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**Women's Writing and the "Anxiety of Authorship" in
Nineteenth-Century Italy: Bruno Sperani and Others**

**by
Joanne Balletti-Thomas**

**Department of Italian
McGill University, Montreal**

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ABSTRACT

As women's literature emerged in late nineteenth-century Italy, female authors encountered many obstacles. Foremost among them was the near-total absence of Italian female literary role models. Female writers often expressed ambivalence towards the writing of other women, which was considered inferior to male writing. However, their reverence for male writers revealed how conflictive their identities as writers were, and it was an impediment to the establishment of a serious women's literary tradition. In addition to such personal conflicts, these writers also faced the challenge of gaining acceptance by the male-dominated literary community and by their readers. These two groups expected that women's writing conform to a moral code which did not apply to men's writing. This thesis is an analysis of the specific problems that female novelist Bruno Sperani and others faced as they strove to establish themselves in Italian literature.

RÉSUMÉ

Lors de l'apparition de la littérature féminine en Italie à la fin du XIXe siècle, les femmes écrivains ont eu à affronter de nombreux obstacles. Un des plus importants était l'absence presque totale de modèles littéraires féminins. Les femmes écrivains exprimaient souvent de l'ambivalence envers l'écriture d'autres femmes, une écriture considérée inférieure à celle des hommes. Pourtant, leur vénération pour les hommes écrivains a dévoilé combien leur identité en tant que femmes écrivains était conflictuelle. Cette vénération empêchait en outre l'établissement d'une sérieuse tradition littéraire féminine. En conjonction à de tels conflits personnels, ces écrivains ont fait face au défi de se faire accepter par la communauté littéraire dominée par les hommes écrivains et par leurs lecteurs. Ces deux groupes demandaient que l'écriture des femmes se conforme à un code moral, un code qui ne s'appliquait pas à l'écriture des hommes. Cette thèse propose une analyse des problèmes spécifiques que la romancière Bruno Sperani et d'autres ont rencontrés alors qu'elles essayaient de s'établir dans la littérature italienne.

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INTRODUCTION

What is one to do with the lost women writers?¹ When Nancy K. Miller asked this question, she could easily have been thinking about Italian women writers who, among this group, seem particularly lost. Until the Seventies, when Italo Calvino reprinted *Un matrimonio in provincia* by the Marchesa Colombi,² and Luigi Baldacci republished Neera's *Teresa*,³ Italy's nineteenth-century women novelists were virtually forgotten.⁴ Benedetto Croce's studies of women writers, and especially his correspondence with Neera have become famous only because they were written by him.⁵ Croce's essays have remained as a part of the corpus of his work, but many of the women novelists and their texts have faded into oblivion.

Towards the end of the last century, when women in Italy began writing for publication in increasing numbers, the literary community reacted with anxiety and suspicion. Male writers were uneasy about the possibilities that women's writing presented. Luigi Capuana, one of the major literary figures of the time, began his observations on the phenomenon by asking whether it was to be feared or not:

¹ Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *Subject to Change. Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 28.

² Marchesa Colombi, *Un matrimonio in provincia* (1885). Reprinted in 1973 by Einaudi, with a preface by Natalia Ginzburg.

³ Luigi Baldacci, ed., Introduction, *Teresa*, by Neera (Torino: Einaudi, 1976).

⁴ Evidence that women writers were not taken seriously in Italy can be found in the important literary anthologies, many of which make little or no mention of women writers of the nineteenth century. The major literary anthologies, such as *Guida al Novecento*. (ed. Salvatore Guglielmino, 4th ed, 1990, Milano: G. Principato, 1971), routinely make no reference to nineteenth-century women writers, or to the cultural phenomena created by the emergence of women writers into the literary market-place. In his introduction to *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy*, Santo L. Aricò surveys some literary critiques of Italy's contemporary writers and finds that women writers have been largely overlooked. "A reader receives the impression that serious literary communication in Italy is exclusively a male domain ... Gianfranco Contini, Italy's most important contemporary philologist, projects a global and expressionistic vision of his country's literature in *Letteratura dell'Italia unita: 1861-1968*. Nevertheless, in his analysis of one hundred writers, he studies a work by only one woman - Anna Banti's *Artemisia*." Santo L. Aricò, ed., Introduction, *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy. A Modern Renaissance* (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1990) 3-4.

⁵ Antonia Arslan and Anna Follis, *Il concetto che ne informa. Benedetto Croce e Neera. Corrispondenza (1903-1917)* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1988).

C'è da impensierirsi, come fanno taluni, dell' invadente concorrenza della nella letteratura narrativa? Non lo credo. Né mi sembra che siano giusti ed equanimi color che parlano con disdegnoso disprezzo della produzione letteraria femminile.⁶

Kinder than some of his contemporaries, Capuana nevertheless uses the word *invadente* to describe women's entry into the literary market-place, thus revealing his anxieties regarding women writers. The overall tone of Capuana's essay is respectful, cordial, and at some points even admiring, but his conclusions are patronizing and denigrating:

esse esistono unicamente perché ci sono stati gli intelletti mascholini che hanno aperto la via nel lontano avvenire ... le donne saranno quel che ora sono gli uomini ... gli uomini lasceranno interamente alle donne l'occupazione di scrivere romanzi, liriche tragedie, commedie e, se ci avranno gusto, poemi.⁷

Finally, while Capuana expresses some skepticism about the future of male writers, his conclusions regarding women writers are free of doubt: "... non creeranno nulla di nuovo [...] sarà una eterna ripetizione."⁸

Although Capuana's observations reflected men's growing awareness of women's literary aspirations, critics on the whole were quick to dismiss much of this production as belonging to an inferior genre, inferior even to the popular novel or the *feuilleton*, both of which were widely read at the time.⁹ The female genre, which became known as *il rosa*, was considered to be the lowest of literary forms due to its autobiographical, sentimental nature. It even came to be regarded as somewhat of an embarrassment, to both readers and writers:

⁶ Luigi Capuana, *Letteratura femminile*, ed. Giovanna Finocchiaro Chimirri (CUECH: Catania, 1988) 19.

⁷ Capuana 17.

⁸ Capuana 17.

⁹ For a comprehensive discussion on the origins of the female genre in popular fiction, see Antonia Arslan's *Dame, droga e galline. Romanzo popolare e romanzo di consumo tra 800 e 900* (Padova: CLEUP, 1977).

Ogni discorso critico sulla letteratura rosa è contraddistinto da un certo margine di imbarazzo più o meno evidente. A parte infatti la difficoltà oggettiva di definire questo genere sia nel suo percorso di genere ed evoluzione che nelle sue caratteristiche sincroniche, strutturali, c'è anche una certa tendenza a parlare del rosa come si parla della pubblicità o del linguaggio e delle azioni dei bambini: chi scrive diventa ironico e tende a mettere in luce solo i lati paradossali e ridicoli dell'oggetto con un'operazione spesso insistita e fastidiosa di "grimace" critica. ... Del resto, questa "coscienza infelice" del rosa accomuna anche gli autori (quasi sempre autrici), e i lettori (quasi sempre lettrici), del genere nonché gli stessi personaggi che a più riprese fanno affermazioni del tipo: "La vita è un romanzo da quattro soldi." ¹⁰

That the *coscienza infelice* surrounding women's production would manifest itself in their actual writing is not a surprise. Women writers, whose work was almost exclusively grouped into this sub-category of third and fourth-rate penny novels, were not expected to have literary aspirations. They themselves more often than not declared the purpose of their writing to be to educate, to entertain, or to help their families financially. Those writers who had serious literary interests typically denied them or sought to distance themselves from the critical eye. While this compartmentalization of women writers may be partly responsible for Italy's lack of a George Eliot or Jane Austen, there were some who produced novels of high literary quality. But to avoid controversy and public incrimination, women writers like Matilde Serao and Neera went so far as to declare themselves vehemently anti-feminist, even though their actual writing suggests otherwise. ¹¹

¹⁰ Antonia Arslan and Maria Pia Pozzato, "Il rosa," *Letteratura italiana: Storia e geografia-L'età contemporanea*, vol 3 (Milano: Einaudi Editore, 1989) 1027-1028.

¹¹ In her essay "Neera: The Literary Career of a Woman of the Nineteenth Century," Lucienne Kroha explains: "Despite the occasional insight, for the most part the tone of her [Neera's] writings, especially her essays, remains one of bourgeois

When feminist literary critics began examining the vast body of women's literature from the last century, many "lost women writers" were recovered after years of neglect. Focusing primarily on nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers, these scholars have worked not only to unearth women's texts, but to establish a matrilineal literary tradition parallel to the existing canon. With that goal in mind, the perspective in recent years has been to examine not what makes women's writing equal to men's, but rather what makes it different. The consensus among critics today is that women's writing is indeed different from men's, although theories abound as to how and why gender-marking manifests itself.¹² According to Harold Bloom, the literary tradition is a product of a misreading of previously existing texts, where one writer elicits a response from another, creating a literary chain reaction of sorts that metaphorically links father to son, (or predecessor to ephebe in Bloom's language).¹³ Bloom's model of literary paternity, which is based on Freud's theory of male psychosexual development, is, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,

perbenismo and confirms the popular view of her today: << Una delle più accese avversarie del femminismo fu Anna Radius Zuccari...popolarissima come autrice di romanzi nei quali esaltava l'amore materno, l'amicizia platonica, la mortificazione dei sensi, la dedizione e il sacrificio come tratti significativi della femminilità. >> Or, as a recent, authoritative literary history puts it, << tutta l'opera di Neera è opera di moralista, una vera e propria polemica per illuminare con la giusta luce l'insostituibile missione della donna. >> Kroha's essay goes on to illustrate the dynamics of Neera's complex, often paradoxical representations of women in fiction as opposed to her well-publicized, conservative views on women in society. "Recent criticism," she says, "aware of the 'two faces' of Neera, has tended to polarize her work into fiction and non-fiction, depicting the latter as representative of a theoretical conservatism, the former of an 'intuitive' feminism...In reality, Neera's contradictions are to be found not only in the incompatibility of fiction and non-fiction, but within the fabric itself of both these components of her work." *The Woman Writer in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy. Gender and the Formation of Literary Identity* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992) 67-68. For an analysis of Matilde Serao's views on women in fiction and in society, see Kroha's essay "Matilde Serao's *Fantasia*: An Author in Search of a Character," from the above-mentioned book.

¹² "Initially, the function of difference in Anglo-American and French feminism was to replace equality as a leading idea. Less emphasis was to be placed on equality with men, more on women's difference from them, thereby moving beyond a principle of identity, and beyond negative difference (women are different, that is, not men), towards ways of thinking difference positively, and later, deconstructively."... Undoubtedly, the discovery of psychoanalysis has played the biggest role in influencing the way in which we think about literature in the twentieth century. "From the early 1980's onwards, feminist criticism inspired by French feminist writing began to join forces with American criticism, and thereby helped to politicize psychoanalytic criticism, challenging its (phallogocentric) theory in a new practice of writing, inspired partly by Derridean deconstruction, emphasizing the displacement of meaning, and partly by Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasizing the construction of the (gendered) subject in language." *Feminism and Psychoanalysis. A critical dictionary*, ed. Elizabeth Wright (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992) 103, 226.

¹³ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford UP: 1975).

"intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal." ¹⁴ If however, artistic creation is passed on from father to son, where do women fit into this equation? With no female literary tradition to speak of, what inspired women to "attempt the pen" against all odds in the nineteenth century? Gilbert and Gubar asked these questions in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, perhaps the first comprehensive look at the creative process in the nineteenth-century woman writer. It was obvious to them that an analogous female model of literary inheritance could be drawn on a Freudian model of female psychosexual development. Since it would be incorrect to invert Bloom's model to accommodate women (no such parallels exist in Freudian psychology), the authors turned to Freud's late-in-coming, and incomplete theory of female sexuality for clues. In "Female Sexuality," Freud calls the important developmental stage which precedes the Oedipal period in girls the PRE-Oedipal complex, and comments on his own previous underestimation of its importance in the female psyche. During this period, which Freud found to last much longer than he had earlier anticipated, the girl's primary love-interest, as for boys, is the mother. The girl may then follow three pathways, but only one will lead her to "proper" female development.¹⁵ Gilbert and Gubar trace their "anxiety of authorship" along this Freudian pathway because they found it offers a variety of alternatives from which to study female creativity. If then, according to Freud, love of the mother is the "mother" of creativity, and infant girls form the same initial bond with the mother that infant boys do, Gilbert and Gubar conclude that creativity in the female must arise from a psychological impetus similar to that of the male. ¹⁶

¹⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 47.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" (1931), *On Sexuality. Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, and other works*, trans. James Trachey, ed. Angela Richards, vol. 7 of Penguin Freud Library, 13 vols. (Penguin Books: 1991) 367.

¹⁶ In the now-classic *Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow challenged the traditional approach to the sociology of gender by affirming: "We must question all assumptions which use biological claims to explain social forms, given the recent rise to prominence of sociology and the historically extensive uses of explanations allegedly based on biological sex (or race) differences to legitimate oppression and inequality. That there are undeniable genetic, morphological, and hormonal sex differences, which affect our physical and social experiences and are (minimally) the criteria according to which a

Nonetheless, while the male writer struggled with self-doubt and anxiety regarding the originality of his work, he was not concerned with the many issues that plagued women writers. Gilbert and Gubar posit:

For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is. But for the female artist, the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself.¹⁷

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar ask the question, "What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental attitudes of literary authority are both overtly and covertly patriarchal?"¹⁸ To answer this question, the authors have examined what they call "the psychology of literary history: the tensions, anxieties, hostilities and inadequacies writers feel when they confront not only the achievements of their predecessors, but the traditions of genre, style and metaphor that they inherit from such 'forefathers'."¹⁹ In nineteenth-century Italy, this question had significant implications for women writers. While this thesis is dedicated to an examination of the creative process in late nineteenth-century Italian women novelists, it will focus primarily on the work of Beatrice Speraz, better known as Bruno Sperani, one of Italy's "lost women writers." Among the questions that shall be addressed are: "What inspired these women to attempt writing against the odds?" "How did they respond to the disdain from the male dominated literary establishment?" "What were their resources?" and perhaps most importantly, "Who were their literary models?"

person's participation in the sexual division of labor and membership in a gender-differentated world are assigned, only makes this task more necessary." 15.

¹⁷ *Madwoman* 47.

¹⁸ *Madwoman* 45-46.

¹⁹ *Madwoman* 47.

Before turning to the issues outlined above, I shall examine the *romanzo rosa* as the predominant female genre of the late nineteenth century. While the original definition of the *rosa* included only a certain type of woman's novel with clearly recognizable and predictable elements (all centered around the love story and the eventual happy ending), Italian critics have up until recently used the term to describe the vast majority of women's texts written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ Although the term has a negative connotation, it is useful when discussing women's narrative of this period, as most women writers incorporated some characteristics of the *rosa* into their texts. But in addition to the *rosa*, women writers borrowed much from men's writing, adopting elements from mainstream literary movements such as *Verismo* to create complex narratives out of which a true female literary tradition emerged. Recently, Italian women's writing from the nineteenth-century has undergone more careful scrutiny. What feminist critics have found is that these texts, even the most poorly written, sentimental and pedantic, can be read from a feminist perspective. I will show how women writers like Bruno Sperani used the female genre, but more importantly how they subverted it.

In the first chapter, entitled "Literary Inheritance: A Female Model," I discuss Gilbert and Gubar's model of literary "maternity" as outlined in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and most recently in *No Man's Land (The War of the Words)*. I will discuss the authors' conclusions regarding the implications of a revised Freudian theory as it applies to women's writing, in the same way that Harold Bloom's theories in *The Anxiety of Influence* are applied to men's writing.

²⁰ Antonia Arslan and Maria Pia Pozzato observe, "Alle caratteristiche del genere, [rosa] la produzione italiana non si adegua che in anni abbastanza recenti. Se è vero infatti ... che in sostanza il rosa, come fatto letterario oggi immediatamente riconoscibile, è un prodotto tipico dell'organizzazione *novecentesca* della civiltà letteraria nazionale, collocato storicamente all'interno del moderno mercato delle lettere e destinato a definire il perimetro di una *scrittura* femminile che serve l'universo totale e separato della *lettura femminile*, è altrettanto vero che molte delle opere che sono state ascritte al rosa non corrispondono che in parte agli statuti del genere...In questi romanzi, correntemente chiamati psicologico-sentimentali, spesso di buona fattura, si avverte l'eco del grande dibattito sulla questione femminile della fine del secolo, e delle realizzazioni romanzesche che sul tema della collocazione della donna nella società, sulla sua fisiologia e sulle sue esigenze, come sull'inevitabile sconfitta, attuarono scrittrici come Neera, Regina di Luanto, Willy Dias, la Marchesa Colombi, Bruno Sperani, la Contessa Lara e molte altre." "Il rosa," *Letteratura italiana* 1036.

