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The (Un)Masking of Patriarchal Power in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Clothing the Naked*

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Abstract

This article explores the conflict between female and male voices in two plays by Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Clothing the Naked*. Through the representation of female characters who “talk back,” Pirandello unmasks gender roles as the product of patriarchal power and offers an alternative view to the self-righteous narratives of male characters, especially concerning sexual abuse. The result is a fractured, humoristic discourse, which reproduces patriarchal gender roles while at the same time casting a doubt on them – that they may well be a constrictive mask that men impose on women, and on themselves.

Introduction: The Patriarchal Script

The narrative and theatrical production of Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) is a tireless exploration of the conflicts that lie at the root of human relations and consciousness. Notable Pirandellian characters such as Signora Ponza, Delia Morello, Marta ‘l’amica delle mogli’ [the wives’ friend] and L’Ignota, whose unknowable identities and motivations provide the motors of the plots, epitomize the fragmentation of objective reality into irreconcilable subjective views. The problematic relationship between reality and representation, between individual identity and social masks, is reflected in the prominence of metatheatrical elements, which disrupt the conventions of realist drama. A long tradition of critical readings

of Pirandello's works has concentrated predominantly on their epistemological and individual dimensions rather than on the representation of existing conflicts in society; however, the theme of a conflict between irreconcilable versions of reality, which arguably runs throughout his whole *oeuvre*, is not entirely disconnected from a socio-political dimension.¹ In this article I focus on the conflict between different positions and discourses with respect to gender, linking epistemological and social planes. I look at power and discourse negotiation in two plays, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [Six Characters in Search of an Author] and *Vestire gli ignudi* [Clothing the Naked], paying specific attention to the theme of sexual abuse, which is at the center of heated confrontations between male and female characters but has been long neglected (and, in the case of *Clothing the Naked*, also spectacularly misread) by critics.²

Pirandello's literary and theatrical production engages extensively with the troubled relationship between the sexes, often proposing a rather conservative, when not plainly sexist, perspective on gender roles. The crisis of identity that the author represents, however, is also the crisis of an ideal harmony within the traditional family and of an ideal complementarity of the sexes.³ As Giovanni Macchia argues, "family is the dark seed that generates Pirandello's infinite episodes" (67). In fact, epistemological uncertainty and loss of identity

¹ For example, in Pirandello's historical novel *I vecchi e i giovani* [The Old and the Young] the interests of different generations, social classes and political groups are set against one another, without any single perspective emerging as that of the author/narrator. Through the juxtaposition of contrasting views, the novel produces an effect of ideological uncertainty, which mirrors the epistemological uncertainty that is found in many of the plays.

² The theme of sexual abuse, including rape and pedophilia, is widespread in Pirandello's work. For a study on this theme in Pirandello's short stories see Simona Bianconi, "La donna violata," and Luciano Parisi, "A Reading of *Alla zappa*."

³ Pirandello's first novel *L'esclusa* is exemplary in this respect.

are often triggered by a rupture in the continuum of the “patriarchal script.” With this term I refer to a performative narrative, a rhetorical device that serves to maintain and reproduce a state of social inequality based on a male/female binary. The patriarchal script works through the naturalization of features and roles that are in fact imposed, the creation of an artificial symmetry and complementarity between men and women, and the projection of a number of expelled or disparaged characteristics – such as emotions, the body, passivity and irrationality – onto women. In order to succeed, the patriarchal script needs to conceal the violence through which it operates and erase the perspective of the oppressed. While, in Kathy Ferguson’s formulation, on the institutional level the patriarchal order rests on “male dominance within family, state, religion, capitalism, education, and other social structures” (1049), on the level of discourse it creates and reflects “an exclusively masculine view of the world” (1048), which renders the experiences and perspectives of women invisible. In this way, “patriarchy establishes male dominance in its basic accounts of the world and its standards of knowledge and judgment, as well as in its concrete institutions and practices” (1049).

Recently, scholars have begun to engage critically with issues of gender in Pirandello’s work, an approach that has intensified since the early ’90s, although criticism on the subject to this day remains very limited. A number of studies have analyzed the roles and typologies of female characters, acknowledging the shaping force of patriarchy but often without fully articulating a critical perspective of the problematic dynamic of male subject and female object in artistic representation.⁴ Among critics, some have seen in Pirandello’s

⁴ See Roberto Alonge’s influential *Madri, baldracche, amanti*, and Umberto Mariani’s *La donna in Pirandello*. Other critical readings have focused on the role of actress Marta Abba as source of inspiration and muse of Pirandello’s theatrical production. See Daniela Bini, *Pirandello and His Muse*, and Carlo Ferrucci, *La musa ritrosa*. On the biographical aspect of Pirandello’s relationship with Marta Abba, see Pietro Frassica, *Her Maestro's Echo*.

work, mainly or exclusively, the reinforcement of patriarchal structures and the shaping force of the male gaze.⁵ Others claim instead that Pirandello's plays contain significant feminist elements that challenge patriarchal ideology.⁶ Bridging these two positions, Ann Caesar notes that, although "plots are deeply authoritarian and women are seriously chastised if they aspire to enter the male world" (55), female protagonists "have such integrity, intelligence and overall *presence* on the page that the effect is to attribute responsibility for their own downfall to the patriarchy they have to contend with and not to flaws in the female character" (55).⁷ Caesar's observation is integral to the present analysis as it brings patriarchal structures to the fore and suggests a possible distancing effect from the male construction of female characters.

Another relevant perspective is that of Daniela Bini and Luciana Martinelli, who have analyzed Pirandello's work highlighting the presence of a conflict between male and female characters, the limitations of the male *logos* and the performing of a revelatory function by female characters. As Martinelli observes, "the female perspective becomes the point of rupture in the male order of conscience" (13). Pursuing a similar line of inquiry, Bini, in her analysis of *Six Characters*, foregrounds the clash between the Father and the Stepdaughter as the core drama of the play, thus shifting away from a primary or exclusive focus on representational and epistemological themes, to which the Father wants to divert the

⁵ For example, Maggie Günsberg in *Patriarchal Representations* maintains that female characters are entirely male-defined and male-oriented; Mary Ann Frese Witt in "Woman or Mother?" describes a female subject that cannot escape being constrained by the male gaze. The "male gaze" is a feminist concept coined by Laura Mulvey in 1975. It refers to the tendency of visual artists to represent society from a male point of view and to portray women as objects.

