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THE 'RAPABLE' WOMAN: FROM CAPUANA'S *GIACINTA* TO MARAINI'S *MARIANNA UCRÌA*

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Sommario
Questo articolo esamina la rappresentazione letteraria della violenza sessuale sulle donne nell'Ottocento e Novecento. Si passa dalla rappresentazione, nelle opere di Luigi Capuana e Gabriele D'Annunzio, dello stupro come espressione del desiderio maschile per il corpo femminile, alla raffigurazione, da parte di scrittrici quali Sibilla Aleramo e Dacia Maraini, dello stupro come atto di violenza maschile sul corpo femminile. Gli esempi scelti riflettono i cambiamenti, nei periodi esaminati, del ruolo sociale delle donne ma anche le variazioni nella concezione del corpo femminile. Nelle opere di Capuana e D'Annunzio la violenza sessuale è collegata alla trasgressione femminile, il corpo della donna che desidera anch'esso la sessualità, e quindi serve come forma di castigazione. In queste opere le protagoniste, vittime della violenza sessuale subita, risultano anche vittime della loro società, che non accetta la loro sessualità e un ruolo per loro al di fuori di quello di moglie e madre. Nelle opere di Aleramo e Maraini, invece, lo stupro risulta un metodo per denunciare il tentativo patriarcale di controllare il desiderio femminile. Le protagoniste di queste opere superano la violenza subita e riescono perfino ad affermare un certo proprio livello di autonomia.

Keywords: Rape, sexual violence, female emancipation, *fin de siècle*, Italian women writers

The portrayal of the experience of sexual violence upon women within Italian literature has evolved over time, often reflecting contemporary views of women and their place within society. In *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature* (1997), Barbara Zecchi notes early narrations of rape in the medieval context as "the 'normal' sexual act" (281) or its politicisation by Renaissance writers where the woman's resistance symbolised "the courtier's resistance to the tyrant" (281)[1]. Moving forwards, however, it is possible to note how *fin de siècle* Italian literary portrayals of rape reflected the contemporary sexual victimisation and desexualisation of women within society. In *Reading Rape* (2002), Sabine Sielke argues that narratives of rape "are inextricably intertwined with constructions of sexuality and gender" (2). In nineteenth-century Europe, positivist scientific discourse on women as mentally and physically inferior to men and suited only for the maternal role reinforced an understanding in the social sphere of the female body as sexually passive but also desexualised, a body reserved for the maternal function. Zecchi argues that, with the advancement within modern society of the bourgeoisie, the "formation of the nuclear family creates the paradigm of an asexual and unrapeable angel of the house" (1997:282). One can argue, however, that as women's claims for equality increased within twentieth-century society, the understanding of women's roles became less restricted to the domestic sphere and consequently the female body less tied to its maternal function. In this article, I will explore examples of rape in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian literature which reflect, in my opinion, not only developing changes in women's social roles but also a shift in conceptions of the female body. It is interesting to note, in this context, that only in 1981, with the repeal of article 544 of the Italian Criminal Code, did Italian legislation recognise rape as a crime against an individual rather than against public morality. Under article 544 men could avoid prosecution for rape by marrying their victims. The often quickly

[1] Clearly images of rape extend beyond the origins of Italian literature to find their roots in the very beginnings of Western culture, as Elizabeth Robertson and Christine Rose note in the introduction to *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (2001): "The omnipresence of images of rape in Western literature illustrates how the rapable body has been woven into the very foundations of Western poetics" (2).

arranged marriage between the rapist and his victim, referred to as *matrimonio riparatore* because it 'repaired' the offence committed by the rape (the loss of her virginity) by restoring the honour of the female victim as well as that of her family, was not uncommon in Italy, especially Sicily where it earned the name *fuitina*, escape. This paper will analyse the *fin de siècle* male-authored portrayal of rape as an act of male lust, in works by Luigi Capuana and Gabriele D'Annunzio, and then proceed to examine the central role it plays as an act of male violence within the works of twentieth-century women writers Sibilla Aleramo and Dacia Maraini.

Capuana's novel *Giacinta* (1879) and D'Annunzio's short story "La vergine Orsola" (1902) portray the *fin de siècle* male-authored perspective on rape as castigation for female sexuality. Both texts present cases of rape 'outside the mother's body', specifically the rape of a child and of a virgin, where the sexual violence is portrayed as an act of male lust, linked however also to the female character's sexual awakening. The sexual violence results in feelings of overwhelming guilt and shame on the part of the female character, who ultimately suffers tragic consequences as a result of this experience. In both cases, however, it is possible to note that the female victims of sexual violence are also victims of *fin de siècle* Italian society's categorisation of women and the refusal to accept female sexuality.