In the second chapter entitled "The Rosa and the Evolution of a Female Genre," I will re-examine those characteristics which originally defined the *rosa* and the issues they raised. I will first discuss Bruno Sperani's *Il Marito*,²¹ a novel whose conventional "happy ending" is overshadowed by a dark, bitter compromise. I will also discuss Carolina Invernizio's famous gothic tale *Il Bacio di una Morta*,²² a classic example of the *rosa-nero*, which under close examination reveals a clearly subversive subtext. Italian literary critics Maria Pia Pozzato and Antonia Arlsan provide the theoretical basis for the ideas presented in this chapter. These critics are among those who have laid the groundwork in the field of Italian women's studies by returning the *rosa* and other forms of the feminine novel to their proper place in the history of women's literature.

In the third chapter entitled "Troubled Identities in Women's Fiction I: Characters," I examine the roles which Sperani's protagonists play in the narrative, what messages they communicated to readers, and what specific themes emerge to form a pattern which can be found throughout women's literature of the period. In the second half of this chapter entitled "Troubled Identities II: Readers, Writers, and the *Coscienza Infelice*," I will discuss which aspects of women's writing appealed to readers, why it evoked such anxiety among the literary establishment, and how this led to the negative connotations so commonly associated with women's novels. This inferiority complex, or "*coscienza infelice*," was found to involve all participants in the

²¹ Bruno Sperani, *Il marito* (Milano: Carlo Aliprandi Editore, 1894).

²² Carolina Invernizio, *Il bacio di una morta*, 1889 (Milano: Editrice Lucchi, 1984). "Invernizio (1858-1916) wrote over one hundred novels which had a wide popular readership. Most of her work appeared in *La gazzetta di Torino* and *L'opinione nazionale*." Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994* (London: Athlone Press, 1995) 280. Antonia Arlsan, who has written extensively on Invernizio, explains: "Il 'fenomeno' Invernizio...esplode negli ultimi decenni dell'Ottocento nel campo fino allora maschile dell'appendice, e conquista immediatamente un seguito fra il pubblico in formazione delle lettrici...Nella sua fittizia ma consolante realtà, in cui chiunque può entrare attraverso la lettura, non esistono delitti che non siano puniti, virtù senza premio, vite oscure ma esemplari che non verranno alla luce, operosità non ricompensate, intrighi non svelati; ed è qui che il silenzioso mondo femminile trova una voce, un modello (su cui oggi è certo facile ironizzare!), realizza una sia pur limitata circolazione di idee, matura i primi passi di una propria consapevolezza." From "Vivere in rosa per vivere in casa. La letteratura femminile italiana fra impegno ed evasione," *Intorno al rosa* (Verona: Essedue Edizioni, 1987) 18-19. For further readings on Invernizio, see: Antonia Arlsan, *Dame droga e galline. Romanzo popolare e romanzo di consumo tra 800 e 900* (Padova: CLEUP, 1977); Umberto Eco and M. Federzoni, eds., *Invernizio - Serao - Liala* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1979); Davico, Bonino, eds., *Carolina Invernizio. Il romanzo d'appendice* (Torino: Gruppo Editoriale Forma, 1983: atti del convegno "Omaggio a Carolina Invernizio," Cuneo, Febbraio 1983).

genre; readers, writers and critics. Finally, I will discuss how women writers themselves incorporated the *coscienza infelice* into their texts.

In the fourth chapter entitled "Under the Influence: *La Scrittrice Virile* and the Problem With Literary Fathers," I analyze the methods by which writers such as Bruno Sperani attempted to resolve the "anxiety of authorship " which plagued their literary lives. I will examine Sperani's *Numeri e sogni*, a novel written almost exclusively in the naturalist style of *Verismo*. As Gilbert and Gubar have posited, allegiance to literary fathers came at a high price for some women writers. Highly acclaimed by critics, and yet a commercial failure, Sperani was given to expressing bold, unpopular and often militant political opinions in her narratives, frightening off her mostly female, bourgeois readers, accustomed to more conventional forms of women's writing. In this last chapter I will chronicle the series of events leading to her literary demise by examining the critiques of her novels which appeared in various newspapers and literary journals of the period.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERARY INHERITANCE: A FEMALE MODEL

Historically, privileged males have been the "keepers" of serious literature. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar ask the question: "Is the pen a metaphorical penis?"²³ A historical anecdote has it that while Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia) was away from the Vatican waging war, he entrusted the administration of official Church affairs to his young daughter Lucrezia. On one occasion, Lucrezia sought the advice of the cardinal of Lisbon, who told her: "When the pope brings up a matter in consistory, the vice-chancellor or another cardinal takes down the proposed solutions in writing. That means that someone should be here to record our conversation." Lucrezia answered that she was quite capable of writing, whereupon the cardinal asked her, "Ubi est penna vostra?"²⁴ Lucrezia immediately grasped the bawdy play on words, "penna" having the second meaning of penis. She burst out laughing and gave up her task. The metaphor that the cardinal uses to put Lucrezia in her place perfectly illustrates Gilbert and Gubar's observation that Western literary history is so engendered, that the very act of writing is considered a man's biological prerogative: "In patriarchal western culture, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis." The obvious question this raises is, if the penis is a metaphor of literary paternity, where does that leave the woman writer?²⁵

²³ *Madwoman* 3.

²⁴ Ivan Cloulas, *The Borgias*, trans. Gilda Roberts (New York: Dorset Press, 1989) 195.

²⁵ *Madwoman* 6-7. Elaine Showalter, who rejects the "metaphorical implications of female biological difference in writing," argues that "... the fundamental analogy might be that women generate texts from the brain or that the word-processor, with its compactly coded microchips, its inputs and outputs, is a metaphorical womb. The metaphor of literary paternity, as [Nina] Auerbach has pointed out in her review of *The Madwoman*, ignores << an equally timeless and, for me, even more oppressive metaphorical equation between literary creativity, and childbirth. >> Certainly metaphors of literary maternity predominated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the process of literary creation is analogically much more similar to gestation, labor and delivery than it is to insemination." "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1986) 250.

When Gilbert and Gubar examined the literary production of nineteenth-century women writers, they discovered a pattern of frustration and anxiety which could be traced to a lack of female role models. While most women continued to write within the framework of the popular novel or the *rosa*, their texts increasingly reflected the anxiety they felt at being forced to work within an inferior genre. Feminist critics have found that although women writers were not expected to write serious literature, a pervasive pattern of literary transgression is evident in virtually all of women's early narratives. Gilbert and Gubar observe:

We were surprised by the coherence of theme and imagery that we encountered in the works of writers who were often geographically, historically, and psychologically distant from each other. Indeed, even when we studied women's achievements in radically different genres, we found what began to seem a distinctively female literary tradition, a tradition that had been approached and appreciated by many women readers and writers but which no one had yet defined in its entirety. Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors—such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia and claustrophobia.²⁶

In Italy, texts such as Neera's *Teresa*, and the Marchesa Colombi's *Un matrimonio in provincia*, illustrate how debilitating these feelings of confinement were for women. But Gilbert and Gubar also observe that literary women were confined in art as well as in life:

²⁶ *Madwoman* preface xi.

... trapped in the specifically literary constructs of what Gertrude Stein was to call "patriarchal poetry". For not only did a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men, she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored.²⁷

As has already been mentioned in the Introduction, Harold Bloom declares that all texts live out a patriarchal destiny. Bloom sees Western literary history as based on a misreading of texts, where "a poem is a response to a poem, as a poet is a response to a poet, or a person to his parent."²⁸ While Bloom limits his theory to include only the "strong poet," feminist critics have observed that his theory also excludes women as both writers and readers. In "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," Annette Kolodny observes:

To read or know a poem, according to Bloom, engages the reader in an attempt to map the psychodynamic relations by which the poet at hand has willfully misunderstood the work of some precursor (either single or composite) in order to correct, rewrite, or appropriate the prior poetic vision as his own. ... What is left out of account, however, is the fact that whether we speak of poets and critics "reading" texts or writers "reading" (and thereby recording for us) the world, we are calling to interpretative strategies that are learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected.²⁹

Gilbert and Gubar observe that, to his credit,

²⁷ *Madwoman* preface xi-xii .

²⁸ Kolodny 47.

²⁹ Kolodny 47.

[l]ike Freud,...Bloom has defined processes of interaction that his predecessors [other critics and literary scholars] did not bother to consider because, among other reasons, they were themselves so caught up in such processes. Like Freud too, Bloom has insisted on bringing into consciousness assumptions readers and writers do not ordinarily examine.³⁰

But also, like Freud's theory of psychosexual development, Bloom's oedipal model of literary history cannot simply be inverted to include women:

Certainly if we acquiesce in the patriarchal Bloomian model, we can be sure that the female poet does not experience the "anxiety of influence" in the same way that her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.³¹

The problem this created for women writers was twofold. On the one hand, male writers represented patriarchal authority for women, but on the other, they "attempted to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster), drastically conflict with her own sense of self - that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity."³² Thus, while the woman writer struggled against fear of reprisal from the literary establishment if she appeared too ambitious, she was also faced with a deeper crisis of identity which "directly contradicted the terms of her own gender definition."³³ Gilbert and Gubar theorize that the male writer's "anxiety of influence" is experienced by the female writer as an "anxiety of authorship," which they define as "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate and destroy

³⁰ *Madwoman* 48.

³¹ *Madwoman* 48.

³² *Madwoman* 48.

³³ *Madwoman* 48.

her."³⁴ In addition, nineteenth-century women writers needed to express themselves artistically at a time when historically, a woman's only function in art was inspirational. How could women writers reverse the roles which Laura and Beatrice represented in literary history? In other words, if a woman became an artist, who would serve as her muse? Gilbert and Gubar explain that this dilemma is particularly problematic to women, who could not "beget art upon the (female) body of the muse."³⁵

To examine this dilemma from a psychological perspective, the authors quote Juliet Mitchell, who explains that both girls and boys "as they learn to speak and live within society, want to take the father's place (in Bloom's terminology the precursor's), but only the boy will one day be allowed to do so."³⁶ Furthermore, as Freud saw it, since it is the mother's desire to replace the phallus with the baby, both boys and girls want to be the phallus, or object of desire, for the mother. However, once again, "only the boy can fully recognize himself in his mother's desire."³⁷ Oedipal theory maintains that as the boy grows up he will outgrow his desire for the mother and symbolically annihilate his father. The boy's "proper" sexual development therefore entails a breaking of the parental bonds leading to autonomy. According to Nancy Chodorow, girls do not break this bond with the mother in the same way as boys but, due to cultural conditioning and other factors, remain in a state of relative dependence, oscillating in loyalties from one parent to the other.³⁸ Juliet Mitchell further argues that the implications of Freud's theory on female sexuality relegate the girl to a position of

³⁴ *Madwoman* 49.

³⁵ *Madwoman* 49.

³⁶ *Madwoman* 49.

³⁷ *Madwoman* 49.

³⁸ Chodorow theorizes "For a girl [as opposed to a boy's] there is no single oedipal mode or quick oedipal resolution, and there is no absolute 'change of subject.' Psychoanalytic accounts make clear that a girl's libidinal turning to her father is not at the expense of, or a substitute for, her attachment to her mother. Nor does a girl give up the internal relationship to her mother which is a product of her earlier [preoedipal] development. Instead, a girl develops important oedipal attachments to her mother *as well as* to her father...An oedipal girl, according to psychoanalysis, oscillates between attachment to her mother and to her father." *The Reproduction of Mothering* 126-127.

object in life as in art, whereby for the girl to make the "proper" sexual development, she must learn "that her subjugation to the law of the father entails her becoming the representative of 'nature' and 'sexuality'." ³⁹ So Gilbert and Gubar observed that as the male writer engaged in what Bloom called a misreading, or swerve away from the precursor's text towards literary autonomy, the woman writer struggled "not against the precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of her." ⁴⁰ Although women were conditioned to seeing themselves represented in men's fiction, the struggle for representation from a female perspective led to what the authors describe as the "anxiety of authorship." Needless to say, compared to the male tradition of "strong, father-son combat," the woman writer lived her "anxiety of authorship" as a debilitating, if not alienating experience. ⁴¹

By the twentieth century, a female literary tradition had been established in most Western countries. In *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar devise a Freudian-based map of literary pathways in order to analyze the creative process in the twentieth-century woman writer, who faced a different challenge than did her nineteenth-century literary mothers. According to the authors, Freud's theory of female psychosexual development, as outlined in "Female Sexuality," "becomes a suitable paradigm for the analysis of literary history at just the point when the woman writer confronts both a matrilineal and a patrilineal inheritance, that is, the twentieth century." ⁴² While Gilbert and Gubar's theory is applicable primarily to twentieth-century women writers, it can also be useful in examining the work of a turn-of-the-century woman writer such as Bruno Sperani. Gilbert and Gubar's map of literary pathways is extrapolated from Freud's theory of female sexuality, which states:

³⁹ *Madwoman* 49.

⁴⁰ *Madwoman* 49

⁴¹ *Madwoman* 51.

⁴² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land. The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1, "The War of the Words" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 167.

...the growing girl may follow three lines of development. The first leads to her turning her back on sexuality altogether because frightened by the comparison of herself with boys, [she]...gives up her phallic activity...[and remains in a state of relative "frigidity"]. If she pursues the second line, she clings in obstinate self-assertion to her threatened masculinity...whilst the fantasy of really being a man in spite of everything, often dominates long periods of her life. This "masculinity complex" may also result in a manifestly homosexual object-choice. Only if her development follows the third...path does she arrive at the ultimate normal feminine attitude in which she takes her father as love-object, and thus arrives at the Oedipus complex in its feminine form.⁴³

Translated into literary terms, this model implies that a woman (artist) can experience what Freud considered a "frigid rejection" of both traditions and remain in a state of artistic impotence, or she may defiantly "claim the maternal tradition as her own" which Freud called the "masculinity complex" and saw as leading to homosexuality, or she may make the "proper" choice and renounce desire for a literary mother in favor of a patrilineal tradition.

Whichever pathway, or combination of pathways the female artist takes, according to Gilbert and Gubar, the struggle is going to engage her in a what they have called the "female affiliation complex." Since in Freud's theory, the girl's developmental pathway involves a "libidinal redirection" from the mother to the father, it follows that women artists are frequently seen, as "oscillating between their matrilineage and their patrilineage in an arduous process of self-definition."⁴⁴ The authors have found that indeed, twentieth-century women writers often exhibit ambivalent, even hostile

⁴³ *No Man's Land* 168.

⁴⁴ *No Man's Land* 169.

reactions when confronted with the accomplishments of their nineteenth-century literary mothers. Typically,

...allegiance to literary fathers does not sweep away longing for literary mothers; anxiety about literary mothers does not always lead to desire for literary fathers. Indeed for all its flaws, Freud's model is useful precisely because it implies such a range of reactions to (literary) parentage.⁴⁵

In the following chapters, I will apply Gilbert and Gubar's map of literary pathways to the evolution of a matrilineal tradition in Italy. From the literary mothers of the *rosa*, to the influential literary fathers of *Verismo*, I will show how at the end of the nineteenth century, women writers like Bruno Sperani experienced their "anxiety of influence" as a call to action, experimenting with genre, but, most importantly, giving the next generation of writers female precursors to emulate or reject.

⁴⁵ *No Man's Land* 169.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROSA AND THE EVOLUTION OF A "FEMALE" GENRE

Prior to the 1880's, there was no real female narrative tradition in Italy.⁴⁶ There was, however, a growing "female" genre known as the *rosa* which began around that time and which quickly became enormously popular with women readers and writers. The more important women writers of this period such as Neera and the Marchesa Colombi took from this female genre certain elements, while creating narratives of psychological depth and introspection. However, due to financial constraints and a combination of internal and external pressures, these same women writers continued to write novels which more closely resembled the classical *rosa*, and which were more commercially profitable:

Al tempo stesso, insieme ad opere di acuta introspezione sociale e psicologica, praticamente tutte le scrittrici dell'epoca, da Neera ad Annie Vivanti, dalla Contessa Lara a Matilde Serao, compiono incursioni nel campo del romanzo popolare: una linea molto esile e spesso varcata divide infatti in loro l'impegno dall'evasione, il romanzo "serio" da quello "d'intrattenimento", in una generale mescolanza dei livelli che dimostra, e non mancano le testimonianze dirette, una precisa volontà di persuasione e di propaganda.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ A female literary tradition did exist in Italy in the form of poetry, with written accounts dating from the early thirteenth century. "Il primo movimento letterario italiano è quello della Scuola siciliana, fiorito alla corte di Federico II verso la metà del Duecento. Si è parlato di una donna che poetasse in quel gruppo, ma purtroppo la critica non è riuscita a verificare l'esistenza di questa Nina Siciliana (detta anche di Dante), come è successo poi con altre poetesse medievali. Perciò Compiuta Donzella è la prima poetessa italiana documentata. Appartiene a quel periodo di transizione che sta fra la Scuola Siciliana e il Dolce Stil Nuovo, e suscitò gran meraviglia fra i suoi contemporanei stupiti del fatto che una donna fosse dotata di intelletto poetico." Natalia Costa Zalesow, *Scrittrici italiane dal XIII all'XX secolo. Testi e critica* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, n.d.) 10. Throughout the centuries, Italy has had numerous, highly acclaimed poetesses and women of letters, from the Medieval religious writings of Santa Caterina da Siena, to the high Renaissance "pertrarchist" poetry of Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547), Tullia d'Aragona (1505-1556), Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554), and many more. For further readings on Italy's poetesses, refer to *Scrittrici italiane* for bibliography.

