 32% of the Canadian responses and 37% of the Italian responses noted stilettos made them “feel more feminine” and “more like a woman” (38-C; 39-C; 9-C; 10-C; 29-I; 30-I, etc.). Many used adjectives related to maturity, such as sophisticated, classy, refined, authoritative. As one respondent noted, “There are a few things that I actually like about stiletto heels. (1) They make me look taller, thus thinner (2) they show off my still slim ankles (3) I feel very 'formal' and 'adult' in them” (38-C). This sense of “womanhood” refers to a particular demographic for both cultural groups: women in their sexual prime, from the 20s to mid-30s.⁹⁹ The maturity noted in the responses referred to the age-frame, which coincides with young adulthood and not, for example, middle aged women or young girls. This may be due in part to what Flugel was pointing to in his protection of fertility thesis, in that woman wear stilettos to suggest they are reproductively available, so that once that period of fertility passes, there is no more need for a woman to appear sexually provocative. On the other hand, the practice of censoring young girls’ uses of stilettos relates not to her lack of fertility, but rather reveals a social taboo related to the age of sexual consent. So the stiletto has a restricted and limited time span in a woman’s wardrobe. The woman who wears stilettos needs to be of a certain age – not too young, nor too old, but just ripe. This sense was confirmed in the responses, as

⁹⁸ See L La Roche, *Kick Up Your Heels...Before You're Too short To wear them: How To Live a Long, Juicy, Healthy Life* (2007). This self-help manual’s title signals not only its subject, dealing with age, but also plays with the corporeal transformation that occurs as we age.

⁹⁹ In my own personal experiences, the Italian cultural ideal has a slightly different age range: the upper range goes to about mid 40s.

many older women lamented the loss of wearing heels, a nostalgic yearning for youth lost. As one woman noted, “I used to wear them when I was younger and was going out to a bar or an event” (8-C). I also found in Schwedner’s research that those who could no longer wear high heels really felt “a sense of loss,” as something they had “to give up” (160). One woman in her research also noted how heels were about fun – a feature of youthful countenance and, as such, “returned her to her youth”(Schwedner 182). This real sense of loss noted across studies may be what sparked the envy I noted in my survey responses, as one woman, in a more caustic tone noted “Although I wore stilettos when I was younger, practicality (and longevity) have become more important as I age” (36-C). Another woman’s response clearly highlights the relation between stilettos, sexual appeal, and age, as she retaliated to the question “how do u wear those all day” with:

“I just smirk and say cuz I love them! Secretly these women hate me cuz I am wearing what they wish they wore– stilettos... because they know men like these painkilling shoes and are somewhat maybe jealous that they didn’t put theirs on... or maybe they are now questioning themselves as to why they haven’t put on stilettos in 10 years!! Hehehe” (35-C).

It’s Not Always About Others

“I like to wear them because I am short, and I like the extra height I get” (29-C).

“I feel taller...” (39-C)

The stiletto heel is no stranger to meaning, as particular connotations, such as sexy, dangerous, and provocative append themselves to those who choose to make use of them.

However, clothing does not constitute a consistent system of meaning. Stilettos, in this

semiotic light, purport to communicate messages about the wearer, and while this may be the case, the lack of consensus about the stiletto's possible meanings problematizes this assumption. In the case of the SlutWalk movement to be discussed in the final chapter, stilettos are seen to mean numerous things. Campbell discovered that the messages clothes send are not perfect one-to-one messages; he found, for example, that 45% thought pant cuffs were in fashion while 43% thought they were out of fashion (161). In my survey responses, there were also a good number who found stilettos not appropriate attire for the office (see 12-C) and those who thought you can't go to work without them (9-C). There were also many who thought the stiletto symbolized vulgarity and many others who saw them as a symbol of elegance.

This lack of consensus challenges the sociologist's emphasis on the symbolic meaning of clothes (Campbell 160). The sociologist's stress on symbolic meaning detracts from considering the way things are used, and it stresses that people take on meaning rather than create it (ibid). Here the individual consumer lacks agency and actually invests one's self in sending out messages in the hopes of gaining recognition and confirmation from others (Campbell 166). I found that the act of putting on heels is a much more self-reflexive activity. One of the respondents noted she wore heels in the privacy of her own home (20-I), while another responded, "When wearing them they make me feel a lot more aware of my gait, balance and coordination" (30-C) – a clear sense her body is learning something it would not have necessarily been aware of had it not been for the stiletto's effect on her body.

There was a sense in the responses that the women liked the way in which the stilettos made them aware of their own senses. As one respondent noted, "[When I wear

stilettos,] I have to walk more slowly; life slows down and I feel that I notice my world around me more, and that I am noticed more." 50% of the total women surveyed specifically noted that they liked the way they felt and looked in stiletto heels. As one Canadian graduate student put it, "They give me more confidence and I feel like I can have more fun while wearing them" (26-C). These women do not necessarily dress only for "others" or because they want to emulate "others" as psychoanalysis, as well as sociology and structuralist thought, argues. When women dress, the physical sensation they derive from the clothing is a self-reflexive activity. In some instances, like the wearing of stilettos, there is a physicality that lends women a heightened sense of their body. The pain they mention also works to create an increased sense of corporeality, of being in the world, almost like a metamorphosis of sorts, a transformation of the body proper, as they exclaim "I feel taller!" The women's almost unanimous response that they feel taller wearing stilettos functions as a reference to one's own self and not taller than someone else. It is a relative observation, 'taller than me,' which signals a desire to transform the self on one's own, using whatever means possible, rather than an attempt to compare oneself to others or for others. As in the survey results, 64% of the Italian respondents and 50% of the Canadian respondents pointed out that stilettos provide a sense of height, an elongation of the body proper. On this point, both groups were almost indistinguishable. The notion of height appears as the number one response for both groups, which presents a challenge to both cultural and social theory, in that wearing stilettos is not just a conditioned cultural response or a matter of gaining more social presence or a matter of imitation, as their responses cross cultural boundaries.

As well, one must consider the non-communicative aspect of stilettos. Here I want to suggest that the stiletto, its pain and physical effects are something that continue to be denied to women as their own personal choice but are rather seen as something dictated by social custom. While in the case of the stiletto testimonies I gathered, women did note the functional aspects of the stiletto, for example, the potential of heels to protect and secure economic interests (as one woman stated, “even in the workplace, flats are to be worn after you’ve secured a position and feel comfortable, but, until then, suffer with heels” (9-C), many women described how they loved the way the stilettos made them *feel*, while only seven of the 35 Canadian respondents and one of the Italian respondents replied that they dressed to please others. As McLuhan noted, media as extensions of ourselves, as appendages, enable us to feel. Interestingly, to explore this concept he uses the myth of the self-absorbed Narcissus to suggest humans are “fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves” (McLuhan 41). The reference to Narcissus clearly points out how devoid of social expectations we are: self-absorbed in our own personal activities, while having to nonetheless circulate in social contexts.

Many of the women mentioned the pain related to wearing stilettos, which begs the question: why would women subject themselves to such torture? What draws women to wear these things? Why is it that women can be comfortable but choose not to be? They do so because clothes, in general, have nothing to do with comfort. As one survey respondent put it, “Women who don’t wear stilettos are afraid to wear them because they aren’t comfortable. They are definitely not comfortable.... It is not about comfort, it is about how they make you look and feel” (12-C). Kunzle’s look at the primitive practices of body-sculpture points to the way in which women may be using constrictive footwear to assert

their own identities. He finds that this practice in the West, limited as it is in scope, shares some of the same purpose – to act as a permanent reminder of a new and irreversible identity (3). He discusses the way in which the high heel can be understood as clearly sculpting the body so that women are engaging in ‘body-sculpting’ through the “compression of toes rendering them pointed in their alignment where nature made them broad and square” possibly in an attempt to assert their own ‘new’ and ‘irreversible’ identities (Kunzle 11). He is suggesting that the physical transformation, the body sculpting caused by the stiletto, may be women’s response to the accusations that rendered them pathological.

My findings have shown that more than half of the women surveyed agreed that wearing stiletto heels is important to them because of the height they add, a height that in some cases the women felt was rightfully their own. Although cultural differences do exist in the responses between the two groups of women that can be explained by social constructivist theories, they do not account for the cross-cultural similarity that found both groups interested in the vertically extended sense of self that stilettos lent them. I wanted to test whether motivations for wearing stiletto heels are entirely socially driven or whether, as both Schilder and Campbell hint at, we make use of what the social offers to advance our own sense of self. As this section of my research attests to, the women surveyed made use of stilettos to gain an increased awareness of their own bodily selves.

The findings discussed here create some interesting obstacles for a number of semiotic as well as sociological theories because they highlight the fact that not all clothing is about communication and not all dressing is a social act. Rather it is also a physical, sensual primordial act. Clothing acts as a layer of skin producing all the somatic responses

of any other nerve-producing impulse. Wearers become so tightly in tune with their clothing that they feel an actual metamorphosis or transformation occur. The stiletto can be considered a kind of prosthesis, an augmentation of the self. This discussion brings us closer to the domain of biology, which is not to suggest that only biology can account for the body or our experience of the body, but rather to point out that somatic reaction must be taken into consideration when looking at any extension of the body, something Joanne Entwistle attests to with her look at embodied practices.

What became clear to me from the Canadian and Italian survey responses was that the stiletto was used as the kind of protection Flugel described. When Flugel considered the functional aspect of clothing, he considered how one protective measure of clothing could also be psychological protection, “a protection against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole; or, expressed more psychologically, a reassurance against the lack of love” (Flugel 131). In this sense I came to see how stilettos functioned in some instances as a tool to instruct other women, to morally debase them in an attempt to promote one’s own position, or to defend women’s rights, and I also noticed that women use the stiletto as an excuse to reprimand one other. Laced throughout the commentary of the women who rejected stilettos was a deep moral lesson that any “smart” woman would not be subject or be led into such licentious behaviour (34-C; 38-C). The women who did wear them were defensive, apologetic and apprehensive about admitting their use. As one Canadian respondent put it:

“I don't know what the general public opinion on stilettos is. I suppose, like most things, it depends who you ask. I've heard comments (from men) that they make women’s legs look better, and I've heard comments (from women) that they make

women look like sex-trade workers. The only comments I get personally are pretty banal; 'how can you walk in those things' (answer = carefully and with difficulty); 'why are you wearing those things' (answer = because - in my not so humble opinion - this mid-calf silk dress with sequined top looks really stupid with flats); generally, the comments indicate that the shoes are seen as somehow silly/vain/pretentious. The people who comment on my footwear to my face are mostly my friends, none of whom wear high heels for any reason - but then, they don't wear the clothing that I think requires them, either" (38-C)

An Italian woman noted:

"Ho sentito spesso dire che i tacchi a spillo sono volgari e aggressivi. A mio avviso tutto è relativo a chi li indossa! Sono un accessorio molto particolare e "delicato", é vero che basta un niente, anche solo un piccolo accessorio accostatogli in modo errato, per cadere decisamente nel ridicolo" (15-I).¹⁰⁰

While she does not support the idea that stilettos are perceived as vulgar and aggressive, she nonetheless makes it known that a woman *can* appear ridiculous in them. Another Italian woman noted the way shoes divide women and that women definitely *size* each other up in them:

"Le donne guardano molto le scarpe delle altre a volte con ammirazione, a volte con invidia e altre volte con disprezzo. Gli uomini vorrebbero che ogni donna indossasse per loro tacchi a spillo, li trovano molto sexy. Alcune signore over50 li credono

¹⁰⁰ "I've often heard said that stilettos are vulgar and aggressive. In my opinion, everything is relative to who wears them! They are a very particular and 'delicate' accessory, it's true that it is sufficient a small nothing, even a small wrongly paired accessory to decisively fall into the ridiculous".

scomodi, poco pratici, poco raffinati e dannosi per la salute di piedi e schiena (e non a tutti torti)” (34-I).¹⁰¹

Here she conjures up all the connotations stilettos evoke in women: admiration, envy and depreciation. A Canadian woman came to the defense of women who wear them despite not wearing them herself: “I saw a woman at work wearing a really pretty pair of strappy stilettos, and other women were commenting on how stupid it was for her to wear them to work. I think people should wear whatever they want to wear” (8-C). Confirming Flugel’s suggestion that we wear clothes that protect us in the social realm, against unloving eyes, another noted, “I think heels are perceived differently, depending who is looking” (29-C). Another woman summed up this sentiment:

For example, [I would wear stilettos] if I were going out on a date with a boy who I knew appreciated the aesthetic value of said heels, and who also had a car, so I wouldn't have to walk around too much in them!! (I want to have an image in my head of me walking to his car, and looking hot in my heels, and getting compliments for it.) (1-C).

She would wear stilettos only if she knew the boy she was romantically interested in would appreciate them. Depending on the context and the eyes watching us, we will dress, as Flugel notes, to protect us from those watchful eyes.

¹⁰¹ “Women very much look at others’ shoes sometimes in admiration, and other times with envy and other times with contempt. Men would want that every woman wear stilettos, they find them very sexy. Some women over 50 think they are uncomfortable, not practical, not very fine and damaging to the health of feet and back (and no one wrong)”.

Research Challenges

A cross-cultural comparison is complicated on a number of different levels. In the Canadian context, cultural identity is a little more ambiguous than in the more homogeneous Italian context¹⁰². A factor that complicates the Canadian identity is not only occupation but also the various cultural groups that people identify with. In a city like Toronto where only 10% of the population actually identifies as Canadian, this makes for a difficult comparison to say this group is entirely Canadian (Census 2006). This may have been shortsighted on my part, as I did not ask the respondents to identify their nationality but instead their place of birth and of residence. My survey looked mainly at Torontonians, but in that context it also had a wide range of participants from a number of cultural groups. In order to test for cultural differences in the Toronto context, I would need a larger sample of participants. Nonetheless, my comparison has brought to light that regardless of the cultural differences that may exist in a Canadian city like Toronto, there are some similarities between female Torontonians regardless of ethnic differences. The quite pronounced finding that in the Canadian women's responses the adjective 'sexy' comes up 51% of the time, whereas in the Italian responses it only appears in 14% of the responses, suggests consensus does exist among the Torontonian participants. Likewise, in the Italian context it is interesting to note that 'elegant' comes up in 31% of the responses, and in only 17% of the Canadian responses.

For the Italian case, it should be clarified that the Italian cultural reality is not in fact entirely homogenous, as there exists a cultural tension between the north and south of

¹⁰² The Italian reference will be further qualified shortly.

Italy. However, my sample seems to efface this distinction as it represents positions specifically from the northern Emilia Romagna region, and Liguria, as well as the southern regions of Abruzzo and Puglia, two groups of regions separated in this north south dichotomy. My sample group in Italy was collected partly during my time in Italy as I distributed the link to people, friends, family in Bologna, as well as family in Abruzzo and Puglia, which they then passed the link on to their own networks. Despite the geographic difference the dichotomy didn't hold, as my survey respondents in both the north and south unanimously described the stiletto as a predominantly elegant female accessory, in a sense, erasing this divide. This interesting find would be useful to follow as it points to a fundamental social reality that would point to a more indistinguishable female experience in both the north and south of Italy, despite the prevailing prejudices, which do not acknowledge the similarity of experience. What may help explain this unanimous experience is the way in which the media landscape on the national level has an important impact on quite consistent, nationally determined imaginaries on female adornment; and, as a consequence or as evidence, the north south divide does not seem to hold in the Italian survey responses. For example, *Elle* is distributed throughout Italy, and available to women both in the north and south without distinction. Therefore, representation of the female Italian fashion experience on a national level is equally accessed and similarly experienced. Here, a close look at the power of the media would be interesting to pursue for future research considerations.

Conclusion

In the survey responses the stiletto emerged as an incredibly versatile female tool. But more so, its power lay in its canny ability to demonstrate the cultural peculiarities of each group of women, while also highlighting that not only culture informs one's thoughts or opinions on things. One's occupation does so as well, but with a quick sleight of foot (in this case) it also demonstrated that neither of those conditions suffice to explain the complexities of women's experiences, thoughts and actions. In fact, what was perhaps most enlightening was the way in which the stiletto helped women realize a part of themselves they may never have been privy too, and in Narcissus-like fashion, enabled them to peer into themselves, into their reflections and ponder the way the stiletto extends their sense of self and understanding of the self.

The responses from this survey showed a great variety of experiences with some overlap in the various occupational responses, which demonstrated that the stiletto is neither strictly understood as emancipating women nor is it seen or experienced as an object that places women in a submissive role. The Canadian women's sense of 'sexy' and the Italian women's sense of 'elegance' in stilettos pointed to a cultural dictate in relation to the use of stilettos. While the survey clearly highlighted culture's role in shaping one's uses and ideas about things, I would also like to now turn and look at the possibility of how some things, like the stiletto, may function outside of culture.

Semmelhack notes the power of heels "has very little to do with its practicality as a shoe and everything to do with its function as a mutable signifier able to convey complex sets of values...., the true power of the high heel is its ability to be invested with the social values of its time" (Semmelhack *Heights* 66). My survey responses testify to this as the

stiletto in both sets of responses was found to signify a complex set of values: from hooker to elegant woman, to power woman, to young woman. However, while they generally manage to communicate social allegiances and values, as personalized items they enable individuals to express their selves, their uniqueness, which works to, at times, challenge those same systems of value and belief in which stilettos have been forced to circulate.

The survey responses I collected regarding how the general public perceives stilettos uniformly repeated key themes and perceptions. While a very personal item, it seems to carry specific values that are repeated in the individual responses. The survey responses confirm what Semmelhack, Steele and others have noted: that stilettos are a key component of the contemporary cultural construction of femininity. They are not only personal items but collective objects as well, with a complex history and imaginary. Most importantly, the survey responses confirmed that the things we choose to wear, such as a stiletto shoe, inform and are informed by a whole system of belief and values. As sociologist Kurt Back notes in his look at fashion and modernism, “the need of the whole society for clothes links fashion directly to the structure of society” (Back 399). Fashion and society are closely intertwined precisely because people clothe their bodies in various ways, shapes and forms, which are informed by a number of belief systems particular to the society being observed. Therefore, meanings are imbued, constructed in our clothing practices.

However, “things” also slip from under our feet. As Bill Brown notes “things are messy, useless, unpredictable”; as such they defy meaning, as Campbell also attests (4); and while stilettos may carry predictable meanings, they also work to defy those exact meanings as will come up in the case of the riot grrrls in chapter 6, which begs us to

consider the unpredictability of things, that “things are occasions of contingency” (Brown 4).

Chapter 4: To Wear or Not to Wear Heels: An Academic

Distinction

As we have seen, while for some of the women surveyed, the stiletto signifies women's liberation in many of its representations, for many others it signifies a complete degradation of the female condition. Depending on whose foot it found itself, the stiletto also emerged as a marker of women's class division. By a stroke of luck, this chapter emerged from a discussion question I posted on a listserv regarding my research on heels. From the answers I received, I began to see what Bourdieu had captured in his look at French culture in the 1960s: the ways in which our professional formations have the ability to shape our thoughts and opinions. I started to ask myself: "Well, how much of what I think about women in heels is my own, and how much of it depends on the particular social setting I find myself in? More to the point, how much of my opinion has been shaped by the academy in which much of my theoretical thinking was formed?" Luckily, through the listserv's responses I was able to peer closely at exactly these questions – how opinions of things can be influenced by, for example, one's pursuit of higher education.

So I started to consider the potential of answering some larger questions that were emerging, such as: How may a close look at a group of intellectual and academic women's opinions on heels help highlight the social distinctions that Bourdieu was pointing to in *Distinction*? Can the way one thinks and talks about things, such as a pair of heels, really reveal one's socio-economic position? Can talking about heels reveal the social drifts that

exist in our social settings? And can the social settings and relations individuals find themselves in work to define their opinions and judgments on topics such as women and stiletto heels? This chapter tries to examine these questions by taking a closer look at how one's professional formation and association creates certain conditions of existence, as Bourdieu notes, which then shape and influence opinions and tastes of particular things, such as the stiletto.