⁶ See John Champagne, "A Feminist Pirandello: Female Agency in *As You Desire Me*."

⁷ This view is also congruent with the lens adopted by Enza De Francisci in her recent volume, *A 'New' Woman in Verga and Pirandello*, where she investigates the emergence of female voice and agency on stage.

audience's attention. Bini notes that "the Stepdaughter enacts the progressive deconstruction of the paternal text, performing, little by little, a true parricide" (170). While Martinelli and Bini are accurate in their analysis of the role of female characters in disrupting and challenging the male gaze, they both inadvertently replicate the binary logic of the patriarchal script by interpreting female characters as representing an anti-*logos* perspective, equating the female with the "value of the irrational" and arguing that "woman is the perfect character to represent the alogical nature of life" (Bini 183). These scholars follow the lines of a Derridian metaphorization and misappropriation of the feminine, which understands "woman" as the figure of elements that are expelled and repressed by logocentrism, such as the body and emotions, instead of considering the dualism between male and female and between mind and body as itself produced by a patriarchal discursive regime. As Sally Robinson notes about Jaques Derrida's *Spurs*, "the feminine is a metaphor constructed according to a male desire," whereby "the woman remains in the position of object to man's subject" (49). In this sense, Bini's and Martinelli's analyses, with their emphasis on a metaphorization of "woman as giver of life, woman as living force and energy, woman as art" (Bini 184), ultimately reproduce a patriarchal mindset and fail to account for the multiplicity of perspectives that feature in Pirandello's work. Conversely, the suspicion that the separation between male *logos* and female *aisthesis* is itself the product of a "script," an imposition of roles, is advanced by Pirandello himself, through the words of the Director at the beginning of *Six characters*: "Lei è la ragione, e sua moglie l'istinto: in un giuoco di parti assegnate, per cui lei che rappresenta la sua parte è volutamente il fantoccio di se stesso" (45) [You are reason; your wife is instinct. These are the roles you've been assigned, so that by acting your own part you willingly become the puppet of yourself].⁸ Here, the metatheatricity of Pirandello's

⁸ For the purposes of close reading, I use my own literal translation. For freer and more agile translations, see *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. by Jennifer Lorch, and *To Clothe the Naked and Two Other Plays*,

lines foregrounds gender roles and the division between male *logos* and female *aesthesis* as the enactment and reenactment of a “script,” providing a compelling intuition of what later, deconstructive feminist critiques such as Judith Butler’s and Adriana Cavarero’s identify as the performativity of gender and the “dichotomous” working of the “patriarchal symbolic order” (Cavarero 110).⁹

My analysis takes a different angle from Bini and Martinelli, pointing out a tension between replication and contestation of the patriarchal script in Pirandello’s works. Such a tension originates in the prominence of the voices of women and in their striking contestation of, and resistance to, the male gaze. A relevant and productive concept in this respect is that of “talking back,” elaborated by bell hooks in relation to Southern black communities in the US: “‘talking back’ meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion” (124). This is not what women are entitled to do in the subject-object economy of the patriarchal script, and it is conversely what some female characters do in Pirandello’s plays, with intensely destabilizing results. Although their views are usually dismissed by the male characters and their instances are defeated by the plot development, women’s “acts of defiant speech” (hooks 127) create a break into the coherence and alleged neutrality of the patriarchal discourse, which is intermittently exposed as the product of a situated and dominating male subject. Instances of “talking back” and consequent interruptions in the patriarchal script are structural elements of *Six Characters* and *Clothing the Naked*. While conflicts around gender roles and the family can be found in many of Pirandello’s works, these two plays have been chosen as the focus of the present analysis because of the prominence of female voices and their challenge to male discourses; furthermore, in both plays here considered the interpretation of episodes of sexual

trans. by William Murray.

⁹ Translation from Cavarero is mine. On gender performativity, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

abuse is the point of rupture that assumes a revealing function with respect to male denial and mystification.¹⁰

Six Characters in Search of an Author: The Stepdaughter “Talks Back”

Six Characters in Search of an Author, written and first performed in Rome 1921 (and considerably revised in 1925), is one of Pirandello’s best known and internationally acclaimed plays. It inaugurates the “theater within the theater” trilogy (which also comprises *Ciascuno a suo modo* [Each in His Own Way] and *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* [Tonight We Improvise]), breaking down the fourth wall and revolutionizing modern drama. The play represents a group of Characters (the Father, the Mother, the Son, the Stepdaughter, the Boy, and the Little Girl) who interrupt the rehearsal of an acting company and demand that their own “drama” be represented instead. They start narrating their story to the Director and the actors, but they argue about facts and motivations and cannot produce a single and coherent narrative. The most intense antagonism is that between the Father, spokesperson for the group and figure of authority, and the Stepdaughter, who challenges his accounts of the events.¹¹ This is already striking, if we consider that, as Lynda Boose observes, father and daughter (stepdaughter, in this case) are “the two figures most asymmetrically proportioned in terms of gender, age, authority and cultural privilege” (20). Detail after detail, the drama of

¹⁰ In consideration of the world fame and recognition of *Six Characters*, its greater metatheatrical complexity and the ongoing critical engagement with it, I dedicate more space to this play, with *Clothing the Naked* providing a connected case study.