⁴⁷ Antonia Arslan, "Vivere in rosa per vivere in casa. La letteratura femminile italiana fra impegno ed evasione," *Intorno al rosa* (Verona: Essedue Edizioni, 1987) 20-21.

Although Arslan doesn't suggest as much, what resulted was a uniquely feminine (ist) literary production.⁴⁸ While Arslan suggests that women writers may have used their writing to promote social causes, I believe it is precisely for this reason that this early women's literary production, in its various forms, deserves a more insightful analysis. Even in the most conservative of women's novels, hints of rebellion and frustration can be detected. While initially women's books were intended to instruct or entertain, it seems the *rosa* [']s anthropological function was multi-faceted and complex.

According to Arslan and Pozzato, the *rosa* is usually characterized by a number of clearly identifiable stylistic and thematic elements. Pozzato says these characteristics tend to form a family, "nel senso wittgensteiniano del termine, cioè un insieme tenuto unito da una serie di somiglianze fra i membri senza che si possano trovare delle proprietà comuni a tutti questi membri."⁴⁹ In the following discussion, I will outline some of the important "familial" aspects which characterize the *rosa*, but also marginalize it as a lesser genre.

The first and perhaps most obvious characteristic of the *rosa* is what Pozzato calls the *confronto polemico uomo-donna*, where the lovers are presented as antagonists in a love-hate struggle, and where only the virtue of the woman will elicit the man's love and admiration, necessary for a happy resolution. The lovers will encounter a number of obstacles, however, before this can be achieved. The plot is

⁴⁸ Elaine Showalter originally defined and differentiated the "feminine" novelists from the "feminist" novelists. But she argues that, notwithstanding their differences, a common, cultural experience was born out of their struggles for self-affirmation. "Feminine, feminist or female, the woman's novel has always had to struggle against the cultural and historical forces that relegated women's experience to the second rank. In trying to outline a female literary tradition, I have looked beyond the famous novelists who have been found worthy, to the lives and works of many women who have long been excluded from literary history. I have tried to discover how they felt about themselves and their books, what choices and sacrifices they made, and how their relationship to their profession and their tradition evolved." *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists From Bronte to Lessing* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977) 36. I have adopted Showalter's terminology for use in this thesis, where I use the notation (ist) to indicate where I believe gender-marking, in addition to inscribing femininity in the text, also suggests a feminist agenda.

⁴⁹ Maria Pia Pozzato, *Il romanzo rosa* (Milano: Editori Europei Associati, 1982) 18.

almost always predictable and rarely deviates from this format, Pozzato says, because readers of the genre (or the popular novel for that matter) depend on and derive pleasure from a recognizable and therefore predictable narrative.⁵⁰ From the opening chapter, the predestined couples are presented in such a way that the reader knows immediately who will fall in love with whom, who will be rejected, and what type of romantic scenario will unfold. The prototypes are usually the following: young girl-mature man; older girl/spinster/widow-mature man, or young girl-young man. The protagonist is almost always female, and the hence the conflicts the couple faces are experienced and narrated from the woman's point of view. Frequently, the protagonist has a virtuous-but-gently-rebellious nature which will eventually be tamed by the prospective husband. Her rebellion, however, can never be of an overtly subversive nature, such as opposition to marriage, promiscuity, or another serious transgression of societal norms. In the *rosa*, the protagonist is pure, yet sensual and romantic (as opposed to the protagonist of the nineteenth-century popular novel, who is devoid of sensuality and pitted against a wicked/sexual anti-heroine). The prospective husband may be characterized as the good, hero-type, but more often he is something of a rogue and is given to excesses such as womanizing and gambling. In this case he will be reformed by the virtue and love of the protagonist. When competing against a wholesome, but boring prospect, the rogue will usually win the protagonist's heart, precisely because of what Pozzato calls his "bad boy" nature. The problems which the lovers encounter can never be so serious as to prevent the plot's happy resolution however. Frequently, the woman's rebellions against the man appear silly and capricious. Eventually, however, the woman will mature and learn to tolerate her mate's masculine vices, as he will be domesticated by her love and dedication. Pozzato explains:

⁵⁰ Pozzato 36.

Il genere rosa non ammette solitamente grandi rotture, morti, abbandoni, tragedie; preferisce allontanare i suoi amanti o futuri amanti con il litigio, il pettegolezzo, i calcoli patrimoniali, la virtù misconosciuta, le deduzioni sbagliate attorno a un regalo, a un viaggio, a uno sguardo.⁵¹

The authors use the term *confronto polemico* to mean a situation of struggle in which one of the antagonists will prevail: one will dominate, and one will be dominated. In the *rosa*, they posit, although the woman will struggle and rebel, she will always eventually be dominated. The girl's struggle takes place within a maturation process in which her previously strong and independent personality is suppressed and she yields to the wishes of her mate. A likely scenario is one in which as a child, she may be a tomboy; preferring to play with boys and read her father's books than to indulge in typically "feminine" activities such as embroidery. As a young woman she may be headstrong and capricious, continuing to assert herself even in marriage. Somewhere along the line though, usually after becoming a mother, the protagonist gives in to the domestic role imposed on her. According to Pozzato, any rebellion on the part of the protagonist will eventually be suppressed by the *confronto polemico* in which the man always prevails.

La letteratura sentimentale, più che sciogliere la schiavitù e vendicare il sopruso, dolcifica entrambi in modo che proprio la resa, il dominio finale sembrano desiderabili al massimo grado.

What I would like to emphasize is not so much the outcome of the struggle, but rather the nature of the rebellion itself. The two novels which I discuss in this chapter depict strong and independent protagonists, who must struggle after marriage to reclaim their identities. Although both novels end with an apparently happy resolution of the marital crisis, the nature of the protagonist's rebellion, upon close examination, reveals an

⁵¹ Pozzato 37.

intense struggle for self-affirmation. The "lieto fine" is therefore overshadowed by uncertainty and uneasy compromise.

In the first of these novels, Bruno Sperani's *Il marito* (1894), Silvia Orlandi narrates her story through an exchange of letters with her childhood friend Leonilda Martineau, a doctor living in Paris. Leonilda is a role model for Silvia. As a child, Silvia was urged by her father to emulate her; to read and study to prepare herself for a profession. This irritated her mother and other women in her milieu greatly however, as Silvia happily rejected the usual feminine pastimes: "Non amavo il ricamo, nè il cucito, nè il pianoforte, nè le faccende di casa. Amavo i poeti e i romanzieri e le grandi escursioni per la campagna, su i monti." ⁵²

Silvia's father had intended for her to finish school and pursue a profession. Predictably though, her father dies, and she is forced by her mother to renounce her studies and marry the first suitor to come along, the dashing but rakish Tullio Orlandi. Initially, Silvia is infatuated with the idea of marriage to the handsome, prominent suitor, but at seventeen, she says, who wouldn't have been? Shortly after their wedding her husband resumes his womanizing, openly and flagrantly showcasing his conquests. Silvia thinks that motherhood will fill the void in her life, but when her newborn dies, even this hope is lost. Silvia has no one to support her against her husband's tyranny. Eventually, she becomes romantically involved with Alberto, a young soldier who courted her prior to her marriage. Her interest in literature comes back to haunt her, as her family and the townspeople blame her "romantic" disposition for her husband's abandonment:

Tu sai bene, amare i libri vuol dire, per certa gente, fare le romantiche...Trovano che mio marito è stato troppo buono, troppo generoso, che avrebbe dovuto farmi un processo per adulterio e mandarmi in prigione "a far la romantica." ⁵³

⁵² *Il marito* 12.

⁵³ *Il marito* 13.

When she becomes pregnant with Alberto's child, she is forced to leave her house, disinherited by both her husband and her mother (who defends the husband despite his flagrant abuses), and goes to live in Alberto's family house until she has the child. In order to conceal Silvia's marital status, Alberto has told his family that she is a young woman whom he has seduced, and plans to marry after the child is born. Their secret is not safe for long, however, as a series of mishaps leads people to discover that she is separated from her husband. First she is forced to leave Alberto's house only hours after delivery, and takes refuge with her newborn in a hospital for the poor. There she and her baby are cared for by a kindly doctor and his staff. At the hospital she becomes interested in medicine, and impresses the professor so much that later in the story, he will help her to become a doctor. She then moves into several rooming houses with Alberto, but is forced to leave when his military career is threatened by the scandal. When Silvia moves to another town with the child, Alberto begins to stray and is reputed to be engaged to a wealthy heiress. Finally, Silvia realizes that Alberto is weak, and that she must survive on her own. She gets a job cleaning jewelry in a shop owned by a friend of her father. (As a child, she assisted her father in his jewelry shop. Once again, he has a positive influence on her life.) She supports herself and her child and studies to become a doctor at the university with the professor's help. Meanwhile, a repentant Tullio, who now wants his wife back, kills Alberto in a duel and suffers injuries himself. After much agonizing, Tullio proves himself worthy of Silvia, who now realizes that she has always loved him. Silvia's mentor, the kindly professor, has appointed her director of a new hospital for the poor in another town, and Tullio has agreed to move there with her and the child, whom he has recognized as his own. In the last paragraph, Silvia writes to Leonilda:

E ora dimmi, non ti pare un sogno? ... Il mio romanzo termina bene: io ritorno con mio marito! con mio marito! E tu approvi, tu, la ribelle. Strane vicende della vita! Il fatto sta però che l'ultima cosa di cui posso convincermi è che Tullio sia mio marito. Lo amo; l'ho sempre amato

anche quando credevo di odiarlo; l'ho amato contro la mia volontà, contro le mie convinzioni; e cedo, finalmente, povero atomo stanco di lottare, cedo a una forza strapotente, fatale, che deride ancora ogni nostra teoria, ogni nostra ribellione.⁵⁴

These words do not describe the blissful reunion of husband and wife which is typically thought to characterize the *rosa*. While the essential formula within the framework remains intact - love, marriage, conflict and happy resolution - the subtext reveals a subversive and indeed overt confrontation of this prescribed female text. In the end, Silvia is conscious of the power struggle which she entered into with Tullio, and she views her return to her husband as an admission of defeat. Her choice of terminology reveals the ambivalence with which she accepts her situation. "Strane vicende della vita! Il fatto sta però che l'ultima cosa di cui posso convincermi è che Tullio sia mio marito."⁵⁵ While on the one hand she states that she has always loved him, she also says she cannot believe that Tullio is actually her husband again. She clearly understands the dynamics of the power-struggle which exists between them. She is attracted to power, and by analogy to Tullio who wields it. Silvia sees the inevitable outcome of this power-struggle as relegating herself to a position of inferiority, for she loses something of herself as she gives in to her feelings and desires. When Silvia says that she concedes defeat, she clearly perceives her husband's attraction to her as a seductive force which has overpowered her. She rhetorically asks herself if she will be happy: "Sarò felice? .. Non so. Non mi curo di saperlo. Mi par di sognare: mi par di essere un'altra. Il passato è svanito: non sento più il suo peso."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Il marito* 339.

⁵⁵ *Il marito* 339.

⁵⁶ *Il marito* 338.

While this novel is dedicated to Silvia's struggle to become a strong and learned woman, she is made to accomplish this goal within the framework of marriage. Yet it is only when she is actually separated from her husband and leaves her lover that she is able to fulfill these ambitions. It is not surprising therefore that men, like the reformed Tullio, are represented somewhat ambivalently. Women on the other hand, especially mother figures, are either absent or represented negatively. Silvia's childhood friend Leonilda is the exception, although her relationship with Silvia is also ambivalent at times. Although Silvia says repeatedly that she is an inspiration to her, Leonilda's role in the story is a relatively passive one, since she lives out of the country and can communicate only through letters. On the one occasion when Leonilda does take an active role, it is only to assist Silvia's husband in his search for her, which can be viewed as a potentially hostile act since it is clearly against Silvia's wishes. Because female mentors in women's fiction often represent an "alter-ego" who can act out a subversive role in the narrative, they frequently take on marginalized roles, living abroad or on the fringes of society. As Leonilda has no voice in the narrative, neither does she have any real representation. Her letters are not transcribed in the text, but are only referred to indirectly by Silvia. Leonilda passively acts out her role as a mentor from a distance, providing inspiration and guidance to the protagonist who must reconcile her own subversive side with her otherwise "proper" role as a married woman. Pozzato observes that the protagonist's rebellions are short lived in the *rosa*, but as I have shown in this novel, they are a force to be reckoned with. In the last sentence Silvia uses the plural pronoun *nostra*, bringing the issue onto a wider platform to include all women.

In some novels, the plot is much darker. The protagonist must undergo a series of terrible, even gruesome trials before she sees her marital situation happily resolved. The typical narrative device in early popular novels was to project inner conflict onto external sources, so the protagonist's misery is attributed to an oppressive, and/or

adulterous husband, and his sexually potent "other woman." In Carolina Invernizio's *Bacio di una morta*, Clara is a young bride whose husband has left her for another woman. In order to be rid of her, he attempts to kill her by administering a fatal dose of poison. Count Guido Rambaldi's behavior is attributed to his involuntary and "fatal attraction" to Nara, the exotic actress of foreign extraction. There is another, much more important story line in this novel however, concerning Clara's relationship with Alfonso, her long lost brother (the illegitimate child of her dead mother).

The figure of Clara is an enigmatic one. Invernizio has given this protagonist an angelic exterior, but a secretive and defiant nature. As a young girl, when Clara learns of the existence of her brother Alfonso, she embarks on a campaign to undo the wrongs done to him by her father, who gave the child to the evil goat-herder Ronco. Clara's unconventional relationship with Alfonso is presented in an erotically suggestive fashion, their encounters always secret and passionate. In a letter to Clara Alfonso writes, he states:

Mia diletta Clara,

Da lungo tempo non ho tue nuove e sono tanto inquieto per te. La mia vita scorre triste in questa lontananza, e il mio sogno sarebbe quello di volare tra le tue braccia, di ricominciare la vita felice condotta per tanti mesi. Ti ricordi, mia Clara diletta, di quei nostri colloqui segreti in cui l'anima si espandeva tutta intera, di quei convegni furtivi? O la mia cara, nei miei studi ho potuto conoscere come la natura umana sia fragile, ingombra di meschine passioni; ma vi sono altresì degli affetti sublimi, incancellabili, che il tempo non fa che aumentare, la lontananza accresce all'infinito. Questa fiamma divina è quella che io provo per te, mia Clara. Io non ho che la tua dolce immagine dinanzi a me, aspiro il profumo delizioso dei tuoi capelli, delle tue vesti.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *Bacio di una morta* 172-173.

In addition, she deceives her father by concealing her knowledge of Alfonso's existence, and taunts him on several occasions by making obscure allusions to him. It is the father's discovery of this knowledge that provokes him to murder Ronco. After that, the father dies himself, apparently troubled by his conscience and by his daughter's knowledge of his misdeeds. Clara also conceals the secret of her brother's existence from her husband, which leads to his accusation of adultery against her. She even names their child after Alfonso, without telling her husband why. As Invernizio paints the picture of the good Clara, she also taints this image with such indiscretions. Prior to marriage, Clara defies her father by secretly caring for her brother, and after marriage, she defies her husband in the same way. Her strong, rebellious character, the secret side of her identity, will be punished in the text by her husband, but will resurface and be rewarded later on.

Initially, Clara enthusiastically accepts her role as a married woman, but is never wholly convinced of her husband's good character. This is evident in the early chapters, where in a conversation with Alfonso she describes Guido as being weak: Ah, temo purtroppo di essermi ingannata sull'uomo che ho sposato! Ho scoperto in lui dei difetti che mi fanno paura: è debole, falso, carparbio.⁵⁸ She continues to communicate secretly with Alfonso throughout her engagement and marriage, confiding to him her intimate thoughts. Alfonso reacts with jealousy and suspicion upon learning of Clara's engagement. In a conversation with Nemmo, the family butler who looks after him, Alfonso confuses romantic love with love between family members, leading one to believe that Invernizio purposely uses this relationship in her text as a device to pervert Clara's character. The quasi-incestuous nature of the relationship affords the protagonist a passionate yet "safe" diversion, for the intimacy they share is restricted to the level of language. Although Invernizio blames Guido's cruelty on his fatal attraction to Nara, the rather obvious subtext points to a punishment wrought onto his wife for her defiance.