While compiling my literary resources for this dissertation, I approached the Rutgers Child Lit listserv – a Rutgers University discussion forum dedicated to discussing children's literature – to solicit their help in identifying children's books that feature heels or that make reference to heels and women. While the discussion produced a number of very interesting textual references, the feminist polemics that developed proved useful for my research purposes because this group of women's personal opinions provided another survey sample from which to observe women's perception of and relation to heels.¹⁰³ This particular sample proved to be important on two fronts: it showcased the opinions of a specific socio-economic group of women, i.e. academics, intellectuals; and, it provided me with a look at group dynamics. In addition, it clearly demonstrated the general tensions surrounding high heels, which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

The discussion began with the following question that I posted to the forum:

I am compiling research on women's/girl's relations to high heels and looking for literary examples. I am looking for stories that might highlight heels as a rite of passage for girls, or as a means for emancipation from motherly (or fatherly) rule, or

¹⁰³ This is in addition to my general survey of women posted on Survey Monkey that was discussed in the previous chapter.

any story that figures a girl and heels. So far I have the obvious: Cinderella and Andersen's "The Red Shoes."

Within twenty minutes of my post, I began to receive replies, and within a week I had received a total of 42 responses. The responses wavered between literary references and personal opinion, and the opinions managed to match the literary references with forty-nine percent of the responses, so out of 35 responses only 18 were directly related to the question.

The discussion provided me with valuable references, such as to *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, a coming of age novel that "features a chapter/vignette where the girls find and wear old high heels, and they note how this affects their perception of themselves, as well as how other people view them – both men and women," as summarized by MC (2-MC).¹⁰⁴ However, three responses into the discussion, a comment from one of the members put a twist on things and set the tone for the remainder of the discussion. Jen posted a critique to the group which I used as an epigram for the introduction: "Fascinating bit of our culture, this. I find high heels to be anything but emancipatory." What ensued was a display of tension that had no parallel in my survey responses, even if a large number of my survey participants were also academics and intellectuals. I wondered what the difference could have been and what could have fuelled this tension.

The remainder of the discussion turned from technical inquiry to personal stances on the issue of heels in general. Jen's post provoked a whole slew of feminist-type

¹⁰⁴ Although the Rutgers listserv is technically a public domain, I have opted to keep the names of the members anonymous.

commentary related to the stiletto that I was not anticipating. Her response in and of itself was not all that surprising to me. As my research has so far shown, the topic of high heels draws out many tensions in intellectual traditions. What was interesting was the way in which it set the tone for the subsequent responses, the way in which it instigated a particular type of discourse.

Discourse Analysis

To consider the dynamics of the discourse that developed, I turned to theories that examine how the self can be shaped by the particular social conditions in which an individual is situated (Goffman, Bourdieu). What I understood from them is that the participants presented particular, idealized versions of their selves that most closely fit the situation in which they found themselves, but this presentation is not static but rather quite fluid (Goffman). I also looked at theories that examine the way discourses are shaped by the dynamics and expectations set forth by the participant's particular context (Baxter, Foucault).

In *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman considers how the self is shaped by interactions within closed social situations. He finds when individuals appear before others, they have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive and try to make, and he notes how an individual's actions will, in turn, influence the definition of the situation which they come to have (15). One's performance, which Goffman defines as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion, serves to influence the other participants as well (6). Most influential, however, is the initial group performance because "in consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the

situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, [she] automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat [her] in the manner that persons of [her] kind have a right to expect” (13).

The initial position taken or performed in a particular situation, therefore, sets the tone for all subsequent performances and enforces the presentation of an idealized version of the self that matches the overall tone of the groups’ sensibilities and presentations, as performed in that initial utterance. For example, the initial criticism expressed in the list serve discussion set the tone for all the other replies. The disdain expressed by Jen became the backdrop for all the other women’s responses, to either defend or challenge. Jen opened up the possibility for all those who also wanted and welcomed the opportunity to assert their own position in the discourse, their own critique of the culturally specific topic of women in heels. In a sense she broke the ice, and in doing so shifted the discourse from simple literary exchange of information to moral debate.

As Goffman notes, in whichever social situation one finds oneself, an idealized version of the self is put forth compatible with the “overall definition of the situation that is being fostered” (51). This idealized version is not fixed, however: one’s status is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed. It is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated (75). To establish a position within a discourse means to constantly negotiate one’s position as reflective of that particular setting. It works as a process of negotiation so that “to *be* a given kind of person, [in a particular situation] then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one’s social grouping attaches thereto” (75). It is an articulated performance. Members demonstrate their worth through what they say as well

as through their actions. In the case of the listserv discussion, the members attempted to prove their group compatibility by reinforcing or presenting slight permutations of the initial accusatory declaration that “heels are anything but emancipatory,” or they chose to avoid the discussion altogether, which also demonstrated a particular position in the hierarchy of the discourse (Foucault).

Judith Baxter notes how speakers in public settings are constantly negotiating for positions of power, with a demonstrable duty to “prove their worth” by accomplishing goal-orientated tasks, such as solving problems or making decisions (8). In public settings there is a stronger demand for peer approval, which is obtained through the negotiation of meanings demonstrated by the way one positions oneself, and is also positioned by a specific discursive context (8). Baxter notes that the power or powerfulness speakers obtain in these particular public contexts depends on their positioning within a combination of discourses, (9). The relationship between discourse and power is arguably more conspicuous in public, institutionalized contexts because here people are invested in their social personas. The power relations in this particular group of women’s relations are shaped by the context of the university listserv, in which they find themselves. This setting demands the demonstrations of particular attitudes about female power, which, in turn, explains the resounding, indignant replies concerning the high heel.

When I contrasted the listserv discussion with the individual survey responses I conducted, I found the survey responses took on a much more self-reflexive tone. The moral indignation was either not entirely present or differed drastically from one voice to another, which was not the case in the listserv responses, where the women loudly rejected heels, and even those who seemed to defend heels or tried to balance the discussion were

either apologetic or quite defensive. For example, one woman noted that she too hated heels for all the aforementioned reasons but had to wear them to work because she felt she was too short otherwise:

Somewhat OT¹⁰⁵ - I'm a little sad to admit that I wear high heels almost every day because at 5'2" I am shorter than many of my students, and at 30 (almost 31!) years old, I am still younger than the average age of my students. (12-PS)

The differences between the listserv responses versus the survey responses can be attributed to the differences found in performances made in public versus private settings. The listserv is a public forum, what Goffman would call a closed setting or what Foucault would consider a heterotopia – a space that is both inclusive, yet exclusive, where each individual is vying for a position in the hierarchy of the discourse –, whereas the survey is a personal, private space, not entirely dependent on public scrutiny.

In the listserv discussion, where the member's opinions and judgments are open to scrutiny and censure from other members of the group, an overall self and group censorship was felt, as women made apologies, imparted imperatives, and reprimanded others' opinions. The overall morale that prevailed was that heels are a clear site of tension for women, in particular educated women.

Bourdieu considers a uniformity of position, such as the feminist interpretation of heels as exploitive, as "being the product of the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence, it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others" (56). The manner in which one demonstrates

¹⁰⁵ OT is internet slang for "off topic." The use of texting acronyms also signals her age.

one's tastes works to classify one's position in the social realm; as Bourdieu notes, "taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others" (56). In the case of the Rutgers listserv discussion, where the women are all implicitly understood as carrying a modicum of academic capital, which was the very basis of their association, the discourse resounded with a feminist critique very typical of the feminist anti-fashion attitude discussed by Davis, which renounces all things that reinforce feminine stereotypes (Davis 93).

For the group of women in the Rutgers listserv discussion, certain key structures and 'perception of practices' inform their position on high heels (170). This group of women here share one thing in common: they are all invested in displaying their academic distinction (Bourdieu 86). The women made numerous attacks on the sensibilities of women who choose to wear a "stupid" shoe, such as the stiletto. Bourdieu notes that those who owe most of their cultural capital to the educational system are particularly sympathetic and subject to academic definitions of legitimacy and tend to proportion their investments very strictly according to the value the educational system sets on the different areas that shape their habitus (Bourdieu 86). This group of academic women's position on stiletto heels reflect the values of the educational systems in which they came to obtain their educational capital. "To live up" to their own essence, they must identify and accept the demands implicitly inscribed in this entitlement (Bourdieu 23). As Bourdieu notes, a group who owe most of their cultural capital to the educational system will, in turn, tend to promote the positions most closely aligned to that profession, i.e. conservatism and asceticism (Bourdieu 86). In this educational setting, the heel comes to function as a tool to highlight the group's general moral attitudes.

Furthermore, Bourdieu suggests that as a dominated fraction of the dominant class concerned with advancing their own personal agendas that would promote their own vision of the world or “culture,” the middle classes – which academics form a part of – have a high degree of anxiety about external appearances due to this oppressed position (252-3).¹⁰⁶ “The middle classes are, therefore, *committed* to the symbolic... to appearances, as they are haunted by the look of others and endlessly occupied with being seen in a good light” (Bourdieu 252-3). The women on the listserv attempted in numerous ways to demonstrate their good sense, and their overall group value, by demonstrating their intellectual value, for example, the sensible librarian, the smart Chair of the English Department, the precocious Assistant Professor, the academic with witty references to, for example, Kasturba Gandhi (32-KU), etc.

Bourdieu further notes that the interest each class dedicates to self-presentation is linked to their awareness of the profits they can gain materially and symbolically (202). One’s appearance and opinions, therefore, situates beings in particular economic and symbolic realities. As one member put it, “One of the *best* things about *being a librarian* is, you’re expected to wear *sensible* shoes” (10-ZA, my italics).

Bourdieu’s analysis of the relation between one’s socio-economic condition and their social distinction is closely aligned with Karl Marx’s analysis of the social relations produced in a capitalist system. In *Capital*, Marx postulates that the means by which one obtains their things, or the manner in which they sell their labour, shapes their social relations, or to borrow Bourdieu’s term, shapes one’s habitus; however, while the producer

¹⁰⁶ For a full discussion on the topic of diversified class behaviour, see Bourdieu, “The Habitus and the Space of Lifestyles.”

of meaning is convinced that her habitus is natural to her, Marx, like Bourdieu, demonstrates how it is a result of the social conditions of production inherent in a capitalist system. For Marx, economic activity determines the social sphere (13). In a capitalist system, social relations are formed between agents that resemble the capitalist relation between things or between individuals and things, or by extension between self and 'others'. Here, class distinctions are born to reflect the capitalist system, where each group, defined by their particular accumulation of capital, sees themselves as distinct from an 'other', and comes to see their own position as natural, as right. For Marx, things are made and come to us through a mode of production that shapes and reflects the society in which they appear. In "The Labour Process and the Valorization Process," Marx points out that "material production is the basis of all social life, and therefore of all real history" (286). It is important to note that Marx saw value in a society organized around concrete material phenomena, so that the ways in which humans produce for themselves the necessities of life shapes who they/we are, everything else about us (social class, ideologies) are appendages shaped out of economic activity. Where one appears on the production scale of the capitalist system, in turn, informs one's position in the social system. For example, one's profession – their economic capital, to borrow from Bourdieu – informs their cultural capital, i.e. where they belong in the social sphere. Individual economic agents are literally invested in their profession, and obversely, one's profession invests social agents.

So the material realities of one's social conditions and economic activities are also reflected in one's symbolic investments, in one's overall habitus. In the discussion that follows, the individuals represent a group invested in their academic capital, and who, in

turn, defend the positions that promote and reflect their particular form of accumulated capital (Bourdieu 86).

A Feminist Discourse

The Rutgers listserv discussion board is a university-based forum, whose participants tend to be like-minded. It is what Foucault would consider a heterotopic space because its membership is both exclusive as well as inclusive (it contains this paradox). One's membership depends on and implies an affiliation with a particular intellectual vocation, i.e. professor, librarian, principal, graduate student, etc. Even though membership does not rely on face-to-face interaction as in the examples Goffman looked at in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, each member's position and the group's exclusivity was nonetheless displayed through their professional credentials, in the form of a signature or in other classificatory details. Participants clearly identified themselves as "Chair of English," "completing a PhD in Ethnomusicology," "recently promoted," "Associate Editor," "Associate Professor," "Assistant Professor," and "Reference Librarian." As direct representatives of an intellectual tradition, these women were invested in maintaining and demonstrating their place in a tradition. Their discourse was shaped by some beliefs ingrained in what it means to be intellectual, to be smart, which demonstrated to the group their academic capital. The prevailing sentiment reflected and reinforced the overall academic discourse, which rejects fashion due to its perceived frivolousness. What was at stake for the speakers was the presentation of self as an academically viable representative. Members were engaged in performative speech acts that worked to establish their position within the discourse on numerous levels.

Since the participants were clearly aware of their audience, their performances mirrored the setting. For example, one respondent immediately followed a post by apologizing for grammatical errors she felt she had made in her response and also made the effort to explain how it happened: "Sorry, last bit was sent from my phone, hence the brevity and poor sentence structure" (6-MC). She had to set things straight with the group. The identification with this 'academic self' became even more apparent when as I attempted to goad the discussion, I was on more than one occasion scolded for bringing up what were considered "stupid ideas." On one occasion, for example, I brought up the idea that flat shoes have also been found to damage feet, tendons and toes, to which I received the following satirical reply:

I don't know that contrasting heels with flip flops makes sense... that one kind of shoe can hurt feet doesn't mean that it's "okay" to hurt feet another way. We need to be listening to our bodies, not to a marketing scheme or aggregating research. Sometimes we need one kind of support, other times another. Would we wear parkas in Florida heat? (35-CM).

This defensive tone was evident in other responses. In an academic forum, where members are engaged in an exchange of academic information and merit, a sort of battle of wits emerged, where the high heel became the scapegoat onto which the members were able to pin their academic and feminist positions. The dominant position that won out here was that stilettos were definitely far from any kind of emancipation, and the stiletto quickly became dichotomized into good versus bad behaviour.

However, the responses were not simple repetitions of the same idea. Significant permutations emerged, and some antagonisms as well. In order to understand the way the

heel was interpreted in this discussion, I want to offer a close look at the following contrasting interpretations made by two members.¹⁰⁷ Their differing interpretations represent a particular dichotomy that emerged from the discussion:

MF: While I support people's right to make really stupid decisions, I don't think I shouldn't be able to point out they are stupid decisions.

High heels damage tendons, toes, knees and backs. They wreck feet and can severely reduce the mobility (and consequently healthy) of post-high heel wearing older people. They reduce mobility in and of themselves and they can be lethal (a girl died last year running in high heels – she slipped and fell under a train). If they don't hurt, it's because the feet have "adapted" to the shoe.

I wore them when I was young. I was unlucky in that joint disease struck me young and I haven't been able to wear anything but flats for years, but you know: the first time I put on a pair of lace-up Ecco shoes (flat) and walked for half an hour I looked at my partner and declared in genuine shock: "My feet don't hurt!"

Also, regarding smartness, I am, thank god, one of the generations that discovered that well-polished Doc Martens look utterly fabulous with fishnet tights and miniskirts (and I used to cycle on a boy's bike through the city of York because you can wear a short skirt over a crossbar).

I do sympathise with the desire to look smart at work: it's become a crisis for me as I cannot wear anything but very supportive shoes now ... But I have just bought some

¹⁰⁷ I use the term 'members' to describe the women in this group as opposed to 'respondents' or 'participants' as in the survey responses because it best describes their position in the group and discussion. These women were free to respond, they were not asked to express their opinions, they did so of their own will, and as members of the listserv group.

gorgeous and almost flat very sexy calf boots, and I have several pairs of very shiny and smart lace ups. They are sensible, the brand and the insoles I wear are so good for my feet that I no longer walk with a cane (so let's not go the route of *all shoes are bad for you in some ways* because it's just not true). I look like a woman in command (I just got promoted) and I have been told I look pretty damn intimidating even at 5' 3" (not something I normally celebrate). And oh yes, today I ran for a bus. Don't underestimate the joy of rediscovering this small ability.

Let's not promote the idea that to look smart and sexy you have to hurt yourself.

Yes, shoes are like make up. But high heels are to feet, what lead whitening is to skin.

Look after your feet, and encourage your daughters to do the same: I remember the feet of my grandmother's generation. I'd love to calculate how many hours at the chiropodist to each of the twenty pairs of winkle pickers, kept fondly in her wardrobe (25; 36-MF).

MF here captures a number of sentiments and themes expressed in the other critiques: health warnings, alarmist projections, what it means to be sexy, the expiration date of heels for aging women, the inappropriateness of heels, and most importantly the relation between one's opinions of heels with their own intellectual capacities. While she vehemently critiques the wearing of heels, she is not an entirely anti-fashion feminist type that wants to discard all things feminine. Rather, she wants to maintain a sexy presence, but she also wants to be able to rearticulate what that sexiness should look like, as in the case of her recently purchased sexy flat calf boots.

Her response attempts to subvert the image of the typical sexual female type to include or outright replace it with an image of a woman in Doc Marten's – her preferred shoe. Docs as army boots were appropriated by feminists in the 1960s as a symbol of gender equality. MF, who is of that generation, attempts to subvert established dominant beauty norms and to give legitimacy to her own feminist position on the topic of beauty. This technique of subversion is an attempt at subverting dominant ideology to give legitimacy to one's own ideology, with the hopes of supplanting and becoming the dominant position (see Bourdieu's chapter 5 "The Sense of Distinction"). Simply put, those in the dominant class who own the economic capital to their education try to supplant dominant class ideologies, such as excessive spending or interest in material things, by promoting more grass-root-like initiatives, for example, advancing their own social position and ideologies. Here, MF is attempting to advance the position that Docs are sexy, sensible and smart – the ideal shoe for any sensible woman, as opposed to the more culturally revered sexy stiletto.

In response, another participant, AD, noted that, while she too feels that heels are not emancipatory, her daughter, who was working on her PhD in Ethnomusicology, found her female surgeon's glamourized self, represented in high-heeled black boots, as "reflecting several levels of competent and successful femaleness" (33-AD). While somewhat apologetic, AD nonetheless wanted to register that there may be successful women who nonetheless find stilettos empowering.

These two contrasting positions represented the overall dichotomy of the dialogue that ensued. While most of the women interpreted the stiletto as an object whose use demonstrates a lack of reason, there were a few women who very apologetically tried to

defend the notion that there may be a potential to feel realized through such an item, such as PS, who was a little sad to admit that she wears high heels almost everyday (12-PS). However, the clearly dominant discourse was that heels were anything but emancipatory, and all other voices worked in response to that initial position.

Analyzing these two comments by MF and AD I found some telling similarities: both women are from not only a similar academic background, but they are also roughly of the same generation. They are both mature women, and we can note this from the contextual and relational cues provided. AD speaks of a daughter who completed a PhD, which places her in an age bracket of 50+, and MF mentions that she used to wear heels when she was young. So there is a generational feminist division clearly present, which PS's and AD's comments put them on the older end of.

What is interesting is that AD chose not to speak of her own position on the topic but chose to represent the experience of her daughter, who is part of a younger generation of feminists and does not share the same opinion as those of earlier generations. As AD herself notes, "(her opinion not mine)." This is an important distinction to make because she is both stating an opinion and prepared to reject it in case of a rebuttal from other members of the group by simply stating that the opinion does not necessarily reflect her own. She never claims it as her own opinion, and the disclaimer she includes protects her from any opposition that may arise. In a sense, she saves face with the feminist position most closely aligned with her generation, while also showing a sympathetic response to the new younger generation of stiletto feminists.

AD's interpretation of her daughter's experience acknowledges that women have an influence on other women and that they can be perceived as models for other women,

especially women who are in the midst of realizing themselves within a framework in which they may feel oppressed by the dominant mode of thinking and appearing.¹⁰⁸ It also demonstrates that women's professional appearance is understood to be determined by various professional sectors and different for each sector.

As a young feminist and "as someone who fought against the 'dowdiness' she saw in her field," AD's daughter found relief in seeing a professional woman stylishly dressed. Clothes can provide us with a real and immediate sense of expression, as they are often symbolically conflated with representations of character. John Flugel's functionalist analysis of clothing in "Protection" notes that clothes can protect us against moral danger in that "certain garments can become... symbolic of character, severity of moral standard..." (130). This suggests that clothes have the power to reveal one's character as well as one's morality. He notes that garments are symbolic in that certain styles, colours, textures, cuts, etc., are symbolically connected to certain character traits (130).

