

***‘Talk Little and Know How to Listen’: Women’s Magazines as Moral Judges  
(1953-1973)***

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2016  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Women’s magazines are extremely valuable as historical sources, representing source material about the lives, thoughts and concerns of women in a particular period of time. At the same time, they play an important role in constructing the social reality they are part of, by describing and constructing ideas and ideals for women in society. The study of women’s magazines can thus add to our understandings about women’s lives in the past and present. In this paper, we are particularly interested in the period between 1953 and 1973 and the way in which these older magazines transmitted their beliefs and attitudes on relationships on their readers. As a case study, we have analysed the advice columns in two Flemish women’s magazines, *Het Rijk der Vrouw* and *Libelle*, of the years 1953, 1963 and 1973 to explore how these magazines write about women and their relationships and how they are able to impose their relational advice by presenting it in a moralizing way. We will argue that the magazines make use of their authoritative position as experts to present their ideas about women and their relationships to the readers. More specifically, the magazines operate as moral judges, stating what is right and wrong or what is acceptable and what is not in a relationship. On the basis of the analysis of our corpus, we were able to differentiate three linguistic tools the magazine editors use to adopt a moralizing tone: the frequent use of imperatives, the presentation of the information as a general truth and the appeal to the sentiment of the woman readers by influencing their sense of responsibility.

Keywords: women’s magazines, sexuality, relationships

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## 1. Introduction

Women's magazines are an important source of public information about relationships. Traditionally feminine themes as beauty, fashion, health and interior design, but also love, romance, relationships and sex have always been key subjects in women's magazines. Previous research has even indicated that dating, love, and marriage typically dominate in women's magazines (e.g., Duffy and Gotcher 1996), not only on the covers (McMahon 1990), but also in the content of the articles about interpersonal relationships (e.g., Duran and Prusank 1997). Personal stories about successful or failed relationships, articles on adultery or being in love and personal advice in the problem pages all contribute to the general image of relationships these magazines want to proclaim. In previous content analyses of women's magazines, British and American scholars have distinguished different types of messages about romantic relationships and sexuality. All together, these messages point to a traditional portrait of the female sexual role. Women should present themselves as sexually desirable to men by using certain products and dressing in specific ways to gain their attention. Secondly, relationships are depicted as being the responsibility of women; they need to teach men about romantic relationships and intimacy, as men are incompetent when it comes to relationships. Women and men also differ in their sexual nature: while women are often depicted as passive, dependent and responsible, men are portrayed as sexually aggressive. Traditional notions of masculinity and femininity have placed men as hunters and women as the hunted (Levy, 2005; Vogel, Wester, Heesacker & Madon, 2003 as cited in Joshi et al. 2010: 6). Some content analyses also refer to ambivalent and contradictory representations of female sexuality (Durham 1996; Garner et al. 1998; Joshi et al. 2010). For example, while women are encouraged to be sexually attractive to men, they are at the same time advised to wait and abstain. Moreover, while magazines lay emphasis on women's independence, they also spread the idea that women's primary goal should be to please men (Firminger, 2006; Garner et al. 1998; Jeffries 2007; McLoughlin 2000). Another ambivalent message lies in the fact that women are frequently portrayed as being able to communicate well about their emotions. However, in a romantic relationship they should suppress their concerns, in order to appear not too emotional (Garner et al. 1998).

While the majority of these studies are based on content analyses of more recent magazines, this paper presents a case study in which we will analyse the advice columns in two older Flemish women's magazines, *Het Rijk der Vrouw* and *Libelle* of the years 1953, 1963 and 1973 to explore how these magazines write about women and their relationships and how they are able to impose their relational advice by presenting it in a moralizing way. We will argue that the magazines make use of their authoritative position as experts to present their ideas about women and their relationships to the readers. More specifically, we want to show you how the magazines operate as moral judges, stating what is right and wrong or what is acceptable and what is not in a relationship.