⁵⁸ Bacio di una morta 11-12.

Invernizio even suggests this in the narrative when Guido, in order to justify his own adultery, accuses Clara of adultery and questions their daughter's paternity. In fact, Clara's relationship with Guido is overshadowed by ironic circumstances from the very beginning. When Clara first encounters Guido she is revisiting a place where she and Alfonso had spent time together. This first encounter is marked by death, as Guido shoots Clara's horse who has been spooked and is running wild. When Guido proposes marriage, Clara's first thought is of Alfonso:

Ella pensava al fratello...Guido mi farebbe forse dimenticare mio fratello?
Devo io confidare a questo giovane così devoto, che mi ama tanto, la
storia di Alfonso? Egli perdonerebbe? Permetterebbe che Alfonso fosse
vicino a noi? ⁵⁹

Guido mistakes the troubled expression on her face as a demonstration of her love for him:

Guido non poteva immaginare ciò che angustia l'anima di Clara; egli la
vedeva turbata ed attribuiva quel turbamento alle emozioni che una
fanciulla pura ed innocente prova sempre trovandosi per la prima volta
vicino alla persona che ama. ⁶⁰

Even Clara's wedding day is wrought with intrigue, as she is beckoned to by a menacing Ronco while leaving the church. She must lie to Guido and beg her governess to bring Ronco to her secretly, whereupon he comes to her bedroom and promptly blackmails her, threatening to tell her father and husband everything. Clara's exchanges with Ronco reveal the cunning and "knowing" side of her personality, which are carefully hidden from proper society:

-Aspettami, disse ella a un tratto, staccandosi dal braccio di Guido.

-Dove vai? chiese il conte che era dietro di loro. Ella sorrise con aria infantile.

⁵⁹ *Bacio di una morta* 113.

⁶⁰ *Bacio di una morta* 114. .

-Vado a deporre il velo e i fiori, e torno subito qui.

Questa fuggì con un piccolo grido, ed entrò nella sua camera di fanciulla che avrebbe dovuto abbandonare per sempre. La governante l'aveva seguita.

-Volete che vi aiuti? disse alla sposina.

-No...piuttosto fammi un piacere...sono entrata qui con un pretesto...perché Guido non sospettasse di nulla. La governante guardò la fanciulla stupita...

-Ma vi pare conveniente, di ricevere un capraio in questo momento?

-Lasciami un momento sola con lui. E' l'ultimo favore che ti chiedo...tu che mi hai amata tanto e che sei stata per me una seconda madre.

....

Appena la vecchia fu uscita, la fisionomia della fanciulla cambiò di espressione.

-Parla, che vuoi da me? disse al capraio. Sbrigati, perché ho pochi minuti da concederti.⁶¹

Guido, who has become impatient in the meantime, follows her to her room, where she hides Ronco behind her bed while her new husband professes his love to her. This entire scene is extremely well-scripted by Invernizio, revealing once again the "sordid" underside of Clara's proper exterior.

After the attempted murder, Clara is rescued from the grave by her brother and literally brought back to life. The front cover of the novel published by Lucchi still depicts the corpse-like figure of Clara resting in her coffin, reminiscent of Sleeping Beauty, being kissed by the handsome prince. Readers of the novel were naturally intended to recognize the fairy tale aspect implicit from the cover. The reader would then enter the text with a set

⁶¹ *Bacio di una morta* 120-121.

of assumptions which would serve to circumscribe the narrative's otherwise unconventional departure from the fairy tale, since the romantic kiss which revives Clara is not delivered by Prince Charming, but by her brother! "Ed appoggiò le sue labbra ardenti su quelle della povera morta."⁶² Clara and her brother meet and carry on much like lovers throughout the novel, so it is not surprising that it is he who awakens her from the catatonic state.

The two story lines finally fuse when all the characters are brought together for the common good of reuniting husband and wife. After her rescue, Clara immediately embarks on a plan to lure Guido away from Nara. The only hope she has of winning him back from so powerful a woman is to assume the identity of a sexually powerful woman herself. This novel is not so much about a husband's demise into debauchery as it is about a protagonist's defiant struggle for sexual identity. Clara assumes an alter-ego in the form of the Dama Nera, a sexually provocative and mysterious woman much like Nara, to win her husband and her social status back. Clara's defiant character, which led her to inappropriate behavior with her brother, will now be redirected and put to use for more acceptable purposes. As is often the case in Invernizio's novels, female identity is split between a good woman and a bad woman; Clara and Nara. Interestingly though, in this novel another more intriguing personality split exists in Clara her self when she becomes the veiled Dama Nera. Veiled women are typical in nineteenth-century novels, and almost always represent a splitting, or dividing of personality to reflect those less virtuous, "subversive" tendencies such as sexuality and strong female identity which cannot be attributed to the protagonist. In addition, the veil can be seen as a permeable, or temporary barrier, an invitation to the observer to look beyond it. Elaine Showalter explains:

Despite its "uniquely feminine significance," the veil is a kind of permeable border, an image of confinement and enclosure that is also

⁶² *Bacio di una morta* 28.

extremely penetrable; "even when opaque it is highly impermanent, while transparency transforms it into a possible entrance or exit."...In the Gothic novel, the veil is "a necessary concealer of grotesque revelations, of sin and guilt, past crimes and future suffering."⁶³

In this novel, the Dama Nera functions in all of these capacities. She is Clara's sexual "other" who can finally attract and be attracted to her husband. The veil represents an invitation to sex, while it also conceals her secret past of deception and intrigue. What, then, is Invernizio saying about female identity? Only when Clara finds a more acceptable outlet for her sexuality, as the alluring and provocative Dama Nera, does she resolve her identity crisis and win back her status as a married woman. Although all of these female identities reflect Invernizio's ambivalence regarding women's sexuality, she clearly attempts to incorporate the asexual, virtuous woman of popular fiction with a less virtuous, even sexually-defiant protagonist who in the conclusion acquires social acceptability. While on the one hand, the conclusion reflects Invernizio's moral and conventional attitudes where adultery and intrigue (only female) are punished (Nara commits suicide by jumping from the roof of the insane asylum she is committed to, and is so disfigured she can barely be identified), on the other hand the novel's blissfully happy ending has a peculiar twist. In the epilogue, five years have passed and Guido, now domesticated, has had to renounce his philandering ways and is basically put "out to pasture" in the countryside, where he and Clara now share a modest cottage with Alfonso and his wife. During this time, Clara has become a mother again. Upon hearing the news of Nara's death, Guido asks Clara if she has forgiven him. Clara's response is to hold up their infant son, (whose name is Alfonsino), and say, much like a priest giving a benediction: "Ecco il perdono, la benedizione, che Dio ha fatto discendere sul tuo capo."⁶⁴

⁶³ Elaine Showalter quotes S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siècle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) 148.

⁶⁴ *Bacio di una morta* 302.

As I have shown from examination of *Il marito* and *Bacio di una morta*, the protagonists are subjected to a series of difficult trials by abusive, even murderous husbands. In Invernizio's text, Clara's rebellion is not altogether in vain. When Guido initially proposed marriage, she was fearful that he would not permit her lover/brother to be near them. In the end, she succeeds in having both her brother and her husband by her side. When in the epilogue she tells Guido that the absolution for his sins would be their son Alfonsino who is her brother's namesake, one is naturally led to speculate as to the child's paternity. Invernizio entitles the chapter dedicated to Clara's identity struggle and its murderous consequences "Il romanzo di Clara." As she puts it, "Clara era giunta ai diciotto anni senza conoscere nulla del libro della vita."⁶⁵ Although she has equated Clara's "education" with a fiction, what Clara actually "learns" about this life-text is that sex equals power, and women's identity, even if defiant, emerges as victorious in the *confronto polemico* between men and women.

In *Il marito*, the identity crisis leads to a newer, "better" protagonist, but not for reasons which can be attributed to the sanctity of marriage. Initially, because of her love of books and independent spirit, Silvia is alienated from her family and husband. It is only through the maturation process she undergoes after she abandons the marriage that she evolves into the strong, independent woman she dreamt of becoming in adolescence. Although she accepts her husband back, it will be on her terms now, as she has responsibilities outside of the home. What this text says to its readers, as Invernizio's does, is that marriage remains the only acceptable status for women in a patriarchal society. On the other hand though, Sperani sees this arrangement as destructive to women's identity. Evidence of this can be seen in her choice of the novel's title, *Il marito*, to narrate the story of a *woman's* identity struggle. The masculine bias of the title dominates the feminine text, "immasculates" it and attempts to obliterate

⁶⁵ *Bacio di una morta* 69.

it.⁶⁶ It does not, however, succeed entirely, for once the novel is opened and read, the true "feminine" nature of the text is immediately evident.

⁶⁶ Judith Fetterley uses the term to describe the affect of androcentric literature on women readers. According to Fetterley, "the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the immasculation of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny." *The Resisting Reader. A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978) xx.

CHAPTER THREE

TROUBLED IDENTITIES IN WOMEN'S FICTION I: CHARACTERS

Although Bruno Sperani's characters come from all levels of society, most are young, middle-class girls who for various reasons end up living on the margins of society. Regardless of social status however, the women she writes about all seem to suffer from the same ills: lack of education, unhappy marriages, financial dependency or poverty, loneliness and boredom. While her plots are often repetitive and predictable, Sperani does give her protagonists a certain psychological depth missing from much of women's narrative of the time. Some of Sperani's protagonists coexist with the prototypical evil "other" common to popular fiction, but more often they are multidimensional and introspective. Marina Camerino has observed that Sperani's "thinking" protagonists tend to be of the middle class, less stereotyped than her aristocratic protagonists who are often *rassegnate*, or peasant women who tend to rebel with violence. Male characters on the other hand are more predictable in Sperani's narrative. Husbands are generally bad, whereas fathers are generally good. Male artists and political figures (*garibaldini*, socialist sympathizers) are good, whereas businessmen and landowners are bad. Camerino observes:

Gli uomini sono per lo più, nei romanzi della Sperani, i garanti della tradizione, interpreti più o meno spregiudicati o deboli di un'idea di matrimonio come valore sociale, indipendente dai sentimenti. Essi pensano e vivono il matrimonio come luogo di potere spingendo le donne alla "sottomissione" o, negli ambienti alto-borghesi e aristocratici, alla "frivolezza." Quelle - e sono la grande maggioranza - che accettano questa 'prigione' non hanno sbocchi psicologici, né evoluzione narrativa. Vivono chiuse nella stereotipia di un comportamento - e di un cliché romanzesco - che sfocia nella protesta muta della malattia, della rinuncia, del suicidio. Più vitali, anche dal punto di vista narrativo, sono le donne che situazioni oggettive e

motivazioni soggettive spingono a prendere coscienza dei condizionamenti che le assediano. Sono percorsi intricati, sia per gli ostacoli materiali che per quelli psicologici e, forse per un'esigenza di realismo, coinvolgono soprattutto le donne medio-borghesi, le più giovani, le più acculturate. Le aristocratiche tendono infatti a rassegnarsi, le proletarie a ribellarsi.⁶⁷

While I generally agree with this observation, I do not draw the same conclusions regarding her female characters. In *Nell'ingranaggio*,⁶⁸ Laura is a working-class girl employed as a governess in the household of a wealthy capitalist. She is seduced by him and falls in love. Although he has the legal means to obtain a divorce from his wife because she is a foreigner, he chooses not to despite his feelings for Laura. She is devastated when he abandons her, having ruined her reputation and her chances of obtaining a position in another household. Despondent, she throws herself under the wheels of the speeding train which carries him and his family to their vacation home. The metaphor of desperation and helplessness, implied in the title, is unmistakable. The same "mechanism," (the train being a phallic symbol of power and progress) which thrusts the man confidently forward into the future, carries the woman to her death.

In *Le vinte*,⁶⁹ Lucia is a wealthy but superficial girl who has fairy-tale dreams of love and of acquiring an aristocratic title. She marries into a noble but bankrupt family only to discover that her handsome young husband has been forced to marry her for her dowry, and is in love with someone else. Her fantasies are shattered in a loveless marriage. She realizes that she can either suffer in virtuous silence like her mother-in-law, who suffered a similar fate in her own marriage, or she can give in to what she perceives as corruption and take a lover to occupy her time. Either way, Lucia believes

⁶⁷ Marinella Colummi Camerino, "Donne nell'ingranaggio. La narrativa di Bruno Sperani", *Les femmes écrivains en Italie (1870-1920): Ordres et Libertés*, ed. Emmanuelle Genevois, Colloque International 26-27 May 1994 (Paris: Université de La Sorbonne Nouvelle) published as no. 39 / 40 of *Chroniques Italiennes*, 1994, 75-88.

⁶⁸ Bruno Sperani, *Nell'ingranaggio* (Milano:Editrice Sonzogno, 1885).

⁶⁹ Bruno Sperani, *Le vinte* (Milano Editrice Aliprandi, 1896).

she loses, and makes an unsuccessful attempt at suicide by drowning herself. After she is rescued, she is embraced by the saintly figure of her mother-in-law Donna Eleonora, who begs Lucia to accept the situation as she did once. She tells Lucia that they will comfort one another, like mother and daughter. But mother figures are not positive role models in Sperani's texts (or in most women's writing from this period), so that this is not a viable alternative to the emptiness in her life. Donna Eleonora can only commiserate with Lucia by offering an existence as lonely and as unfulfilling as her own.

A novel which addresses the problems of the lower classes is *Tre donne*, a story about three peasant women who must endure the hardships and squalor in the rice plains of northern Italy. For Maria the heroine, long hours in the rice fields are followed by domestic duties which amount to virtual slave labor. In addition, Maria's husband is having an affair with his brother's wife Virginia, for whom Maria is forced to cook and clean. Maria is even deprived of food. Her sister-in-law Virginia is a sultry vixen who uses her appeal to her advantage, callously disregarding the suffering of Maria. Maria's younger sister Cristina on the other hand is a true rebel. Cristina is disgusted by the abuse her sister silently endures and is determined not to be subjected to a similar fate. "Voglio andarmene da questo posto! Non la voglio più fare questa vitaccia!"⁷⁰ Cristina is bold, flirtatious and outspoken. She pursues her own interests to the point of openly engaging in an illicit affair with the town priest. In a *risqué* departure from the subtle eroticism characteristic of women's novels, Cristina consummates this relationship. Soon after however she and the priest are forced to flee when news of their relationship is made public. Maria is so distraught as a result of the mounting problems she is faced with, that her only form of escape is daydreaming about her impending maternity. Meanwhile, Virginia's husband learns of her affair and kills his brother, leaving Maria a widow. Virginia then dies of consumption, and Maria loses the

⁷⁰ Bruno Sperani, *Tre donne* (Milano: Editrice Galli, 1891) 4.

baby she is carrying. On a more cheerful note however, Cristina and the priest successfully emigrate to South America where they marry and live happily ever after. The novel ends after a lengthy illness in which Maria is cared for by an sympathetic young doctor. Maria goes back to work in the rice fields, whereupon, hearing that peasants in nearby towns are rebelling against the landowners, she is so taken by the spirit of revolt that she begins singing *Il canto dei lavoratori*.