With the attention to rape by women writers in the twentieth century, however, sexual violence has become linked to denouncing patriarchal oppression of women within society, reflecting and anticipating modern feminist interpretations of rape as an instrument of patriarchal misogyny. Susan Brownmiller's seminal 1975 (here 1993) text, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, suggests: "Rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear" (72). Also arguing for the separation of the understanding of rape from notions of lust, Michel Foucault in 1977 proposed that rape be defined as an act of physical violence rather than one of sexuality, and punished as such within legal systems, revealing an understanding of sexuality as "a dense transfer point for relations of power" (Sielke,

2002:2, see also Foucault, 1988:200-2). Although Aleramo and Maraini treat rape as an act of male violence aimed at controlling and subjugating women, the female characters of these women writers' novels manage to overcome the trauma of their experiences of sexual violence, freeing themselves not only from their aggressors but also from society's restrictions on female behaviour and sexuality.

Although the examples of liberation enacted by the protagonists of Aleramo and Maraini's novels provide a definite change of direction with respect to the victims portrayed in previous male-authored narrations of sexual violence, I argue that Capuana's portrayal of the experience of sexual violence reveals an underlying critique of the social restrictions for female behaviour and sexuality. His attention to analysing the psychological consequences of rape as the manifestation of trauma represents the beginnings of a modern sensibility regarding this delicate topic and establishes Capuana as an innovator for initiating this shift, despite the milieu in which he operated.

Fin de siècle European scientific discourse interpreted women's role in society through the lens of their biological characteristics and reproductive function. The works of positivist thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Cesare Lombroso, Paul Julius August Moebius and others provided evidence for how the supremacy of the maternal instinct in the female nature excluded women's capacity for intellectual and artistic activity. In the 1893 study, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, Italian anthropologist and criminologist Lombroso argued that "la intelligenza in tutto il regno animale varia in ragione inversa della fecondità" (Lombroso, 1915:132). 1893 also witnessed the publication in Italy of Raffaele Gurrieri and Ernesto Fornasari's *I sensi e le anomalie nella donna normale e nella prostituta* (1893), which, like Lombroso's text, studied female capacity for morality and intelligence based on physical attributes.

Outside Italy these theories flourished as well, exemplified by German physician Paul Julius August Moebius' *Über die Verschiedenheit männlicher und weiblicher Schädel* (*The Physiological Mental Weakness of Woman,* here 1998, in Italian), published in 1900. In these studies, which circulated widely throughout Europe, theories of women's deficiency were based on

'concrete' evidence – her body – and they thrived within the context of nineteenth-century positivist culture, where natural sciences provided the foundation for an understanding of human reality in its historical and social realms. Darwinian theories on women's mental and physical inferiority, which was seen to determine their role in society as mothers, also permeated beyond the realm of scientific circles. Although an increased awareness of women's social inequality characterised the second half of the nineteenth century, the tendency to attribute female subordination to natural factors was prevalent[2]. Positivist science offered *fin de siècle* European society the physical evidence of women's inferiority, proving that women were unsuitable to fulfill the same roles as men and at the same time arguing for women's place within the home as mother. Studies on the issue of women's natural inferiority abounded and the topic circulated as an issue of debate in scientific and cultural circles.

French thinker, Auguste Comte (1798-1857), considered the father of positivist philosophy, asserted the natural inferiority of woman in *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830, here 1967, in Italian), where he argued that women's natural subordination to man was an intrinsic aspect of the family composition, making the family a social structure that relied upon female inferiority. Comte's theory of female inferiority reflected and supported bourgeois ideals of femininity, which exalted the emotional and sentimental over the rational. Portraying women as incapable of fulfilling men's role in society but adept for domestic duties, the positivist view of the female nature inevitably linked women's role in society to their role within the family.

Decades later, positivists such as Lombroso continued to study the differences between the sexes in support of theories that women were not only physically, but morally and mentally, inferior due to biological differences and weaknesses. They theorised that the supremacy of the maternal instinct in female nature excluded women's capacity for intellectual and artistic activity. In *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, Lombroso explained, in

[2] It is no coincidence that these theories, which protected the established social order, circulated at the same time as the feminist movement, which aimed to disrupt that very order, began to take ground in Europe.

fact, women's intellectual inferiority through the predominance of maternal and reproductive functions dominant in the female nature: "c'è un antagonismo tra le funzioni di riproduzione e le intellettuali" (1915:132). In women, according to Lombroso, the reproductive and the intellectual spheres could not co-exist because the predominance of the maternal instinct excluded all other inclinations, even those of a sexual nature: "la sensibilità materna prevale sugli affetti e la sensibilità sessuale" (92). Lombroso linked female repression of personal desires and aspirations to a process of Darwinian natural selection: "la selezione sessuale diede la preferenza non alle donne più forti, ma alle più graziose e quindi più miti, mettendo in onore la grazia e le doti morali, che alla grazia, per associazione, si accompagnano" (85). In such a way, Lombroso's theories provided scientific support for the repression of female desire and aspirations that was typically asked of nineteenth-century women, who were instructed to suppress personal concerns and aspirations, particularly those of a sexual nature.