## 2. Women's magazines as historical sources and cultural products

The present analysis is part of a larger historical study of Flemish women's magazines between 1953 and 2013, in which we examine how three popular Flemish women's magazines represent women's roles in their partner relationships. Women's

magazines are extremely valuable as historical sources, representing source material about the lives, thoughts and concerns of women in a particular period of time. Women's magazines are 'mirrors of their time', as 'the morality, customs and traditions, yes, the whole spirit of that age is captured in letters and lines' (Wassenaar 1976: 8).

However, instead of being mere passive witnesses or a reflection of the 'real' world outside, women's magazines are also very important as cultural products, as they themselves define, by means of their organisation, number and content, cultural reality. According to Aerts (1996), magazines play an active and fundamental role in shaping culture by creating the categories 'public' and 'public opinion'. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, culture was made possible by magazines that created publicity. For the creation of culture, a 'space for communication' is needed, a public sphere for the exchange of thoughts and information. Newspapers and magazines were the perfect site for this exchange, as they were '(semi-) public spaces where people could meet, unite with like-minded people and inform about important matters' (Aerts 1996: 174). The periodical press even made 'being informed' a need and consequently also a necessity:

The press raised the question of and answered the demand for practical information, but also for knowledge, especially in the social and cultural meaning of the word – what is going on in the civilized world? (...) It might seem obvious now, but the periodical press is responsible for the fact that literature, art, science and since the late eighteenth century also politics have become a matter of public opinion and discussion. (Aerts 1996: 174-175).

So, while magazines were for many years studied in a descriptive way, considering them merely as reflectors of an independent social reality, in recent years, there has been a shift towards a constructionist view, emphasising the important role they play in constructing that reality (Kitch 2015). Consequently, magazines are considered to be prescriptive as well as descriptive, as they not only reflect society as it is, but also prescribe how it should be by constructing ideals to which readers should aspire (Kitch 2015: 10). As such, women's magazines themselves are able to contribute to historical change, as they are 'one of the most powerful agents for changing women's roles, and (...) they have consistently glamorized whatever the economy, their advertisers, and, during wartime, the government, needed at that moment from women' (Wolf 1991: 64).

The study of women's magazines can thus add to our understandings about women's lives in the past and present, and can yield insight into the general cultural processes which define women's position at any point in history, in any given society (Wadia 1991). In the present study, we are particularly interested in the period between 1953 and 1973 and the way in which these older magazines transmitted their beliefs and attitudes on relationships on their readers.

### **3. Women's magazines as experienced friends**

The communication between the editors of the magazines and their readers is characterised by the notions of trust and trustworthiness (Temmerman 2014). When buying and reading women's magazines, readers express a certain trust in these magazines. Consequently, it is important for the magazines to take up a trustworthy

position. The editorial voice in the magazines therefore has to corroborate its trustworthiness and communicate in a trustworthy way. The language in women's magazines is thus very different from the language in mainstream news magazines. The journalistic values of independence and impartiality are not the main values. Instead, the underlying purpose of women's magazines is to advertise goods or commodities to the reader. Temmerman (2014) shows that the language in women's magazines resembles the language of advertising. This suggests that the communication of women's magazines is persuasive in nature.

According to Talbot (1995), there are two persuasive voices in women's magazines. The first one is the expert with special knowledge. By presenting themselves as experts, the magazine editors try to influence the readers and convince them of the right way to act and behave, e.g. how to behave in relationships, how to raise children and how to use make-up.

Furthermore, women's magazines present themselves as 'friends' by establishing a personal, intimate relation with their female readers, who are addressed as a single community, a homogeneous group with similar practices, shared experiences and patterns of behaviour (Caldas-Coulthard 1996: 252). In earlier research on women's magazines, this social group has often been described as a 'surrogate sisterhood' (McRobbie 1978; Ferguson 1983; Winship 1987). The term refers to the fact that producers of women's magazines and their women readers are set up in a 'sisterly' relationship (Talbot 1992: 574). Talbot calls this 'synthetic sisterhood', based on Fairclough's *synthetic personalization*, 'a compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual' (Fairclough 2001: 52). It involves the construction of an implied reader who is treated as an actual individual. An anonymous audience is addressed as thousands of identical *yous*, with attitudes, values, and preoccupations ascribed to them (Talbot 1995: 147-148).