¹¹ Other spaces of power negotiation are present in the play, such as the relationship between the Characters, the Director, and the actors; the ambivalent role of Madama Pace; the Mother’s inarticulate antagonism; and the conflict between the Father and the Son. The concept of “talking back” and the core argument developed here of a tension between multiple perspectives that partially disrupt and partially replicate the dominant script could be applied productively to investigate further power dynamics in the play.

this disrupted family unfolds; the Father and the Mother had one child together (the Son), but then the Father sent her off to live with another man, taking the Son from her. The Stepdaughter, the Boy, and the Little Girl were born into this second union. When the Mother's partner died, the family fell into poverty and the 18-year-old Stepdaughter became a prostitute. The nucleus of the Father's drama, his "eternal moment," shows him together with the Stepdaughter, as her client, and the Mother walking in as they are about to have sex. Much of the debate among the Characters focuses on the reasons behind the Mother's separation from the Father, his decision to take the Son away from her, and his sexually charged relationship with the Stepdaughter.

From the beginning of the play, the Stepdaughter fiercely contests the Father and the Director, refusing to allow them exclusive control of the Characters' drama. In response to the Stepdaughter's outspoken attitude, there are countless times in which the Father and the Director form an alliance against her, actively trying to silence her: "–Il padre. [...] Ma la faccia smettere! È insopportabile! –Il capocomico. La smetta! Mi lasci sentire, santo Dio!" (67) [–The Father. [...] Stop her please! I can't stand it. –The Director. Yes, stop it! Let me hear, for Heaven's sake!]; and again, "–La figliastra. (*tentando d'intromettersi*) [...]. –Il padre. (*scacciandola* [...]) Stai zitta, tu! –Il capocomico. (*seguitando senza badare all'interruzione*)" (75) [–The Stepdaughter. (*coming forward*). [...] –The Father. (*shutting her up* [...]) You be quiet! –The Director. (*continuing, heedless of interruption*)]. Their silencing attempts are only partially successful, as the play draws attention to the silencing process itself. The Father, with the Director's support, is arguably granted far more talking space than any other character and he voices sophisticated philosophical reflections. However, the Stepdaughter manages to intersperse the Father's discourse with comments and accusations that undo his self-righteous narrative. In her relentless acts of defiant speech, she calls into question the Father's own interests behind his philosophical lucubration. She wants to act

what happened, while the Father wants to explain it. His words, his explanations, are thus presented as aimed at framing and controlling the Stepdaughter's account of the events.

Il padre. [...] Imponga un po' d'ordine, signore, e lasci che parli io, senza prestare ascolto all'obbrobrio, che con tanta ferocia costei le vuol dare a intendere di me, senza le debite spiegazioni.

La figliastra. Qui non si narra! qui non si narra!

Il padre. Ma io non narro! voglio spiegargli.

La figliastra. Ah, bello, sì! A modo tuo!

Il padre. Ma se è tutto qui il male! Nelle parole! Abbiamo tutti dentro un mondo di cose; ciascuno un suo mondo di cose! (65)

The Father. [...] I would ask you, sir, to exercise your authority a little here, and let me speak, instead of paying attention to all the horrible things that she is so cruelly trying to blame me with, without adequate explanation.

The Stepdaughter. We're not narrating, we're not narrating!

The Father. But I don't narrate, I want to explain to him.

The Stepdaughter. Ah yes, explain it in your own way!

The Father. But don't you see that the whole trouble lies here! In words! Each one of us has within himself a whole world of things, each one his own world of things!

In a long and verbose speech, the Father confesses his misery in looking for a prostitute and, as we learn later, in urging the girl to take off her mourning dress to rapidly get to having sex with her. The Father's self-pitying acknowledgement of his own wretchedness, which does not include any empathetic recognition of the hardship endured by the girl, soon gives way to

the exaltation of his own bravery in admitting his shame, while most people – he argues – hide themselves behind a hypocritical posture of virtue. In a crescendo of self-righteous statements, the Father ends up blaming women for seducing men, as they close their eyes and surrender to men’s desire. His alleged remorse swiftly turns into a claim of innocence and into an accusation of women. It is at this point that the Stepdaughter intervenes, rebuffing the Father’s portrayal of women’s alleged shameful passivity and refusing to “close her eyes.” As Bini notes, “woman has finally opened her eyes, eyes that man has desired and forced to be shut for centuries, and she uses them now to unmask the hypocrisy, the power politics” (173). Dismantling the Father’s arguments, the Stepdaughter explicitly charges him with using philosophical reflections as a smokescreen for his sexual abuse.

Il padre. [...] La donna – ecco – la donna, infatti, com'è? Ci guarda, aizzosa, invitante. La afferrì! Appena stretta, chiude subito gli occhi. [...]

La figliastra. E quando non li chiude più? [...] Ah, che schifo, allora, che schifo di tutte codeste complicazioni intellettuali, di tutta codesta filosofia che scopre la bestia e poi la vuol salvare, scusare... Non posso sentirlo, signore! Perché quando si è costretti a “semplificarla” la vita – così, bestialmente [...] niente fa più sdegno e nausea di certi rimorsi: lagrime di cocodrillo! (71)

The Father. [...] Woman – for example, look at her case! She turns tantalizing, inviting glances on you. You seize her. As soon as she’s in your grasp, she closes her eyes. [...]

The Stepdaughter. What about when she no longer closes them? [...] Oh, all these intellectual complications make me sick, disgust me – all this philosophy that uncovers the beast in man, and then seeks to save him, excuse him... I can’t stand it,

sir. When a man seeks to “simplify” life bestially [...] then nothing is more revolting and nauseous than a certain kind of remorse – crocodile’s tears, that’s what it is!

The Director’s intervention shuts down the discussion and the Father takes no notice of the Stepdaughter’s words. Yet, through her words an alternative point of view has emerged, one that is not aligned with the Father’s self-absolving narrative and that discredits his reflections, as they aim at excusing the “beast in man.”