Lombroso acknowledged women's mental inferiority as partially due to social factors: "È innegabile che di questo sviluppo inferiore dell'intelletto sia stata concausa la inerzia forzata degli organi a cui l'uomo ha costretto la donna" (131). He was quick, however, to provide a biological explanation for even this, stating: "Ma sarebbe un errore indicare questa cagione come artificiale, mentre è anche essa naturale e rientra in quel fenomeno generale della participazione maggiore, in tutta la scala animale del maschio alla lotta per la vita" (131). In this way, Lombroso condoned the many tyrannies to which women had been and were still victim, affirming that one's social condition resulted from one's biological constitution, concluding, as Comte had also done, that women's oppressed condition was the result of a natural order, which in turn determined the social order.

While the works of *fin de siècle* positivist thinkers, such as those referred to above, proposed an understanding of women as mothers and of their bodies as destined exclusively for maternal functions, in much literature of the period the maternal was also exalted. Literary representation of women often offered a binary portrayal, juxtaposing the saintly and passive wife and mother to the transgressive adulteress. Passionate desire was reserved for the transgressive *femme*

fatale, for whom a tragic fate was reserved in most cases: alienation and/or death[3]. I will examine two literary examples of rape from the period, which "preserve the purity of the maternal body" by portraying a child and a virgin as the victims of this sexual violence. In both cases, however, rape is associated with the female character's sexual awakening, which leads to her downfall, alienation and ultimately death, thereby upholding the predominant positivist view of women as mothers and of their bodies as destined exclusively for maternal functions.

Capuana's novel *Giacinta* (1879, here 1980) analyses a case of thwarted female sexuality and the neurosis that derives from the protagonist's early childhood experience of sexual violence. The episode of Giacinta's rape at the age of ten by the family's twelve-year-old servant boy, Beppe, is narrated as follows:

> Beppe e la Giacinta uscivano in quel momento dalla galleria. La bimba piangeva e si asciugava le lagrime col grembialino. Beppe, confuso, pieno di rabbia, la scuoteva brutalmente pel braccio dicendole sottovoce:
>
> "Stai zitta! stai zitta!"
>
> Ma la bimba vedendosi venir incontro la Camilla aveva già dato in un più forte scoppio di pianto.
>
> "Che è stato?" urlò la serva, attirando verso di sé la bimba, e squadrando il Beppe con un par di occhi terribili.
>
> "Di che si mescola?" rispose questi sfrontatamente, tentando d'impedire che la Giacinta parlasse.
>
> […]
>
> La bimba stentava a parlare interrotta dai singhiozzi, spaurita di quel che era avvenuto, col viso nascosto fra le mani ch'ella talvolta allontanava dagli occhi per

[3] See the binary representation of women as either faithful wives or transgressive *femme fatale* in novels such as, for example, *Tigre reale* (1875) by Giovanni Verga, *Madonna di fuoco e madonna di neve* (1888) by Giovanni Faldella and *Cuore infermo* (1881) by Matilde Serao.

> interrogare con un timido sguardo il volto del Beppe […]. (1980:35-6)

Still very much an innocent and naïve child, Giacinta is unable to fully understand the nature of what has happened, other than her awareness that it is something not to tell, however, the violent nature of the event is revealed through the young girl's immediate reaction: tears and fear. Although she is presented as a child, Capuana describes Giacinta, at only ten years old, as already possessing "un'aria di donnina" (30) and presents her responses to Beppe's initial advances as the awakening of a newly discovered sexuality, as the following episodes reveal:

> Ma il Beppe riprendeva a tenersela stretta fra le braccia, e la innocente creatura provava un languor, un venir meno, una sensazione indicibilmente dolce che la compenetrava tutta e le faceva abbandonar la testina sul petto di lui, come se le fosse montata una vertigine al cervello (31);

> la buona e innocente bimba, […] fu insensibilmente avviluppata entro una rete di seduzioni dalle quali non poteva schermirsi ignorandone affatto il significato e il valore (33);

> E poi (bisogna ben dirlo) sia che il suo spirito risentisse pronto gli effetti delle male arti del Beppe, sia che il contatto di quei baci, di quelle carezze svegliasse precocemente nel suo delicato organismo i germi della fina sensualità della donna, la Giacinta cominciò a provare un certo compiacimento malsano in quel nuovo genere di chiasso a cui Beppe la invitava. (33)