In this study, we will argue that the magazines of the fifties, sixties and seventies predominantly present themselves as experts when convincing the woman readers of the proper way to behave in their relationships with their partners. However, instead of merely taking on the role of experts giving advice, we want to argue that the magazines act as moral judges, using their pedantic finger to teach the readers what is acceptable in a relationship and what is not. This positioning as moralists implies a hierarchical relationship between the magazine and the readers: the magazine presents itself as an authority, communicating from a higher position. In the analysis, we will demonstrate which linguistic tools are used to adopt a moralizing tone. But before that, we will shortly introduce the two Flemish women's magazines we have investigated.

#### **4. Composition of the corpus**

Our object of study consists of randomly chosen issues of the two Flemish weekly women's magazines *Het Rijk der Vrouw* and *Libelle* of the years 1953, 1963 and 1973, twelve for each magazine and each year. Both magazines were chosen because of their similar target group: the average reader of the magazines is somewhere between 25 and 54 years old and family life is of core interest for her. Both magazines can be categorized as 'domestic weeklies' (Hermes 1995: 6) based on the fact that they are published weekly and the women in these magazines are situated in a

domestic sphere. This also reflects in a more traditional choice of topics, with an emphasis on true-life stories.

*Het Rijk der Vrouw* ('Women's Realm) came onto the market in 1934 and was intended for both young women and more experienced housewives. The magazine served as a practical guide for housewives and girls, offering contributions on fashion, fancywork and interior design. It also included several readers' letters with advice on married and family life (Flour et al. 1995). In 1990, *Het Rijk der Vrouw* was declared bankrupt and taken over by *Libelle*. The origin of this magazine is to be situated in 1938, when the Dutch magazine (which already existed in The Netherlands since 1934) came onto the Flemish market. During the Second World War, the production of the magazine was stopped, but from 1945, *Libelle* was published weekly again, this time in a separate Flemish version. With the subtitle 'weekly for the Flemish woman', the magazine was intended for housewives of the middle class, but from the 1960's it was also oriented towards women who worked outside the home (Flour et al. 1995). *Libelle* is the oldest, still existing Flemish women's magazine and nowadays also the most popular one, with a circulation of about 240 000 copies a week (CIM 2015).

The analysis focuses on the problem pages in the magazines, from which we have selected all the answers to the readers' letters that contain some sort of relationship advice. It was our intention to also include sexual advice, but no such advices could be found in the corpus. The sample only consists of the answers to the readers' letters from the editors, as we wanted to find out how the magazine editors present their advice to the public.

## 5. Analysis

The analysis of the corpus has enabled us to differentiate three different linguistic tools the editors use to present their advice in a moralizing way: the frequent use of imperatives, the presentation of the information as general truths and the appeal to the sentiment of the readers by influencing their sense of responsibility.

### 5.1 Imperatives

By using the imperative mood, the editors are able to create an instructive tone: they instruct the readers and teach them how to behave in a relationship. This places the editors in a position of authority (Temmerman 2014): they offer a solution to any given problem, they give recommendations on how to find a partner or they instruct the readers on how to improve their current relationship.

- (1) **Wees opgewekt en vrolijk en spreek liever** over onderwerpen, waar ge zelf belang in stelt (RdV 1953).

*Be light-hearted and cheerful and rather talk about subjects you're interested in yourself.*

- (2) **Maak van dat alles** echter geen drama. **Wijs er uw man eenvoudig op** dat uw liefde nog niet door de tijd werd aangetast en het u dus leed aandoet wanneer u bij hem blijken van onverschilligheid opmerkt (RdV 1963).