As the play itself treads an unstable line between the focus on the Characters’ story and the focus on more abstract philosophical concerns, the negotiation of the distribution of attention between Father and Stepdaughter can also be read in metatheatrical terms. The Father wants to talk about philosophy, as separated from the “beast”; the Stepdaughter wants to talk about sexuality and abuse. Reflecting on critical readings of *Six Characters*, it is significant to note that while the philosophical questions posed by the Father and the metatheatrical innovations of the play have attracted much critical attention, the actual story of the Stepdaughter has often been considered as incidental to theoretical and epistemological concerns. For example, Romano Luperini introduces the plot as the Father tells it, unproblematically aligning his perspective with that of the authoritative male character. According to Luperini, the Father is “constantly interrupted and peevishly corrected by the Stepdaughter,” who “displays her offended viscosity and marked corporeality” (102). To the critic, the core drama of the play is the relativity of truth and the impossibility of realist representation, independently of the specific story of the Characters, which has lost all its tragic depth and at which Pirandello “cannot but laugh comically” (111). Similarly, Roger Oliver strongly sympathizes with the Father, whose philosophical argument he finds fully convincing, and who is described as a victim of the situation, a “man of intellect trapped in a moment of carnal weakness” (57). Most scholarship has thus aligned itself with the Father’s

point of view, considering sexuality as separated from intellect and diverting attention from the exertion of abuse and domination in favor of a detached and theoretical outlook, which is itself typical of the patriarchal script. Contrary to these interpretations, Pirandello has constructed the play in such a way that the very process of diverting attention from the story of abuse to theoretical reflections is represented and performed in the play itself, with the Stepdaughter chiding the Father for using philosophical discourses as a means to cover up his sexual abusiveness. In the economy of the distribution of attention in the play, the Father's perspective certainly prevails, but the Stepdaughter's speeches, far from being the illogical expression of "viscerality and marked corporeality," cast a serious doubt on the Father's credibility and deeper motivations.

The tension between philosophical "higher" concerns and "bestial" components of the self, especially sexuality, is presented in the form of an internal split in the Father. In the stage directions given by Pirandello at the beginning of the script, we learn that the Characters were supposed to wear a mask expressing their "sentimento fondamentale" (54) [fundamental feeling]; this is "il rimorso per il Padre, la vendetta per la Figliastro, lo sdegno per il Figlio, il dolore per la Madre" (54) [remorse for the Father; revenge for the Stepdaughter; disdain for the Son; sorrow for the Mother]. However, the development of the play shows that the Father's feeling of remorse is unstable and not fundamental at all, as he keeps trying to justify himself while accusing and controlling the others, especially the Mother and the Stepdaughter. This is reflected in Pirandello's initial description of the character as deeply ambivalent: "a volte sarà mellifluo, a volte avrà scatti aspri e duri" (55) [At times he is mellifluous, other times he has harsh and violent reactions]. This double feature of the Father – as remorseful and violent at the same time – is linked to a state of intermittent awareness of his own position of power, for which he is unable and unwilling to take responsibility. In response to the challenge posed to him by the Stepdaughter, he

constructs a sophisticated discourse on the multiplicity of the self, which is one of Pirandello's most famous passages and a cornerstone of his philosophical outlook. The Father states:

Il dramma per me è tutto qui, signore: nella coscienza che ho, che ciascuno di noi – veda – si crede “uno” ma non è vero: è “tanti”, signore [...]. Ce n'accorgiamo bene, quando in qualcuno dei nostri atti, per un caso sciaguratissimo, restiamo all'improvviso come agganciati e sospesi: ci accorgiamo, voglio dire, di non esser tutti in quell'atto, e che dunque una atroce ingiustizia sarebbe giudicarci da quello solo, tenerci agganciati e sospesi, alla gogna, per una intera esistenza, come se questa fosse assommata tutta in quell'atto! Ora lei intende la perfidia di questa ragazza? M'ha sorpreso in un luogo, in un atto, dove e come non doveva conoscermi, come io non potevo essere per lei; e mi vuol dare una realtà, quale io non potevo mai aspettarmi che dovessi assumere per lei, in un momento fugace, vergognoso, della mia vita! (72-3)

For the drama lies all in this, sir – in the conscience that I have, that each one of us believes to be one, but is “many” [...]. We realize this when, by a tragic accident, in something we do suddenly we are suspended, caught up in the air on a kind of hook. Then we perceive that all of us is not in that act, and that it would be an atrocious injustice to judge us by that action alone, to keep us hooked and suspended, as if all our existence were summed up in that one deed. Now do you understand the perfidy of this girl? She surprised me in a place, in an act, where she shouldn't have known me, just as I couldn't exist for her; and she now seeks to attach to me a reality such as

I could never suppose I should have to assume for her, in a shameful and fleeting moment of my life!

Here, the Father's abstract discourse on a split and alienated self is formulated in relation to a very specific side to his identity, which has to do with sexuality and sexual abuse. As he does not recognize himself in his own action, he protests the Stepdaughter's injustice in holding him accountable for it. The Father's discourse represents a quintessential narrative of abuse, and its denial. As the rational man is alienated from the "beast" in himself, the mind from the body, he refuses to identify with, and take responsibility for, his own actions. The Stepdaughter reveals the abuse that should have remained hidden, thus disrupting the patriarchal script and undermining the Father's sense of identity. As Caesar points out, "what much of Pirandello's fiction registers is the crisis that occurs when the consensus between self and other breaks down" (53). The image that the Stepdaughter reflects back to the Father does not coincide with the positive narrative that the man has constructed for himself. The same pattern, in which a female character reveals a scenario of sexual abuse and a male character declares his refusal to identify with his own action, contrasting it with a generally positive image of himself, features in *Clothing the Naked*, as is discussed in more detail later.

The Father's discourse, separating a man's abusive sexual behavior from his otherwise good-natured character and depicting himself as a victim of injustice is, in fact, a standard narrative of the patriarchal script, and specifically of rape culture, as defined by Dianne Herman.¹² As Julian Vigo notes, rape culture is the larger discursive framework in which "the violation of women is conceived as the rupture in behavior and 'good boy' normalcy that constitutes the civil subject."¹³ Such a view has a punctual parallel in criticism,

¹² Dianne F. Herman, "The Rape Culture."