Each of Sperani's protagonists discussed above attempts to resolve her problems in a manner largely dependent on the possibilities, and limits of her social circumstances. In *Nell'ingranaggio*, Laura's reputation is ruined due to her involvement with a married man. Rejected by her lover, her family and "proper" society, her only hope is to become an actress, a career "honest" girls did not pursue. Laura ends her life rather than live on the margins of society. Although Lucia's suicide attempt is unsuccessful in *Le vinte*, we do not know how her story ends, for Sperani leaves this open. We do know that Lucia, as opposed to Laura, can maintain her position in society even if she compromises herself. And while she finds this unacceptable, she has more choices available to her than Laura, who would forever remain a "fallen" woman. *Tre donne* is clearly a novel with a political agenda, and not surprisingly it had little commercial success. The sisters' struggles against the establishment are rewarded in the end with the most important of virtues. Cristina finds happiness in marriage (although she must leave Italy) and Maria finds a higher purpose in the socialist cause. And while, as Marina Camerino observed, Sperani's protagonists do often fall into stereotypical or romanticized roles, the focus of this analysis is to determine what these protagonists have in common, and the one experience which is common to all of them is suffering. This brings me to a crucial question. Why, as Gilbert and Gubar found, was the portrayal of long-suffering females so pervasive in women's literature? Was it, as Maria Pozzato claims, *consolatorio*? To help ease

women into accepting their subordinate status in society? To render more readable the inevitable female "text" of virgin, wife, mother and widow? Antonia Arslan observes:

Si instaura dunque un rapporto strettissimo con le lettrici e insieme un'assunzione di responsabilità verso di loro, questo vasto pubblico non certo di emancipate né di liberate, oppresso da mille convenzioni e lacci di costume e di comportamento, molto ignorante, a cui si deve fare un lentissimo cammino di presa di coscienza dell'infelicità femminile - e dell'individualità femminile - pena la disaffezione, attraverso la descrizione di tipi culturali e sociologici esistenti e la proposta di modelli in cui non sia impossibile riconoscersi.⁷¹

What stands out in Sperani's narratives is a particular kind of appeal to readers: feminine, urgent and often highly politicized. Frequently she will interrupt the narrative to interject a personal opinion or judgment, a device commonly used by nineteenth-century women writers. In *Il romanzo della morte*, where the protagonist Argia becomes pregnant after being seduced, Sperani asks:

Ma perché c'era questa cosa terribile nella vita della donna? Perché, una fanciulla poteva diventare madre, anche senza il concorso della sua volontà, senza sapere, senza averci pensato? Un uomo passava nella sua vita, approfittava della sua debolezza o della sua ignoranza, e continuava il proprio cammino. (...) dunque non bastava che la donna fosse condannata dalla natura a tutte le miserie della maternità: non bastava che dovesse perdere l'indipendenza, la bellezza, le forze, e molte volte, la vita, per dare la vita ad un essere che, in moltissimi casi, il suo cuore non aveva sognato, né desiderato?...⁷²

⁷¹ Antonia Arslan, "Ideologia e autorappresentazione. Donne intellettuali fra Ottocento e Novecento," in *Svelamento. Sibilla Aleramo: una biografia intellettuale*, eds. Annarita Buttafuoco and Marina Zancan (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988) 168.

⁷² Bruno Sperani, *Il romanzo della morte* (Milano: Libreria Editrice Galli, 1890) 265.

While texts such as these have previously been seen by critics as self-serving, expounding a pedagogical or moral agenda, this now suggests a sense of *urgency* which must be taken into consideration when discussing the "value" of early women's literature. In *Narratrici dell'Ottocento*, Anna Santoro notes that while women writers had little choice but to assume the marginal role imposed on them, they often accepted this role willingly to propagate their own ideas for social reform:

Dopo l'Unità, la maggior parte della produzione letteraria femminile ha intenti pedagogici non solo perché la nuova classe dirigente ha improntato di sé tutta la cultura del tempo e questa prevede appunto un "ammaestramento" generale alla nuova ideologia ma perché alle donne specificamente (che nel frattempo erano con veemenza uscite dal privato) viene assegnato un luogo letterario e una precisa missione che è quella dell'educazione, secondo la solita pratica di incanalare le forze eversive. E la donna, sentendoselo ripetere, finisce per crederci (anche perché è intimamente convinta della sua superiorità in certi campi intendo) e ci crede tanto da impegnare seriamente le sue forze per "cambiare il mondo." ⁷³

The novels of writers such as Bruno Sperani, Annie Vivanti and Ada Negri often reflected strong political ideologies. Arranged marriages based on dowry requirements, the lack of divorce, lack of education for women and the victimization of the peasant population by the growing industrial middle classes, are pervasive themes throughout women's production of this early period. While almost all of Sperani's novels work within the context of the love-story, they are also strong indictments of a society which inevitably disempowered women, children and the underclasses to the greatest degree. Clearly, the topics women wrote about and the messages women communicated through their texts were of a deeply personal and often conflicting nature. In many novels, protagonists reflected a growing

⁷³ Anna Santoro, *Narratrici italiane dell'Ottocento* (Napoli: Editrice Federico e Ardia. n.d.) 18, 177.

self-consciousness which had its roots in the uneasy, bourgeois culture of fin-de-siècle Italy. The pattern of long-suffering females which emerges in Sperani's narrative reflects a larger social crisis, and is evidence of an urgent appeal to readers to see themselves in the characters and to read themselves in the words.

TROUBLED IDENTITIES II: READERS, WRITERS AND THE *COSCIENZA INFELICE*

In Chapter Two I introduced Maria Pozzato's concept of the "familial" elements common to the *rosa*. Another of these characteristics is what she calls the *coscienza infelice*. According to Arslan and Pozzato, readers of romance novels, (one thinks of the popular American Harlequin Romances, or Barbara Cartland novels in England, or the still-published romances of Liala in Italy) have typically felt embarrassed if attention is called to their choice of reading material, and have come to regard their consumption of this literature as "*un piccolo vizio*."⁷⁴ This sense of inferiority extends to most forms of women's literature from this period and is shared by readers, writers, and characters.⁷⁵ One reason may be that both readers and writers of women's texts came to regard the genre as a comfortable female space, where women could "speak" to one another, as interlocutors, in a language that men could not appreciate or understand.⁷⁶ But what is most important for the reader to identify with is what lies hidden in the subtext, and is not always consciously expressed.

Certainly one aspect of identification is the concept of desire, or fantasy, which the writer invites the reader to indulge in, and which, according to Freud, is intrinsic to writing. In "Creative Writing and Daydreaming," Freud states that "creative writing, like a day-dream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of

⁷⁴ Arslan and Pozzato, "Il rosa," 1028

⁷⁵ Pozzato 18. Writers of modern romance speak out in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women. Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992). "Few people realize how much courage it takes for a woman to open a romance novel on an airplane. She knows what everyone around her will think about her and her choice of reading material. When it comes to romance novels, society has always felt free to sit in judgment not only on the literature but on the reader herself." 1. Evidence that critics also share in this sense of inferiority can be seen by the lack of attention afforded to women's writing and especially the overall disregard for the genre as a literary form: "No one who reads or writes romance expects to be able to teach critics to appreciate the novels." 1.

⁷⁶ Judith Fetterley suggests: "The reading of women's texts has the potential for giving women a knowledge of the self, for putting us in contact with our real selves which the reading of male texts cannot provide." "Reading about Reading: *A Jury of Her Peers, The Murders in the Rue Morgue, and The Yellow Wallpaper*." *Gender and Reading. Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, eds. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 151.

childhood." ⁷⁷ Since the adult has given up playing, she now ceases to derive pleasure from that activity. But Freud goes on to say that this is never the case:

Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with the real objects; instead of *playing*, he now *phantasies*. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called *day-dreams*. ⁷⁸

Since fantasies are comprised of secret and intimate longings, they are usually a source of embarrassment which people take great care to conceal from each other. This may explain in part the enormous appeal that romance and popular novels have for readers. Interestingly, Freud chose as the basis of his theory "those less pretentious writers of novels, romances and short stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes." ⁷⁹ More important however, is the opportunity the writer affords the reader to partake of her story or fantasy: i.e., her text. Harmony publishers in Italy actually invite the readers to "*sognare a libri aperti*," an obvious take on the expression "*sognare a occhi aperti*." ⁸⁰ This can be interpreted literally as an invitation by the publishers to let the narrative daydream for the reader. On several occasions in *Il marito*, Silvia refers to her life as a dream, and equates this dream with a romance novel; "Mi par di sognare: mi par di essere un'altra" and "Ed ora dimmi, non ti pare un sogno?... Il mio romanzo termina bene." The protagonist herself believes she is part of a dream. Her description of her life-story as a dreamy romance novel makes clear the connection Freud drew between creative writing and fantasy.

⁷⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 of Penguin Freud library, 14 vols, (Penguin Books, 1990) 139.

⁷⁸ Freud 133.

⁷⁹ Freud 137.

⁸⁰ Pozzato 33.

While I am not suggesting that fantasy is the only source of creative thinking, in the following paragraphs I will further discuss the connection of women's writing, fantasy and the *coscienza infelice* which surrounds it.

As Freud made the connection between fantasizing and creative writing, so too did he associate these activities with secrecy and shame. If women's writing is perceived as an extension of women's fantasies, it is easy to see why society would regard it with suspicion. The *questione femminile*, which is how the question of women's emancipation came to be known, was generally seen as an affront to the social order.⁸¹ Therefore, while most critics dismissed as inferior the intimate nature of women's writing, all were uneasy about what it revealed. The following passage, taken from critic Giuseppe Ravegnani's 1930 study "I Contemporanei," clearly demonstrates this point:

It seems to us ... that female literature, particularly the recent one, likes putting on trousers, and has the mania of putting a mask of openness and even cynicism on its face (...) As for us, we would like a woman, especially if overflowing with ink, to be old-fashioned, perhaps romantic, homey, and a little exhausted by housework; that is to say, concerned with what may well be a world precluded to man's observation, frightened to offend and to pervert the nature of femininity's intimate secret.⁸²

⁸¹ A journalist sent to cover the proceedings of an annual women's caucus in Rome (1890's) had these comments to make at meeting's end, when in his opinion the gentle tone had changed to hostile as the acceptable discussions of educational and religious matters gave way to the more hardline (and threatening) issues such as women's suffrage and divorce: "Nelle conversazioni, negli attriti d'idee, nelle risposte secche e perfino aspre a qualche timida obiezione maschile, voi scoprivate una inattesa forza di dialettica formidabile...E poi il linguaggio d'uso pareva diverso. S'era fatto virilmente duro, frettoloso, deciso e preciso. Per questa china ci avviamo alla soppressione d'ogni superfluo complimento, d'ogni inutile cerimonia...Sarà bene o sarà male? Come uomo risponderai malissimo. Ma troverei forse di parer contrario le signore che sussurrarono e rumoreggiarono, quasi urtate e stizzite, quando un galante oratore alluse al fascino irresistibile del sorriso femminile. Eppure, a Congresso chiuso, noi amiamo sperare che non tutte le signore, che vi presero parte, siano disposte alle troppe rinunzie a cui l'ala estrema delle femministe vorrebbe costringerle." Annibale Gabrielli, "Note sul Congresso femminile," *Fanfulla della domenica* (no date or publication information available) Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma, Rome.

⁸² As quoted in Pickering-Jazzi 107-108

The threatening nature of women's texts can be further explained by patriarchal society's pervasive dread of women.⁸³ Reader-response theory has shown that textuality is indeed gender-biased in the sense that male writers typically write for readers of both sexes, but from a pointedly masculine perspective, whereas women writers, especially of the nineteenth century, created texts almost exclusively for women. In *Gender and Reading*, Patrocinio Schweickart elaborates a theory of reading which states:

The extreme anxiety raised by the issue of solipsism in masculine Western thought derives from a pattern of habitually effacing the other, of which the control of textuality is but one manifestation [...] Perhaps what is at issue here has less to do with effacing the other than with a need to protect a certain concept of the self.⁸⁴

Judith Fetterley further explains that because in a patriarchal culture, "what is good for men is bad for women," texts written by men will frequently be "inimical" to women.⁸⁵ Fetterley and Schweickart are proposing that under the guise of educating women and broadening their perspectives, men have preserved their own sense of self and "immasculated" women. Also, since men control the literature, they define as good what empowers them and serves their interests. When men insist that their texts are the only ones worth reading, they in fact protect themselves against the same "inimical" experience that they impose on women. When faced with a woman's text, Fetterley says that men will

⁸³ Although feminists have used this concept widely to describe a social condition existing within patriarchal society, it was first introduced by psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1885-1952) in response to the belief at the time that the female castration complex left a girl "psychically" damaged because she did not possess a penis. "She [Horney] proposed one of the first systematic arguments against Freud's theory that penis envy constituted the central organizing force in female development. She argued that masculine narcissism was responsible for the assumption that the female feels her genital to be inferior and that male envy and fear of the female's reproductive capacity is the underlying motive behind this assumption." *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* 161.

⁸⁴ Judith Fetterley quotes Patrocinio Schweickart in "Reading About Reading" 153

⁸⁵ Fetterley 153.

...enter the situation bound by a set of powerful assumptions. Prime among these is the equation of textuality with masculine subject and masculine point of view. Thus, it is not simply that men cannot read the text that is placed before them. Rather, they literally cannot recognize it as a text because they cannot imagine that women have stories.⁸⁶

If men could imagine that women have stories, they might have reason to fear the same treatment that they imposed on women throughout literary history. Perhaps this begins to explain the suspicion with which the literary establishment regarded the intimate nature of women's texts. If writing represents a fantasy aspect of the psyche, this glimpse into a woman's "story" naturally provokes suspicion and anxiety and becomes a threat to masculine self-preservation.⁸⁷ Thus, the *coscienza infelice* which troubled women's writing actually had its roots in the troubled psyches of men.

Naturally, the fantasy aspect of a woman's text could also be read as an invitation to the public to "read" her story, one which may have had an erotic and subversive plot otherwise forbidden in real life. As the erotic side of female life was not considered a proper topic of conversation among nineteenth-century women, Judith Fetterley suggests that literature may have provided women access to an erotic world where written language "spoke" to them.⁸⁸ At an unconscious level, women readers

⁸⁶ Fetterley 147-148.

⁸⁷ In Italy, where the emergence of women's writing was met with particular resistance, many of the country's prominent male writers voiced their anxieties with increasing uneasiness. In her essay "Scrittori, scrittrici e industria culturale: *Suo marito* di Pirandello," Lucienne Kroha uses a quotation from one such writer, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, to illustrate the "threatening nature" of women's writing for the literary establishment: "Le recensioni di Borgese a testi femminili sono particolarmente interessanti, perché tradiscono, oltre al disprezzo e la condiscendenza, anche la perplessità di chi si trova a dover accogliere un punto di vista 'diverso'. Non solo fa notare come nel romanzo *La paura di amare* di Carola Prosperi << il mondo si trasfigura stranamente falsificato in una prospettiva tutta femminile >>, ma, anziché riconoscere nei *Divoratori* di Annie Vivanti il capovolgimento fantastico della prospettiva maschile, ironizza sul fatto che nel mondo "puerile" della scrittrice << gli uomini non sono indispensabili: Anzi gli uomini non sono che comparse: belli e robusti animali che aiutano le poetesse a generar le musiciste e aiutano le musiciste a generare, poniamo caso, le pittrici. Solo i re sono probi e sapienti, ovvero si dice che sian probi e sapienti; in realtà, sono i mariti delle regine. >> " *Otto-Novecento*, vol. 19 no.5, Sept.-Oct. 1995, 170.

⁸⁸ "Our discussions (Fetterley and her university students) led us to feel closer to nineteenth-century women readers as well as to women writers, for we began to think that we might understand in some essential way why nineteenth-century American women read with such passion, even avidity, the work of their contemporaries, despite the steady stream of warnings delivered to them on the abuses of novel reading. We began to speculate on the degree to which the reading of women's texts

and writers, probably more than men, used the romance novel with its erotic overtones as a metaphor of sexuality. The eroticism implicit in women's writing suggests one more reason why it provoked such anxiety. Manifestations of this anxiety are evident throughout the literary production of men and women from the previous century, as women's texts also came under attack as sources of corruption.⁸⁹

Women who read romance novels were often thought to be silly, flighty, and easily corruptible. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the character of Emma Bovary, whose romantic disposition, and eventual fall from grace, were attributed to her reading of romance novels. Emma's delusions about love and marriage are, in fact, directly related to what she "learned" from reading romances: "Emma cercava di immaginare esattamente cosa si intendesse nella vita con quelle parole, felicità, passione, ebbrezza che le erano parse tanto belle nei libri."⁹⁰ While it is clear that male writers such as Flaubert regarded romance novels with suspicion, manifestations of the *coscienza infelice* are also pervasive throughout texts written by women. In *Il marito*, Sperani attributes the protagonist's alienation to her interest in reading, as likewise the townspeople blamed her corruptibility on the romantic disposition she acquired from reading romance novels. As writing alienated the protagonist, so too did "attempting the pen" alienate woman writers, some of whom went to great lengths to conceal their literary ambitions. In her introduction to a collection of short stories, the Marchesa Colombi (Maria-Antonietta Torriani-Torelli, 1846-1920), attempts to distance herself from her perceived

by women might have been and might still be eroticized... Might not the gratifications of masturbation and the gratifications of reading women's texts be similar for women?" "Reading About Reading" 151.

⁸⁹ In the following passage from Neera's preface to *Addio!*, the writer is forced to defend the novel's "integrity" against charges of "immorality" brought about by critics: "La morale oltraggiata, voi dite? Ma se dalla prima all'ultima parola è tutto un inno alla morale? se accanto alle frasi più appassionate c'è sempre il grido della coscienza, egualmente vero, egualmente forte?... Forse che lo scrittore deve prendersi la responsabilità dei casi di coscienza e delle mancanze di educazione del pubblico?" Neera, preface to *Addio!* (Milano: Baldini, Castoldi e C., 1904) viii, x.