Not only may clothes demonstrate particular character traits, but as Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher note in "The Language of Personal Adornment," clothes may also indicate economic status (114). "Adorning oneself can reflect connections with the system of production characteristic of the particular economy within which one lives," note Roach and Eicher (ibid.). Clothing, therefore, can reveal the productive and

¹⁰⁸ MF's and AD's responses point to an essential feature of feminist discourse: that women judge other women, and they do so from varying social positions and to support differing feminist positions. This may not be such an enlightening finding, but when we consider Karen Hanson's critical look at feminism and philosophy, we can begin to understand that certain philosophical positions, and the framework of philosophy itself, works in many ways to pit educated women against one another. Hanson specifically looks at fashion in "Dressing Down, Dressing Up – The Philosophic Fear of Fashion," and warns that feminists should beware of running into the comforting arms of philosophical traditions. Her concerns apply to the stiletto heel, as it is a particular example of a fashion that attracts the kind of philosophical contempt reserved for all things feminine, fashionable and frivolous.

occupational role of an individual as well (ibid). Some work costumes can be more explicit, such as a policeman's uniform, while "other costumes place individuals in general occupational categories: white-collar apparel (suit with shirt and tie) is, for example, associated with many levels of office work and the professions (ibid). However, they note how for American women, dress is generally more ambiguous in its symbolism of occupational role than is men's (ibid). The ambiguity is due in part to women's "lack of a clearly perceived position within the American occupational structure, and correspondingly no form of dress that clearly distinguishes them as belonging to a particular occupational category" (115).¹⁰⁹ On a symbolic level, Roach and Eicher note how the "persistence of nineteenth-century traditions concerning male and female roles is probably what more strongly limits symbolic association between women's dress and occupation" (115). Furthermore, they suggest, how "nineteenth-century society developed an expectation of women to indulge in personal display through dress, [which] contrasted with an expectation of men to eschew such display and to garb themselves in sombre symbols of the occupations provided by an industrializing society" (115).

Through Roach and Eicher's analysis, the older generation of women's rejection of heels may be understood as an attempt to realign themselves with more sombre symbols of dress that are more closely aligned with the male uniform. Their opposition to heels may

¹⁰⁹ Women in Canada continue to dominate traditional female forms of labour, in sales and service as well as secretarial positions. Statistics Canada distributed the following statistics with regard to the occupational gender gap in Canada. In 2009, for example, over 50% of women were found in two occupational groups: sales and services; and business, finance and administration. Women were also more likely than men to work in occupations in social services, education, government services and religion, and in health. In contrast, men continued to predominate in trades, transport and equipment operators and, to a lesser extent, in occupations in the natural and applied sciences; management; and occupations unique to manufacturing, processing and utilities.... While women still predominate in what may be considered to be traditionally female occupations, they have also made gains in a number of non-traditional occupations as well. (McMullen et al.)

also be understood as an attempt to inculcate a particular uniform, as in the case of ZA, the librarian who notes that as a librarian she is *required* to wear sensible shoes (12-ZA, italics added). For this group of what Roach and Eicher define as white-collar workers, wearing more sombre-like clothing may help resolve the insecurities tied to the persistent paradigm that a lack of uniform equals a lack of occupational purpose. Bourdieu also notes that middle-class women, in particular, have a high degree of anxiety about their external appearances (about their position within the dominant fraction), and are most likely to aim for uniform styles of dress to have them *appear* to be part of the dominant class (206). For Bourdieu, one's "class is defined in an essential respect by the place and value it gives to the two sexes and the value it gives to the two sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions" (107). Given that a woman's class position is always as the dominated, even if situated in the dominant class position, we can understand the reasons for this group of women's investment and defence of a particular mode of dress, a particular uniform: namely, as a form of display meant to better situate them in a dominant position.

In the case of AD's daughter, what she perceives as the dowdiness of her field is meant not only to attack the "dowdy" academic, but also, as a metaphor, to attack the perceived "dowdy" attitude that goes along with that appearance. The immediate satisfaction garnered by dressing in a "glamorous" way provides her with an immediate and visible moral challenge to her field which she perceives as ingrained in philosophical traditions that reject material interests and dress that sombrely reflects its moral allegiance, not to mention its rejection of all things feminine. The medical doctor, then, manifests for AD's daughter a defiance towards the sombre traditionalist higher education system of which she is part.

This frustration with higher education demonstrates a real feminist concern with the way feminine modes of experience continue to be devalued within universities. While female enrolment in higher education has increased since the 1970s (see Ortega), the work of Louise Morley in “Opportunity or Exploitation? Women and Quality Assurance in Higher Education” tells another truth about the structure of the institution itself. While women have made headway in higher education, they still suffer adversity, which, as Morley outlines, has to do with the competitive nature of the institution. Although Morley is looking at UK institutions, she argues “the devaluing of women is a globalized social norm in the academy” (420) and finds that “hegemonic masculinities and gendered power relations are being reinforced by the emphasis on competition... and ‘macho’ styles of leadership are being promoted” (411, 419), something true of the changing Canadian research landscape as well. In higher education, Morley finds that women bear the brunt of the responsibility for student-focused services while men are frequently more connected to the thrusting power of international research and publication, which she links to the breast/phallus distinction (413). Masculine-type attributes continue to supplant feminine-type attributes, such as caregiving, or provocativeness, perceived as less efficient, which may be extended to the discourse of appearances, where feminine modes of appearance, like sexy or beautiful, are also discredited and in some cases perceived as inappropriate in an academic setting.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ In my first year of graduate school, I attended a graduate seminar where a female student showed up in a low-cut top, heels and red lipstick, and I overheard another female student whisper to a male student: “What does she think this is?! A fashion show?! So inappropriate! I wonder how she’s thinking of getting through grad school?”

Nonetheless, powerful women models can be found in all sectors of society, and for AD's daughter, a PhD candidate, her female surgeon "in high-heeled black boots" was a symbol of competence and success regardless of what the norms of her institution may lead her to believe. As AD recalls, the heels were important to her daughter because they were interpreted as a rejection of established norms for women in high-powered positions, and more importantly because they acted as a rejection of what she saw was her own profession's norms, a tension Simmel explains in "Fashion." Fashion helps us meet both our needs for social adaptation as well as to manifest our need for differentiation (Simmel 133). Standing outside the norm allows one to preserve a sense of individuality and to acknowledge that one can do things on one's own terms. Fed up with the "dowdiness" of her own profession, AD's daughter saw the surgeon as a welcome potential to be something other than that which she perceives are the standards of her profession, while, nonetheless, retaining qualities she holds dear, such as her academic credentials.

The "dowdiness" AD's daughter attributes to her field also brings up questions of style. As Craig Thompson and Diana Haytko note of glamour discourses, "Social theorists have argued that these glamourizing discourses have facilitated the emergence of the consumer-driven capitalist economy by widely diffusing an image of 'the good life' based on the attainment of material affluence" (17). As such, items such as the stiletto are often dismissed as superficial by the academic community (Wright).

Trying to retain a sense of style in an academic setting seems to be a great difficulty for AD's daughter. Caught by surprise, her daughter was impressed by the appearance of her surgeon because the surgeon was asserting what AD's daughter considered an impossibility in her field, an assertion of femaleness. How is this informative? AD's

daughter found her surgeon's attire to be an image of femininity that combined competence, success and intelligence with glamour and style, which stood in stark contrast with her perception of what a successful, smart woman was supposed to look like.¹¹¹

AD's daughter was not the only one to be influenced by the image of her surgeon in high heels. Her story prompted another respondent to recall:

I remember seeing an article recently on a woman m.d. in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in San Francisco. She dresses to the nines because it does have an impact on her patients – not the least of which is that femininity and professional are not mutually exclusive (I'm NOT saying they are – but I know that there is a prejudice that way, I remember a 'friend' asking once, "Why are you all called feminists? There's nothing feminine about feminists." Sigh.) (34-LS).

LS's response not only highlights all the sentiments AD's daughter felt she was fighting against, particularly the stereotype that femininity and professionalism are perceived as mutually exclusive, but also that feminism is perceived as having a particular look that is in no way "feminine." This sentiment echoes the critiques that also followed the girl-power movement of the 1990s, in that anything pretty or feminine cannot be perceived as threatening (Filar).

MJ's comment that opened up the discourse on the value of stilettos set the tone for the remainder of the comments, which culminated in: wearing stilettos is not smart.

Wearing stilettos was dismissed on the grounds that it impairs judgment for two reasons.

¹¹¹ My own interest in this dissertation topic was fueled by this similar sentiment: as an academic, why did I have to renounce to certain things (my stilettos) and why in a field where I was taught to challenge and question things did I feel there was a fixed opinion on what constituted the appearance of a scholar? This latter position seemed to clearly contradict what I was supposed to be doing as an academic – breaking down fixed belief.

Firstly, they cause physical damage, which is understood as being insensible. For example, as ZA put it: “I consider them to be instruments of torture, personally. One of the best things about being a librarian is, you're expected to wear sensible shoes” (10-ZA). Secondly, they support the objectification of women. As WB notes, “they can be indicators of a society that forces women into the role of sexual object” (30-WB).

The comments from those who completely rejected the heel were in keeping with the health and naturalist anti-fashion attitude, as described by Davis. In general, anti-fashion attitudes are expressed by those invested in challenging dominant social norms that are seen as vain, wasteful, frivolous, and impractical (Davis 89). This attitude is set in traditional religious ascetic behaviours, which promotes abstention from all forms of indulgence. Davis’s description parallels Bourdieu’s definition of the petite bourgeois, which is marked by an inclination towards asceticism (170). The position taken here was that not only could heels “damage tendons, toes, knees and back... they can [also] be lethal (a girl died last year running in high heels - she slipped and fell under a train)” (25-MF). In her analysis of the dangers of wearing shoes in the arctic, BM provides the following tale of warning:

Shoes in the Arctic-

When I was Chair of English at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, I warned new female faculty not to walk outside in high heels. Dogs up there will pack, sometimes with wolves or coyotes, and take down what they perceive as crippled prey. For the same reason, toddlers have to be watched closely; they also wobble when they walk (37-BM).

BM fuses the wearing of heels to acting like a toddler. This conflation between grown women in high heels and toddlers functions as a sarcastic slight on the intellect of women who choose to wear high heels. Again, resonant of some of the other attacks, women in heels are seen by BM as intellectually inferior. Other warnings were also advocated as in MFs imperative: “Let’s not promote the idea that to look smart and sexy you have to hurt yourself... Look after your feet, and encourage your daughters to do the same...”(36-MF).

Many also used the discussion to voice their opinions of other forms of foot bindings, such as the case of pointe shoes in ballet, and in the cross-cultural comparison to Chinese foot binding. In the case of pointe shoes, CM notes:

Dancers continue to dance pointe even when it hurts. Even when they don't *like* to dance pointe. They want to be grown, special, pretty women. And this is the route, in the ballet world, that is offered. (If you are a girl. I'll try not to get started on gender parity in ballet... sigh.)

So on the one hand, I would agree that as women, we have to decide for ourselves what is healthy and empowering for us as individuals. But at the same time, I hope we are each thinking very hard about the impact we have on each other, and on children. Let alone ourselves (35-CM).

Some also referred to the socially ideological implications of heels, in their ways of fixing women “into the role of sexual object” (30-WB). As HJ recalls, “looking back, I don't see them as emancipatory. In fact, from where I am now, I see them as one of those things meant to lock us into a rather restrained role that also included girdles, nylons, etc. Becoming a woman in the fifties was definitely not emancipation. It was restriction” (16-HJ).

A kind of reverse ageism emerged from the discourse as well. The more mature women contrasted their wisdom with the insecurities of the younger women, trying to establish authority based on age and experience. For example, MJ takes a retrospective look at her use of heels and contrasts it with the younger women's experiences, clearly highlighting the apparent age-related divide within the discourse:

Hope my comment didn't make anyone feel dissed for wearing heels – it's just that I'm now reaping the painful fruits of having worn 'em in my younger years, which has made me perhaps more sensitive to the not-so-liberating long-term aspects of what I freely chose to do back when bone, muscle, and nerve were more resilient. At this point, the experience of having been more 'aesthetically interesting' or 'powerful' when wearing heels pales in comparison to finding that my sweet husband of 30+ years never 'got' the whole heels thing and seems to appreciate me more in hiking boots.

To quote some young person I know, 'I'm not sayin'; I'm just sayin'.'"

Looking back to the original post regarding literature for young people that presents the wearing of heels as perhaps transgressive and/or a rite of passage with positive aspects: I'm wondering if there is any youth literature that addresses recognition/acceptance of the need to wear orthotic devices and sensible shoes as a rite of passage in and of itself. I'm only half kidding here -- if such literature exists, it's probably not something any person under the age of 40 will want to read ;-) (27-MJ)

Some of the more mature women were, however, sensitive to the needs of the younger generation and stood up for their position, such as AD's mentioning her daughter's

feelings about heels. Another apologetic mother of a teenager noted, “They are not in the slightest emancipatory, I completely agree with you. Sometimes there’s no arguing with a teen girl’s idea of vanity though. Sigh” (5-LS).

In fact, the more moderate responses came from the younger members, who advocated for acknowledging the complexity and diversity of feminine experience; and they stood in stark opposition with the overall group sentiment by refusing to pass judgment on emancipatory female practices in general. For example, in the latter case, in response to PS’s shame for wearing heels, D replies:

Why be ashamed (it seems) of wearing heels or scornful of those who do? Surely it's all about choice. Women needn't be brainwashed to actually like the look of heels and the look of themselves in heels. We're all supposed to be in control of our lives, but if we wear heels we're not sensible or we're masochistic? (24-D).

D’s rebuttal to the group worked to challenge the assumption that heels are anything but emancipatory. She asked the group to consider the potential for heels to actually give women control over their image and not to present her as insensible or as a sexual deviant for wearing them: “We're all supposed to be in control of our lives, but if we wear heels we're not sensible or we're masochistic?” Although she stood up here against the overall growing sentiment in the discourse that sees wearing heels as a “stupid” thing to do (25-MF), she does conclude her defense by realigning herself with the overall group’s stand, noting that she herself “prefers flip-flops” to heels, but does “love putting on a dress and heels” (24-D).

In another instance, WB sees both sides of the coin and asks the group to consider why one position is perceived as less objectifying than another:

They can be emancipatory, and they can be indicators of a society that forces women into the role of sexual object.

The way I see it, there are people who are going to make you an object, and then there are people who would rather see you in hiking boots. But for some reason, preferring you in hiking boots does not make you an object because hiking boots are "comfortable" (teasing the person whose hubby prefers her poor feet that way lol)

Sometimes I wear heels; sometimes I wear flats. I wear what looks best with my outfit. Sure, "what looks good" is predefined for me (usually by *Vogue* or Anthropologie), but when I feel happy about my appearance, I feel happier about myself in general and more able to greet the day. Of course, I also tend to take my shoes off in the car and drive barefoot, but no one has to know that.

Are we going to attack make-up next? I don't wear make-up, but most women do. I don't think they are societal pawns because of it. What about wanting breasts ... is growing breasts emancipatory/a rite of passage? (Thinking of "I must increase my bust!") It can be taken to the extreme, when grown women get breast augmentation.

I think I am just more in the habit of studying and questioning as opposed to outright passing judgment. (30-WB)

Although WB's comment is not entirely devoid of judgment, as she suggests grown women who get breast augmentations can be seen as extreme, she does seem to defend one's right to choose what makes them feel good about themselves whatever that may look like.

However, mentioning the social conditionings related to heels, as a demonstration of her academic capital, works to realign her position within the discourse. To further

demonstrate her commitment to her intellectual position, in a self-righteous slight towards the other members, she discerns how she is in the “habit” of studying and questioning as opposed to out right passing judgment. With some minor concessions, both D and WB indirectly challenge the group to reconsider their parameters of judgment and to acknowledge that women’s relation to high heels, in general, is multifaceted.

Finally, CJ’s admiration of the baby-toting, high-heeled professor manifests the other end of the discourse’s spectrum, which directly challenges the dominant sentiment and acknowledges the assertive value of the high heel:

This reminds me of a sight I saw when I was in graduate school. In an old building on campus where our English Department was housed, there was a steep, grand staircase with steps made of slippery, sliding marble. It was scary to walk up or down those steps in sneakers and with minimal baggage. One day as I stood waiting for the elevator next to this grand, scary staircase, I looked up and saw a female professor running down them, wearing spiky high heels, carrying a bulging, obviously heavy briefcase on one arm, and a tiny baby in the other arm. I admired how sure she was of herself in those shoes (23-CJ).

In response to MFs claim that wearing heels is a stupid thing to do, PS retorts:

[MF] My mom once told me that the reason why she insisted on buying pricier, Italian-made leather shoes was because they were made better and therefore would not ruin our tendons, toes, knees, and backs, and would not injure our spinal cords and then our brains - which we both need, as we love to read and learn.

Or maybe that was just her argument to get my dad to approve our shopping habits.

While PS reconfirms the female stereotype that women love to shop, she nonetheless, like CJ, finds that heels can carry both aesthetic as well as intellectual value.

Conclusion

This group was examined separately from the survey responses covered in the preceding chapter for two reasons. Firstly, this group's responses did not fit into the measurable parameters found in the survey questions. Their spontaneous responses required a different analytic approach more reflective of a phenomenological analysis, where responses are induced in a more open-ended manner (Thompson and Haytko 19). Secondly, they represent a very specific demographic group, women whose economic capital is shaped by a particular intellectual tradition, which allowed me to take a close look at the tastes and opinions of this particular group.

While two extreme positions evolved from the discourse, they do not represent the subtleties that also developed. The women's responses can more clearly be divided into four camps: 1) those who rejected the use of heels outright and found them to be "anything but emancipatory"; 2) more moderate groups who in the first case rejected the heel but included some concessions; 3) those who confessed and supported the use of heels but were apologetic and noted the exploitive quality of heels; and finally, 4) the very underrepresented group of those who defended the use of heels as a tool for empowerment. The listserv's dominant discourse censured the heel for its senseless damage to the body. Wearing heels was perceived as "stupid" or "idiotic," which functioned as a clear attack on intelligence – the skill par excellence of their own trade, and therefore, the most direct attack. Those who defended the use of heels did so to demonstrate their

support in general of women's will to choose and also to challenge conservative academic views on female experiences. Not much has been said of the women who chose not to impart any judgment, but just directly addressed the literary inquiry. What I would add is that their silence actually demonstrated another form of academic capital, one meant to demonstrate their dedication to the higher pursuit of learning and the exchange of knowledge, seeing the discourse as one member put it, as a "heel tangent" and unrelated to the business of imparting *useful* knowledge (35-CM). While no clear consensus bound the voices of all the women on the forum, the clear message was that high heels presented a sight of tension for this group of intellectual women and created a space from which to support and promote their own ideological positions.

Section 3: Debates and Controversies

Chapter 5: Dressing Up Tension: Philosophical, Religious, and Medical Objections to High Heels

“Women should be beautiful. All repositories of cultural wisdom from King Solomon to King Hefner agree: women should be beautiful. ... Beauty is transformed into that golden ideal, Beauty – rapturous and abstract. Women must be beautiful and Woman is Beauty.” (Dworkin, *Women Hating* 112).

As a gendered item, the stiletto enfolds within itself all the connotations related to Judaeo-Christian and Western philosophical beliefs, in which women are depicted as inferior due to their proclivities for dressing, for covering themselves up. This chapter explores how the relationship women have had to clothes has been dealt with in philosophical, religious, and medical texts. From being accused of the fall of man to having her inclination for fashion likened to fetishistic worship to continuously being reprimanded for the clothing choices made available to her, woman has borne the brunt or shame of clothing. Moreover, she has had to defend herself and bear that shame alone. The tension clothing creates for women is manifested in the alienation of women from each other as they all vie to regain some sense of authority or prominence.