¹³ Julian Vigo, "Rape Culture and 'Twenty Minutes of Action.'"

for example in Oliver's sympathetic apology of the Father as unjustly threatened by identification with his "act of passion": "His intellectuality, his kindness, and all his good sentiments and deeds are ignored. His life is summed up in the one action dramatized, an action representative of his carnal weakness as a man" (56-7). On the contrary, in the Father's twisted rhetoric in the dispute with the Stepdaughter, Pirandello showcases the functioning of the patriarchal script, at the same time unmasking the distorting mechanisms on which it rests. The Stepdaughter tells the truth of the reality of abuse centered on sexuality, but such a truth is unbearable, and the male subject refuses it.

While feeling dissociated from one's negative actions concerns the individual level, it takes the comforting support of a social environment and a shared ideology for the individual's positive mask to hold. Significantly resorting to a theatrical metaphor, Vigo explains such a mutual reinforcement between individual and social structure as requiring a collective "suspension of disbelief," which stages the tragedy of abuse as a romantic comedy:

If it is possible for one person to commit this "action," then it is even more probable that this actor is surrounded by other like-minded actors who have set the scenario, costumes, stage props, and lighting such that everyone but the victim is acclimatised to the leap of faith necessary to suspend disbelief in *his* reality. Rape culture is a permanent state of this suspension of disbelief, from the perpetrator [...] and anyone who prefers to view the staging of this tragedy as a romantic comedy, as rapist with a heart of gold.

In *Six Characters*, Pirandello shows how this comforting image is provided by means of men's bonding and their control of discourse and representation. During the break between the first and second act, the Director and the Father agree on how to represent the scene of the

encounter with the Stepdaughter. As the Director explains the scene to the actors, the Stepdaughter realizes that he and the Father have carefully edited the events, lightening the tone and portraying the Father as a caring and respectful man. What they have done is precisely turning a scene of abuse into a romantic atmosphere. When the Stepdaughter accuses them of censoring and altering reality, the Director declares that it is not possible to represent the actual scene in the theater, as this would shock the audience. But the Stepdaughter rebels, contesting the power that the Director and the Father have to decide what can and cannot be represented on stage, and countering their interested hypocrisy with a claim to truth:

La figliastra. No, signore! [...] Bisogna che lui mi dica come m'ha detto: “Togliamo via subito allora, codesto vestitino!” [...].

Il capocomico. [...] Per carità! Che dice?

La figliastra. (*gridando, frenetica*) La verità! la verità, signore!

Il capocomico. Ma sì, non nego, sarà la verità [...] ma comprenda anche lei che tutto questo sulla scena non è possibile!

La figliastra. Non è possibile? E allora, grazie tante, io non ci sto!

Il capocomico. Ma no, veda...

La figliastra. Non ci sto! non ci sto! Quello che è possibile sulla scena ve lo siete combinato insieme tutti e due, di là, grazie! Lo capisco bene! Egli vuol subito arrivare alla rappresentazione dei suoi travagli spirituali; ma io voglio rappresentare il mio dramma! il mio! (96-7)

The Stepdaughter. No sir! [...] He must say what he said to me: “Well, let's take off this little dress at once!” [...].

The Director. [...] For Heaven's sake! What are you saying?

The Stepdaughter. (*crying out excitedly*) The truth! The truth, sir!

The Director. It may be, I don't deny it [...] but you must surely see that you can't have this kind of thing on the stage, it's not possible!

The Stepdaughter. Not possible, eh? Very well! Thank you very much, but I'm off!

The Director. Now be reasonable...

The Stepdaughter. I won't stop here! I won't! I can see you've fixed it all up with him in your office, what is possible for the stage... I understand! He wants to get at his complicated “cerebral drama,” to have his spiritual labors acted; but I want to act my part, my part!

Once again, the Stepdaughter frames the Father's “cerebral drama” as instrumental to the denial of his abusive sexual conduct and she puts forward an alternative narrative that disrupts the dominant one, agreed between the two men. Furthermore, she calls into question the role of theater in creating and reinforcing that dominant narrative. Günsberg interprets the removal of sexual abuse from the scene as exemplifying and enacting patriarchal domination (93); however, Günsberg's reading does not take into account the fact that, thanks to the Stepdaughter's intervention, the process of gender policing and camouflaging of motives and modes of domination is overtly shown and actually foregrounded in *Six Characters*. In fact, the removal of the scene of abuse is far from complete. With a powerfully metatheatrical move, Pirandello reveals the reality of abuse while at the same time unmasking the interests at stake and the power dynamics that enforce its concealment. Part of the story of *Six Characters* is also the attempt made by the Father and the Director to re-write the events

according to, and in fulfilment of, the patriarchal script. But the Stepdaughter's intervention interrupts the "suspension of disbelief" that is required for the performance of the patriarchal script to function.

Toward the end of the play, the Characters call into question the Author and his choice not to grant them full life on the stage. As the Father explains with great frustration, the Characters could have been fully alive, escaping the Author's control, even acquiring "un significato che l'autore non si sognò mai di dargli" (105) [a meaning that the Author had never imagined for them], but the Author has decided instead to "negargli la vita" (105) [deny life to them].¹⁴ The discussion recalls the pattern of the "removed scene"; something is evoked but not represented, and the choice around what is omitted becomes a subject for scrutiny. The Father blames the Stepdaughter's excessively outspoken attitude for their aborted existence, thus pointing to the Author's reluctance to give voice to such a disruptive and demanding female character: "Ma forse è stato per causa tua: appunto per codeste tue troppe insistenze, per le troppe incontinenze!" (106) [Perhaps it was because of you, because of your pushy and unrestrained attitude!]. Yet, the Stepdaughter responds: "Ma che! Se egli stesso m'ha voluta così!" (106) [Nonsense! Didn't he make me so himself?]. In other words, the Author himself – and Pirandello behind him, as the actual author of the play – has chosen to represent and give voice to the Father's antagonist, the Stepdaughter. Bini comments that, by means of the Stepdaughter's reply, Pirandello is admitting to be caught in an impasse, escaping which "will be possible only through humor and the provoking laughter of his creature" (175). The Stepdaughter's intervention, however, is much more articulate than a humoristic and provoking laughter. She becomes here the spokesperson for the Author, replacing the Father in his alliance with the Director and providing a socially grounded