Although Giacinta's innocence is repeatedly affirmed in these descriptions, the passages describe the awakening of her body to the seductions of Beppe's attentions and gestures. Beppe, himself little more than a child, takes notice one day of Giacinta's budding

femininity and the following detailed and lengthy description of the ten-year-old girl reveals, however, the perspective of an adult male gaze, which perceives in the young girl the early signs of a woman's sexuality:

> La Giacinta era ancora vestita coll'abito corto. Le gambe, diritte e ben tornite, finivano in un piedino delicato, reso più civettuolo da un paio di calzarini eleganti. Portava sovrapposto alla veste un grembiale bianco, alto fino al collo, tenuto fermo sulle spalle da due cigne dello stesso tessuto, e stretto alla vita da un cinto che si annodava di dietro con un bel fiocco, finendo appuntito ma molto più largo e lavorato con un ricamino a traforo. I capelli, tirati in su, le scendevano per le spalle legati in due trecce, e la fronte appariva più spaziosa, e gli occhi neri ed aperti brillavano sotto le ciglia come due stelle. I lineamenti del viso, di un'irregolarità che piaceva, il nasino affilato, le labbra sottilissime, il colore della carnagione di un bruno leggiero che sulle gote prendeva una sfumatura di roseo, il busto largo che già accennava a rialzarsi dolcemente sul davanti, le davano davvero un'aria di donnina anche a dispetto di quell'espressione d'ingenuità e di candore che traspariva da tutta la persona e specialmente dai suoi modi addirittura fanciulleschi. (29-30)

In *Giacinta*, rape is not associated with notions of power and oppression but rather with male lust, and it is interesting to note that it is the non-maternal body, that of a child, that functions as the object of desire.

It is only years later that Giacinta comes to better understand the violence she experienced as a young girl, and she suffers physically upon her full realisation of the event: a raging fever and long illness leaves her physically weakened. She is also emotionally scarred by the event, resulting in her inability as an adult to maintain healthy relationships with men: she marries a man she does not love, only to betray him with the man she truly loves. Giacinta's doctor, Dr. Follini, declares her "un caso di patologia morale" (Capuana,

1980:161), coming to the following conclusion regarding her condition: "Le donne della sua natura non possono amare che una sola volta" (170). Geno Pampaloni notes that Capuana's protagonist has been condemned to "non-amore, per cui risulta vano ogni suo tentativo di ritrovare quasi per scommessa, *à rebours*, la normalità affettiva e sociale" (1972:18). Unable to allow herself happiness and sexual fulfillment within marriage, Giacinta's desire for love and sexual satisfaction must come from outside marriage.

Giacinta suffers physically and emotionally the consequences of the childhood event that marked her for life. Although she reasons to herself that she is justified in taking revenge on the society that has unjustly marked her, an innocent victim, as tainted, Capuana's portrayal of the traumatic event's effects upon Giacinta, madness and death, reveals otherwise. Giacinta is overcome by feelings of repulsion for the violation she experienced as an unknowing child: "Tutto quello che era accaduto ella voleva almeno meritarselo con qualcosa di spregevole, di ributtante, dove la sua volontà fosse intervenuta colla più piena coscienza. E poiché il suo corpo, quel miserabile suo corpo diceva di no, ella voleva buttarlo in preda al primo capitato per isbarazzarlo da quei pudori e da quegli scrupoli serviti solamente a ridurla infelice" (190). Although she cannot bring herself to give herself to the first man she meets, her "follia" and "furore omicida" bring her to contemplate killing herself and her lover Andrea. In the end, she succeeds only in taking her own life.

In *Giacinta*, Capuana depicts the female protagonist as a victim of an episode of sexual violence as a young girl who nevertheless continues to suffer as an adult, afflicted and overcome by her feelings of unworthiness. In the preface to the third edition of *Giacinta*, Capuana defines his novel as "l'analisi d'un carattere, lo studio d'una passione vera, benché strana, anzi patologica" (Pampaloni, 1972:35). His goal of uncovering the underlying motivations for Giacinta's behaviour reveals the modern sensibility of this author who can be seen as a precursor for his time in the attention he lent to investigating female dissatisfaction, which often took the form of malady in his writings. Although positivist science of the time, using clinical observation and analysis, categorised women as inferior or hysterical as justification for why they fulfill certain roles in society or as

explanation for their failure to do so, Capuana's literary analysis of various forms of female malady reveals an awareness of other causes: from Giacinta's rape and feelings of unworthiness as the source of her unhappiness to the marital strife and repressed sexuality as the cause of Eugenia's affliction in *Profumo*[4]. Capuana recognises sociological causes as the reasons for women's dissatisfaction, revealing a Freudian understanding of illness as the manifestation of repressed trauma.