Philosophical Objections to Heels

In philosophical thought, clothes have often been called on to act as a metaphor for the body, which works to reinforce numerous prevailing philosophical dichotomies:

mind/body, good/evil, true/false, etc. In *Clothes*, John Harvey asks the pointed question: “Why can’t we trust our clothes?” Harvey examines how fashion has been interpreted philosophically and highlights how clothes have often been seen in a negative light, due, in part, to their deceptive nature. The prevailing philosophical tenet holds that “we wear them but they are not us: the important ‘us’ is hidden by them” (Harvey 5). The body contains the truth, while clothes conceal it. Unlike in philosophical debates that see the body as subordinate to the mind, here the body is seen as closely tied to the truth and the ability of clothes to conceal truth imparts upon them an immoral quality.

In particular, the stiletto is perceived as immoral as it also causes unnecessary pain. Many of the women surveyed noted that stilettos cause a certain amount of physical discomfort, as they reported them to be painful, uncomfortable, damaging to feet, to lower back, and to the body in general. In *On Human Finery*, Quentin Bell attributes the overall discomfort of clothes to a spiritual aim. Bell examines the motives for dressing fashionably, as he stresses the importance of studying clothes to better understand human behaviour “(whether sociological or historical)” (16). Motivated by Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption, he elaborates on this theme by considering the way in which everyday uses of fashion informs our behaviour. To illustrate this, he takes everyday questions – what should I wear for this or that occasion – and considers that although they do not demonstrate the most heroic aspects of mankind they nonetheless help illuminate a very fundamental human activity that helps inform those grand spiritual passions of mankind. As he puts it:

when we consider the question of ... whether heels should be high or low, we are a good long way from the passion of the hero or the ecstasies of the saint; indeed we are well within the area of everyday life. The seeming triviality of such questions,

the virtual impossibility of linking our sartorial decisions with the grand spiritual passions of mankind, make clothes not less but more important to those who seek to understand their fellow men (and themselves) (17).

Clothing, he finds, contains a spiritual purpose because of its “direct relationship between aesthetic and social feelings” (17). Concern for personal appearance, Bell explains is tied to a “whole system of morality”, what he terms a sartorial conscience (19). Reasons for dressing uncomfortably illustrate this best for him. In support of Veblen’s claim that the need of dress belongs to a higher realm of cognition, Bell asks the question:

Who does not appreciate the expense, the inconvenience, perhaps even the discomfort of that which they feel themselves compelled to wear... No doubt there is a valiant minority which does wear ‘those’ shoes, which is not afraid to be looked at, but in the great majority of cases, and cases of this kind have been occurring for hundreds of years, the uncomfortable shoes are worn and the decencies are observed even at the price of a severe blister (17).

Bell attributes our desire to wear uncomfortable clothes to obeying customary practices. As Bell puts it:

In obeying custom we undergo distresses... for the sake of something that transcends our own immediate interests. That which we may call our ‘baser nature’ may protest against the tyranny of tailors and dressmakers; but their commands are continually urged upon us by our sense of propriety. There are some who can rejoice in fashion, others may detest it or regard it as a more or less harmless nuisance; but as any photograph or reasonably faithful image of any gathering of

human beings will show, there will be very few who are ready positively to defy the laws of custom (Bell 18).

Out of a sense of propriety we succumb to the impossible demands of fashion and that even those who rile against it are not readily prone to defy the laws of custom, Bell suggests. One of my respondents who found heels to be 'sacrifices' nonetheless admitted that she does wear them for special occasions: "I think there is a time and place for heels, and don't like the idea of sacrificing personal comfort for beauty. At the same time, I would wear heels for a special occasion (like a wedding)" (29C). Many of the respondents made this similar excuse. While noting the exploitive qualities of heels, they also admitted to occasionally wearing them. In some responses, the reason for wearing them despite their exploitive/sacrificial quality was seen almost as a duty, especially in the case of heels and formal events. For example, one respondent noted how "Society views high heels as "dressed up." It is inappropriate to wear flats at a wedding so I would feel "underdressed" going to a wedding without stilettos" (28C). Another concluded that while the relation between heels and formal settings is a form of social conditioning, they nonetheless *do* go together: "I do feel that certain garments 'require' heels to complete the look, even though I know that this is social conditioning; still, I find cork-soled sandals with party clothes somehow tasteless; tacky, even. Although I don't look at them, or at women who wear them all the time, with scorn, I'm always glad to take them off and put them back in their box for another 6 to 8 months" (38C).

This relation between clothing and custom echoes Rouse's analysis, which suggests that tied to a sense of propriety invested in our clothing practices is an understanding and adoption of habitual practices and the shame one feels when those practices are

transgressed. Rouse's look at why we dress stated that we do so not to conceal our nakedness nor for modesty, but out of embarrassment tied to shame (123). For Rouse, dressing oneself is a socially determined practice. She found the embarrassment we feel in our clothes helps reveal our motivations for wearing what we do. Firstly, she found clothing practices are not a universal phenomenon, but relative to each culture; in that each culture interprets and wears clothes in a specific manner, which may differ from other cultures (123). Dressing oneself, therefore, can be understood as exemplary of customary practices, and the embarrassments felt when appearing out of place are proof of this relation.

William James, in *The Principles of Psychology*, also addresses the way in which clothes constitute part of the self. In his influential theory of the self, he notes "a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house..." (James, Ch. 5). James describes the body as:

the innermost part of the material Self in each of us; and certain parts of the body seem more intimately ours than the rest. The clothes come next. The old saying that the human person is composed of three parts - soul, body and clothes - is more than a joke. We so appropriate our clothes and identify ourselves with them that there are few of us who, if asked to choose between having a beautiful body clad in raiment perpetually shabby and unclean, and having an ugly and blemished form always spotlessly attired, would not hesitate a moment before making a decisive reply. (James, Ch. 5)

Clothing, James notes, forms an integral part of one's selfhood, so important as to be aligned with the soul and the body. So invested are the body and its clothing that if one has to

choose between the two, one would prefer to be ugly but well dressed rather than beautiful and dressed shabbily. While this claim seems arguable, James's point echoes some of the responses of the women I interviewed, who claimed not to mind disfigured feet as long as they could wear stilettos. As one respondent put it, "Others might say that heels hurt your feet, give you bunions, the bottom of your feet get hard and so on but I say, IT IS ALL WORTH IT!" (9C); or another, "They are uncomfortable but I know they make me look good so I am willing to put up with the discomfort" (28C).

While some may appreciate the social value of clothing and the way it informs one's selfhood, clothing has been a contested discourse. Harvey ties the origin of the idea that clothing cannot be trusted to Plato, who around 300 BCE was already discussing how all appearances were a false front hiding an unseen truth (5). Many thinkers have in the meantime supported this metaphor, such as Wittgenstein, who stated that "language disguises thought as clothes disguise the body" (cited in Harvey, 5), and Kierkegaard, who advised that for the attainment of truth: "as one takes off one's clothes to swim, so one must strip oneself mentally naked in order to know the truth" (ibid.). Thoreau warned us to "beware of all enterprises that require new clothes" (ibid.).

Clothing's deceptive immoral quality easily drew disdain from those who were interested in preserving rational thought. In the period of the great male renunciation – the late eighteenth century when men renounced their custom of refined and elaborate clothing, relegating it instead to women – clothes became an easy target to attack in order to usher in rational thought and make way for the enlightened *man*. From this a new social distinction formed, a gendered division, according to which men were depicted as intellectually superior to women due to women's perceived proclivity for dress. During the

Enlightenment in Europe, dress was often instrumentalized both as a political tool to disenfranchise women and as a social tool to instruct female comportment and morality. As Semmelhack notes, “enlightenment arguments promoted the idea that men, including those of the lower classes, were uniquely endowed with rational thought and that this capacity made them worthy of political enfranchisement” (*Heights* 25). Women, Semmelhack continues, “were represented as being inherently deficient in rational faculties and unfit for education, citizenship, and control of property” (*ibid.*). Semmelhack adds that “attention to matters of dress was offered as proof of women’s inborn proclivity toward foolish adornment, and the wearing of high heels provided clear evidence of this failing” (*ibid.*). In contrast, men confirmed their intrinsic good sense by rejecting the high heel and other forms of impractical dress (*ibid.*).¹¹² While men were wise enough to shed their god-forsaken heels, women’s continued propensity for this folly was used to banish them from all social realms, including spiritual, philosophical, and religious ones.

Nietzsche echoed these sentiments when he suggested that “comparing man and woman in general one may say: woman would not have the genius for finery in general if she did not have the instinct for a *secondary* role” (Harvey 8). Nietzsche highlights the cultural belief that nothing is perceived as farther from woman’s nature than truth: “From the beginning, nothing has been more alien, repugnant, and hostile to woman than truth—her great art is the lie, her highest concern is mere appearance and beauty” (Nietzsche 232). Conflating women with deception and beauty, Nietzsche reinforced the sentiments

¹¹² The court shoe was not the only example, the redingote, for example, a popular utilitarian overcoat of the 1850s for males, by the late 1800s, was worn also by women as an elegant house coat used when hosting society events.

working to expel women from the kingdom of knowledge, rendering her a second-class citizen.

Baudrillard also examined how morally and politically “the conjunction of fashion and woman, since the bourgeois, puritan era, revealed... a double indexation: that of fashion on a hidden body, that of woman on a repressed sex” (Baudrillard 471). Since fashion was perceived as hiding the body (truth), woman’s relation to fashion rendered her a repressed sex because she, like fashion, conceals the truth, and, as such she is seen as unfit for political and social representation. Interestingly, Baudrillard notes that in the world of fashion the gender of ‘le mannequin,’ the model on which clothes are placed, is masculine (474), so that the naked, true body is always masculine and fashion, which conceals the true naked ‘masculine’ body is therefore symbolically linked to femininity.

Philosophically, then, clothing and fashion in general have symbolically represented numerous social tensions. In particular they have highlighted gendered tensions as women have often been blamed for fashion’s fickle nature. As American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger notes, fashion was considered in the eighteenth century “‘a lady... of the strangest unconstant Constitution... who changes in the twinkle of an eye... Introduced to society by her elder brother Taste’” (38). Here again fashion personifies as feminine, and is seen as being ushered into the world through her more sensible elder brother, Taste.

Religious Objections to Heels

Perhaps the most resonant objection to clothing resides in the Bible, which implicates it in humanity’s fall: “their clothes of sewn leaves were the proof and sign of their guilt and shame” (Harvey 9). In “Why Do People Wear Clothes?” Elizabeth Rouse considers how “our

bodies are shameful and need to be covered” and attributes this to the common Judaeo-Christian belief tied to the story of Genesis (122). The story of the fall aligns women with dress, and women continue to bear the shame of dress more so than men, as Harvey also notes, since they have always been and continue to be associated with dress (8). This sentiment reflects a belief that sits at the root of Judaeo-Christian ideology, in which the primordial woman, Eve, is depicted as the arbiter of the fall of mankind, precisely because her action leads Adam to have to cover himself up (Roach).

Rouse goes on to suggest that the shame our clothing practices engender is tied to the sense of loss rooted in the Judaeo-Christian belief of the fall of man [sic]. Rouse notes that this loss is manifested as a loss of custom – what we are accustomed to wearing or feel is required in a particular situation. She uses the child trope as example, where the child is not embarrassed of being naked, until accustomed to wearing clothes (123). Modesty or shame is merely a result of the habit of wearing clothes, or the loss of custom.

Shedding any relation to frivolity in matters of dress not only worked to signal man’s intrinsic good sense, but it also signalled their moral righteousness as they adhered to the scripture edicts against the uses of finery. In Deuteronomy, the Lord commands, “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God” (Deuteronomy 22:5). From a spiritual as well as a philosophical point of view, women’s association with dress turned her into a scapegoat, upon whom all ills could be projected and cast away: guilt, shame, vanity, folly, and deception. Therefore, in line with Judaeo-Christian belief, by shedding any relation to female attire, men were also able to gain God’s love and admiration, while women drew the Lord’s disdain. As a vestigial remain of the

male sartorial code, the heel symbolically represented women's expulsion from the kingdom of God, and as such also became a trap for domination, of the kind Eco describes in "Lumbar Thoughts," which examines how women's putting on men's clothes acts for women as an "apparent symbol of liberation and equality with men" but functions as a "trap of Domination" (317). He is specifically discussing jeans, but his argument may be extended to the heel. The "armours" women don, "feminine" or "neutral," "don't free the body, but subject it to another label and imprison it in other armours" as they are borrowed remains of a 'male' wardrobe (ibid). However, this does not work in the reverse, as in the case of the *Britain's Got Talent* French dance trio that will be discussed in the final chapter, men who take on women's clothing, as in the case of transvestites, are seen to "own it," "master it" and "work it."

What also emerges in light of these prevailing attitudes is the tradition of women chastising other women regarding their appearance. This chastising is rooted in the belief that particular parts of the body are demonized – an idea set forth by the Church and by religious proponents. Frigga Haug's extensive phenomenological analysis is particularly interesting because her project asked how " 'innocent' parts of the body... become 'guilty'" (153). Haug and her group found that "institutions like the Catholic Church are those who forge links between something like the showing of legs and immorality" (156).

During the nineteenth century, this relation served the agenda of female defenders of class as well. In relation to heels and feet, a group of Catholic women, the Association of Catholic Seamstresses, as well as women of the Parisian nobility, who nonetheless wanted to be in fashion but also wanted to distinguish themselves from that which was vulgar (a way to maintain class distinctions), critiqued the exposure of feet as 'excessive' (Haug 156).

In the first group, the women were attempting to uphold propriety, custom and morality; in the second, they were trying to defend class. In both instances the target of the attack was women who showed *too much* foot. Here, as in the case of the fetish, the heel became a tool for moral instruction – to preserve the good woman as well as to maintain the status quo. In this very interesting moment, there appears overlap between the heel as retaining its class meanings, while also maturing into an exclusively gendered object.

Heels were also attacked by other pious authorities. In one of his popular sermons, the seventeenth-century Viennese Augustinian monk and imperial preacher Abraham a Sancta Clara riled against fashionable female footwear, “which causes the toes to be squeezed together ‘like herrings in a box’ and ‘like the damned in hell.’ ‘Ach, such suffering, such suffering? And suffering only for the sake of the devil ... so little suffering for God ... but for hell the proud suffer gladly’” (Kunzle 11). Likened to devil worship, female footwear transformed into a fetish, carrying with it the associated connotations: primitive, magic, devil, bewitching.

In his examination of the fetish, Kunzle highlights the way in which the high heel in the eighteenth century was perceived much like tight lacing. The word “fetish,” Kunzle notes, “derives from the Portuguese *feitico* meaning fated, charmed, bewitched, and entered the English language with reference to primitive beliefs in magic” (11). In the West, the fetish was immediately vilified due to its associations with primitive spiritual practices of “erotic, magical and religious power, through which a semblance of supernatural control is achieved, and states of transcendence and ecstasy may be entered” (11). The fetish engendered moral fears as “fetishistic practice [was] seen as a means of acceding to grace and power, and of uniting participants in a religious-erotic ritual...” which was condemned

by the Church because the forms of physical suffering associated with fetishistic manifestations of primitive groups was considered for the devil, not God (Kunzle 11). As such, the concept of the fetish became a tool of moral instruction. Kunzle notes that “tightlacing was compared to Chinese foot binding,” a comparison meant to take a foreign practice seen as repulsive and apply a moral judgment on our own Western practices (4). This form of cultural comparison is not unlike the gender comparison of allying women with fashion to demonstrate the intellectual superiority of men. Aligned with the practice of corset wearing, constrictive footwear became the second major fetish of Western fashion (4).

Medical Objections to Heels

The fetish was not only challenged by religious authorities. The medical professions have also rallied against fetishistic practices and rendered forms of fetishism pathological (Kunzle 13). As such, the meaning of the fetish entirely transformed into a signifier for social deviance, and women were perceived as deviants due to their relation to fetishistic practices. By the 1940s, women were said to be “possessed of a mild shoe fetish” (Semmelhack 42). Stilettos endured censure from medical professionals due to their “obvious” display of female sexuality. The physical alteration of protruding chest and bottom and the development of calf muscles prompted critiques that pointed out various health risks. Their antisocial reputation worsened when the medical profession, confronted by an increase in foot and postural problems, advised against wearing them (Wright 202).

The critique from the medical profession dates back more than 250 years. Marc Linder has reviewed in detail how “medical science has warned of the deleterious impact of

high heels” (296), and noted a pattern. While the deleterious effects recounted over the years were the same – the physical deformations of the foot –, the moral imperatives changed. In the late 1700s, when heels were worn predominantly by bourgeois women, and with revolution in the air, the heel became a vehicle to attack the more generally despised class distinctions.

In his work on sexually discriminatory workplace footwear requirements for female employees, Linder notes how during the Enlightenment many medical professionals critiqued the use of high heels. In particular, he notes “an outstanding European comparative anatomist”, Petrus Camper, who, in 1781, “wrote a treatise in which he devoted special attention to the class distribution of shoe wear” (Linder 301). Linder summarizes: “whereas ‘bourgeois women’ adopted ‘this absurd fashion’ of high and slender heels from the old and young women of ‘good form,’ ‘our peasant women are wiser... providing themselves with shoes that make their body steady and render walking easy” (Linder 301). Linder also notes that Camper goes on to liken the bourgeois woman’s walk to a quadruped who when standing walks only on its toes (Linder 302). Here the bourgeois woman suffers a debasement aesthetic as described by Stockton, where her clothing literally transforms her not into an authoritative towering presence, but instead into an animal.

When the high heel became fashionable again in the nineteenth century, it became part of a “mandatory workplace dress code for women,” and medical-legal conflicts arose. As Linder recounts, “As large numbers of women began working as sellers, especially in clothing stores and department stores – women in sales occupations in the United States increased 24-fold from 1870-1900 – they were subjected to formal pressure by employers

as well as informal cultural pressure to wear precisely the kinds of fashionable shoes that their customers wore” (305-6). Shopgirls were forced to dress like the women they were selling to – the idle bourgeois women who did not spend 12-14 hour days standing on their feet (Linder 307).

The medical profession here worked to fight for the rights of women. As one physician put it, “the ‘rule of the establishment’ requiring shop girls to dress neatly, really meant dressing showily,” and these girls were “often forced to practice economies which are unwise in order to reach or maintain the standard in dress” (Linder 306). Here the critique of women was an attempt at directly attacking the new establishment: the emergence of a new consumer society. These efforts by the medical profession proved valuable for this new class of vulnerable female workers. By the end of the 1870s, “the dangers of constant standing for salesgirls were recognized, and it was urged that they be furnished seats and allowed to use them” (Linder 307). In 1880, “*The Lancet*, Britain’s leading medical journal launched an editorial campaign against this ‘Cruelty to Women’” (Linder 307).

While the efforts of medical professionals acknowledged the abuses women suffer on account of cultural demands, they also bring to light the insidious reality that women are continuously reprimanded for what they wear, even if what they wear is out of their control. For example, the physician Mary Melendy, an advocate for the use of low heels at the beginning of the twentieth century, notes, “in purchasing shoes at one time it was next to impossible to find them with low heels” (304). In another example, a woman went to see an “orthopaedic surgeon in New York City for some spinal trouble, and when, after examining the case, he found that she was wearing a pair of these fashionable shoes, he

immediately seized them and with language more forcible than elegant pulled off the heels and flung them away, following them with a shower of denunciations, and prophesying all sorts of ill results should the abominable fashion be continued” (303). Other critiques from the medical establishment masked the more imminent threat that the heel poses to social sensitivities regarding the display of female sexuality. As Semmelhack recounts, “to preserve the morals of young women, a wide variety of authorities across the United States agitated for the prohibition of high heels from schools and colleges” (*Heights* 40). Among these authorities, medical professionals were quite vocal in their condemnations: “*The Washington Post* reported in 1920 on a gathering of three hundred women to hear one of the city’s best-known surgeons” who ““animated with a holy zeal for the preservation of both health and morality, denounced the vile thing... [and] The distinguished surgeon went on record as being wishful to send to the penitentiary all manufacturers of high heels on the ground of mayhem and mutilation”” (ibid.). In 1921, another health practitioner noted that by wearing high heels, “maternity is thus affected” (NYT, *Stand by Heels*, 6). In February 1921, a legislative committee in the State House proposed a bill designed to prevent the wearing of high heels by women, supported by the Massachusetts Osteopathic Society (ibid.). A group of shoe manufacturers and dealers – known as the shoe men – immediately opposed calling it a “freak and foolish measure” (ibid.). A shoe fitter “assured the committee that her experience showed that more women who have worn low heels have foot troubles than those whose fancy runs to the high heels” (ibid.). In retaliation, “Dr. Smith, President of the Massachusetts Osteopathic Society, proclaimed the high heel the worst epidemic any country has ever known, as a result of which we are slowly dying physically” (ibid.). In 1940, an article for the *New York Times* reported that “Doctors and

health authorities have waged an unsuccessful war for years against the vagaries of women's shoes, blaming everything from maternal mortality to insanity on their pernicious effects" (Duval 108).