¹⁴ In the 1925 Preface to the play, Pirandello further discusses the Characters' desire to find representation and the Author's refusal to grant them full artistic life.

interpretation of Pirandello's authorial choices: "*(Verrà presso al Capocomico per dirgli come in confidenza)* Io credo che fu piuttosto, signore, per avvilitamento o per sdegno del teatro, così come il pubblico solitamente lo vede e lo vuole..." (106) [*She goes close to the Director to tell him as if in confidence*] In my opinion he abandoned us in a fit of depression, of disgust for the ordinary theater as the public knows it and likes it]. As in the case of the removed scene, Pirandello is giving credit to the Stepdaughter's voice – and not to that of the Father – in order to develop a criticism of contemporary theater and the audience's expectations. In doing so, he is at the same time unleashing a disruptive force, that of the female voice, which threatens his very authority as a male author who participates in producing and reproducing a patriarchal script – he is making that threat and that conflict the very subject of his play.¹⁵

The dialogue about the Author also hints at another aspect of Pirandello's personal investment in the play. Through the Stepdaughter's words, Pirandello intimates that she was the most tempting and potentially disturbing character, and he subtly alludes to an erotically charged setting: "È vero, anch'io, anch'io signore, per tentarlo, tante volte, nella malinconia di quel suo scrittojo, all'ora del crepuscolo [...]. Che scene, che scene andavamo a proporgli! – Io, io lo tentavo più di tutti!" (105-6) [It's true. I too have sought to tempt him, many, many times, when he was sitting at his writing table, feeling a bit melancholy, at the twilight hour. [...]. Oh, what scenes we proposed to him — and I tempted him more than any of the others!]. We do not know for certain what scenes were "tempting" Pirandello, but if we consider that the barely missed sexual encounter between the Father and Stepdaughter constitutes the incandescent core of the play, the specter of incestuous sexual desire is here

¹⁵ As Caesar rightly argues, one of Pirandello's strongest convictions is that "the act of creation [...] can only take place on condition that the artist's conscious self gives way to alternative selves seeking self-expression" (60).

evoked. Furthermore, the Stepdaughter repeatedly alludes to the Father's pedophilic attraction to her when she was a little child: "Piccina piccina, sa? con le treccine sulle spalle e le mutandine più lunghe della gonna – piccina così – me lo vedevo davanti al portone della scuola, quando ne uscivo." (68) [When I was a little child, you know? with plaits over my shoulders and knickers longer than my skirts, I used to see him waiting outside the school for me to come out]. The Father protests: "Questo è perfido! Infame!" (68) [This is infamous, shameful!], but ultimately he can only dismiss the issue as belonging to the past, asking and obtaining to simply move on: "Tutto questo è antefatto. E io non dico di rappresentar questo" (69) [This is just the back story. I don't suggest this should be staged].

The haunting presence of an incestuous and pedophilic sexual desire is particularly relevant, considering that just a few years before writing *Six Characters* Pirandello had been accused by his wife of incestuous desires towards their daughter Lietta.¹⁶ Following the accusations, in 1916 Lietta had attempted suicide and her mother was confined in a mental institute. Regardless of Pirandello's own responsibilities and drives, which are impossible to ascertain, the play has its pulsating and disturbing nucleus in that tangle of remorse and denial connected with specific forms of sexuality, namely incest and pedophilia. Luperini points out the presence of this theme in the play but, replicating a form of intermittent awareness, simultaneously accuses the Stepdaughter of skewing the situation rhetorically: "Through the girl's *malign words*, the audience even learns that the man, possibly morbidly interested in her as a child, used to go and wait for her outside her school" (102. My emphasis). If the girl is exposing the Father's "morbid" interest in her when she was a child, which is supported in the play by the fact that the Mother takes her out of school for a while upon learning about the Father's visits, why would her words be "malign"? Similarly, Luperini holds the girl responsible for instigating the Father's – and the Author's – sexual

¹⁶ See Claudio Vicentini, *Pirandello. Il disagio nel teatro*, 53–72.

attraction: “In the use of the verb “tentare” [to tempt] we glimpse the sexual provocation that constantly characterizes the girl, as well as the possibility of an overlap or identification between the Father [...] and Pirandello himself” (104). Luperini’s interpretation ignores the basic fact that the Stepdaughter is a fictional character, and Pirandello is her creator. The Stepdaughter’s “provocation” of the Author is, and can only be, a product of Pirandello’s creation. Pirandello, like the Father, is implicated in “the attempt to conjugate the need to tell a story, and its refusal” (Vicentini 65), the alternate reproduction and deconstruction of the patriarchal script – he is, after all, the Author of the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

“That Little Bit of Vice”: Ersilia vs Ludovico and Grotti in *Clothing the Naked*

In 1922, closely following *Six Characters*, Pirandello writes *Clothing the Naked*, which also provides a relevant example of “talking back” and interruption of the patriarchal script. The play, though it did not meet the same international acclaim as *Six Characters*, has many themes in common with the latter: a young female protagonist who is a victim of abuse and prostitutes herself; the accidental death of a little girl; the presence of discordant versions of the events, and the metatheatrical reflection on the relationship between fiction and reality. Furthermore, *Clothing the Naked* also represents the impossibility of knowing the truth about an individual, and typically about a female character, which is a dominant theme in several of Pirandello’s plays, such as *Right You Are (If You Think So)*, *The Wives’ Friend*, *Each in His Own Way* and *As You Desire Me*.