D'Annunzio's short story "La vergine Orsola" presents the story of a young woman whose existence is conditioned by the morals and traditions of the village in which she lives. Orsola's life is marked by the rhythm of nature and the countryside as well as by observance of religious customs and holidays: from the cold, snowy days of winter to the thawing that comes with spring and the religious events in which the whole town participates, such as Carnival, Lent and Easter[5]. Her existence is also conditioned by the categorisation of women within that society according to strict social roles. This categorisation is reflected by the labels used to identify various female characters in the novel, such as *vergine*, in Orsola's case, or *femmina*, indicating a woman who is no longer pure. Deviance from the community's strictly observed roles and behaviour for women could lead a *vergine* to become a *femmina*. Orsola's divergence from the role of virgin, manifested through sexual awakening, leads to an episode of sexual violence which in turn results in her untimely and tragic death.

The short story begins with Orsola's convalescence from a recent grave illness, which has left her physically weak. Soon, however, she experiences also moral weakness when she finds herself drawn to the sight of prostitutes exhibiting themselves outside the brothel below her home: "la tentazione diabolica la trascinava a quello spettacolo […] ci restava lungo tempo, dietro la persiana quasi cadente, mentre i miasmi del lupanare la turbavano e la corrompevano" (D'Annunzio, 1995:76). With her sexuality ignited by scenes of sensuality and

4 Eugenia's illness is a form of hysteria that manifests itself in the typical symptoms noted for the time and, quite atypically, in the emission of the smell of orange blossoms from her fingertips.

5 Originally published in 1884 with the title "Le vergini", it was later revised and published in the collection *Le novelle della Pescara* (1902).

provocation, Orsola feels overcome by her desire, up to that point repressed, for love of a physical nature: "Il bisogno dell'amore, prima latente, si levava ora da tutto il suo essere, diventava una tortura, un supplizio incessante e feroce da cui ella non sapeva difendersi" (76). Not long after these feelings of sexual awakening, Orsola finds herself in close physical contact with a man while taking part in the procession for Palm Sunday and her senses are increasingly heightened:

> Era l'annunzio della processione, che mise un sommovimento enorme in tutto il popolo. Per istinto, senza pensare, Orsola si attaccò all'uomo, come se già gli appartenesse: si lasciò quasi sollevare da quelle braccia che la prendevano ai fianchi, si sentì ne' capelli quel fiato virile che sapeva lievemente di tabacco. Ella andava così, indebolita, sfinita, oppressa da quella voluttà che l'aveva colta d'improvviso, non vedendo se non un barbaglio dinanzi a sé. (78)

Although Orsola feels remorse and fears punishment for what she feels are transgressive feelings and behaviour, she begins a secret relationship with the man from the procession through the exchange of letters, agreeing to meet him alone in a secluded location. Her newfound love interest ignites also a newfound sensuality, which brings her to explore her physicality in unprecedented ways: when she is alone in her home she undresses and observes her nudity, reveling in its discovery and exploration.

The sexual violence Orsola experiences does not come, however, from Marcello, the man from the procession, but from his messenger Lindoro. On one occasion, Lindoro's arrival coincides with one of Orsola's moments of sexual self-exploration and, upon viewing her partial nudity and sensing her vulnerability, he rapes her in a moment of lustful passion:

> Ma ella, a un punto, involontariamente, per quel cieco istinto da cui una donna è avvertita d'essere innanzi a un uomo bramoso, corse con la mano a chiudere sotto la

> gola, sul petto gli uncinelli. Quell'atto, col quale Orsola così riconosceva nel mezzano l'uomo, quell'improvviso atto fece scattare dall'abbiezione di Lindoro un impeto di orgoglio maschile. – Ah, egli dunque aveva potuto per sé stesso turbare una donna! – E si fece più da presso; e, come il coraggio del vino lo animava, quella volta nessun ritegno di viltà trattene il bruto. (83-4)

Although Orsola's sexual awakening could be portrayed as part of a natural order, like the thawing of nature in spring, the guilt and castigation she experiences as a result reveal D'Annunzio's adherence to representing the strictly enforced roles and behaviour for women of his time. Orsola's feelings of shame after her rape prevent her from continuing a normal life. Overcome by guilt for her transgression and by shame for the loss of her virginity, she seeks the assistance of a woman, marked with the label *strega*, whose potion to relieve Orsola of the evidence of her sin brings about instead her death. Orsola's death is marked by intense physical pain and suffering: "in mezzo al sangue del peccato, con i pollici stretti nei pugni, senza grida, la sposa violata del Signore per alcuni attimi si agitò nella convulsione mortale" (96). Tainted by her violated state, Orsola pays the price for her transgression, that of sexual awakening, with her death.

As in *Giacinta*, Orsola's rape is portrayed as an example of male lust for the non-maternal female body and like Giacinta, Orsola experiences guilt and punishment as a result of the event. Unlike Capuana, however, D'Annunzio does not explore Orsola's sexual violence as other than the result of her sexual awakening. Rape does not provide, as in *Giacinta*, the means for exploring female psychology and repressed trauma, but rather the means for castigating the female character for her transgression.