The medical war against high heels did not end in the 1940s. Health practitioners continue to critique and condemn the heel on health and moral grounds. Recently, these concerns resurfaced in an article in the *Huffington Post*, which included an infographic to detail the adverse effects of the heel (see Fig. 5.1). In short, the stiletto continues to be perceived as a deviant thing, and since it is attributed to the class of female dress, a further conflation occurs, in which woman too is figured as a deviant, in particular a sexual deviant. However, these health threats are not the prominent association with women in heels. These medical observations are a small cry in a sea of images that promote women in heels. What continues to be reinforced in the cultural imagery is women's sexiness and that it is somehow worth the health risks.



Fig. 5.1

Linder notes that since the 1930s, medical texts have consistently warned that high-heeled shoes if worn for long periods can cause serious changes in body mechanics (305). He also notes, “just as significantly, however, the tone of women’s magazines changed during the post-World War II period” (305). “Driven perhaps by the interests of their powerful fashion-industry advertisers, these publications”, like *Ladies Home Journal*, featured numerous clothing, but especially high-fashion high-heel shoe advertisements, which became much more prominent by the 1950s (305). Therefore, they “...instead of educating their readers as to the health risks posed by high heels, tended either to glamourize the shoes (especially as paired with nylon stockings) or, to pooh-pooh the pain of wearing them as an inescapable natural fate” (305). At work here are the dictates of the fashion industry, an industry driven by profiting from the consumer, particularly the female consumer, whom it is invested in persuading to adorn herself.

The medical profession’s efforts, critiques, and chastisements have, nonetheless, been attempts to protect the dignity of women. However, their efforts have depended on the long-standing tradition of reprimanding women for their actions, in often very patronizing ways, and in some instances, reinforcing the image of women as the weaker sex.

Towards a New Vindication of Women’s Rights

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” noted that women develop skills in dressing not because of a natural-born love of fashion but because it is the only instrument of power available to them (Semmelhack *Heights* 25): “that the fondness

for dress, so extravagant in females, arises from the same cause – want of cultivation of mind” (Wollstonecraft, ch. 13). Wollstonecraft’s argument was fuelled by the convention of her day that women were deprived of an effectual education due to their feeble mindedness, partly attributed to their want of dress, a sentiment reinforced by Jean Jacques Rousseau’s “new attitudes toward womanhood and the gendering of politics,” which held sway in Wollstonecraft’s Britain (Jones).

Rousseau’s *Emile, or on Education*, published in 1763, had profound social effects. The French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1835 *Democracy in America* acknowledged that America’s “singular prosperity and growing strength” was its women, whom he describes as though they had been educated by Rousseau. In the Introduction to his translation of Rousseau’s work, Allan Bloom describes Rousseau’s motives for penning *Emile* as follows:

Rousseau insisted that the family is the only basis for a healthy society ... the family tempers the selfish individualism which has been released by the new regimes founded on modern natural right teachings. And Rousseau further insists that there will be no family if women are not primarily wives and mothers. Second, he argues that there can be no natural, i.e., whole, social man if women are essentially the same as men (24).

Women, according to Rousseau, were to “contribute to a common aim,” which was essentially the preservation not only of family, acting as wives and mothers, but more importantly, the development of “social, political man,” as he adds:

the whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to

care for them when grown, to counsel them. To console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet – these are the duties of women at all times (358; 365).

From this premise, the diversity of the sexes is born as a moral relation where “One ought to be active and strong, the other passive and weak. One must necessarily will and be able; it suffices that the other put up little resistance...” (Rousseau 358).

So how was this weaker sex supposed to spend her time? They were to dedicate their time to adornment. “Little girls love adornment almost from birth. Not satisfied with being pretty, they want people to think that they are pretty” (Rousseau 365). As Rousseau tells us, “to be a woman means to be coquettish, but her coquetry changes its form and its object according to her views” (365). Not only is she coquettish, but her wantonness is also fickle.

Wollstonecraft stands up to these accusations and defends women’s fondness for dress because she saw that dress had the potential for women to express themselves, to express their own cultivation of mind, which was denied them in other areas. More than a century later, in 1905, Georg Simmel similarly notes that woman, due to her lack of differentiation in her social position, turns to fashion to “strive anxiously for all the relative individualization and personal conspicuousness that remains” for her (143). Through the outlet of fashion women may explore their desire for individualization and for group affiliation (144). As he acknowledges, fashion becomes the valve “through which woman’s craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields” (ibid.). Simmel echoes Wollstonecraft’s conviction that women used fashion as an outlet for personal expression, since she was denied individual conspicuousness in other fields. As Simmel notes, men show an

indifference to fashion not because they are more uniform but because they are the more many-sided creature and for that reason can get along better without such outward changes (143).

Another feminist writer, Virginia Woolf, in her non-fiction essay *Three Guineas*, addresses a general's question of how to prevent war by examining how the gender divide informed such things as education that still persisted in the time of her writings in 1938 (155). She considers some of the ways in which men work to make themselves impressive, and she reiterates how clothes also differ between the sexes and help create a sense of "astonishment" (177). However, she is not pointing to women but flips the argument to show that it is *men* who are most invested in adornment as they dress themselves in ways to impress authority.

Current feminist positions on the subject of dress mirror those of the early twentieth century. The suffragettes were met with scorn from women who were also fighting for female rights but who identified as anti-suffragettes. While both were vying for the same rights, the anti-suffragettes were concerned that new freedoms for women would mean the end of femininity, and so they picked on how horribly dressed the suffragettes were (Semmelhack *Heights* 38). Women collided with each other over points of dress in their attempts to gain new freedoms, with some women who wanted to retain their distinction versus those who wanted to appropriate male rationality (ibid.). As Semmelhack notes, "the connections between femininity, fashion consumption, and purported power established in the eighteenth century continue to inform the meanings of the high heel to this day" (*Heights* 25). While women have come a long way in terms of cultivating the mind, and gaining education, this stereotype continues to haunt the

powerful and intelligent female who might choose to appropriate fashion as a rebellious outcry against the canons of philosophical, religious, and medical thought. She continues to be aligned with fashion and all its connotations. As the fashion system comes to put increasing pressure on feminine behaviour, it also works to pit women against each other, asking them to choose a side and demonstrate their feminist allegiance.¹¹³ Women continue to be divided on the conflation of women's overall moral status and the value of her clothing. The following chapter will explore the feminist debates and discourses that use the stiletto as a medium through which discourses and positions are negotiated, fostered and promoted.

¹¹³ I use the phrase fashion system here and elsewhere in the text, in the sense that Barthes and Baudrillard made of fashion as a system (systems signify communication – meaning making), a system fuelled by socio-economic motivations (Barthes, *Fashion System*; Baudrillard, *Object Destiny* 178). Barthes and Baudrillard were both attuned to the communicative power of clothing.

Chapter 6 : Feminist Responses to Sex and Sluts

“There is room for more than one feminist march, and more than one kind of feminist activism. Going on a SlutWalk doesn't mean you can't go to Reclaim the Night, and vice versa. It's not a flawless concept, sure, but show me your perfect action and I'll find you at least 10 women who fundamentally disagree.” (Filar)

Leading fashion scholars, such as David Kunzle and Valerie Steele, have called the stiletto heel the corset of the 21st century. The parallel is intended to draw to mind the debates the 18th-century corset prompted and continues to incite between those who argue that the corset bound women to servitude, like Steele, and others, like Kunzle, who argue that it signalled women's freedom to control their own bodies. Similar arguments continue to be used to attack or defend the stiletto heel. As will be discussed in this chapter, the rise of the stiletto feminist and the SlutWalk movements further highlight the feminist divide over its image politics.

Feminists have often cast the stiletto as an object of exploitation, along with other items of clothing that appear to be inherently feminine (Wright 197). In her historical analysis of the stiletto, Wright notes the disparity in the perceived gender of objects. The category of “feminine things” symbolizes female subordination, while male gendered objects do not experience the same symbolization. Wright finds that “the more ‘female’ an object, the more it is devalued” (198). This association implies “that meanings are often based on an association already determined: that is, that meaning is subject to stereotyping, which results in the perpetuation of particular perspectives” (ibid.). Objects with gender referents carry forward gendered stereotypes: “all too often objects construed

as male are equated with masculine and are therefore active and assertive, while defining female is equivalent to 'feminine', indicating passivity and subservience" (ibid.). Therefore, the stiletto, as a feminine object, comes to personify passivity and subservience.

In retaliation, some feminists take the position of refusing those typical 'feminine' objects to free themselves from the constraints of the Western dress code. In "Anti-Fashion: The Vicissitudes of Negation," Fred Davis describes "the anti fashion [attitude] of feminist protest" as a position that "...sees in fashion, and for that matter, in the clothing code of the West generally, a principal means, as much actual as symbolic, by which the institutions of patriarchy have managed over the centuries to oppress women and to relegate them to inferior social roles" (Davis 93). By literally shedding her 'feminine' things, the feminist here also figuratively sheds all the stereotypes associated with femininity: weak, feeble-minded, etc, and denounces all things fashionable.

Their rejection of fashion is fuelled by a number of tensions related to fashion's fickleness, its lack of function and female voice, and its support of male domination. Davis notes that this 'type' stands in stark opposition to fashion because "fashion's invidiousness and conformism" puts woman under constant "...pressure to supplant one wardrobe with another" (93). Furthermore, "the unending succession of styles devised for them... is rarely functional" and "usually [concocted] by male designers" (93). "In addition, modern fashion's fixation on youth, slenderness, sexuality, and eroticism serves mainly to diminish other aspects of woman's person while reinforcing those favoured by men, i.e., such traditionally sanctioned roles as sexual object, wife, mother and homemaker" (93). Complying with the demands of the fashion world works to fix women in her position as submissive conformist who must depend on the male imagination (the male designers) to

attempt to differentiate her own particular beauty tied also to her ability to maintain her youth. While feminists in general reject these positionings, “there appears to be less agreement among them on what can and should be done as far as women’s clothing is concerned” (93). There are those who “decry women’s fear of not being in fashion,” advocates of which often urge women to dress essentially as men (Davis 93). However, there is a danger present here: adopting male-like clothing merely reinforces male dominance, as well as creating a sense of defeat through partial incorporation. Davis notes that “other feminists believe the adoption of men’s clothing... would [only] lend tacit legitimation to the patriarchic representation of the world,” so they strive to symbolically represent the values and attitudes that are perceived as anchored in *feminine* experience, to allow those values to surface because human welfare would only benefit from the balance (94).

Even in 2015, when gender blending type clothing is “trending” as noted in a *Globe and Mail* Fashion editorial and “never before has the fluidity of the sexes been so acknowledged and even embraced” in the fashion world, when on the runways “more guys appear in dresses, women are sporting faux beards and gender-neutral clothing boutiques are appearing in department stores,” gender-blending type clothing still seems to support a celebration of masculine clothing forms: blazers, dress pants, skorts, baggy clothes, etc. (Shea 7). The more form-fitting clothes associated with feminine-type clothing were not apparent in the clothing line-ups for the season.

The feminist who wants to celebrate “femininity” as a challenge to a patriarchal understanding of the world is often confronted with a paradox, or as Eco calls it, a trap of domination, where the valorization of femininity appears to trap one in one’s own

femininity (Eco). A further problem then ensues: celebrating all things feminine often entails degradation. Recent critics of fashion coming out of queer theory, such as Katherine Stockton, have examined how clothes operate through what she terms debasement aesthetics. In "Cloth Wounds, Or When Queers Are Martyred To Clothes: The Value of Clothing's Complex Debasements," Stockton describes this as follows: "material meant to decorate, seen as aesthetic enrichment for the body, can visit debasement upon the wearer, even as the wearer may think she is being praised" (310). The appropriation of feminine clothes to assert one's self, to feel good about one's self works to put one's sexuality on display and open to degradation based on the displayed sexuality.

Stockton describes what she calls "sartorial shame" as the way clothing can function as both a form of oppression and subversion (289). "There are many ways to be hurt by one's clothes," she notes, but, most particularly for women, clothing reveals her "genital 'wound'" (291). Her critique of Freud's perception of "femininity" reveals the way women's relation to clothes has been perceived historically, as a relation between vanity and shame. Just as pubic hair covers the vagina, so has cloth come to cover the woman, and with that her 'genital deficiency,' Stockton explains (292). Her vanity is tied to her vaginal shame – her sexual inferiority (292). According to Freud, a woman's clothing is like a concealment of this 'genital deficiency'. This display of genital shame is "civilization's' strong investment in gendered clothes (different clothes for women and men)" (292). Stockton notes: "Clothing is not primarily concealment; it is not primarily a more attractive version of its model, pubic hair. Clothing is rather bold revelation, a cover turning inside out: it reveals the category (male or female) of the person's genitals it purports to cover" (292). On "every woman's' sweater, a vaginal wound" notes Stockton (292), meaning that a woman's

sweater covers the breasts but reveals them at the same time, which in turn reveals her sexual inferiority. Stockton suggests that clothes are not actually coverings of the body, but instead reveal the body, clearly marking and stigmatizing gender. By keeping women in *her* clothes, Stockton's theory suggests, she continues to be cloaked in shame, in her "genital deficiency."

Stiletto Feminists

Some feminists continue to hold the position that "female power is about wearing what you want to wear" (Luckhurst). However, embracing it generates a number of concerns related to the sexualisation of women, the celebration of rampant consumerism, the infantilization of feminine experience, and the resulting shame that continues to haunt women in 'feminine' clothes. Out of this sentiment emerges what Cox defines as a new feminist: the stiletto feminist – a woman who embraces easy expressions of sexuality that enhance rather than detract from women's freedom (136). As we saw in Chapter 3, the 1990s saw the stiletto emerge as the new symbol of 'Girl Power.' This new feminist position was dressed in a post-feminist attitude that aligned itself with "traditional symbols of femininity" but worked to juxtapose feminine style with masculine style to challenge "...the adult patriarchal worlds of propriety, class expectations and hierarchy" (Cox 138, Gonick 311). They also worked to mix "...a girlish aesthetic with some of the more threatening aspects of adult females: self-assertiveness, bitterness, and political insight" (Gonick 311).

While women parading around in stilettos in 2016 might not constitute Dick Hebdige's notion of the 'spectacular subculture' but instead actually be exemplars of "normality" as opposed to "deviance," the riot grrls of the 90s often opted to wear stilettos,

alongside their more uniform Doc Martens, as a challenge to mainstream beliefs of what constitutes normalized female behaviour, for example *Sleater-Kinney*. The riot grrrls challenged mainstream cultural beliefs because as Hebdige notes “by repositioning or recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist gives the lie to what Althusser has called the ‘false obviousness of everyday practice’” (Hebdige 257). For example, by perceiving the stiletto as a representation of a particular image of femininity, we fail “...to recognize the strange mode of existence enjoyed by the object behind our back” as Merleau-Ponty notes in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 29). We miss, in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, the ability to observe how something like the stiletto heel has also the potential to challenge our practices, our normative beliefs, and to exist outside these common practices.

The riot grrrls punk bands of the 90s, such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy, paved the way for the girl power sentiments that evolved throughout the 90s and culminated in the image of the Spice Girls. Gonick notes that some cultural theorists attribute the origins of the movement to “black Hip Hop music” that demonstrated the “changing modes of femininity” with such phrases as “You go, girl,” while others mark the beginning of this movement even further back to the 1960s “in the call-and-response rhythms of the girl groups” (Gonick 311). The consensus seems to be that the Spice Girls have been most closely associated with the Girl Power motto (Gonick 311). When they came on the scene and presented a commercially viable image of Girl Power in 1996, even feminists began to reconsider the potential for “traditional symbols of femininity [to be] reused to inculcate a powerful post-feminism” (Cox 138).

Along the way, however, the message got diluted, which some attribute precisely to musical influences like the Spice Girls. Semmelhack notes that while the 1990s promoted the onset of “girl culture,” instead of promoting or supporting feminist goals, it was immediately co-opted by pop culture and commercialized. For Semmelhack, the girl power movement seemed to reinforce, instead of challenge, the gender status quo: “The conceit that female power was attainable through fashion was simply good business” (*Heights* 62). Ray Filar also notes in her review of the riot grrrl attitude of the 1990s that:

As they became successful, riot grrrl bands were commodified, commercialised and eventually repackaged. Girl groups became known mostly as visions of unmitigated, unthreatening saccharinity. “Revolution girl style” was conflated with “girl power,” real empowerment with relentlessly boring, soft-porn imitation (Filar).

In her look at “Girl Power,” Marnina Gonick recounts how the Spice Girls were critiqued “for doing the ‘seemingly impossible: they have made feminism, with all its implied threat, cuddly, sexy, safe, and most importantly, sellable’” (312). While they began as movements to challenge the sexism prevalent in mainstream culture, they were immediately co-opted by mainstream culture and pacified, packaged and sold back to young women. More recently, Beyoncé, as known as Queen Bey, made a point of declaring herself a feminist in her 2014 MTV Video Music Awards’ performance, and she did so while appearing on stage in heels and hot pants and twerking to her music.¹¹⁴ Many have argued that this is not at all empowering but rather a further sexualization of female experience.

¹¹⁴ Twerking is when a woman dances provocatively by thrusting her behind while in a squatting like position. This is a very simplified definition of the dance which has deeper cultural meanings as an African-American type dance. Here one may argue that although the dance perhaps further sexualizes the female experience, it does manage to bring to the foreground and celebrate an African-American experience.

The link between the wearing of stilettos and “girl power” gave way to all forms of sexualised dressing as “girl power,” which subsequently led to the argument that “female power is about wearing what you want to wear” (Luckhurst). Luckhurst argues, however, that the lines have become blurred between the freedom to express our sexuality and sexualisation. One is about the free will to choose what we wear, the other is about buying into the illusory power of the dominatrix, which is less about female empowerment than about a certain type of man trying to work through some complicated and unresolved childhood issues (Luckhurst).

Angela McRobbie also warns that parading for the right to “wear what you want” also makes for good business as it promotes general consumption with a disregard for the inequalities that ensue. McRobbie critiques “cultural feminists” who stress consumption as liberation because this overlooks that the production of commodities produces also social class distinctions that manifest themselves in the accessibility of goods (73). Many of the liberated women mentioned thus far – Wintour in her limo heels, the Spice Girls, Madonna, and the sexy, savvy, executive-type stiletto stoner – all have the economic independence that enables them to exercise the freedom to wear what they want.

The “wear what you want” slogan also promotes an infantile-like pursuit of consumer activity, which leaves no space for political engagement. It was also a relatively safe endeavour because of its unthreatening, young female face. The association with young girls worked to limit the movement’s social and political voice, while also putting a limit on its trajectory. Its initial potential to disrupt the social order by encouraging young women to see themselves not as passive consumers of culture but as creators of knowledge helped create a clear vocal dissent (Gonick 311). However, as the movement carried on, and as the

mainstream media started to re-articulate the movement's aims and potentials, the message was watered down (311). The movement began to be read as a cute coming of age story and was dismissed by many outlets. As Gonick notes, large-scale media outlets, such as *Newsweek*, began "dismissing the seriousness of the Riot Grrrls movements' politics by associating their youth with a time of natural – but temporary – rebellion... that would eventually evaporate when it hit the adult real world" (Gonick 312). The interpretation of the movement as a 'natural' youthful time of rebellion made it appear as something that would eventually pass, which worked to discredit the dissenters' protest.