⁹⁰ Pozzato quoting Flaubert in *Il romanzo rosa* 102. For an excellent analysis of the *elemento rosa* in Flaubert, Jane Austen and others, see pages 96-122.

literary ambitions in a seven-page long sentimental appeal to her readers in which she explains that her main reason for writing is to have money to spend on her family:

Per tutti i cavallini e le carozze e le armate internazionali di legno e di piombo che faranno impazzire di gioia i miei bimbi, per tutte le bambole e le casine e le cucinette ed i corredini, che ispireranno alle bambine le prime idee casalinghe e materne, pei vezzi, pegli abiti, pei buoni libri che faranno sorridere e palpitare le giovenette, io auguro al mio nuovo editore che questo libro gli porti fortuna.⁹¹

Women writers also attempted to distance themselves from one another by denigrating each other's literary accomplishments. While attempting to claim the maternal tradition for themselves, at the same time these writers exhibited ambivalence and even hostility when faced with the accomplishments of other women.⁹² In the following passage, Neera sarcastically dismisses as unworthy of consideration much of women's literary production, reducing even the more serious endeavors to sentimental excess.

Voglio scartare subito per non perdere tempo, e perché veramente è superfluo parlarne, le candidate spinte alla letteratura dalla vanità, dall'ozio o dalla semplice imitazione; mettiamo pure nel numero anche quelle che vi si applicano come ad una nuova forma di *flirt* - che sono parecchie - e prendiamo direttamente a considerare lo scopo utilitario, il solo che abbia almeno apparenza di serietà. È stato osservato che la donna scrive più facilmente dell'uomo, e ciò è vero se si considera l'abbondanza della sua corrispondenza; ma se vogliamo ricercare il perché di cotale abbondanza, piuttosto che nella disposizione della mente non lo troveremo forse nelle

⁹¹ Quoted in "The Marchesa Colombi's *Un matrimonio in provincia*: Style as Subversion," *The Woman Writer in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy* Lucienne Kroha 47.

⁹² *No Man's Land* 201.

abitudini sedentarie e nel bisogno di sfogo sentimentale? Occorre tuttavia aver presente che altro è scrivere lettere ad amici ed altro volumi per il pubblico, appunto perché il contenuto e non la forma fa il vero scrittore e si può imparare a scrivere bene, ma, se non si ha nulla a dire, scrittori non si diventa.⁹³

Throughout Bruno Sperani's texts, there is evidence of such ambivalence towards the literary accomplishments of other women writers, most of whom she describes as "...romanzieri inconsapevoli, tormentate dal bisogno di inventare, trascinate a mentire da un'esuberanza morbosa di fantasia."⁹⁴ Implicit in this statement is a rebellion against the sentimental, late-Romantic literary style to which most women writers, including herself, were still bound. Throughout her literary production, male artists and otherwise enlightened men are depicted in the most favorable manner. It comes as no surprise that in *Numeri e sogni*, her only novel written exclusively in the naturalist style of *Verismo*, she makes a personal statement regarding one of France's most famous literary woman, Madame de Staël (1766-1817), who has been credited with bringing Romanticism to Italy.⁹⁵ In the following passage, Donna Altobella, (a self-serving, arrogant aristocrat who is forced to spend some months of the year on her husband's rural estate) is raving about the vulgarities and inconveniences of the country as compared to the sophisticated lifestyle which the city offers:

Citava Madama Stäel, alla quale si vantava di somigliare (...) in questo suo odio. *Comment! vous avez encore le préjugé de la campagne?*

⁹³ Neera, "La donna scrittrice," *Le idee di una donna* (Milano: Baldini, Castoldi e C.) 95-96.

⁹⁴ Camerino Colummi n.p.

⁹⁵ "Il fatto nuovo nella cultura europea dei primi decenni del secolo XIX è, come tutti sanno, il Romanticismo. In Italia esso fa il suo ingresso ufficiale con la pubblicazione, nel 1816, di una lettera di Madame de Stäel in cui si invitavano i letterati italiani a prendere conoscenza delle nuove correnti letterarie oltremontane e a tradurre le opere dei maggiori scrittori del momento." Giuliano Procacci, *Storia degli italiani* (Roma: Laterza, 1990) 334.

diceva a quelli che le vantavano l'aria pura e la vita dei campi, compiacendosi di ripetere le parole della grande scrittrice.⁹⁶

Though Sperani is careful to give proper reverence to Staël, it is no mere coincidence that she would associate her with a disreputable character like Donna Altobella. The pause after *somigliare* adds to the ambiguity, for on the one hand, it seems to indicate that the similarity between the two women ends with their mutual dislike of the countryside, but on the other hand perhaps Sperani wished to leave that point somewhat vague. Stäel's right-wing monarchist and Romantic idealism would clash with Sperani's militant social utopianism. But while Sperani's political views would have left her suspicious of urbanization, her literary interests and lifestyle were firmly rooted in the industrial cities of Northern Italy. In *Numeri e sogni*, this debate is reflected in the protagonist's internal conflict as he searches for his identity between the big city of Milan and the tiny village where he was born. Although Madame de Stäel was one of the few "literary mothers" of Sperani's time, she nevertheless represented the old ways: individualistic, Romantic and politically anti-progressive.

Another example of how even the most successful women writers incorporated the *coscienza infelice* into their texts can be seen in Neera's (Anna Radius Zuccari, 1846-1918) classic *Teresa* (1886), a novel now regarded as one of the period's finest. In her study of the novel entitled "The Search for Literary Mothers: Neera's *Teresa*," Lucienne Kroha has identified the persona of George Sand in the reclusive figure of Calliope, a societal outcast who is a source of fear and fascination for the repressed Teresa. Although many of Neera's novels including *Teresa* are clearly written from a feminist perspective, she maintains a vehemently anti-feminist position in her personal letters and essays.⁹⁷ Kroha sees Calliope as a literary "other" created by Neera, representative of the anxiety she feels regarding her

⁹⁶ Bruno Sperani, *Numeri e sogni* (Milano: Giuseppe Galli, 1887) 450.

⁹⁷ See *Il concetto che ne informa. Benedetto Croce e Neera. Corrispondenza (1903-1917)*, eds. Antonia Arslan and Anna Folli (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1988).

role as a woman writer, and the possible consequences of such a transgression of traditional feminine values:

What are these consequences? ... Neera's misgivings are not, I believe, primarily of an ideological nature, but are far more deeply ingrained, so much so that they are projected onto a minor character, created precisely for the purpose of giving voice to them. ... The character in question is Calliope, the town madwoman "quella stramba nemica degli uomini ai quali faceva gli sberleffi, come un monello, dietro le ferriate del piano terreno" (p.91). Calliope lives in complete isolation, ostracized by the rest of the townspeople, for whom her mysterious past is a subject of endless speculation. For Teresa, who is forced to pass by her ground-floor window whenever she goes out, Calliope functions as a living example of the fate awaiting women who deviate from prescribed feminine behavior.⁹⁸

But while Neera sought to distance herself from her literary persona, her now-famous correspondences with Benedetto Croce illustrate the troubled father-daughter relationship into which many women writers entered with their male contemporaries, and which I will discuss further in the following chapter. The precarious situation in which women writers found themselves at the turn of the century, faced with a strong patriarchal literary model and a just-emerging, inferiorized and "corrupt" female model seems to indicate that, as Gilbert and Gubar observed, these writers experienced an "anxiety of authorship" which resulted in fear of reprisal and conflicting loyalties: male versus female role models, woman writer versus woman writer, and especially woman versus woman writer. And although for the first time in literary history women were given the narrative voice, they continually cast doubt on the validity of their own texts. Such conflicts caused women writers like Sperani and Neera to turn against each other

⁹⁸ Kroha 92.

to embrace a patriarchal literary model which they felt was superior. At that time, women writers were still largely dependent on and indebted to literary fathers for inspiration and approval. Attempts to narrate within the "male" genre proved problematic for women writers however, because according to Freud, girls may respect and admire their fathers, but only boys can fill their shoes.

CHAPTER FOUR

UNDER THE INFLUENCE: *LA SCRITTRICE VIRILE* AND THE PROBLEM WITH LITERARY FATHERS

As discussed in Chapter Three, women writers sought to distance themselves from their writing by various, often self-deprecating means. One way in which women writers accomplished this was by using literary pseudonyms. While it became something of a fad to use aristocratic or exotic sounding pseudonyms such as Marchesa Colombi, Contessa Lara, Willy Diaz, and Liala, the sheer numbers of women writing, almost all under assumed names, is a clear indication of the conflict which saw women writers attempting to cope with their newly formed literary personae. On the other hand though, the use of pseudonyms, especially the male ones, can be seen as a way to gain credibility.⁹⁹ By adopting these extravagant or powerful-sounding literary "others," women may have felt freer to experiment with different genres, or to express literary ambitions more openly. Bruno Sperani, or Beatrice Speraz, was actually one of the few Italian women to use a male pseudonym.

While the precise biographical information is not available to me, I assume Sperani's choice of pseudonym was made early in her career, and perhaps influenced by previous successful women writers such as George Eliot and George Sand. Before settling on the masculine choice, Sperani experimented with several feminine pseudonyms including Donna Isabella and Livia. But with the protection a masculine guise afforded her, she may have found herself freer to narrate outside the prescribed women's genre, which she regarded as inferior. By mimicking male narrative, Sperani attempted to usurp literary power for herself, or as Gilbert and Gubar put it, "sought an influx of patriarchal power."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Gilbert and Gubar note that women writers "... attempted to solve the literary problem of being female by presenting themselves as *male*. In effect, such writers protested not that they were "as good as men" but that as writers, they were men. Disguised as a man, after all, a woman writer could move vigorously away from the "lesser subjects" and "lesser lives" which had constrained her foremothers." *Madwoman* 65.

¹⁰⁰ "Rather than being a form of "masculinity complex" in Freud's sense, the male mimicry practiced by Victorian woman artists functioned to signify their acquiescence in their own (female) inferiority: by mimicking male precursors, they sought an influx of patriarchal power." *No Man's Land* 185.

By choosing a male pseudonym, Sperani makes an obvious attempt to mask her feminine identity in order to pursue what she regarded as serious literature. The male pseudonym gave her this freedom, as is evident in *Numeri e sogni*, a novel written under the influence of *Verismo*. While this novel was well received by critics, at the same time it earned her the label of the "*scrittrice virile*," the dreaded stereotype of the immasculated, trouser-wearing female novelist which haunted women writers like Neera.¹⁰¹ As I will show, these associations had negative consequences for Sperani's public image.

When Gilbert and Gubar devised their map of literary pathways, they found that early nineteenth-century women writers like Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, with no female literary role models, were extremely successful when they wrote within the male narrative genre.¹⁰² So, too, Bruno Sperani sometimes adopted the strong literary style of popular male writers of the day: French naturalists and Italian *veristi* such as Zolà, Daudet and Verga, and Russian writers such as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. *Nell'ingranaggio*, *Le vinte*, *Il romanzo della morte*, *Nella nebbia*, and *In balia del vento*, are titles of some Sperani novels which evoke the gloomy fatalism associated with Naturalism. In "Donne nell'ingranaggio. La narrativa di Bruno Sperani," Marinella Colummi Camerino observes:

I titoli di Bruno Sperani ... alludono ad una fatalità cieca che coinvolge - e travolge - i protagonisti dei suoi romanzi. Il richiamo alle leggi del sangue e della società, ad un destino predeterminato e chiuso che macina la vita degli individui "come un congegno pieno di ruote, di seghe, di punte di ferro che - scrive l'autrice - gira ciecamente intorno a se stesso" è ricorrente nell'opera speraniana e ne fa affiorare il generico sostrato deterministico.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ See Kroha's "Neera: The Literary Career of a Woman of the Nineteenth Century" and "The Search for Literary Mothers: Neera's *Teresa*".

¹⁰² *Madwoman* 72.

¹⁰³ Camerino Colummi 75.

An example of how such a pre-determined fate unfolds from a feminine perspective is in *Le vinte*. As previously mentioned, the protagonist Lucia is faced with an unhappy dilemma: she can either follow the example of her mother-in-law the "martyr," a long-suffering wife who has silently endured a lifetime of adultery and neglect by her husband, or she can choose to emulate her father-in-law's mistress Donna Ortensia, whom she calls a hypocrite because she has been at the center of scandals and vicious gossip while maintaining a façade of decorum. The novel has a typically naturalist outcome, suggesting that Sperani may have had Verga's *I vinti* in mind when she wrote this novel.¹⁰⁴ In Sperani's version however, the loneliness and claustrophobia of Lucia's existence in a marriage of convenience becomes the central theme of the text, rather than the adultery and disgrace which are typical of Verga's fallen women. Another interesting aspect of Sperani's text is its lack of closure, which in keeping with Verismo, offers no solution to Lucia's dilemma.

The influence of *Verismo* is evident in other Sperani novels. Her second and most acclaimed novel *Numeri e sogni* is a sprawling tale about the debilitating identity crisis experienced by a young male artist. Sperani tells the story of artistic frustration and impotence with the reserve and cautious objectivity of a Verga or a Zolà, creating an essentially positivist novel set in the art salons of Milan. While she does employ some of the more conventional narrative devices such as frequent *colpi di scena*, conspicuously absent are the typical sentimental or late-Romantic themes which dominate her other novels. Whereas in most of her texts the central theme is that of the *confronto polemico uomo-donna* (as discussed in chapter Two), in this novel the central theme is a *confronto uomo-uomo*, (or rather *donna-donna*), for although the protagonist is male, the conflict clearly points to a female identity struggle.

¹⁰⁴ "Il Verga sentiva che il progresso fatale della specie era costruito sull'infelicità della persona; donde il suo tragico sentimento della vita e la pietà per i vinti, cioè, sostanzialmente, per tutti gli uomini, condannati al dolore e alla morte, che costituisce la sostanza profonda della sua poesia." Mario Pazzaglia, *Letteratura italiana. Testi e critica con lineamenti di storia letteraria*, 2nd ed., vol 3 (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1986) 733.

Set in Northern Italy in 1868, *Numeri e sogni* begins with the upcoming graduation of the young artist Adriano Superti from the Accademia d'Arte in Bergamo. Adriano's parents have made great sacrifices to allow their son to study, and now with his graduation approaching, they expect he will return home to Cadinardi, a small town near Bergamo, and make his career painting portraits and the occasional fresco for a restaurant or café. Adriano has other plans however, and is seduced by the prospect of becoming a great artist, a goal he only can see fulfilled if he moves to Milan. Adriano's father is offended by this, seeing it as an affront to the family and to the city of Bergamo, which Adriano now views as inferior and uncultured compared to Milan:

Nei frattempo, egli aveva conosciuto degli artisti di fuori: era stato a Milano un paio di volte; aveva molto letto e molto fantasticato sul nuovo indirizzo dell'arte.¹⁰⁵

This comprises the first of a set of external conflicts which Sperani constructs in the narrative: big city versus small town, and progress versus tradition and patriarchy. Early on, Sperani describes Adriano as being insecure, indecisive, and tormented by artistic self-doubt, setting up a series of internal conflicts which make up the subtext of this complex drama:

Disgraziamente, se gli altri non erano contenti di Adriano, Adriano non era contento né di sé, né degli altri Si sentiva pieno di incertezze e di angosce, appena si metteva all'opera. Per concretarla, quest'opera, che gli balenava nella mente e lo innamorava, egli aveva soprattutto bisogno di tempo e di pace, della concentrazione di tutte le sue forze. Ogni minimo spreco poteva essere la sua rovina. Adriano Superti era, dunque, di quelli che piangono di rimorso dopo ogni debolezza non superata.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ *Numeri e sogni* 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Numeri e sogni* 4,12.

Adriano spends his first year in the city attempting to resolve some of the conflicts in his life. But his painting does not go well, and he is in constant debate with himself over artistic principles, such as the difference between real art and what he perceives as "arte di mestiere," or art for commercial profit, which he is afraid he will be forced into producing to support himself. Adriano is determined not to resort to commercial production, but the financial strain inevitably forces him into selling his talent for quick profit. He is also caught in the struggle of changing artistic movements; between the old, Romantic style which had dominated the first half of the century, and the newly-emerging and controversial Impressionism of the latter part of the century. Because the same debates over realism which dominated literature during the last quarter of the nineteenth century also existed in art, there is an insistence on the "quadro tolto dal vero" which Adriano considers progressive and "modern". The debate over modernity and individuality in art is juxtaposed to the problem of what is commercially viable, hence the title of the novel. Sperani's views can be summed up in the following description of a novel which Adriano illustrates for a friend:

Il romanzo portava per semplice titolo un nome: il nome e cognome del protagonista. Era uno dei primissimi tentativi del romanzo analitico, moderno... I personaggi sono tutti dell'oggi, e non hanno nulla di romantico: proprio, sembrano persone alla buona, come te e me! E anche gli avvenimenti sono avvenimenti comuni di tutti i giorni, raccontati con una certa libertà.¹⁰⁷

But modernity comes at a high price, as Adriano is tormented by his self-critical nature: "Era un vero moderno, lui, uno spirito eccessivamente critico e analizzatore, nato per tormentarsi."¹⁰⁸ At one point he attempts to free himself by reverting back to a traditional, Romantic style of painting, but when he finishes and calls his friends in to view the painting, he is overcome with anxiety and destroys it. He spends much of his

¹⁰⁷ *Numeri e sogni* 78.