The protagonist is Ersilia Drei, a young woman who, having survived a suicide attempt, is contacted by an old writer, Lodovico Nota. Intrigued by the news of her terrible vicissitudes in a newspaper, he decides to write her story and to “save” Ersilia, transforming her from the source of his inspiration into a character of his own creation. From the

beginning, the play features a prominent metatheatrical element, drawing attention to the creative process itself. Specifically, it shows a male author appropriating the story of a female character, turning her reality into his own fantasy. Ersilia, still distraught by recent tragic events, is initially willing to cooperate with Lodovico's project, but when she realizes his manipulative intentions she tries to resist, claiming the right to safeguarding her own identity: "–Ersilia. [...] Dio mio, se fui, almeno una volta, qualche cosa, per come tu hai detto, voglio essere io, nel tuo romanzo; io "questa", come sono! Mi pare un tradimento, scusa, che tu ci debba vedere un'altra. –Lodovico (*ridendo*): Oh, bella! Come un'appropriazione indebita, ti pare?" (858) [–Ersilia. [...] God, if I've been, at least once, something, as you said, I want to be me, in your novel; "this" me, as I am! It feels a betrayal, I'm sorry, that you must see someone else in me. –Lodovico. (*laughing*) Oh, really! And that would be an unfair appropriation, wouldn't it?].

The play thus stages Lodovico's attempt to re-write the female character according to his own wish, exerting a form of "violent gaze" (Alonge 91), and Ersilia's precarious but nonetheless antagonistic position with respect to his fantasies. In the middle of the discussion between Ersilia and Lodovico, another male character bursts onto the scene. It is Grotti, a prominent diplomat and Ersilia's former employer, as she used to work as his daughter's nanny before the child died in an accident. As we learn from an exchange between the two, he was also her "lover" for a brief period of time, after she had been abandoned by her fiancée. The nature of the relationship between Ersilia and Grotti, however, is the subject of a heated negotiation between the man and the woman, as she reveals that initially he had sexually forced himself on her, and later repeatedly took advantage of her, at a time when she was particularly vulnerable. Similar to the Stepdaughter, she inhabits the position of a "fallen woman," and uses that position to speak the truth:

Ersilia. Bada che posso dir tutto, io, adesso – quello che nessuno ha mai osato dire – tocco l'ultimo fondo, io – la verità dei pazzi, grido [...]! – Tu m'afferrasti ancora calda del fuoco che m'aveva acceso lui nelle carni, quando, una volta toccata, non potevo più stare! E nega che ti morsi! Nega che ti sgraffiai il collo, le braccia, le mani!

Grotti. Oh vigliacca! Tu m'aizzavi!

Ersilia. Non è vero! Non è vero! mai! – Fosti tu!

Grotti. Prima, sì! Ma dopo? (892)

Ersilia. Mind that I can say everything, now – what nobody dared to say – I hit rock bottom – I shout the lunatics' truth [...]! – You took me when I was still warm from the fire he had lit in my flesh, when having been touched I could no longer rest! Deny that I bit you! Deny that I scratched your neck, your arms, your hands!

Grotti. You coward! You incited me!

Ersilia. That's not true! It's not true! Never! It was you!

Grotti. At the beginning, yes! But later?

While Grotti insists on framing their first sexual encounter as consensual, she resolutely denies it, recalling her physical struggle and urging him to acknowledge the violent nature of his actions. However, Grotti's confession of the rape of Ersilia – “at the beginning, yes” – bears no consequences on his understanding of the events. In fact, as demonstrated in the following dialogue, in the same moment Grotti recognizes his own brutality, he also manages to shift the blame on Ersilia, as the Father does with the Stepdaughter in *Six Characters*.

Grotti. [...] E non me ne sarei mai approfittato, se tu –

Ersilia. – io? –

Grotti. (*subito*) – non che l'abbia voluto! Ma... non so... come mi guardasti una sera nel levarci di tavola... [...] Sentii che tu non credevi che io avessi potuto essere così buono unicamente per fare la tua felicità. Ecco, ecco... E per non credere questo, guastasti tutto! Perché avevo più che mai bisogno, io, che tu credessi, per mantenermi, per vincere ogni tentazione -

Ersilia. – ma non mia! non mia! –

Grotti. – no, mia stessa! Ma se tu avessi creduto al mio disinteresse, alla mia bontà, che era pur vera, il brutto non si sarebbe destato in me, all'improvviso, con tutta la sua fame disperata. (895)

Grotti. [...] And I wouldn't have taken advantage of you, if you hadn't... –

Ersilia. – me? –

Grotti. (*quickly*) – not that you wanted it! But... I don't know... how you looked at me one night as we had finished dinner... [...] I felt that you couldn't believe that I could be good to you only for your happiness. That's it! That's it! And because you couldn't believe it, you ruined everything! Because I truly needed you to believe it, to keep myself, to win all temptations –

Ersilia. – but it wasn't my temptation! It wasn't mine!

Grotti. – no, it was my own! But if you had believed in my honest intention, my goodwill, what was also true, the brute that is in me wouldn't have woken up, suddenly, with all his desperate hunger.

Grotti accuses Ersilia of seducing him while at the same time admitting that it was his “temptation,” (the same word used for the Author of *Six Characters*), and not hers. Grotti

reproduces a state of intermittent awareness that is also reminiscent of the Father's in *Six Characters*, but with significantly less disruptive results, as the confession of his violence leaves his sense of self intact and does not affect the development of the plot. Grotti observes coolly that Ersilia's life is ruined, while he just wants go back to his everyday life, refusing any identification with his own brutal actions:

Ersilia. E volete che vi affoghi io sola, per rimettervi a scorrere, voi, nella vita di tutti i giorni [...]?

Grotti. Ma a tutta la mia vita, che tu, maledetta, hai impigliata per un momento confondendomi! Ma che credi? Che io sia tutto in quella stupidaggine d'ozio, d'un po' di vizio, che ho speso con te?" (893)

Ersilia. And you'd like me to drown in it alone, so you can go back to your everyday life [...]?

Grotti: Back to my whole life, which you – shame on you! – have caught up for a moment, confusing me! What do you think? That I'm all in that silly idleness, in that little bit of vice, that I spent with you?