Protesting in Stilettos: The SlutWalk Toronto Example

The feminist protest movement "SlutWalk," which was initiated as a response to an incident on January 24, 2011, in which a Toronto police constable stood up at a safety information session at York University and warned women to not dress like sluts to avoid being raped, also brought to light the disparities that exist within the feminist community regarding women's experiences and sentiments about the relation between female gendered clothing and empowerment (Maronese). The protestors who marched in sexually provocative clothing, such as stilettos, corsets and lingerie, drew much disdain from other feminists. For example, Rebecca Traister of the *New York Times* was irritated by the notion that "stripping down to skivvies and calling ourselves sluts is passing for keen retort" (Traister). While the protest claimed to reappropriate the term 'slut' to empower women and dispel rape myths, it excluded many feminist positions on the issue of female empowerment. Feminists were divided on the issue for reasons based on the overall profundity of reappropriating such a term and also on the exclusivity of such

reappropriations. As Katie Baker noted in the *San Francisco Gate*, “some feminists say SlutWalks are a superficial distraction.”

The movement also received much critique from the academic community. Gail Dines and Wendy J. Murphy commented in *The Guardian* that “women need to take to the streets to condemn violence, but not for the right to be called 'slut.’” They also felt that “The term slut is so deeply rooted in the patriarchal “Madonna/whore” view of women's sexuality that it is beyond redemption. The word is so saturated with the ideology that female sexual energy deserves punishment that trying to change its meaning is a waste of precious feminist resources... Encouraging women to be even more “sluttish” will not change this ugly reality” (Dines and Murphy). *Globe and Mail* writer Judith Timson agreed, noting that “After my mild irritation at the trivial nature of SlutWalk (as one commenter asked, “Is publicly calling yourself a slut and dressing provocatively really empowering?”), I brooded about how the movement was enmeshed in what has become the hypersexualization of all women, but especially young girls” (Timson). Traister adds that while objecting to these classifications is absolutely necessary, “to do so while dressed in what look like sexy stewardess Halloween costumes seems less like victory than capitulation (linguistic and sartorial) to what society already expects of its young women” (Traister).

One of the questions feminist scholars Bonnie Dow and Julia Wood focus on in “Repeating History and Learning from it: What can SlutWalks Teach Us about Feminism?” is how “SlutWalks can function oppositionally in the context of a contemporary media culture that celebrates women’s “agency” vis-à-vis their sexuality for voyeuristic ends” (Dow and Wood 29-30). While they argue that all forms of feminist protest have legitimate

potential to disrupt order, they also note that some critics find SlutWalks have the unfortunate potential to “accept and embody the pornification of girls and women” (Dow and Wood 29). However, they conclude that SlutWalks are a legitimate form of protest, especially since they have the potential to draw a whole generation of young women into the feminist fold. They therefore warn against opposing the paradigm of a singular feminist voice that does not represent the multifaceted experiences of women:

Too often in our history, mass media and feminism’s opponents have treated feminism’s diversity of ideas, modes of expression, and objectives as a sign of weakness rather than strength. For feminists to do the same is to accede to a paradigm which is not of our own making and which is not in our interests.

SlutWalks cannot be reduced to simple nostalgia for feminism’s past nor to a claiming of its future by young women in stilettos and bustiers. Rather, they – and their attendant furor – are evidence of feminism’s vitality and another opportunity to reflect on the stakes and stakeholders in the ongoing quest for gender justice (39).

Their work also illustrates how feminists have had to deal countlessly with the struggle over feminism’s image politics throughout its various waves (Dow and Wood 24).

Besides the differing responses on reappropriating the term ‘slut,’ the protest movement and the reactions it generated helped to highlight another profoundly controversial and fundamental female reality: that particular feminine garments exist which are designated or defined as ‘slut’ clothing. The movement also highlighted the way in which women, in particular feminist women, are divided on the subject of the value of feminine clothing to either advocate for female rights or to debase them. Finally, the very

discussion of the value of feminine clothing in the feminist discourses that followed the “SlutWalk” also reinforced the notion that identities, particularly women’s identities, as well as behaviours are largely shaped by appearances, by what they wear.

The conditions that led to the SlutWalk protest movement clearly demonstrate the relation between women’s clothing and shame. Women continue to be served messages that certain things they wear are shameful, which continues to promote a generalized debasement aesthetic geared to women (Stockton 310). In retaliation, women put those same shameful clothes back on to defy the authorities that mock them for dressing in that way. Clothes then become a symbol, or, I would add, visible proof of subversion *and* oppression (Stockton 289). Therefore, this feminist position is quite slippery to hold. Its underlying position wants to stand in stark opposition to masculine ideals even if confronted with numerous paradoxes.

Karen Hanson and Lee Wright are two proponents who have wrestled with these paradoxes. They both warn against being absorbed by philosophical debates that continue to devalue all that is perceived as feminine behaviour, including fashion. Wright notes that “women have accepted this notion of stiletto all too readily” and points out that “by using male forms of clothing we are perpetuating the dominance of masculinity” (Wright 204). Similarly in “Dressing Down, Dressing Up – The Philosophical Fear of Fashion,” Hanson warns that feminists should not run into the arms of traditional philosophy to escape what has turned them into objects for so long because “philosophy’s drive to get past what it takes to be the inessential has usually been linked with a denial or devaluation of what it has typically associated with the woman” (113). Hanson warns:

Feminism may suppose it shares with traditional philosophy an initial distrust of fashion, but this could prove poor ground for fellowship. Philosophy does indeed manifest sustained scorn for attention to personal appearance and fashionable dress, but there is a risk that a sympathetic response to that scorn may simply mean attachment to an unattractive and sometimes abusive partner (107).

Regardless of this warning, many feminists continue to adopt this stance of refuting all things 'fashionable' to shed the shackles of frivolity associated with dress. However, looking back at the debates surrounding woman's perceived proclivity for fashion, fashion could be seen as Wollstonecraft saw it back in 1792, as the only outlet available to them for self-expression, the only potentially empowering social activity for women to engage in.

On the question of what women should or should not wear, the SlutWalk movement made a further feminist divide apparent. In an "Open Letter from Black Women" to the SlutWalk, black feminists and activists expressed their sense of exclusion from the protest, as it did not represent their own personal experiences and only reinforced the racial divide within feminist discourse. Their response included the following sentiment:

We are perplexed by the use of the term 'slut' and by any implication that this word, much like the word "Ho" or the "N" word should be re-appropriated. We find no space in SlutWalk, no space for participation and to unequivocally denounce rape and sexual assault as we have experienced it (Blackwomen's blueprint.org).

In response to dressing like "sluts" in order to reappropriate the term, the group notes that dress is just one part of the black women's rape experience: "The way in which we are perceived and what happens to us before, during and after sexual assault crosses the

boundaries of our mode of dress.” Their interpretation of the right to wear what you want revealed the following profoundly racial inequality:

Although we vehemently support a woman’s right to wear whatever she wants anytime, anywhere, within the context of a “SlutWalk” we don’t have the privilege to walk through the streets of New York City, Detroit, D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, Miami, L.A. etc., either half-naked or fully clothed self-identifying as “sluts” and think that this will make women safer in our communities an hour later, a month later, or a year later.

The stiletto functions in this context as an example of a controversial female gendered garment that highlights the divides within the female community. It continues to provide a medium through which women negotiate their selves and their alliances. Women who choose to wear stilettos meet criticism precisely from other women. This was also prevalent in my own qualitative research, as previously discussed in section two. As one of the mature Rutgers listserv respondents stated in regard to wearing stilettos, “While I support people's right to make really stupid decisions, I don't think I shouldn't be able to point out they are stupid decisions” (25-FM). Or as another of the survey respondents put it, “I feel that others that wear stilettos are not intelligent due to the injuries that they can sustain from wearing them” (17-C).

As the fashion system comes to categorize feminine behaviour, it also works to pit women against each other, asking them to choose sides and demonstrate their feminist allegiances. Valerie Steele noted in 1989 in *Shoes: A Lexicon of Style*, that women are divided into two groups when it comes to shoes – those who love heels and those who hate them (11). In regard to feminists specifically, she found that they generally “tend to interpret

[high heels] as symbolizing female subordination” (16). As we have seen in this chapter, since the writing of her text certain feminist schools of thought have arisen that see the heel as a potentially emancipatory female tool, able to elevate women economically and socially, rather than simply a tool that exploits female sexuality. Nonetheless, women remain divided on the subject of stilettos because, as a gendered item, it appears as a manifestation of feminine subordination. Yet herein also lies the paradox: precisely because they are a female object, they have the potential to subvert social conventions, in turn empowering women, which also demonstrates that women are divided: there are those who can attempt to flout convention and those who cannot.

Conclusion

The girl power movement and the recent SlutWalk movement both managed to highlight a key feminist conundrum in regard to women and the use of stilettos: whether as feminists who dismiss feminine clothing and reject wearing stilettos or as feminists who support feminine representations and celebrate wearing stilettos, both positions continue to affirm that women cannot escape image politics – the paradigm that any step forward requires a new set of clothes, or new pair of shoes. Whatever that new look may consist of, it will have to struggle to break free from carrying forward the binary feminist issues that preceded it of either absorbing male rationality as a position or reinforcing “feminine-type” values.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ I would also like to add, in conclusion to this discussion, a reflection on Professor Scardellato’s precise comment that while I present a considerable amount of citing of opposing views, I make little effort to come to a critical conclusion. I do want to point out that my aim was not to come to a conclusion but to present a more holistic representation of the SlutWalk by juxtaposing opposing views. As evidenced with the black women’s response, the SlutWalk movement speaks from a position of privilege which excludes many women and which draws on one particular feminine experience – the very stereotypical adornment, which in my mind negates or flattens female experience re-presenting her as a one-dimensional creature as noted by Simmel in his 1911 treatise on fashion. I, therefore, do not particularly endorse this movement, and hoped to

make this evident by highlighting the black women's responses. I feel this is a negative image to send to younger women, teenagers, pre-pubescent girls, who are already inundated through the plethora of social media outlets to a vast array of images which objectify women and girls in debasing ways. My position on objectification is also somewhat provocative as I don't necessarily support the belief that being perceived as an object is always a negative thing - as in the "object of my affection" - but there are degrees of objectification that women are particularly vulnerable to that I think would be best to steer clear from rather than accentuate as in prancing around in one's skivvies.

Chapter 7: Who Can Walk the Walk? Male Responses from

Misogyny to Mimicry

“Even the imagery of the names of various types of foot suggest, on the one hand, feminine passivity (lotuses, lilies, bamboo shoots, water chestnuts) and, on the other hand, male independence, strength, and mobility (lotus boats, large-footed crows, monkey foot). It was unacceptable for woman to have those male qualities denoted by large feet. This fact conjures up an earlier assertion: footbinding did not formalize existing differences between men and women – it created them. One sex became male by virtue of having made the other sex something, something other, something completely polar to itself, something called female” (Dworkin, *Woman Hating* 107).

In 2014 on the TV show *Britain's Got Talent*, three French men came on the scene dancing in towering high heels to a compilation of Spice Girls' tunes, and they were a big hit. Their act mimicked the Spice Girls' own dance routines, which included thrusting their behinds and marching coyly towards the camera in high Hollywood camp fashion. At the conclusion of their performance, one of the female judges, Alesha Dixon, stood up and with staunch resolve declared, “You know what, boys? That was *ten* times better than any female dancer that we've seen on that stage today. You worked those heels.” Not only was the statement a dismissal of the efforts by female dancers on the show, but it also exalted the trio's efforts as surpassing any female attempt at performing, literally, in their own shoes, as the three men had worn *their* heels and worked them. As the group's popularity grew over 2014, this sentiment rippled through numerous journalistic reviews. As one online article for *People* magazine put it, “Watch Three Guys Dominate Beyoncé's Dance Moves in High Heels”

(Bender). Most of the reviews seemed to highlight that women should learn some lessons from these sexually appealing and proficient men. An example from *New Delhi* television exhorts, "Women, no more complaining about having to wear high heels. These men are dancing in them and making it look easy" (Roy).

The trio went on to enjoy mainstream success by dancing to tunes from sexually charged female superstars such as Beyoncé, the Spice Girls, Tina Turner, Donna Summers and Madonna. Their use of powerful female singers that stand for female empowerment and sexuality may seem to support female power and sexuality; however, one dance compilation, which featured a number of Beyoncé tunes, led a journalist to note, "'Ring the Alarm,' 'Crazy in Love,' and 'Naughty Girl' are all in the mix to prove who runs the world: men in high heels!" (Takeuchi). As we know, there is a great deal of irony to this comment as men in heels actually did rule the world prior to the 'Great Male Renunciation' that saw the banishment of heels on men. Now that men, but more specifically, homosexual men, and transvestites are reclaiming the heel and making use of it, what may this reappropriation suggest?

May the question then be posed: who has the right to wear stilettos? If women in this century have been vilified or mocked for wearing deceptive, seductive apparel, such as stilettos, then what does it mean for women when men appropriate them? May this act be read as a form of domination? Should women take offence at this gendered appropriation of an object so often scorned for making women appear ridiculous? To tackle these questions, this chapter will examine the conditions under which the stiletto has appeared as a modern female accessory, such as the pervading misogynistic sentiments fostered by the 'Great Male Renunciation' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that painted a

picture of women as deceptive seductresses that lured men from more noble endeavours.

The chapter will also explore how those sentiments manifest themselves in the stiletto, as it appears in the construction of the femme fatale and in the pornographic renderings of women.

The Femme Fatale

The femme fatale is a revolutionary type of woman, full of sexual zeal and deception who poses a threat to men who crossed her path. Whether real or imaginary, the femme fatale is a projection of male sexual fantasy and anxiety. She is often figured wearing heels, and in twentieth-century pornographic renditions she is often stripped down to nothing but heels, in particular, stiletto heels. In *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women*, Patrick Bade examines the representations of the femme fatale in Western culture and finds that inherent in her image is an implicit misogyny fuelled by inherent fears that are appended to the image of the femme fatale, such as the fear of disease, and the fear of the loss of one's self to the deceptive claws of manipulative women. "Of course wicked women had always existed in art as in life, and there had always been men who feared female sexuality or who took a masochistic delight in fantasies of fatal women" (9). As we saw earlier in Chapter 5, "the Bible offered an impressive array of potential subjects: Eve, Jezebel, Delilah, Judith and Salome.... the ancient world too was fertile ground with personages like Medusa, Helen of Troy, as were the Middle Ages with Dante's Francesca, the Renaissance as well with its overall lawlessness and amoral cruelty" (7). However, Bade nonetheless contends that "the preoccupation with evil and destructive women is one of the most striking features of late nineteenth century culture" (6). This preoccupation was tied to a very threatening health-

related concern: “it should also be remembered that in the nineteenth century, when there was still no effective cure for syphilis, women often were quite literally the carriers of hideous disease and death. Prostitution was by far the ‘profession’ most widely practised by women” (Bade 9). As such, women were the ones blamed for the spread of syphilis, and not men. The femme fatale was seen as the carrier of disease, among other things, aligning her very closely to the mythological character of Pandora, the primordial example of the destructive, disease carrying woman.¹¹⁶

This very tangible threat may have helped usher in such sentiments towards promiscuous sexual fears, but there were others whose “hostility towards women was often accompanied by a [general] ambivalence towards sex” (Bade 6). Here, it wasn’t the fear of disease that made men want to keep women at bay, but the fear of losing one’s self. The ambivalence is drawn, notes Bade, from an association of eroticism with pain and death and the belief that sexual relations entail a subjugation, often violent and destructive, of one partner to the other (6).

However, the concerns were not only health-related or rooted in sexual anxieties. Bade notes that “A deep-rooted misogyny had been common among many artists since the beginning of the century, like Delacroix, Degas, Moreau and Munch, who avoided marriage,

¹¹⁶ There is, of course, a long tradition of such representations. John Keats’ 1888 poem, “La Belle dame sans Merci” is an expression of that fear, as all ‘la belle dame’s’ patrons lie on the “cold hill’s side... alone and palely loitering”. They also seem to figuratively bear the marks of syphilis, as the protagonist of the poem describes the knights as looking “haggard” as well there is a:

lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

The lily, a bulbous plant, may be a reference to the actual effects of syphilis, which, in its tertiary stage, manifests itself in large putrefying bulges on the body, known as papules or nodules, and the “moist and fever-dew” effect described may also be referring to the nodules that may open if irritated (Medline). And the fading rose, with its redness may also be a reference to the colouration of these sores.

fearing that their work would suffer from female interference. The belief was widespread that women sapped creativity and that they were incapable of elevated feelings or of understanding art” (6). Here lie the echoes of Enlightenment thinking that we encountered in Chapter 5, where women were seen to lack the faculties of reason.

The femme fatale is anything but reasonable. She figures in art as “pale, proud, mysterious, idol-like, full of perverse desires yet cold at heart”; she lacks “natural feeling” and she has an “androgynous appearance and abundance of hair” (8, 9, 13). By appending these licentious qualities to the evil femme, it enables men to alienate those qualities from himself and have them reflected back to him through an evil woman – facilitating disdain – which reassures his own sense of self. In the above instances, woman is perceived as a seductive and enchanting force that must be contained. She is capable of bringing on disease, of absorbing the self, and of destroying reason.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the femme fatale had taken on real-life form as women were co-opting the image for their own use, as “the clothes worn by fashionable women... emphasized height and created an impression of Amazonian vigour and power” (Bade 30). The women who were adopting the femme fatale look may have done so to protest the oppression of that very image, and also to assert her presence in the social sphere. High heels were seen as the tool of choice for women who wanted to stand out. Ferragamo recounts that during the 1940s actresses were reluctant to show off their feet because it was somewhat of a taboo (58). Only those who wanted to make scenes, who were on the fringes of the acting world, such as Lily Sampson, “che cercava di fare colpo

sperando in una fama fortuna”¹¹⁷ would brave new shoe styles to become famous (58). It is not a coincidence that, right after WWII, when American women were being told to return to the domestic sphere, the stiletto appeared.

Pornography, Pinups and Stilettos

There was a girl from Sandy Hook
With ankles trim and neat.
She wore red shoes with lots of straps
To give the boys a treat.
(Harold R. Quimby, as quoted in Rossi 89)

The stiletto’s appearance on scantily clad women, whether on the sides of WWII military planes or in magazines such as *Hustler* and *Playboy* managed to perpetuate an image of it as a provocative female tool so that by the 1970s “the role of the high heel in fashion became indistinguishable from its role in pornography” (Semmelhack *Heights* 58). The newly popularized heel, the stiletto, the “little knife,” conjured up images of aggression, which became a prevalent feature “in the complex realm of dominatrix fantasies” (*Heights* 50). The repercussions of this conflation are endless; however, some of the main effects include the objectification of women as sex objects, the manipulation of male desire, and, most devastatingly, the female violence that ensues from the generalization of their sexuality.

Images of pinup girls were first seen in *Esquire* magazine in the works of famous pinup artists, such as George Petty and Alberto Vargas, and in the ‘nose art’ of military planes that featured pinup girls painted by enlisted men during the Second World War (44). The large calendar company Brown and Bigelow employed numerous pinup artists, such as Rolf Armstrong, Alfred Leslie Buell, Earl Steffa Moran, and Gil Elvgren during WWII

¹¹⁷ “Who tried to stand out hoping for fortune and fame.”

to create pinup girl calendars.¹¹⁸ The pinup girl image built upon the established pornographic tradition of depicting scantily clad women in impossible positions and in high heels (Semmelhack *Heights* 44). This long list of artists and their resulting successes testifies that the image of the pinup girl was already a popular image by WWII.¹¹⁹

Semmelhack notes that the popularity of 1930s pinups was astounding, and it was soon to be co-opted by popular culture and advertising (*ibid.*). However, the thin spiked heels that they typically wore could not yet be purchased. They were pure fantasy, in this case, for enlisted men.