¹⁰⁸ *Numeri e sogni* 97.

time wondering if he should go home to paint in the peace and serenity of the countryside. Eventually, Adriano's conflicts will reach a crisis point. On one occasion, he squanders a large sum of money entrusted to him by his father for the purpose of purchasing material for his sisters' wedding gowns. On another occasion he reacts violently when his favorite model, who lies dying of consumption, tells him she has had lovers. That same evening he returns home very late to find a telegram informing him that his father has died and that his family had been attempting to reach him. Adriano returns home the following day full of guilt over his behavior the previous evening while his father lay dying. Upon returning home, Adriano is promptly installed as head of the family. During this time he is able to find some solace in his new life away from the problems he had encountered in the city. He is even able to complete a painting which is well received in Milan. Also, his mother chooses a wife for him whom he finds pleasant, but for whom he has no romantic feelings. He hopes that the stability of marriage and family life will inspire him to paint. But guilt and desperation are his motivating factors, and even Adriano is aware of how tenuous they are. When he returns to Milan to settle his affairs, he has difficulty accepting the decisions he has made. He stays longer than he had intended, and is only able to leave when he learns that the model whom he once cared for has died.

Once established as head of the family, Adriano throws himself into his new life. But the peace and tranquillity which he initially experiences are short-lived, as old insecurities return to wreak havoc. Adriano is once again plagued by self-doubt, and finds he is as unable to paint in the countryside as he was in the city. He goes on long walks to distract himself and dreams of a life which is "puramente vegetativa."¹⁰⁹ There is much talk of dreams, fantasy, and escape. He claims that the artist who is worst off is the one like himself - who seeks out autonomy and cannot bend to the commercial

¹⁰⁹ *Numeri e sogni* 213.

demands which would have enabled him to earn money. Each time Adriano attempts to paint, something sidetracks him. When he attempts to do a landscape, it rains for a month. When the rains stop, the landscape has changed and he is unable to paint it. When he does a portrait of some peasant women, he is so filled with self-doubt and loathing that he refuses to show it. Only when an artist friend of Adriano's from Milan decides to pay a visit and praises the painting does Adriano suddenly feel legitimized. He decides to show some of his other paintings at an exhibit, but is criticized for not sticking to one painting style. Because he had desperately been attempting to "find himself" in the city, then in the country, his changing artistic moods are reflected in his painting. Sperani interjects in the narrative to defend his middle-of-the-road painting style which she sees as modern. This is the first time in the narrative that Sperani defends the hapless Adriano:

Il quadro grande, appunto perché si staccava egualmente dalle due scuole, cercando di riunire le buone qualità di tutte e due, accennando a una strada nuovissima, più libera e vigorosa della vecchia scuola pseudo-classica e romantica, più ragionevole dell'impressionismo, veniva giudicato da ambe le parti un quadro di carattere ibrido; ricco di pregi, naturalmente, quadro pensato, lavoro di un ingegno, ma ibrido.¹¹⁰

The last part of the novel chronicles Adriano's personal and professional demise. Trapped in a loveless marriage, he commits adultery with the wife of a colleague in Milan, and then falls in love with his cousin Eugenia. A large part of the second half of the novel is dedicated to the story of Eugenia and her ill-fated love affair with a young man who is killed while attempting to elope with her. Although this story line is secondary in terms of its relevance to the narrative, Eugenia is an interesting character because of her relationship to Adriano.

¹¹⁰ *Numeri e sogni* 293.

Her background is sketchy. Born out of wedlock to an aunt of Adriano's and a captain in the French military, she is brought to live in Adriano's house as a young child, whereupon he takes charge of her upbringing. While Eugenia is still an adolescent, Adriano finds himself attracted to her, and even vehemently protests her engagement to a very suitable young man. Eugenia's love-affair is cut short by her fiancé's death, causing her to sink into a depression lasting several years. During this time, Adriano decides to teach Eugenia to paint to help her recover. While Adriano falls deeply in love, Eugenia experiences a sort of "awakening," discovering in herself a talent which she never knew. Eugenia is grateful to Adriano for his tutelage, but she soon becomes aware of his feelings for her. This confuses her, for although she too is attracted to him, she knows that such a situation is impossible. Rather than become a "fallen" woman like her mother, Eugenia decides to leave Adriano's house and go to France to study painting. Adriano is devastated and initially refuses to allow it, professing his love to her and proposing that they run away together. She refuses him, choosing instead to make a name for herself abroad.¹¹¹ This rejection reduces him to a state of depression from which he does not recover.

Numeri e sogni ends on an ironic note, taking it momentarily out of the naturalist mold to which it had adhered rather faithfully up to that point. When Adriano's wife Filomena is unable to tolerate his depression over the loss of Eugenia any longer, she offers him a separation. He refuses, but in true naturalist style, Sperani does not have him fall in love with his wife again and live happily ever after. Adriano is deeply moved and humiliated by her generosity, but can offer her a relationship based only on friendship, admiration and respect, nothing more. Filomena is devastated by the implication, but knows that she must be content with this to keep the family together. Then, as if in a dream, Adriano encounters an old artist friend of his returning home from his military service with Garibaldi, where he has been commended for bravery. Profoundly moved

¹¹¹ Like Leonilda in *Il marito*, Eugenia must go abroad (in both cases to France) to fulfill her ambitions.

by the soldier's heroism, Adriano acknowledges that he himself has been a failure.

Ora si giudicava senza collera e senza orgoglio. Forse non si giudicava affatto. Aveva pietà di sé medesimo come degli altri. Era stato un uomo debole, pieno d'incertezze, tormentato da pregiudizii ereditari, pieno di slanci, di aspirazioni e mancante di energica resistenza, di tenaci impulsi: si rassegnava a questo.¹¹²

Inspired, Adriano concludes that the "pure" art he has been striving to achieve is not found solely in the material accomplishments of men, like painting or sculpture. Instead, it is part of the spiritual world. It exists in the spirit of man, intrinsically linked to the human psyche, where acts of heroism and altruism represent true works of art. In this conclusion, politics and philosophy fuse to embrace the Hegelian notion of art having socially redeeming consequences, a concept which Sperani champions throughout her writing.¹¹³

Numeri e sogni represents, on one level, a woman writer attempting to write within a male narrative genre. For the most part, this novel successfully describes and details the problems faced by the artist Adriano as he struggles against the establishment which values only that which is commercially profitable. This novel has many of the narrative qualities which made the *romanzo verista* successful when used by male writers. Where this novel differs though, from the perspective of gender, is that the major conflicts experienced by the protagonist are primarily internal and caused by guilt, insecurities and excessive preoccupations. The external conflicts which provide the framework for this novel involve the debate over artistic movements and painting

¹¹² *Numeri e sogni* 612.

¹¹³ The idea of art being intrinsically linked to the human psyche, having socially redeeming consequences, could be extrapolated from the political philosophy of Russian utopists such as Vissarion Belinski, who was widely read in Italian leftist circles of the time. In the 1840's he wrote: "La libertà creativa si concilia facilmente col servizio alle esigenze sociali; per questo non occorre forzare se stessi, non occorre scrivere su temi obbligati, violentare la fantasia. Per questo basta essere cittadini del proprio paese, figli della propria società contemporanea. Per questo occorre un sentimento di simpatia, di amore, un sano senso pratico della realtà; così ciò che è entrato e si è profondamente impresso nell'animo, spontaneamente rifiorirà in esso come una manifestazione artistica." Giuseppe Berti, introduction, *Il pensiero democratico russo nel XIX secolo. Scritti di Belinski, Herzen, Cerniscevski, e Dobroliubov*, eds. Giuseppe Berti and Maria Bianca Gallinaro (Firenze: Casa Editrice G.C. Sansoni, 1950) xiv.

styles, the value of pure art versus art for commercial profit, the benefits of the city versus the country, and to a lesser extent the consequences resulting from the lack of divorce laws in Italy. But central to Adriano's struggles as an artist is his own incapacity to function efficiently at any level. He fails as an artist, as a shopkeeper, as a husband, a father and even as a lover. His problems result primarily from the indecisiveness and fear of failure which torment him from the beginning of his career. Crucial to Sperani's portrayal of Adriano is the insistence that he is a true artist, even though his artistic production is mediocre: "[Adriano] era un artista. Questo almeno gli restava ancora...per un po' di anni. Era una fonte di gioia indiscutibile, forse la più pura, forse la sola."¹¹⁴

At a superficial level, Sperani's troubled literary persona is immediately evident in Adriano's struggles against the establishment, as one critic from the literary magazine *Rassegna Critica* noted: "In *Numeri e sogni* v'ha la virile robustezza di scrittrice - che tutti riconoscono nell'Adriano."¹¹⁵ But Adriano's struggle has little to do with talent and all to do with psychology. In the following paragraphs I will show how this internal conflict points essentially to a female identity crisis, though attributed to a male protagonist. When Gilbert and Gubar devised their map of literary paths, one such pathway led the woman writer to what they describe as artistic impotence. This pathway corresponds to Freud's belief that if a girl was unable to make the "correct" sexual choice, she would remain in an obstinate state of sexual "frigidity," rejecting both male and female role models:

The woman writer may be so overwhelmed by the male-female competition her creativity seems to instigate that she might choose to relinquish literary desire altogether. Such a renunciation of desire is, of course, the strategy Freud sees at the heart of female frigidity, for the girl who rebels against the "unpleasant facts" of her situation may, in his view, "turn her back on

¹¹⁴ *Numeri e sogni* 613.

¹¹⁵ "Alcuni giudizi della stampa italiana su i romanzi di Bruno Sperani", in appendix to *Tre donne*, by Bruno Sperani, (Milano: Libreria Editrice Galli, 1891) 26.

sexuality [that is, desire] altogether" (FS198). Analogously, the woman who turns her back on aesthetic ambition would seem to have been so alarmed by "unpleasant" facts that she has become completely inhibited.¹¹⁶

What the authors found is that often women writers expressed this "frigid rejection" through the struggles of a protagonist like Adriano, a writer or an artist who for various reasons is unable to pursue a career.

... the female *Künstlerroman* tradition frequently explores the lives not just of literary women but of would-be painters, actresses, musicians and sculptors in order to record the problems posed by the renunciation of artistic desire.¹¹⁷

Gilbert and Gubar observed that turn-of-the-century women writers like Sperani may have experienced their "anxieties of authorship" as an "affiliation complex," engaging them in a struggle of loyalties between a revered paternal model, and a newly emerging, comparably second-rate matrilineal tradition.¹¹⁸ In *Numeri e sogni*, the issue is somewhat complicated by the fact that Sperani's protagonist is male. But Sperani's physical description of Adriano clearly oscillates between masculine and feminine overtones:

Anche il suo fisico si modificò con vantaggio dell'estetica. Le sue forme si assottigliarono, divennero più eleganti; la sua statura, di poco superiore alla media, sembrò allungarsi; la floridezza esurbante delle sue guance diminuì sensibilmente; gli occhi, di un tono azzurro-cupo, divennero più profondi, lo sguardo più intenso; i suoi lineamenti, serbanti ancora una morbidezza e una rotondità femminea si squadrarono, e l'energia virile si manifestò decisamente nel suo viso geniale quando si lasciò crescere la barba: una barbetta alla romana, corta e morbida.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ *No Man's Land* 181.

¹¹⁷ *No Man's Land* 183.

¹¹⁸ *No Man's Land* 169.

¹¹⁹ *Numeri e sogni* 10-11.

Just as the blushing heroines of the *rosa* suddenly bloom into womanhood upon marriage, so Adriano's changing physical characteristics are an important clue to his maturity. Further on we discover that Adriano is a nervous, high-strung type, given to fits of depression and self-loathing brought about by guilt and insecurity. Adriano is also excessively preoccupied with his family's approval. These preoccupations are profoundly intimate, connected to a troubled psyche and based primarily on guilt, first for having left his family, and more significantly, for having accepted their generosity:

Tutto per lui. Per lui, che a venticinque anni compiuti non guadagnava un centesimo, per la sua fissazione egoista...si, egoista! era la parola terribile che la coscienza gli mormorava, che i nervi eccitati dalla fatica facevano rimbombare nel suo cervello. ¹²⁰

This troubled family connection will eventually end Adriano's painting career in Milano. When the father dies, he is expected to return home, marry the woman his mother has chosen, and take over the family business. While similar dilemmas existed in the male world, in a female consciousness familial obligations were sure to take precedence over other matters. For the woman writer, a literary career may have placed her at odds with society's expectations that she live up to domestic obligations, as well as with her own desire for a family life.¹²¹ Such a dilemma does in fact dominate Adriano's life. Once married, his relationship with his wife Filomena proves to be a constant source of agony for them both, for which he clearly takes the blame:

Ed egli cadeva. Si sentiva precipitare giù giù nella infinita miseria...non soltanto egli era infelicissimo, ma faceva infelice gli altri. Qualunque cosa dicesse in propria giustificazione, Filomena era la sua vittima. Inutile il sacrificio, lo sforzo sterile. Inutile, sterile! Queste due parole si erano

¹²⁰ *Numeri e sogni* 10-11.

¹²¹ Elaine Showalter quotes English novelist Dorothy M. Richardson, who felt that "Women's responsiveness to human demands kept them from becoming great artists." *A Literature of Their Own* 251.

confitte nel suo cervello: lo consumavano. Certo, questa inutilità doveva derivare da *insufficienza* personale. Egli non faceva abbastanza sforzi per la felicità degli altri. Filomena era trascurata, maltrattata.¹²²

Based on the premise that a part of Adriano's identity is feminine, his fear of failure can be directly attributed to a problem of role models as experienced by nineteenth-century women writers. Adriano is torn between competing artistic movements in the same way that the woman writer may have felt conflicting loyalties to both her literary fathers and the newly emerging female tradition. At the point at which he attempts his own style, he is criticized by the artistic community for being unsure of himself. But it is the same circle of male artists who give Adriano the self-esteem to show his painting *Povere donne*, whereas at home, his supportive female family members cannot motivate him. This closely-knit artistic circle reflects the patriarchy which dominated the arts and literature, and which writers like Sperani both admired and resented. Even the name of the painting, *Povere donne*, which Adriano submits to his male friends' critical eyes, is a metaphor for the women's inferiorized position. It is only at the end of the novel, when Eugenia replaces her mentor, that Sperani fully acknowledges women's contribution. When Adriano falls in love with his pupil Eugenia, he fulfills the typical father-daughter paradigm of romance literature. But in this novel, where the father is a failure, the daughter will be a success. It is Eugenia who, (only after leaving Italy), goes off to the most important art city in the world to paint. And it is she who takes Adriano's painting to the exhibit in Paris where it wins a prize. The father-daughter paradigm therefore falls apart when the teacher is replaced by his student. But Adriano has not been replaced because of a lack of talent. It is his own fear of failure and lack of self-esteem which override all his rationalizations for why he cannot paint.

Sperani's use of a male protagonist to illustrate what can also be read as a female identity crisis can be approached from several critical perspectives. Assuming that a

¹²² *Numeri e sogni* 427- 428.

combination of conscious and unconscious drives is at work in all artistic endeavors, then one altogether conscious motivation might have been that a male protagonist could move about more easily in the artistic circles featured in the novel. Just as Sperani may have chosen a male pseudonym for more freedom and credibility in her career, she may have chosen a male protagonist in this role for similar reasons. In addition, this conscious choice would have allowed Sperani to fulfill her reversal of the father-daughter literary paradigm, allowing Eugenia to replace her literary father for the next generation of artists. At an unconscious level, Adriano's "feminine" identity, and subsequent creative struggle suggests the "affiliation complex" which Sperani may have experienced in her precarious role as a woman writer at the turn-of-the-century.

The intimate nature of the crisis Adriano undergoes emphasizes the ambivalence with which women writers like Sperani embraced the male literary tradition. Although Sperani does attempt to work within the style of *Verismo*, she succeeds in depicting an identity struggle in all of its minute aspects, bringing it closer to the psychological novel of the twentieth century. The novel was well received by critics for its robust, "virile" quality. In the *Gazzetta Letteraria*, the critic Depanis says: "*Numeri e sogni* – un romanzo senza alcun dubbio vigoroso ed audace; e, nella terza parte specialmente, virilmente efficace."¹²³ Notwithstanding its critical acclaim, *Numeri e sogni* was a commercial failure. According to critic and writer Ugo Valcarengi, the novel lacked the conventional narrative devices which made women's texts popular with a bourgeois reading public:

Il pubblico, il gran pubblico da troppo tempo avezzo alle diagnosi trascendentali del crudo verismo e alle passionali vicende del romanticismo intricato e immaginoso, non fu, come la Critica, così benevolmente sollecito nell'accoglierlo e nel giudicarlo.¹²⁴

¹²³ Appendix *Tre donne* 9.