*Do not dramatize everything. Simply tell your husband that time has not harmed your love and it thus hurts you when you notice signs of indifference.*

- (3) **Overhaast niets: laat het aan uw man over** het initiatief voor zijn terugkeer te nemen. (...) **Wees geduldig en heb ook een beetje medelijden** met uw man: **mannen kunnen in hun egoïsme soms onverantwoordelijke dingen doen.** (Lib 1963)

*Do not hurry: leave it to your husband to take the initiative for his comeback. (...) Be patient and have some sympathy for you husband as well: men can be irresponsible when taken over by their egoism.*

## 5.2 General truth

Example (3) shows another linguistic device that the magazine producers use to claim authority. Here, the plural noun ‘men’ is used in a generic way. This means that, instead of referring to a particular group of men, the name refers to ‘men’ in general. This way, the information is presented as a general truth, claiming that this statement is valid for all men.

In the singular form as well, ‘man’ (or, off course, ‘woman’) can be used in a general way:

- (4) Wat is een man met een beeldschone vrouw die een slecht karakter heeft? (RdV 1963)

*What can a man do with a gorgeous woman who has a bad character?*

- (5) Weet u dan niet dat een man, als hij bemerkt dat een vrouw verliefd op hem is, geen belangstelling meer voor haar heeft? (Lib 1963)

*Don't you know that a man, when he notices that a woman has fallen in love with him, is not interested in her anymore?*

The name ‘women’ is often opposed to ‘men’ to emphasise the difference between the two sexes:

- (6) **Wij vrouwen** laten ons te veel door onze gevoelens leiden. In gevallen zoals dit moeten we onze hersenen laten werken, en ons gevoel het zwijgen opleggen. (RdV 1953)

*We, women, often get carried away by our feelings. In that case, we should let our brains do the work, and make our feelings shut up.*

In this example, we can also see that the use of the first person plural pronoun plays a crucial role in defining the relationship between the editors and the readers (Temmerman 2014). The inclusive *we* in this sentence refers to the group of women in general and at the same time, it indicates that the editors and readers belong to the larger community of all women. In this sense, again, *we* is often opposed to *they*, referring to men.

The differences between women and men are often emphasized. In the following example, again, the information is presented as a fact, which might have the effect that the reader is overwhelmed and does not even have the chance to test, reject or accept the statements. The advice is presented as taken for granted, without any form of argumentation.

- (7) **Het is een feit** dat de vrouwelijke belangstelling van nature uitgaat naar dingen die de man eveneens van nature maar weinig interesseren. (...) **Het is ook een feit** dat de

ontwikkeling van de man in vele gevallen een andere geweest is dan die van de vrouw. (...) (RdV 1953)

*It is a fact that women are by nature more interested in things that don't interest men (that much). (...) It is also a fact that the education of a man has been different than that of a woman in many cases. (...)*

Furthermore, the magazines often refer to proverbial wisdoms such as 'someone's character is more important than someone's appearance', 'love is more important than money', 'love exceeds social stand, political opinion or faith' or 'someday, your prince will come'.

- (8) Het is trouwens niet de uiterlijke maar wel de innerlijke schoonheid van de mensen die telt. Het uiterlijke vergaat, maar het innerlijke blijft en dat weet uw man ook wel! (RdV 1963)

*As a matter of fact, it is not the appearance that matters, but the inner beauty of people. The appearance is temporary, but inner beauty is permanent and your husband knows that!*

### 5.3 Appeal to the sentiment of women readers

A last way in which the magazines present themselves as moral judges is the appeal to the sentiment of women readers by influencing their sense of responsibility. The magazines act as stern judges, pointing the readers to their responsibilities towards their husbands and children. This authoritative style is again characterised by the frequent use of imperatives and the use of exclamation marks to emphasise the rigorous character of the statements. Furthermore, words as 'dangerous', 'forbidden thoughts', 'abandon' and 'unhappy' underline the negative connotations associated with adultery and abandoning your family.

When women readers have doubts about their marriage or they have adulterous feelings for another man, they are always reminded to the holy bond marriage is and that it cannot be broken. Women are not allowed to have adulterous feelings. When they do have them, they are sternly reprimanded to 'expel those forbidden thoughts out of their minds'.