With the attention given to rape by twentieth-century Italian women writers, sexual violence takes on another function within Italian literature: rape as a metaphor for the patriarchal violation and subjugation of women. Sibilla Aleramo's novel, *Una donna* (1906, now 1997), is the first of several novels by women writers throughout the course of the twentieth century to focus on rape in this way, including, for example, Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (1947), Elsa

Morante's *La storia* (1974) and Dacia Maraini's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) and *Voci* (1994).

In this essay I will examine the novels *Una donna* and *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* for their portrayal of rape accompanied by stories of strong heroines who triumph over their oppressors and escape the confines of society's limited roles for women. Aleramo and Maraini recognise the violent historical reality of sexual violence and its patriarchal roots and respond to it by representing their protagonists' respective victories over their victimised female status. In their respective novels, Aleramo and Maraini explore similar ways in which women find self-expression, creating a symbolic female order in which their protagonists express themselves, outside their roles as merely mothers. I will discuss how both novels treat themes proposed by modern Italian feminist thought on the issue of sexual difference and the need for the construction of a female alternative to traditional language and sexual practices based on the male model. Aleramo and Maraini contribute to the construction of a new model of femininity other than that proposed previously by positivist science which denigrated female attributes and roles within society.

Aleramo's *Una donna* is set in turn-of-the-century Italy, where woman was perceived to be "un essere naturalmente sottomesso e servile" (Aleramo, 1997:30). The novel confirms the custom of the *matrimonio riparatore* with the female protagonist's comment regarding such events: "questo era un uso non raro in quei luoghi e al ratto seguiva il matrimonio" (27). Women's passivity in choosing the direction of their future, even if it meant marrying one's rapist, was accepted as the norm at that time. Sharon Wood notes that the setting of Maraini's novel, that of eighteenth-century Sicily, is also a context "where such an incident [as rape] would not even have been a punishable offence", a society where "rape as a legitimate, non-criminalised act inscribed into the social order is the centerpiece of male oppression of women, of women's bodies" (1993:225). Anna Camaiti Hostert notes that eighteenth-century Sicily was indeed "remarkable, even for that time, in the cruelty of its oppression of both the poor and women" (1998:250). It is within these repressive settings that Aleramo and Maraini's narratives of rape take place. Both novels trace the lives of their respective protagonists from

childhood innocence through their traumatic experiences of rape and the resulting loss of innocence and independence. What differentiates the episodes of rape experienced by these female characters from those examined previously, however, is their ability to overcome the experience of sexual violence and succeed in making a life for themselves.

Before her experience of rape, Aleramo's protagonist is a confident and carefree individual who asserts that "*non mi sarei mai maritata*, che non sarei stata felice se non continuando la mia vita di lavoro libero, e che, del resto, tutte le ragazze avrebbero dovuto far come me... Il matrimonio... era un'istituzione sbagliata" (Aleramo, 1997:28). Shortly after she makes this statement however, she laments, "D'improvviso la mia esistenza [...] veniva sconvolta, tragicamente mutata. Che cos'ero io ora? Che cosa stavo per diventare? La mia vita di fanciulla era finita?" (35). What has occurred is her rape, at age fifteen, by a fellow employee at her father's factory. The protagonist provides a confused account of the event:

> Così, sorridendo puerilmente, accanto allo stipite di una porta che divideva lo studio del babbo dall'ufficio comune, un mattino fui sorpresa da un abbraccio insolito, brutale, due mani tremanti frugavano le mie vesti, arrovesciavano il mio corpo fin quasi a coricarlo attraverso uno sgabello, mentre istintivamente si divincolava. Soffocavo e diedi un gemito ch'era per finire in urlo, quando l'uomo, premendomi la bocca, mi respinse lontano. (34)

Similar to the stories of Giacinta and Orsola, the sexual violence experienced by the protagonist of *Una donna* takes place at the hands of someone known and trusted, surprising the protagonist and leaving her disoriented. Unlike Giacinta and Orsola, however, Aleramo's protagonist does not feel guilt for what has happened to her. As was common for the time, Aleramo's protagonist later marries her rapist, revealing her acceptance, at that point in her life, of such a sequence of events: "accettando l'unione con un essere che m'aveva oppressa e

gettata a terra, piccola e senza difesa, avevo creduto di ubbidire alla natura, al mio destino di donna che m'imponesse di riconoscere la mia impotenza a camminar sola" (Aleramo, 1997:82). Marianna Ucrìa, the protagonist of Maraini's novel, also loses her virginity in a childhood experience of rape at the hands of someone known and trusted, in this case a family member. Marianna is also forced by her family to later marry her rapist, although neither she nor the reader becomes aware of this until Marianna is an adult, due to her repression of the traumatic event. Maraini reports the events leading up to Marianna's rape retrospectively, revealing the secret origins of her loss of hearing and speech through the recollections of her older brother Carlo:

> una sera si erano sentiti dei gridi da accapponare la pelle e Marianna con le gambe sporche di sangue era stata portata via, sì trascinata dal padre e da Raffaele Cuffa, strana l'assenza delle donne... il fatto è che sì, ora lo ricorda, lo zio Pietro, quel capraro maledetto, l'aveva assalita e lasciata mezza morta... [...] per amore diceva lui, per amore sacrosanto che lui l'adorava quella bambina e se n'era 'nisciutu pazzu'. (Maraini, 1990:209-10)

As a result of this traumatic experience, Marianna, once a healthy child, loses her ability to hear and speak and is relegated to the fringes of a society that looks down upon those with disabilities.

Both Aleramo and Maraini portray the lasting effects of the rapes that their protagonists experience as children as well as the sexual violence that they continue to experience as adults. Because of their brutal sexual initiations, neither protagonist enjoys later sexual encounters. However, they are repeatedly violated by the same men who initially raped them as children. As a young bride, Aleramo's protagonist reveals her detachment from sexual experiences: "il mio distacco dal mondo, ora, era sincero; dotata di gioventù e di bellezza, io potevo, mercé la crisi attraversata, credermi esente per sempre da ogni desiderio dei sensi" (119). However, she is forced to submit against her wishes to the sexual advances of her husband, lamenting:

"Questa la mia vita. Essere adoprata come una cosa di piacere, sentir avvilita l'intima mia sostanza. E vedere i giorni seguir le notti, un dopo l'altro, senza fine" (189). Like Aleramo's protagonist, Marianna expresses similar reflections, after years of non-consensual sexual encounters: "Può una donna di quarant'anni, madre e nonna, svegliarsi come una rosa ritardataria da un letargo durato decenni per pretendere la sua parte di miele? che cosa glielo proibisce? niente altro che la sua volontà? o forse anche l'esperienza di una violazione ripetuta tante volte da rendere sordo e muto tutto intero il suo corpo?" (190). Wood notes, regarding *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, that "images and rhetorical devices underline the connection between physical violence and sexuality" (1993:233). Indeed, Marianna's description of her sexual encounters with her husband provide the reader with powerful and violent imagery of marital rape. She describes her husband's embrace as "quell'abbraccio da lupo" and sexual relations with him as "una corsa senza scampo" (Maraini, 1990:89). His hands are "le zampe del predatore sul collo" (89) and his body "un corpo che non le ha mai ispirato amore per quei modi austeri, violenti e freddi a cui si accompagnava" (149). Sexual relations with her husband are not only empty but violent and degrading experiences for Marianna. Resulting from the initial and subsequent brutal encounters with her husband, Marianna, like *Una donna's* protagonist, is unable to derive any pleasure from the act.

Maraini and Aleramo both vividly depict the negative consequences of rape on their protagonists, yet they also portray the ways in which their protagonists overcome their victimised status. Aleramo's protagonist reaches a turning point in her life when she survives an attempt at suicide. Having arrived at the ultimate low point in her existence, she localises the beginning of her descent in the experience of rape by her future husband: "Da quanto tempo la crisi si svolgeva in me a mia insaputa? Il dì in cui un informe essere aveva brutalmente interrotto la fioritura della mia adolescenza, un processo di dissolvimento s'era iniziato in me" (Aleramo, 1997:91). The protagonist's suicide attempt represents the attempt to end the life of the woman she had been until that point, a woman with no form of self-expression, trapped in an abusive relationship. With the symbolic death of the woman she had been, the protagonist begins a

new existence from that point onward. Her road to self-realisation and liberation, however, is not an easy one and she is forced to make sacrifices in order to achieve it. When she reflects on the life of her mother, for example, she questions the meaning of such an existence for women: "Amare e sacrificarsi e soccombere! Questo il destino suo e forse di tutte le donne?" (55). *Una donna*'s protagonist decides, however, that such will not be her ultimate destiny. She carries out her first act of rebellion against her oppressive surroundings through the simple act of reading. It is through reading that the protagonist is able to "escape" her isolated existence, often confined to one room of her house during the day, and feel connected to the outside world: "Mercé i libri io non ero più sola, ero un essere che intendeva ed assentiva e collaborava ad uno sforzo collettivo" (110). Writing offers another route for escaping the isolated existence imposed upon the protagonist. Beginning with a diary of reflections on her experiences and those of her growing son, she progresses to writing articles for women's journals, writing on social and feminist issues. Her collaboration with a journal offers her the first chance for liberation from her suffocating existence when she moves to Rome for a brief period to work for the journal.