Semmelhack attributes the sexualisation of the stiletto not to any visibly physical and sexualized transformation of the body but instead to a cultural response. In an interview with *Globe & Mail* journalist Sarah Hampson, she declares:

The iconic power of high heels is in their cultural associations, not in how they pose the body. It's not that they cause the breasts and behind to thrust out, that they tilt the hips in a sexually provocative manner. Forget what Christian Louboutin said about how they put the arch of the foot in the exact position that occurs when a woman is having an orgasm. (Hampson)

Rather, one has to look at the historical moment they emerge, as it was not always the case that high heels on women were “an absolute confirmed staple in erotica” (Hampson). As Semmelhack reiterates, “They come and go in fashion, but each time they re-emerged as a trend, they carried more erotic baggage” (Hampson), culminating in the twentieth-century

¹¹⁸ Brown and Bigelows pinup examples can be found on the web at:
http://bandbmall.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=SFNT&Store_Code=WAW

¹¹⁹ Due to American military policy that enabled enlisted men to mark their aviation fleets with whatever made them boost their morale, the image of the American pinup literally travelled to Europe and Japan as well.

pornographic rendering of women: “the high heel entered the twentieth century as an indisputably female form of footwear linked to both fashion and pornography” (Semmelhack *Heights* 35). Pornography exploits the female image, yet its most insidious quality is its conflation with other images of women, for example, in fashion magazines, advertisements, etc.

In a 1975 interview in *Body/Power*, Michel Foucault discusses the institution of pornography and suggests that it is an example of a social regulatory body, an institution from which power relations are formed: “Since sexuality has now become an object of analysis and concern, surveillance and control comes to play here as well” (56-7). He suggests that rising interests in sexuality in general enables the purveyance of sex, and as it is made more visible, it also allows for the control of its outlets, and, as well, allows for its exploitation. When asked, “What is the response on the side of power,” Foucault responded that it is an economic response: “the exploitation of eroticization, from suntan products to pornographic films” so that power is now invested in a new mode, not in the form of control by repression, but that of control by stimulation (57). Pornography, therefore, becomes institutionalized, and what appears to be endless amounts of stimulation is a new mode from which relations of power are exhibited. What appears to be the proliferation and openness of sexual pursuits is merely another form of institutionalized control, and as such stimulation is also controlled, whose effect is to numb stimulation. Consider also the institutionalized advertising tenet “sex sells,” which transforms sex into a means to a purchasing end.

Jean Baudrillard’s examination of “Fashion, or the Enchanting Spectacle of the Code” in the 1976 *Symbolic Exchange and Death* extends the discussion to highlight the relation

between the world of fashion and sex. Similar to Foucault's thinking, Baudrillard notes that sex is produced through ads, products, etc., and this production of sex impregnates all fashion significations. In his case, he is not directly speaking about pornography, but he shows the same instances are at play in fashion, where sex is generalized through fashion, so that everything is sexualized. What we get is a loss of particularity (Baudrillard 474). In the consumer world Baudrillard examines, everything becomes generalized, consumerism is generalized, and sex as yet another product to be sold is also generalized.

Take, for instance, the representation of women in fashion magazines, such as the controversial 2007 Tom Ford male cologne ad campaign, which featured very explicit pornographic imagery of women. One image featured a close-up of a woman's mouth and chest, and she was pictured squeezing a phallic-like bottle in between her breasts with her mouth agape. What are the consequences of advertising women in this way to sell male cologne? I would argue that here it was not the women's image that was offensive; rather, what remains offensive about women in magazines, in line with Foucault and Baudrillard's discussions, is the way their sexuality is generalized and commodified. There is nothing particularly threatening about photographing beautiful, thin women wearing lavish attire. It is rather that they are photographed at all that presents problems. Through photos their vulnerability is displayed, and their sexuality, a most personal expression, is manipulated. It is the play of sex in fashion, as in pornography, that is intertwined in the discourse to reinforce the idea of women as sex objects and to sell commodities that they are associated with, including themselves (hence the importance of the shift from prostitutes to modern and postmodern working grrrls that was outlined in Chapter 3).

The attempt at making pornographic women more *real* has had *real-life* repercussions. Semmelhack reviews a 1945 article in the *Washington Post* that points to the problem pinup pictures caused: namely, that men would idealize women in that way and expect the same in their wives or girlfriends. It is men's desire that poses a threat here, and not female subjectivity. The manipulation of that desire is what becomes a threat. Heterosexual men can no longer be satisfied by their own women but want idealized women instead (Semmelhack *Heights* 48).

The most devastating effect of what Baudrillard describes as generalized sexuality is the violence women become subject to due to their perceived proclivity for clothes, and in particular provocative apparel, such as the stiletto. In "Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model," Diana E.H. Russell analyzes the causal relation between pornography and rape and finds that there is a direct causal relation between pornography and violence against women: "I have amplified here for the first time a theory about how pornography – both violent and nonviolent forms of it – causes rape and other sexual assault" (68). Her theory draws on three positions: pornography predisposes some men to want to rape women or intensifies the predisposition in other men already so predisposed; it undermines some men's internal inhibitions against acting out their rape desires; and it undermines some men's social inhibitions against acting out (41). In a nutshell, pornography undermines inhibitions and instigates sexually deviant behaviour.

Russell's extensive research revealed a direct link between pornography and violence against women. To begin, she notes

when addressing the question of whether or not pornography causes violence and sexual assault, many people fail to acknowledge that in many instances the actual

making of pornography involves or even requires violence and sexual assault... For example, a man who said he had participated in over a hundred pornography movies testified at the Commission hearings in Los Angeles as follows: 'I, myself, have been on a couple of sets where the young ladies have been forced to do even anal sex scenes with a guy who is rather large and I have seen them crying in pain.'

(42)

Russell finds that pornography also reinforces rape myths, such as "women in general enjoy rape and forced sexual acts," which are used by perpetrators to justify their violent actions. The LA Commission hearings also found that 65% of the rapists interviewed believed that "women cause their own rape by the way they act and the clothes they wear" (58), thus subtly acknowledging that the act may not be welcome while at the same time denying any responsibility for them.

Russell's work rides on the tails of the anti-pornography debates of the 1980s, in which shoes played a significant and under-appreciated role. Dworkin's prolific anti-pornography writings of the 1980s highlight the misogyny and violence inherent in popular culture. In *Woman Hating*, she points to William Rossi's *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* as example of the popular beliefs surrounding the fetishized women's foot. Rossi begins with the assumption that: "The foot is an erotic organ and the shoe is its sexual covering. This is a reality as ancient as mankind, as contemporary as the Space Age" (Rossi 1). From this erotic beginning, he goes on to paint numerous metaphors where the foot is seen as phallic symbol and the shoe as a "yoni, or vulva, symbol" (13). The gendering of this account is unmistakable: "this male (foot) and female (shoe) relationship is both ancient and universal... one 'thrusts' the foot into the shoe or boot or slipper" (13) and essentially

reinforces the way in which *women's* feet have been sexualized and fetishized to serve male desire. Dworkin wonders "How could men idealize the bound feet of crippled women? How and why?" (110), and diagnosed a master-slave dialectic at work: "None of the traditional explanations or justifications for brutality between or among peoples applies to this situation. On the contrary, here one sex mutilated (enslaved) the other in the interest of sex, male-female *harmony*, role-definition, beauty" (110-111). Rossi's text confirms this as he stresses, "Shoes aren't merely sex symbols. They're sex motivators because they help give a woman the look, the poise, the carriage, that conveys a sensual language. Women know this well by intuition and experience" (14). The women in his text continue to be the sex purveyors, there to render pleasure to men. The only agency women seem to have is in their role as seductress, and Rossi dedicates an entire chapter to defining the different sexualized types of female shoes and their associated sexualized feminine type:

All women's footwear belongs in one of four categories: sexy, sexless, neuter and bisexual. Each of these types reflects or expresses a woman's psychosexual makeup and personality.... The types of shoes she wears *habitually* is a reliable key to her true personality and psychosexual makeup (88).

A woman's type of shoe is therefore conflated with her character. What does this description do for women? Firstly, it flattens female agency into a two-dimensional model, and secondly, it limits that agency to the simple potential of being a sex object. Notably, the same story is not true of men's shoes for Rossi's work: "There is no practical reason why boys and girls, or men and women, should wear shoes with pronounced styling differences. The *only* reason is sexual, an insignia to designate the separation of the sexes" (17).

Dworkin's strongest example against Rossi is the case of Chinese footbinding, which allows

her to draw attention to the fact that “*Footbinding did not emphasize the differences between men and women – it created them*, and they were then perpetuated in the name of morality” (Dworkin 103, italics in original).

To return to the question of pornography and violence, the objectification of female sexuality can be further observed in the plethora of pornographic renderings of women in high heels. While both Dworkin’s and Russell’s work may seem dated, their critiques continue to be relevant, as the conditions for the production of pornography have not substantively changed. The internet has proved to be a new media outlet for pornography, and feminist writings are being updated in lieu of the increasing accessibility to pornographic material, a tendency Dworkin already discussed in her 1981 *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. Considering the changes the pornographic tradition had undergone, she noted that while the “only change in the meaning of the word is with respect to its second part, *graphos*: now there are cameras – there is still photography, film, video” (200), these new technologies were contributing to the problem as they in demanding “the creation of more and more *porneia* to meet the market opened up by the technology” (201). Dworkin’s predictions have, of course, been confirmed. The onset of the internet has opened up further avenues for the exploitation of female sexuality, as seen in the plethora of pornographic internet sites.

As Dworkin’s predictions have come to fruition, Russell’s work on rape also continues to be relevant. Violence against women continues to be a social concern because the rape myth continues to be a prevalent institutionalized reality.¹²⁰ Women continue to

¹²⁰ Examples of this type of institutional ignorance are especially alarming when considering the vulnerability of college girls, very much the victims of this abusive stereotyping. Just this year, I had one of my best

bear the shame of sex, as well as the violence. While one would hope that a constant barrage of protests can work to break down these ideas, one must also admit that there have been movements like SlutWalkToronto dating back to the early 1970s, with the “Take Back the Night” protests. Studying protest movements bring to light the debates among varying feminist positions on female experience and agency, and the lack of consensus to defend or expel certain female dressing practices in response to this myth.

Walk a Mile in Her Shoes

In light of the inherent misogyny women have been subject to in their heels, how may I tackle the question I started the chapter off with regarding the gendered appropriation of heels by men? Is there a right way for men to wear heels that is respectful of women’s position in them? In 2001, Frank Baird, a Rape Crisis Advocate, first proposed *Walk a Mile in Her Shoes®: The International Men’s March to Stop Rape, Sexual Assault & Gender Violence to the Valley Trauma Center*,¹²¹ something Baird started because he “wanted to increase the opportunities for men to contribute to efforts to end sexualized violence.” His premise was founded on the age-old adage “You can’t really understand another person’s experience until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes.” While the French dancing trio make it look easy, and the critics may be inclined to tell women to stop complaining, Baird acknowledges that “It’s not easy walking in these shoes.”

Herein lies the stilettos’ paradox: their precariousness draws attention to the vulnerability of women in general, but at the same time they provide the opportunity to

students, a beautiful girl, come to me after missing a class, and with head hanging low and broken blue eyes, she informed me that she had been raped, but that she would not be missing any other classes.

¹²¹ The centre is now called Strength United: A California State University Northridge Community Agency.

tackle the discourse of gender relations because they “get the community to talk about something that's really difficult to talk about: gender relations and men's sexual violence against women” (Baird). This is not to suggest that without the stiletto this would not be possible, but the stiletto has provided a few outlets, such as the SlutWalks and the International Men’s March to discuss gender relations in general.

Conclusion

This material culture analysis of the stiletto has demonstrated that while the stiletto may have been a twentieth-century design, it carries with it remnants of a very complex past filled with mystery and danger, and it also embodies in its design and inclinations the misogynistic tendencies of philosophical and religious traditions that see women as inferior creatures drawn to frivolity and excess. As demonstrated, from its nefarious beginnings to its current versatile life, the stiletto has managed to insert itself into the cultural imaginary in a paradoxical fashion – as a somewhat deviant conformist that has come to define particular aspects of the feminine experience over time. Since its inception in the 1950s, and even dating back farther in time to the late nineteenth century, the stiletto has inserted itself into the repository of cultural memory, and, as such, it provides us with a backdrop from which to monitor, measure, mirror and consider how the conditions of women have evolved.

My approach helped highlight and challenge four different theoretical approaches: psychoanalytic theories that stress the relevance of the ‘other’ in shaping our existence; social constructivist theories that see the role of the collective as superseding and conditioning the individual; consumer culture discourses; and semiotic discourses that see exchange and communication as our primary mode of being. As many of the women surveyed noted, they wore stilettos simply for themselves. The research also presented a challenge to feminist discourses on female subordination in dress by considering the value of the appropriation of fashion by the individual for personal and physical reasons, as in the

case of the women who wore stilettos in the privacy of their own homes and for their own pleasures.

This examination of the stiletto also included a cross-cultural comparative analysis that demonstrated how one object in two separate cultures elicits differing responses to how each perceives women reflective of those cultures. The differing cultural responses made me reflect on the ideological and social structure differences between Canadian and Italian cultures. The cultural perceptions I collected highlighted how latent in this particular object are a number of female stereotypes that range from elegant women to vulgar whores, reinforcing the idea that one's culture has an impact on how one perceives the world. In the Italian women's case, stilettos were perceived as elegant and class seemed to be a leading factor in determining one's position in that society. The almost unanimous response among the Canadian women that stilettos made them feel sexy, on the other hand, highlights the importance that gender has in determining one's position in Canadian society.

In my analysis of the Rutgers listserv discussion, I found that one's social position was a key determining factor in defining one's opinions about things in general. It highlighted how one's profession has the potential to dictate one's tastes. In the case of academic women, the particular philosophical tradition they find themselves in conditions their appearance in a setting that is not in the least inclined to promote 'feminine-like' ideals, such as sexiness, maternalness, etc. In this, I can confirm Louise Morley's work on women in higher education. It is a setting that demands the erasure of feminine traces. Feminist discussions surrounding the stiletto also revealed that at least in the case of feminist academics, the uniform most revered continues to be a subdued masculine-type

attire that erases any traces of femininity and works to contribute to a culture that promotes and favours masculine-type ideals, such as strength, force, individuality, etc.

Since my work here meant to reconstruct a cultural memory of the stiletto by reviewing its cultural, specifically Italian, and personal resonances and by tracking the gender changes it witnessed, it necessarily left out a number of areas that are worth mentioning and considering for future research. The economic consequences and value of the stiletto continue to be orchestrated by market principles that evolve continuously as stilettos rapidly move in and out of fashion, and, therefore, constantly undergo transformations. Stilettos continue to be lambasted and praised by the media, but, most importantly, they continue to be produced. Therefore, studies need to be launched on the production of the stiletto, which take into consideration a number of social, technological, and economic factors. In Italy, for example, these factors relate to the decline of small-scale independent artisanal shoe production, immigrant labour issues, corporate undertakings, and the leather industry's environmental pollution. Shoe manufacturing is one of Italy's strongest independent sectors, and its value of exportation is considered on its own separate from the fashion industry. Large corporations, such as LVMH in the Emilia Romagna region, are continually subsuming the remaining independent small-scale artisans. A Marxist analysis of the processes of production would be useful to begin to open up the social questions this form of amalgamation is producing. For example, the dirty job of tanning leathers in Italy is now taken up by *extra comunitari*, the migrant workforce, who are subject to squalid health conditions. The process of manufacturing has evolved with the advent of new technologies, but this progress does not necessarily reflect improvement. It is an improvement on a mass production scale, where fashion has now reached a form of

“fast-fashion,”¹²² but this has come at the expense of working conditions. The chemicals used to tan may be more efficacious, but they are also complex, and it is therefore more difficult to reverse polluting effects.

Some work has already been undertaken in this area. In “Wool, Fur, and Leather: Hazardous to the Environment,” PETA gathered a number of studies on the topic of leather tanning and found “Leather tanning generates 800,000 tons of chrome shavings annually, and much of this chromium waste ends up in landfills.” They found:

The toxic groundwater near tanneries has caused health problems for residents in surrounding areas. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that the incidence of leukemia among residents near one tannery in Kentucky was five times the national average. Arsenic, a common tannery chemical, has long been associated with lung cancer in workers who are exposed to it on a regular basis.

Several studies have established links between sinus and lung cancers and the chromium used in tanning. (PETA)

Studies of leather-tannery workers in Sweden and Italy found cancer risks “between 20% and 50% above [those] expected” (PETA). Italy’s leather tanning is produced in Tuscany, especially near the region of Prato. A recent report published on Italy’s not-for-profit Consumer Relations website noted high levels of arsenic in tap water for the Tuscan region and warn against drinking and using it for cooking (Altro Consumo).

Besides the environmental degradation and the adverse health effects of shoe production, another area worth continuing to investigate in light of women and their

¹²² At the conclusion of this writing, we have already moved to the “see now, buy now” fashion production system through e-commerce.

relation to stilettos are the political and juridical implications of the stiletto, which would help paint a contemporary picture of the current rights of women and how laws uphold them, i.e. how the law protects women's rights to wear what they want without risk of violence, as noted by Diana Russel's late 1980s report on pornography and rape in the United States. A final area of development that I would like to continue to explore is the cross-cultural comparison of the stiletto and other cultures' relations to stilettos. This would help present a more detailed cross-cultural comparative analysis on the stilettos' various cultural interpretations.

Rather than providing definitive answers, my work raises further questions and concerns for me and points to proscriptive and prescriptive remedies due to the violence that stilettos have provoked for women. In light of the SlutWalk protest, shouldn't women be able to wear whatever they want? Or should women not wear stilettos to protect themselves from violence? Should pornographic images of women in stilettos be banned due to the violence they promote? Should men, especially transvestites, not be allowed to wear stilettos due to the disregard it shows to women's plight in heels? Or by wearing them, is it not a celebration of femininity and so should be encouraged?

Nonetheless, I hope this research has drawn attention to the continued ambivalence and tensions that women's gendered clothing instigates in general. Evoking age-old debates about the frivolity of fashion, I hope to have brought to light the ways in which conducting research in the field of fashion is a necessary endeavour for a cultural analyst as it enriches not only archival research but enables us to challenge preconceived notions of fashion's superficiality. Focusing on high heels has shown me that to accept them as a worthy item of research is to accept women in society. The stiletto can be seen as a pivotal metaphor of

what it means to be woman in society – there is a danger, beauty, growth, strength, and vulnerability.

Through my research, I was fortunate to meet many interesting and powerful women, who don heels for numerous reasons. While I acknowledge that asking women why they wear stilettos reinforces the paradigm that women are constantly forced to consider superficial aspects of themselves, since men are not often asked why they wear what they wear, I do feel that the question allowed me to turn things around to explore the interest in what women wear, and to ask broader feminist questions, such as why we continue to ask women to be concerned about what they wear, and why they can't be left alone to wear what they want. Mostly, I hope this has developed into a feminist manifesto, as I had intended it to be for my daughter and for all daughters out there. To them I want to say: march in what you want, and I hope that your heels click the ground and reverberate through the city streets to travel through the bodies and minds of those passing you by.