- (9) Neem uzelf eens streng onder handen en **ban die verboden gedachten** uit uw geest. Denk aan uw man en wees op uw beurt voorkomend voor hem. Zoek bezigheden die al dat **gevaarlijk gedroom** uit uw geest verjagen. (RdV 1963)

*Pull yourself together and **expel those forbidden thoughts** out of your mind. Think about your husband and in turn be attentive to him. Search for occupations that chase away all those **dangerous reveries** out of your mind.*

- (10) Maar uw gezin **in de steek laten**? Dat nooit! U bent verenigd in lief en leed voor goede en kwade dagen, en u hebt het recht niet drie mensen **ongelukkig** te maken: uw man, de kinderen, die de steun van vader zullen missen. (Lib 1963)

*But **abandon** your family? Never! You are united for better or worse, and you don't have the right to make three people **unhappy**: your husband, the children, who will miss the support of their father.*

If the woman has children, she will be reminded of her commitment towards them and their father: she cannot abandon her family.

- (11) U houdt van u man en uw kinderen en we zijn er zeker van dat u hen nooit in de steek zou kunnen laten. (RdV 1963)  
*You love your husband and your children and we are sure that you could never abandon them.*
- (12) Misschien houdt uw vriendin nog van haar echtgenoot, misschien ook niet. In elk geval kan ze met haar vier kinderen moeilijk weg van hem. (RdV 1973)  
*Maybe your friend still loves her husband, maybe she doesn't. In any case, it's difficult to leave him with four children.*

Again, the information is presented as something that has to be taken for granted, so that the reader doesn't get the chance to reject the statements.

Having a child is even presented as a solution for marital problems:

- (13) Ik wens u van harte toe weldra uw meubilair met een wiegje te kunnen aanvullen. Een kind herstelt zo gemakkelijk het evenwicht in een vrouwenhart! (RdV 1963)  
*I wish you can soon complement your furniture with a crib. A child can repair the balance in a woman's heart so easily!*

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of the corpus has enabled us to differentiate three different linguistic tools the magazine editors use to claim authority and to show how they use this authoritative position to give moralizing relationship advice. In this paragraph we will focus on the content of the advice that is given, by describing how the editors define the relationships between women and men.

In general, we see that marriage is a central and crucial factor in the lives of women of the fifties, sixties and seventies. The magazines consider marriage to be a 'holy bond' that cannot be broken and adulterous feelings are not allowed. Love and commitment to husband and children, on the other hand, are considered to be the highest goods. This is connected to the roles of women that emerge. In the 50s, 60s and 70s, women were advised to adapt and to 'give in' in a relationship. The magazines laugh of the complaints of women about the fact that their husbands are going out too much or the fact that they are way too much interested in other women, by saying that it's an inborn characteristic of men.

- (14) Kortom, het hoogste geluk voor een vrouw bestaat erin echtgenote en moeder te zijn, op voorwaarde dat zij haar levensgezel bemint en door hem bemind wordt. (RdV 1953)  
*In short, for a woman, the greatest joy is to be a wife and a mother, only if she loves her partner and is loved by him.*

Even more, they claim that women themselves are to blame: they have to create a cosy home space, look after their appearance and be cheerful and happy, so that men are not tempted to leave the house. This idea of 'pleasing men' is something that recurs in many pieces of advice: 'talk little and know how to listen' is presented as a magic recipe to attract a man.

- (15) Wanneer uw man veel van huis weg is moet zijn verblijf in de huiselijke kring een verpozing voor hem zijn. Het ligt aan u hem naar zijn huis te doen verlangen en het te doen waarderen. (RdV 1953)



*If your husband leaves the house often, his home has to be a place of relaxation for him. It's up to you to make him long for his home and make him appreciate it.*

- (16) En verder bestaat, om uw mannelijke kennissen te behagen, een recept dat bijna aan toverij grenst: weinig spreken en weten te luisteren. (RdV 1953)  
*To please your male acquaintances, there is an almost magic recipe: talk little and know how to listen.*

The same advice applies when women are in conflict with their husbands. In general, women are advised to 'pull themselves together'. Most of the time, it is better to avoid the conflict by talking to your husband in a very calm way without getting angry. What women have to do when their husbands do get angry or do not listen is mostly not mentioned.