¹²⁴ Ugo Valcarengi, *Rievocazioni* (Milano: L'editrice Italiana, 1932) 27.

Furthermore, he observes that Sperani's public persona was compromised by her unpopular political beliefs: "Il romanzo era anti-borghese, e l'Autrice vi appariva come una bohemienne un poco animata da uno spirito di ribellione fustigatrice delle convenzioni sociali e dei moderni costumi."¹²⁵ Though he may admire her strong narrative style, at the same time Valcarengi makes a point of describing her deteriorated physical appearance after she has become a successful novelist, giving credibility to the popular stereotype of the unfeminine woman of letters: "La rividi parecchi anni più tardi e non la riconobbi. Si era di molto ingrassata."¹²⁶ The critical reviews of Sperani's other novels further emphasize the connection between her unpopular, immasculated public persona and literary demise. In an excerpt from a review written in 1888, a critic makes an interesting comparison between Sperani's well-received *L'avvocato Malperi* and *Il mistero del poeta*, a popular novel written by Antonio Fogazzaro:

Nel leggerlo [*L'avvocato Malperi*] mi è accaduto spesso una cosa curiosa. Alternativamente con questo leggevo *Il mistero del poeta* - di Antonio Fogazzaro, già pubblicato nella *Nuova Antologia*, e di sovente mi veniva fatto di confondere gli autori per modo di credere - *Il mistero del poeta* - racconto idealista, tutto sfumature di sentimenti, lavoro di una delicatissima intelligenza femminile; e - *L'avvocato Malperi* - frutto di lungo e serio studio di costumi, di un forte ingegno maschile.¹²⁷

Again, in the *Gazzetta Letteraria*, Depanis gives Sperani's novel a robust critique, but is careful to emphasize its feminine qualities: "La Sperani al vigore mascolino della pittura unisce l'acutezza dell'osservazione femminile."¹²⁸ By 1890, after the commercial failure of *Numeri e sogni*, Sperani's work began to take on a decisively more feminine

¹²⁵ Valcarengi 27.

¹²⁶ Valcarengi 26.

¹²⁷ Appendix *Tre donne* 13.

¹²⁸ Appendix *Tre donne* 16.

character similar to that of her first novel *Nell'ingranaggio*. *Il romanzo della morte* (1890) is a story about Argia and Fausto, betrothed lovers separated by Fausto's mother, who objects to Argia because she is poor and has no dowry. Due to a miscommunication while Fausto is away, Argia thinks she has been abandoned and one night, under "hypnotic suggestion," is seduced by a musician who is a guest in their home. Eventually, she learns she is pregnant, and so when Fausto returns, much to his bewilderment, she breaks off the engagement. When he discovers she has been unfaithful (though she does not reveal the details), he resolves that they should commit suicide to avoid the scandal which would involve him. They will eventually not commit suicide, but instead get married despite her condition, as he claims the child as his own. While the novel is poorly written and incoherent in places, it does present a serious case against the victimization of women and the social stigma which follows. *Il romanzo della morte* got fair to good reviews from critics who commented favorably. An excerpt from *Il Fanfulla della domenica* reads:

Opera di donna, ma non letterariamente femminile, vigorosa anzi e sentita, evidentemente dovuta ad un forte ingegno e ad una salda coscienza letteraria. Bruno Sperani (nessuno ignora più il nome reale dell'autrice) ci ha da qualche anno abituati a quel genere speciale d'arte spregiudicata, della quale la donna che l'ha adottata si fa banditrice, più presto talvolta e con più vibrato accento dell'uomo...[S]i possono non amare i libri di Bruno Sperani, e *Il romanzo della morte* non è certo il più amabile fra questi, ma torna impossibile lo sconoscere il robusto e virile ingegno dell'autrice, la sua rara e forte intesa delle cose umane, la sua poderosa energia di pensatrice.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Appendix *Tre donne* 18.

The novel's happy ending was not typical of Sperani's earlier works. This obvious departure from her previous style indicates a deliberate attempt by Sperani to make herself more mainstream, a strategy which proved successful, at least in terms of book sales. Felice Cameroni, Sperani's publisher, actually implores the public to read this novel, claiming it does not resemble her other more "rebellious" works, but that it is actually *comforting* to read:

Il romanzo della morte, in mezzo alle sue arditezze, è un libro di carità, il quale dice semplicemente: Fratelli, si muore; fate senno; buttate via i pregiudizi che vi impediscono di gustare questo po' di sole! Siate felici e cercate di rendere felici gli altri, come meglio potete! E' così confortante l'idea conclusionale del *Romanzo della morte*, che dovrebbe convincere persino quei timidi lettori, i quali rimasero perplessi avanti lo spirito ribelle d'altri volumi della stessa Sperani. Non si spaventino, questa volta! Se le proprie ipocrisie, le menzogne e le ingiustizie sociali del tutto non hanno in loro inardito il sentimento della pietà, dovranno persuadersi che // *romanzo della morte* è un'opera di pace.¹³⁰

In keeping with Cameroni's observation regarding the mild, "*comforting*" nature of this text, a critic from the *Rassegna critica* observes:

Ecco un romanzo diversamente bello dagli altri due che ho letto, finora, della Sperani: *Numeri e sogni* e *L'avvocato Malperi*. Se in quelli v'ha la virile robustezza di scrittrice - che tutti riconoscono nell'Adriano, -la niuna preoccupazione di fare un'opera d'arte dilettevole pel gran pubblico - come la vecchia scuola comandava dovesse farsi - se in quelli v'ha la studiosa propugnatrice di nuove e generose idee sociali, e l'osservatrice di caratteri moderni, in questo *Romanzo della morte* - cosa che non avrei

¹³⁰ Appendix *Tre donne* 20.

mai supposto - v'è una muliebre freschezza di passione, v'è, nel contesto, l'idea, il proposito di fare un delicatissimo romanzo, ed in gran parte, v'è riuscita.¹³¹

In other novels, Sperani's protagonists frenetically embrace a humanitarian cause. As socialism and feminism were intrinsically linked in the nineteenth century, Sperani's female protagonists became the *portavoci* for both social doctrine and political ideology. As the ideas of leftist Russian political thinkers such as Bielinski became popular in Italy, writers like Sperani were quick to adopt the ideology which incorporated art, social reform, and Russian literary style.¹³² Evidence that Sperani was influenced by the Russian literary model can be found in excerpts written by her publisher Felice Cameroni, who compares her passionate idealism and literary style to Tolstoy's. Marinella Camerino-Colummi observes:

In molti romanzi ci sono personaggi borghesi che si convertono all'idea umanitaria e al socialismo. E non infrequentemente sono personaggi femminili, o donne che hanno vissuto vicino ad uomini sensibili alle questioni sociali, o donne che hanno trovato autonomamente la loro vocazione, scoprendo che il grande movimento di idee rappresentato dal socialismo poteva salvarle dall'impotenza e dalla frustrazione delle loro vite borghesi. E' un moto istintivo di solidarietà quello che le avvicina alla causa degli oppressi che a Cameroni pare infatti un "ideale altruistico" che avvicina la Sperani a Tolstoi.¹³³

In the last of her critically acclaimed novels, *La fabbrica* (1896), Sperani denounces the growing industrial middle classes in Italy. The sub-plot is a love story in which the

¹³¹ Appendix *Tre donne* 26-27.

¹³² In *Il pensiero democratico russo nel XIX secolo*, Giuseppe Berti discusses the connections Bielinski made between political ideology and art, and its influence on Italian literary culture: "Bielinski pone il problema dei rapporti fra l'arte e la società, tra l'arte e la politica. Bielinski lottava per una tematica democratica e socialista della letteratura, per una poesia civile e rivoluzionaria." Introduction xv.

¹³³ Camerino Colummi n.p.

heroine Luisa is a poor, working class girl, seduced by a wealthy capitalist and forced to put the child born out of this relationship into an orphanage. Her life is a series of terrible misfortunes including the death of the child, eviction from the house she shares with her bedridden mother, and finally the death of her lover Francesco Bitossi, a factory worker and socialist leader who is killed in a work-related accident. The owners of the factory are criminally liable for faulty construction, which they purposefully chose to cut building costs. Bitossi becomes aware of their scheme, but because of his previous prison sentence for anti-government (socialist) activity, he is being blackmailed by the factory owners to allow it to pass inspection. When he finally resolves to blow the whistle on their operation at a union rally he has organized, the factory walls cave in, killing him and several other men. No charges are brought against the guilty parties, and Luisa, who previously could not understand Francesco's passion for the socialist cause, is dramatically made aware of the plight of the working classes. In a violent fit of anger, Luisa avenges Bitossi's death, the death of her son (and by analogy the exploited underclasses), by waiting outside the home of the man who had fathered her child (who also had financial interests in the factory) and shooting him to death. This may be the first novel written by a woman where the heroine commits premeditated murder. Ugo Valcarengi observed:

Oserei dire che ha trasfuso in quel romanzo le sue maschie sembianze; poiché *spogliata* da ogni femminile e suggestiva sentimentalità, seppe assurgere, in forme austeramente levigate e corrette, a quell'impressionante obbiettivismo per il quale la realtà non si trasfigura, ma efficacemente si imprime nell'animo del lettore con risultati di commozione profonda e di umanità redentrice.¹³⁴ (*emphasis mine*)

Though Valcharenghi's comments emphasize the strength of Sperani's narrative, his use of the term *spogliata* lends itself to metaphorical interpretation. Sperani's literary

¹³⁴ Valcarengi 31-32.

success depended not only on the appeal of her books, but also to a significant extent on the public's image of her. The further she veered from the typically feminine and "politically correct" public image demanded of nineteenth-century women novelists, the more she alienated her reading public. While enthusiastic about her work, newspaper reviews perhaps inadvertently reinforced the public's image of Sperani as a free-thinking rebel who had little in common with the "proper" bourgeois ladies who read her books. By the turn of the century, Sperani's literary career had all but faded. The few novels she published after that were of the *letteratura di consumo* variety, and except for an autobiographical account of her life entitled *Ricordi della mia infanzia in Dalmazia* (1915), she wrote nothing that even resembled her previously strong, "virile" narratives. As Valcarenghi pointed out, Sperani's commercial success as a novelist depended on her adhering to the more conventional narrative themes considered appropriate to women writers.

CONCLUSION

A FEMALE LITERARY TRADITION

As Italy's "lost women writers" sought to establish themselves somewhere in the literary culture, they found themselves faced with the problem of having no suitable role models. In addition, they were discouraged from attempting the otherwise serious literary endeavours which men pursued. Gilbert and Gubar observe:

.. the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention - all these phenomena of "inferiorization" mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart.¹³⁵

But women's literary production was multifaceted and complex, involving personal and professional conflicts, a desire to be heard, and ultimately the desire to publish. Most of all however, it represents women's need to express themselves creatively. While these early attempts appear crude when compared to the best of what was produced by male writers, the nineteenth century represents the first time in history that women in Italy "attempted the pen" *en masse*. While one cannot overlook the fact that Italy never had truly important nineteenth-century women writers as did England and France, nevertheless a female literary tradition did emerge in Italy which produced excellent novels such as *Teresa*, *Un matrimonio in provincia*, and *Una donna*.

¹³⁵ "... like most women in patriarchal society, the woman writer does experience her gender as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy; like most patriarchally conditioned women, in other words, she is victimized by what [Juliet] Mitchell calls << inferiorized and alternative (second sex) psychology of women under patriarchy. >> " *Madwoman* 50.

Novelists such as Bruno Sperani risked all by breaking out of conventional female genres to produce the bold, "virile" narrative seen in texts like *Numeri e sogni*. But if Sperani's creative struggles are reflected in the failures of characters such as Adriano, then her hopes for the future are equally represented by the success of Adriano's niece Eugenia, who by surpassing her mentor and going to Paris to paint, reverses the traditional father-daughter paradigm of literary history.

By applying Gilbert and Gubar's theories to the work of an Italian woman writer from the nineteenth century, we see certain themes and patterns emerge which are so similar to those found in the British and American novelists, that certain critical parallels can be drawn. The "coscienza infelice" which plagued Italian women's literature can be found to exist wherever women's writing was undervalued. The language that women writers developed to "speak" to their readers communicated many things that the literary establishment overlooked, or as Judith Fetterley points out, were unable to "read."¹³⁶ But women themselves intuitively read these messages, assimilating the carefully hidden subversiveness which many texts suggested, and which may have contributed to their lasting popularity.

¹³⁶ Fetterley "Reading about Reading," 151.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON BRUNO SPERANI

Beatrice Speraz was born in Dalmatia in 1843. She moved to Milan with a daughter in about 1876 where she began her journalistic career by writing articles for various newspapers and literary magazines, including *Perseveranza*, *La nazione*, *Il cafaro*, *La gazzetta letteraria*, *Il pugnolo*, *Il corriere della sera*, *Piccolo di Napoli* and *Il bersagliere*. She later began writing novels, many of which were first published in installments in the above-mentioned journals and newspapers. Early on in her literary career, Speraz took up the cause of women's emancipation and socialist reform:

Da quest'anno [1887] troviamo la Speraz vicina ai movimenti femministi e Cameroni, Ghisleri e Virginia Olper Monis. Tra la fine degli anni Ottanta e l'inizio del secolo, il periodo più produttivo della Sperani ... [la scrittrice] alterna l'attività giornalistica e l'impegno militante con il lavoro più propriamente letterario.¹³⁷

Bruno Sperani's literary career was broad and multifaceted.¹³⁸ Her literary subjects were varied, ranging from exploited peasant women in *Tre donne*, to the idle aristocracy in *Le vinte* and *La dama della regina*. She was a prolific writer and journalist until about the turn of the century, when her literary production all but stopped. Her life-long companion was the artist Vespasiano Bignami (no mention is made of their marital

¹³⁷ Camerino Colummi 75-76.

¹³⁸ Novels include: *Cesare* (Milano: Brigola, 1879), previously published under the title *Da morte a viva* (1877) in sequel for the literary magazine *Il pugnolo*, and later appeared in *Il sole* in 1879 under the title *Anime avvelenate*. *Veronica Grandi* (1883) published in sequel for *La nazione* but never published as a novel. *Nell'ingranaggio* (Milano: Sonzogno, 1885) later published in sequel for *La nazione*. *Numeri e sogni* (Milano: Galli, 1887) published in sequel for *Il corriere della sera*. *L'avvocato Malpieri* (Milano: Galli, 1888) published in sequel for *Il corriere della sera*. *Il romanzo della morte* (Milano: Galli, 1890), *Tre donne* (Milano: Galli, 1891), *Emma Walder* (Milano: Richiedei, 1893) *La fabbrica* (Milano: Aliprandi, 1893-1894?) *Il marito* (Torino: Roux, 1894), *Sulle due rive* (Milano: Aliprandi, 1896), *Le vinte* (Milano: Aliprandi, 1896), *In balia del vento* (Milano: "La Poligrafica" Società editrice, 1898?), *Macchia d'oro* (Catania: Giannotta, 1901), *Signorine povere* (Milano: Libreria editrice lombarda, 1905), *La dama della regina* (Milano: Vallardi, 1910), *Ricordi della mia infanzia in Dalmazia* (Milano: Vallardi, 1915), *Tragedia di una coscienza* (Firenze: Battistelli, 1920), *Teresita della Quercia* (Firenze: Salani, 1923). Volumes of short stories include: *Sotto l'incubo* (Garango, 1880), *Sempre amore* (Milano: Brigola, 1883), *Eterno inganno* (Milano: Aliprandi, 1891), *La commedia dell'amore* (Milano: Aliprandi, 1895), *Nel turbine della vita* (Firenze: Battistelli, 1920).

status). I do not know whether there were any children from this union, although the following passage would suggest that there were. On the occasion of her last novel, published at eighty years of age, her friend Ugo Valcarengi reflected:

Teresita della Quercia fu l'ultimo suo romanzo; che rimase molto tempo inedito. E' certamente saturo di filosofia e di esperienza. Ella è rimasta così sulla breccia sino all'ultimo istante della sua vita, combattiva ed equilibrata, produttiva e cosciente, intessuta di amarezze ma anche di placide e serene dolcezze; confortata e sorretta dall'amore di un uomo nobile e degno, di un grande artista; e dal costante e devoto amore della propria casa e alla propria famiglia.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Valcarengi 32.

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