Appendix A: The Listserv Responses

Order	Identity	date of response	profession	comment
1	TS	Oct.20/10	Associate Professor	You should contact Sandra Weber at Concordia University (Montreal).
2	C M	Oct.20/10	n/a	There is a chapter/vignette in THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET by Sandra Cisneros where the girls find and wear old high heels and how this affects their perception of themselves, as well as how other people view them- both men and women.
3	SL	Oct.20/10	n/a	Wow, that's interesting. I'd love a list when this is all done (reminds me of when I practiced walking in my ridiculously high Candies back in high school)
4	JM	Oct.20/10	associate editor	Fascinating bit of our culture, this. I find high heels to be anything but emancipatory.
5	SL	Oct.20/10	n/a	They are not in the slightest emancipatory, I completely agree with

			you. Sometimes there's no arguing with a teen girl's idea of vanity though. Sigh
6	C	Oct.20/10	<p>Sorry, last bit was sent from my phone, hence the brevity and poor sentence structure.</p> <p>In MANGO STREET, the heels are really highlighted as both an emancipation and a restriction. I can't remember exactly where in the book this incident takes place, but Esperanza and friends are certainly still on the lower end of the tween-teen spectrum.</p> <p>When they put the shoes on, they all stand about admiring and praising their long legs. And then they teeter down to the store with them on. Men they see every day start paying attention to them (in fairly creepy ways), and they are scolded by a woman (someone's mother I think?) for grasping a hold of their sexuality at such an early age (it's</p>

				<p>only a few steps from high heels to out-of-wedlock pregnancies, you know).</p> <p>The girls decide that they're not old enough for these things yet, so they abandon the shoes-- though I think Esperanza keeps thinking about them.</p> <p>And isn't there something in LITTLE WOMEN, too, with Meg and her first heels (and subsequent injuries)? Or am I confusing movie and book here?</p>
7	B W	Oct.20/10	PhD candidate	<p>Hmm, I'm really curious about this, although I don't remember any such scene. I'm not an expert on mid-nineteenth century fashion, but wouldn't she have already been wearing heeled shoes? Didn't children even have heels in their shoes sometimes? Really curious now!</p>

8	AB	Oct.20/10	reference librarian	<p>Hi Francesca,</p> <p>A picturebook came out last year called Birdie's Big Girl Shoes, where a little girl longs to wear her mom's high heels, but when she finally does, she decides she likes her bare feet better. It's by Sujean Rim. Hope this helps!</p>
9	JH	Oct.20/10		<p>I don't recall this from either the movie or the book. Not so say it's not there. My memory is not what it used to be. Or ever was, perhaps...</p> <p>June H</p>
10	AZ	Oct.20/10	elementary school librarian	<p>I consider them to be instruments of torture, personally. One of the best things about being a librarian is, you're expected to wear sensible shoes.</p>
11	C M	Oct.20/10	PhD	<p>You might look at Alcott's An Old Fashioned Girl as well as Little Women.</p> <p>There's a lot about the stupidity of women's clothes in that book--I believe the main character, Polly, the Old Fashioned Girl, wears bloomers</p>

or something bloomer-like, and not those miserable corsets or puffy dresses. And there is a bit about sensible shoes, and not trying to be grown up too young.

I agree with everyone else that this is a fascinating conversation. I'm sure there are many more books that we haven't thought of. Please post a list to the group when you're done.

Hey, The Twelve Dancing Princesses? Don't they wear out their shoes at night? But those probably aren't high heels. :->

12	SP	Oct.20/10	Assistant Professor	<p>Somewhat OT - I'm a little sad to admit that I wear high heels almost everyday because at 5'2" I am shorter than many of my students, and at 30 (almost 31!) years old, I am still younger than the average age of my students.</p> <p>There's a running joke among Korean Americans about Korean college</p>
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				<p>women (that is, Korean women attending university in Korea) because they wear stilettos on campus. The funny part is, Korean universities were built into the sides of mountains because the land was cheaper, so these poor women are walking up and down mountains in heels! And I've never seen one trip or stumble.</p> <p>Anyway, looking forward to the results of your research!</p> <p>Sarah</p>
13	H	M	Oct.20/10	<p>Is that Polly or is it Rose in *Eight Cousins*--I'm thinking that part of Uncle Alec's child-rearing reforms are in the no corset, warm winter undergarment department--if not Bloomer garb, something next-door to it, just as he institutes not-quite-Graham-ly dietary reform, and takes away her morning coffee.</p>
14		KH	Oct.20/10	<p>There's also the chapter "Fashion and Physiology" in Eight</p>

				<p>Cousins, where</p> <p>Rose is dressed in a fashionable way by Aunt Clara, and Uncle Alex tries to get her to run across the room...</p>
15	MS	Oct.20/10	English department	<p>Perhaps not quite high heels but there's the picture book "Louise the Big Cheese and the La-di-da Shoes" by Elise Primavera, about the desire to wear fancy (albeit uncomfortable) shoes.</p>
16	JH	Oct.20/10		<p>I don't recall books that used heels as a sort of female rite of passage, though I did myself in an unpublished short story. When I was young, the first step to high heels were so-called 'Cuban' heels, low, square-ish clunky heels, but the first move toward the real thing. From there, you moved to something about two inches, and finally, when you reached three-inch heels, you were...grown. ish. I don't recall getting my first real heels much before I was a sophomore in HS--I might have, but I don't recall it. By then, however, they were standard dress-up</p>

				<p>attire. And no, looking back, I don't see them as emancipatory. In fact, from where I am now, I see them as one of those things meant to lock us into a rather restrained role that also included girdles, nylons, etc. etc. Becoming a woman in the fifties was definitely not emancipation. It was restriction.</p>
17	H	M	Oct.20/10	<p>It's in the scene where Meg is staying with a friend (Sallie Moffat?) who dresses her up in "big-girl" clothes for a party--a low cut evening gown, jewelry, and high heeled shoes. She trips and turns her ankle, which her family seems to regard as a suitable punishment for her vain behavior.</p>
18	M	C	Oct.20/10	<p>Just remembered another one.</p> <p>I honestly cannot remember the title or whole story, as I must have read it in elementary school, and so perhaps the Great Mind can help some. But it was about a girl and her friends somewhere in the Caribbean-- I want to say Jamaica, maybe? They would eat</p>

				<p>peaches or some fruit on the way to/from school. And then, using the hot, melty tar from the road, they would stick the pits to their heels and pretend like those were high heels.</p> <p>Clearly, I am a shoe person.</p>
19	W	B	Oct.20/10	<p>Yes!!!! Here is the passage:</p> <p>"On the Thursday evening, Belle shut herself up with her maid, and between them they turned Meg into a fine lady. They crimped and curled her hair, they polished her neck and arms with some fragrant powder, touched her lips with coralline salve to make them redder, and Hortense would have added "a soup-con of rouge," if Meg had not rebelled. They laced her into a sky-blue dress, which was so tight she could hardly breathe and so low in the neck that modest Meg blushed at herself in the mirror. A set of silver filagree was added, bracelets, necklace, and even earrings, for Hortense tied them on with</p>

				<p>a bit of pink silk which did not show. A cluster of tea-rose buds at the bosom and a ruche, reconciled Meg to the display of her pretty white shoulders, and A PAIR OF HIGH-HEELED BLUE SILK BOOTS satisfied the last wish of her heart."</p> <p>It's from the chapter entitled "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair."</p>
20	JL	Oct.20/10	English Professor	<p>Actually, no. Meg turns her ankle early in the book, in chapter 3 ("That Lawrence Boy"). "Vanity Fair" is chapter 9.</p> <p>Here's the text from my copy:</p> <p>Meg appeared in search of her sister. She beckoned and Jo reluctantly followed her into a side room, where she found her on a sofa holding her foot and looking pale.</p> <p>"I've sprained my ankle. That stupid high heel turned, and gave me a</p>

				<p>horrible wrench. It aches so, I can hardly stand, and I don't know how I'm ever going to get home," she said, rocking to and fro in pain.</p> <p>[Jo says] "I knew you'd hurt your foot with those silly things."</p>
21	B W	Oct.20/10		<p>Ah, so then she doesn't learn her lesson, does she? Naughty Meg! :)</p>
22	RP	Oct.20/10	publishing	<p>Although they are not high heels, I wonder if pointe shoes for ballet dancers would work for this purpose. Most girls get their point shoes somewhere between 12-14 years of age. And because they require considerable physical strength to master and make the girl inches taller than even highest pumps would, many dancers find them empowering. Also they open up a universe of dance roles that are unavailable to younger dancers.</p>
23	JC	Oct.21/10	Associate Professor	<p>This reminds me of a sight I saw when I was in graduate school. In an old building on campus where our</p>

				<p>English Department was housed, there was a steep, grand staircase with steps made of slippery, sliding marble. It was scary to walk up or down those steps in sneakers and with minimal baggage.</p> <p>One day as I stood waiting for the elevator next to this grand, scary staircase, I looked up and saw a female Professor running down them, wearing spiky high heels, carrying a bulging, obviously heavy briefcase on one arm, and a tiny baby in the other arm. I admired how sure she was of herself in those shoes.</p>
24	D	Oct.21/10	writer	<p>OT:</p> <p>Why be ashamed (it seems) of wearing heels or scornful of those who do?</p> <p>Surely it's all about choice. Women needn't be branwashed to actually like the look of heels and the look of themselves in heels. We're all supposed to be in control of our lives, but if we wear heels we're not sensible or we're masochistic? I prefer flip-flops</p>

			<p>and thank goodness my job allows me to wear them, but I also love putting on a dress and heels -- some dresses just don't go with flip-flops or sensible lace-ups, or even strappy low heeled sandals.</p>
25	FM	Oct.21/10	<p>While I support people's right to make really stupid decisions, I don't think I shouldn't be able to point out they are stupid decisions.</p> <p>High heels damage tendons, toes, knees and backs. They wreck feet and can severely reduce the mobility (and consequently healthy) of post-high heel wearing older people. They reduce mobility in and of themselves and they can be lethal (a girl died last year running in high heels--she slipped and fell under a train). If they don't hurt it's because the feet have "adapted" to the shoe.</p> <p>I wore them when I was young. I was unlucky in that joint disease struck me</p>

				<p>young and I haven't been able to wear anything but flats for years but you know: the first time I put on a pair of lace up ecco shoes (flat) and walked for half an hour I looked at my partner and declared in genuine shock: "My feet don't hurt!"</p>
26	SP	Oct.21/10	Assistant Professor	<p>Farah,</p> <p>My mom once told me that the reason why she insisted on buying pricier, Italian-made leather shoes was because they were made better and therefore would not ruin our tendons, toes, knees, and backs, and would not injure our spinal cords and then our brains - which we both need, as we love to read and learn.</p> <p>Or maybe that was just her argument to get my dad to approve our shopping habits.</p>

Hope my comment didn't make anyone feel dissed for wearing heels -- it's just that I'm now reaping the painful fruits of having worn 'em in my younger years, which has made me perhaps more sensitive to the not-so-liberating long-term aspects of what I freely chose to do back when bone, muscle, and nerve were more resilient. At this point, the experience of having been more "aesthetically interesting" or "powerful" when wearing heels pales in comparison to finding that my sweet husband of 30+ years never "got" the whole heels thing and seems to appreciate me more in hiking boots.

To quote some young person I know, "I'm not sayin'; I'm just sayin'."

Looking back to the original post regarding literature for young people that presents the wearing of heels as perhaps transgressive and/or a rite of passage with positive aspects:I'm

			<p>wondering if there is any youth literature that addresses recognition/acceptance of the need to wear orthotic devices and sensible shoes as a rite of passage in and of itself. I'm only half kidding here -- if such literature exists, it's probably not something any person under the age of 40 will want to read ;-)</p>
28	D	Oct.21/10	<p>Well, I personally didn't feel dissed by anyone. And sure, people are most certainly allowed to point out if they believe others are acting like idiots :-P</p> <p>Glad to say I've never suffered pain through wearing heels but that's probably because I don't wear them a whole lot.</p> <p>Back to shoes and feet in literature -- does anyone know if there are many references in classical Chinese literature to small feet - ultimately bound feet? How about in contemporary</p>

			<p>Chinese lit? Has the preference remained? I know some see women in heels as just another (milder) variation of bound feet -- heels are supposed to "cripple" a woman just like bound feet do.</p> <p>There is a Singaporean picture book about beaded skippers but I don't think they are high-heeled.</p>
29	SL	Oct.21/10	<p>There is Earthquake by Milly Lee (picture book) talking about how her father had to get a cart to carry her grandmother after the 1906 earthquake because she couldn't walk on her bound feet. When Milly does school talks she passes around her grandmother's shoes, kids are fascinated.</p>

W	B	Oct.21/10	<p>They can be emancipatory, and they can be indicators of a society that forces women into the role of sexual object.</p> <p>The way I see it, there are people who are going to make you an object, and then there are people who would rather see you in hiking boots. But for some reason, preferring you in hiking boots does not make you an object because hiking boots are "comfortable" (teasing the person who's hubby prefers her poor feet that way lol)</p> <p>Sometimes I wear heels; sometimes I wear flats. I wear what looks best with my outfit. Sure, "what looks good" is predefined for me (usually by Vogue or Anthropologie), but when I feel happy about my appearance, I feel happier about myself in general and more able to greet the day. Of course, I also tend to take my shoes off in the car and drive barefoot, but no one has to</p>
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				<p>know that.</p> <p>Are we going to attack make-up next? I don't wear make-up, but most women do. I don't think they are societal pawns because of it. What about wanting breasts ... is growing breasts emancipatory/a rite of passage? (Thinking of "I must increase my bust!")</p> <p>It can be taken to the extreme, when grown women get breast augmentation.</p> <p>I think I am just more in the habit of studying and questioning as opposed to out right passing judgment.</p>
31	ER	Oct.21/10	PhD - English	<p>Also not specified as high heels, the seemingly impractical and fragile glass slippers in Ella Enchanted don't break when dropped, fit perfectly, and magically bend with Ella's foot -- very sensible!</p>
32	UK	Oct.21/10		<p>Mahatma Gandhi's wife Kasturba is reputed to have said: "What a heavy price one has to pay to be</p>

			regarded as civilized." She was referring to wearing shoes--not heels, just shoes. Viewpoint is everything.
33	DA	Oct.21/10	My daughter was finishing her dissertation for a PhD in ethnomusicology when she underwent back surgery. Just before the operation, the female surgeon showed up in high heeled black boots, an attractively contemporary hairdo, and an upbeat attitude. Her appearance did more for my daughter's confidence in her than any other credentials because, as someone who fought against the "dowdiness" she saw in her field (her opinion, not mine), my daughter interpreted her doctor's glamor as reflecting several levels of competent and successful female-ness.
34	SL	Oct.21/10	I remember seeing an article recently on a woman m.d. in one of the poorest neighborhoods in San Francisco. She dresses to the nines because it does have an impact on her patients - not the least of which is that

				<p>femininity and professional are not mutually exclusive (I'm NOT saying they are - but I know that there is a prejudice that way, I remember a 'friend' asking once, "Why are you all called feminists? There's nothing feminine about feminists." Sigh)</p>
35	C	M	Oct.21/10	<p>Francesca, Roseanne, all -</p> <p>On the heel tangent...</p> <p>I think there is accord in general (not just in the medical profession, which is insanely male-biased in its foci) that high heels damage feet. Heels on shoes can be helpful - think riding horses, and plenty of workboots have heels. You wouldn't want to live in tap shoes, but they are useful for certain kinds of work and many are well-constructed shoes of their own. (The best shoes I own are tap shoes... I'm trying to get a pair sans tap!)</p> <p>Heels can cushion and support your</p>

feet, just as can well-made arches, supported toe and ball areas, etc. But high heels? (Sorry, I just mistyped that as high hells... hmm.) They don't empower you to do anything except lengthen your line - e.g., look skinnier, and accentuate your ankles and legs.

I don't know that contrasting heels with flip flops makes sense... that one kind of shoe can hurt feet doesn't mean that it's "okay" to hurt feet another way. We need to be listening to our bodies, not to a marketing scheme or aggregating research. Sometimes we need one kind of support, other times another. Would we wear parkas in Florida heat?

And, people's feet differ, and need different things at different times. I have narrow feet but wider toes, since I don't crush them into heels. I dance, so how my feet feel is incredibly important to me. (Of course, everybody walks, so I would think feet would be important to

everyone, but...)

Roseanne brought up pointe shoes, which is on my mind every day of late, as my daughter's class just went en pointe. She didn't, and won't. Talk about a painful situation... going from having featured positions in class to being in a sub-group (call it whatever one likes). But I won't pay for her to trash her feet, as pointe does. It is absolutely true that going en pointe empowers the girls - they are treated differently, they get new roles. But the dances that all the dancers covet in this studio? None of them are en pointe. None of the best work is en pointe. Yet the structure of the studio is such that pointe is the highest level, and thus the girls pursue it. Even though most of their parents don't approve. How does that happen? Because it is the norm, and the stated goal. Roles are written to pointe, posters glamorize pointe. Children's books are saturated with

pointe images (even for girl mice) - it is presented to girls as the definition of "princess pretty" and elegance, at a very early age. //

Dancers continue to dance pointe even when it hurts. Even when they don't *like* to dance pointe. They want to be grown, special, pretty women. And this is the route, in the ballet world, that is offered. (If you are a girl. I'll try not to get started on gender parity in ballet... sigh.)

So on the one hand, I would agree that as women, we have to decide for ourselves what is healthy and empowering for us as individuals. But at the same time, I hope we are each thinking very hard about the impact we have on each other, and on children. Let alone ourselves.

Back to books... Thank the powers that be for Louisa May Alcott. :)

Cheers,

Maia

What is being lost in the statement "high heels" is the wide nature of the heel---literally. One can have high heels that are broad in the base and with supportive structures to prevent the weight going on the toe. And then one can have spikes that so concentrate the weight that they punch holes in dance floors and require the wearer to sway as if they are on a unicycle to stay centred.

Also, re smartness, I am, thank god, one of the generation that discovered that well polished doc martins look utterly fabulous with fishnet tights and miniskirts (and I used to cycle on a boy's bike through the city of York because you can wear a short skirt over a crossbar).

I do sympathise with the desire to look smart at work: it's become a crisis for me as I cannot wear anything but very supportive shoes now (my knees are

badly damaged thanks to late diagnosed celiac) and as I take an unusually small size (EU 36/USA 5/UK 3.5) there is only one high street brand I can wear, and I really started to feel frumpy.

But I have just bought some gorgeous and almost flat very sexy calf boots, and I have several pairs of very shiny and smart lace ups. They are sensible, the brand and the insoles I wear are so good for my feet that I no longer walk with a cane (so let's not go the route of *all shoes are bad for you in some ways* because it's just not true) . I look like a woman in command (I just got promoted) and I have been told I look pretty damn intimidating even at 5' 3" (not something I normally celebrate). And oh yes, today I ran for a bus. Don't underestimate the joy of rediscovering this small ability.

Let's not promote the idea that to look

				<p>smart and sexy you have to hurt yourself.</p> <p>Yes, shoes are like make up. But high heels are to feet, what lead whitening is to skin.</p> <p>Look after your feet, and encourage your daughters to do the same: I remember the feet of my grandmother's generation. I'd love to calculate how many hours at the chiropidist to each of the twenty pairs of winkle pickers, kept fondly in her wardrobe.</p>
37	MB	Oct.22/10	Chair English	<p>Shoes in the arctic-</p> <p>When I was Chair of English at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, I warned new female faculty not to walk outside in high heels. Dogs up there will pack, sometimes with wolves or coyotes, and take down what they perceive as crippled prey. For the same reason, toddlers have to be watched closely; they also wobble when they</p>

				<p>walk.</p> <p>Mary</p> <p>Florida now</p>
38	LP	Oct.23/10	PhD	<p>Francesca, what do you mean by stiletto heels? In my mind that's only the very high, very pointy ones - not high heels in general. But I'm not sure if your terminology exactly matches mine!</p>
39	LP	Oct.23/10		<p>Thanks, Francesca! In that case I will go and fill in the survey according to my idea of what they are. I just started and then wondered whether I was thinking about the right thing!</p> <p>I hope you'll post something about this when you finish your study, it's such an interesting topic.</p>
40	AP	Oct.27/10		<p>I barely made 5' at age 12 and, 50 years later I am shrinking. I have worn heels in the past- but only pumps- never "Joan Crawford..." and have often thought that heels just made me look like a short woman with sore feet. I take it out in hats</p>

41	ND	Oct.28/10	<p>Prada and Prejudice by Amanda Hubbard, a fairly unremarkable YA timeslip romance novel, uses a pair of red Prada heels as its time travel device.</p>
42	ND	Oct.28/10	<p>me: excellent! thanks! how interesting. wonder if a parallel can be drawn to Dorothy? Nicky: Only a little bit, but there's a great love vs humiliation relationship the protagonist has with the shoes: she loves them but can't walk gracefully in them; they represent her life in the 21st century, but she's also drawn to the cute boy in the Regency; etc.</p>

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