In general, it's up to men to take the initiative in love. When women are interested in a man they are advised to wait for the guy to make a move. If he does not show any interest, it's better to forget him and move on instead of chasing him.

- (17) Als je gelijk hebt met je veronderstelling dat hij ook in jou iets ziet, zal hij van zijn kant die kans met beide handen aangrijpen. Maar laat alles aan hem over en dring je niet op. (Lib 1973)  
*If you are right with your assumption that he's interested in you too, he will grab his chance with both hands. But leave it up to him and don't intrude yourself upon him.*

- (18) In geen geval bent u het die de eerste stap moet doen. Wacht nog enkele maanden en indien hij geen beslissing neemt dan bant u deze man maar beter uit uw verbeelding. (RdV 1963)  
*By no means, you have to take the first step. Wait a couple of months and if he doesn't take a decision, it's better to relegate this man out of your imagination.*

A last conclusion, then, is that love is presented as a fairy tale, which implies a happy end. With names as *de ware* ('the one'/Mr. Right) and *liefde van je leven* ('the love of your life'), the magazine refers to an idealised, hypothetical picture of relationships as love striking unexpectedly and lasting a lifetime. Women are advised to wait until Cupid points its arrows to them and their prince will come. This is again related to the fact that women cannot take the initiative when it comes to love.

- (19) Dwing Cupido niet, hij houdt er niet van gedwongen te worden. Wacht geduldig af, tot hij uw naam op het lijstje van zijn slachtoffers plaatst en dan zal hij u wel helpen de ware Jacob te vinden.  
*Don't force Cupid, he doesn't like to be forced. Wait patiently until he places your name on the list of his victims, and then he will help you find Mr Right.*

## **7. General conclusions**

In this paper, we have examined how two Flemish women's magazines of the fifties, sixties and seventies formulate their relationship advice in the problem pages. We found out that these magazines predominantly present themselves as experts when describing the proper way to behave in relationships. Even more, the editors adopt a moralizing tone and make use of their authoritative position to tell the woman readers what is acceptable in a relationship and what is not. On the basis of our corpus, we were able to distinguish three linguistic tools the editors use to act as moral judges:

the frequent use of imperatives, the presentation of the advice as a general truth and the appeal to the sentiment of the woman readers by influencing their sense of responsibility.

As we have described in the introduction of this paper, content analyses of more recent women's magazines have showed that women are depicted as being responsible of their relationships and men as incompetent when it comes to love. At the same time, men are represented as the active hunters, while women are often portrayed as passive and dependent. Women should please men and present themselves as sexually desirable to men. This, however, is in contrast with the emphasis of recent women's magazines on the independence of women. Our analysis of the problem pages of older women's magazines of the fifties, sixties and seventies has showed that some of these tendencies could already be recognised, but that there are also differences in the way these magazines defined a good relationship.

First of all, sex and sexuality are undiscussed issues. This is not so surprising, given the fact that in general, information on sex was hardly spread during that time (Trommelmans 2006). This changed gradually in the mid-1960's, after the pill was introduced in Belgium and the need for better sexual education became bigger (Trommelmans 2006). When it comes to love and relationships, women are encouraged to await and to remain passive: love is represented as something that strikes unexpectedly and if it does, it is up to men to take the initiative. While the beginning of a relationship lies in the hands of men, women are represented as being responsible for their relationship. The emphasis here lies on pleasing their husbands instead of dealing with the problems that arise. In general, love and marriage are represented as the highest goods in a woman's life and women are encouraged to search and to work for a happy family life. In such a way, women are assigned the active role, as a good relationship is their responsibility and they can only achieve it by pleasing their husbands. Men, on the other hand, are given the more passive role in a relationship, as their share in solving marital problems is minimal. Even more, their imperfections and shortcomings or their adulterous behaviour are often condoned by saying they are typical of men. The moralizing tone the magazines use in their advice is used to fortify this main message: love and relationships are a woman's responsibility; by working hard and pleasing their husbands, women can come to a happy marriage and family life, which is represented as the ultimate goal.

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