Sexuality is represented as a beast, a brute, a part of the man that is completely separated from his essentially good nature. While Ersilia is a lost woman, sinking in the mud of shame, Grotti claims the right to resume his previous life as if nothing happened. The woman, and not the man, is responsible for the awakening of the "brute," and only she has to pay for it. Grotti's identity, unlike that of Ersilia's, is entirely separated from that "silly idleness," that "little bit of vice" – which is rape. Once again, through the female character's acts of defiant speech, the patriarchal script is revealed in all its violence – physical and discursive. Yet, the

revelation of violence is ultimately inconsequential, for man's control of discourse and interpretation and his defining gaze, is even more solid than in *Six Characters*. Lodovico, Grotti and Ersilia's former lover who had abandoned her, all gather on stage and discuss her actions among them, while she kills herself. Like a sacrificial victim, she pays for everyone, as they refuse to acknowledge the larger system of power, abuse and shame in which they are involved. She should not have spoken, but she did, and she dies as the male characters go on with their lives. While the play ends with her death, her words have caused a crack in the compact surface of the patriarchal script.

It is striking to observe an analogous dynamic of awareness and mystification in criticism. Roberto Alonge, in his vast exploration of Pirandello's female characters, provides an insightful reading of *Clothing the Naked*, which is also exemplarily problematic. On the one hand, Alonge clearly identifies the central role of male violence against the female protagonist. He highlights the self-deceiving mechanisms of victim-blaming enacted by Grotti and the alienating split between his "wild, irrepressible sex drive" and his "noble side," characteristics that Grotti shares with the Father in *Six Characters* (80-1). On the other hand, despite having acknowledged the abusive and deceiving nature of the relationship between Ersilia and Grotti, Alonge replicates the same mechanism, arguing that Ersilia's version of a scene of abuse is, in fact, a self-deceiving fantasy which covers her masochism as well as her pleasure. He writes:

Ersilia is horrified at the reality of her own sexual pleasure [...]. And with a clearly self-reassuring, self-deceiving aim, she adopts the perspective of a dynamic of violence, of sexual servitude, of master's imposition. [...] The Console's sadism (which is perhaps only fantasized by Ersilia, or anyway it is surely exaggerated in its

consequences on her) is just the other face of Ersilia's masochism, of her unspoken and unspeakable turbid pleasure in being harassed, chased, hunted (80).

The coexistence of these two interpretations in the same critical reading, on the very same page, is astonishing, and can only be explained through the same mechanism of repression that allows Grotti and the Father to both admit and deny their actions of abuse. Despite textual evidence, Alonge ignores Grotti's admission that he had sexually assaulted Ersilia, and that he was in fact her employer, and decides that Ersilia's view of a dynamic of violence and abuse is self-deceiving; she imagines, she exaggerates, she secretly enjoys. On the contrary, it is sufficient to pay attention to Ersilia's words and her exchange with Grotti to see that the male characters are constructing Ersilia's story according to their own self-absolving narrative, while she is contesting it with the little residual strength she has left.

The conflict between Ersilia and the men's views creates an unresolved tension in the portrait of the female character, for she is represented alternatively as she perceives herself and as the other characters (Lodovico and Grotti) want to see her. To herself, she is a woman who has been first abandoned, and then raped by her employer; to them, she is a lost woman without determination, a seductress, ultimately a void. The counter-narrative put forward by Ersilia remains suspended – a trace pointing to another possible reading of her story, a fracture in Grotti's, as well as Pirandello's, discourse that reveals the partiality of the patriarchal script and the violence and coercion on which it rests.

Conclusion

By giving voice to the Stepdaughter in *Six Characters* and to Ersilia in *Clothing the Naked*, Pirandello's plays unmask the interests at stake in the patriarchal script and the mechanisms of its reproduction. At the same time, Pirandello ultimately aligns his authorial voice with a

male perspective, or rather, he allows the male perspective to dominate and to remain substantially untouched by the recognition of male violence and manipulation. The version of reality constructed by male characters is challenged by female characters who voice an alternative perspective, an alternative version of the story and an alternative image of the male characters themselves, including the revelation of the very processes through which male characters construct their reality and impose it through violence, silencing and denial. Male characters, and, it appears, Pirandello himself, cannot confront and live with the revelation of their partiality and “brutality,” but this inability, too, becomes part of the representation with powerfully disorientating effects. The result of female characters’ “talking back” and male characters’ denial is a fractured, humoristic discourse, which reproduces patriarchal gender roles while at the same time casting doubt on them – that they may well be a constrictive mask that men impose on women, and on themselves. Intermittent awareness and plurality of voices give rise to a deeply and painfully humoristic narrative, where the “sentimento del contrario” [feeling of the opposite] interrupts the “suspension of disbelief” and undermines the patriarchal script.¹⁷

The monolithic, monologic and self-righteous narrative of the patriarchal script is ruptured and turned into the conflict between competing perspectives. What emerges from the antagonism between male and female characters is not an abstract notion of the relativity of truth, but the very material conflict between dominating and dominated subjects and an internal conflict between awareness and denial in the split conscience of the oppressor. Pirandello has discovered that men do not make up all of humanity, and that abstract

¹⁷ See Pirandello’s essay on humor, *L’umorismo*. To Pirandello, humor is the awareness of the coexistence of opposites, whereby different aspects and versions of reality cannot be reconciled yet live together. In this sense, the intermittent awareness of the workings of the patriarchal scripts gives rise to conflicting yet concomitant interpretations that epitomize Pirandello’s concept of humor.

rationality is itself a self-absolving narrative. This is no little discovery. Humor, then, is not an escape into laughter, as Bini reads it; it is, in strictly Pirandellian terms, the intrinsic conflict existing in reality. This perspective thus opens up the possibility of re-reading the work of Pirandello by linking epistemological and social levels, looking not only at the contrast between form and life and between reality and representation as occurring on a purely theoretical level, but also on a social level, as a contrast between discourses and social realities, and between different positions and points of view, which do not find a solution in these works. In this way, this article aims to point out a greater complexity, i.e. a dynamism in Pirandello's plays, that is largely missing from criticism. His work cannot be defined straightforwardly as either fully complicit with the patriarchal script or fully critical of it. What can be ultimately be surmised is that, through an intermittent and unstable narrative, Pirandello offers the spectacle of a deep crisis within the male gaze.

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