Not only does *Una donna*'s protagonist reject the man who has violated her repeatedly, she further triumphs over her experience of rape and the limited existence he imposes upon her by reclaiming her own sexuality. No longer the young girl who passively submitted to marrying the man who raped her, she comes to challenge the notion of women as objects, rather than subjects capable of enjoying a fulfilling sexuality, something she comes to view as her right: "sentivo nel mio sangue penetrare la persuasione d'un diritto mai soddisfatto, e con essa un impeto formidabile di conquista, lo spasimo di raggiungere, di conoscere quella gioia dei sensi che fa nobile e bella la materiale umana; quella fusione di due corpi in un sospiro di felicità dal quale il nuovo essere prenda l'impulso alla vita trionfante?" (188). Despite the laws that deprive her of the right to her own finances or even to her son, the protagonist decides to leave her husband to pursue a meaningful existence. By the end of the novel, she has triumphed over the traumatic sexual violation of her childhood as well as the violations and limitations experienced throughout her adult life.

Marianna, like *Una donna*'s protagonist, also triumphs over the sexual violence she suffered as a child and the repeated violations of her person that she continues to experience as an adult. Especially hurtful for Marianna is the knowledge of her father's role in covering up her rape, as the following passage reveals: "Mai avrebbe immaginato che il signor padre e il signor marito zio tenessero in comune un segreto che la riguardava; che si fossero alleati tacendo a tutti di quella ferita inferta al suo corpo di bambina" (Maraini, 1990:245). The emotional wound caused by her father's compliance in the act is far more damaging than the rape itself, as Joann Cannon observes: "At the origin of Marianna's malady lies not only a traumatic event, but, more important, the very structure of patriarchal society in which women are exchanged in accordance with the law of the father" (1995:140). Although Marianna has been betrayed by the men in her life and subjected to repeated violence and oppression, Maraini's novel traces her triumph rather than her defeat, as Cannon further observes:

> Unlike the "fallen" heroines of the male-authored, feminocentric novels, Marianna will not succumb to her fate. In such works as *Clarissa*, rape marks the end of the heroine's story, the point at which the heroine's fate has been sealed. In Maraini's novel, by contrast, the rekindled memory of the rape ultimately opens up now possibilities to the protagonist. Freed from obedience to a father who betrayed her and a husband who abused her, Marianna's *lunga vita* has only begun. (144)

The protagonist's realisation of her rape as a young child is the catalyst for her self-liberation from the oppressions of the society that has thus far violated and restricted her. In fact, shortly after coming to know of her rape, Marianna finds the courage to discover sexual passion for the first time with Saro, a young servant. Writing functions also in this novel as a tool for emancipation, adopted by Marianna in her struggle to assert herself within the society that excludes her because of her difference as deaf and mute. Writing offers her an autonomous and alternative space in which to break out

of her silence and make her voice heard. Camaiti Hostert writes that *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* "describes a transition from a patriarchal world where women are silenced to a female symbolic order in which women are finally able to speak their own language" (1998:238).

Italian feminist theory explores the themes of the silencing of women within patriarchal society and the need for women to find an alternative means of expression. In *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (1987), Adriana Cavarero emphasises women's need for a language that breaks away from the male-based language of patriarchal society, suggesting the following possible alternatives for women: "In questa esperienza di distanza della lingua, trovano spazio vie di fuga a noi ben note: il silenzio, il residuo non detto, il corpo piuttosto che il pensiero" (53). In *Una donna* and *Marianna Ucrìa*, the actions and behaviour of the protagonists demonstrate such "escape routes": first through silence, then through writing and finally through rediscovery of their body and sexuality. Both protagonists discover self-expression by refusing, at a certain point, to continue to give their bodies to the men who raped them as children and who forced sexual relations upon as wives. Both protagonists come to open themselves to the possibility of sexual pleasure. Wood notes that "Maraini emphasises in this novel that real freedom for the woman lies in the re-appropriation of the expressivity of her own body. For Maraini it is not the text, the word, but the body which is the primary expression of female identity and self" (1993:226). By the end of the novel, Marianna has regained power over her violated body and has learnt to communicate sexual desire and passionate love, portraying the female body as no longer an object of male lust and violence but rather as a vehicle for the attainment of self-satisfaction and fulfilment. This victory for Marianna represents an additional way in which Maraini adheres to Italian feminist thought on sexual difference. In the 1983 *Libreria delle Donne di Milano* article, "Più donne che uomini", the authors locate women's sense of discomfort and inadequacy within patriarchal society in the female body: "Nello scacco come nel disagio diffuso si avverte che la cosa che fa ostacolo, che non c'entra con i giochi sociali, è in definitiva il fatto di essere e avere un corpo di donna. [...] Lo scacco si produce perché l'essere

donna, con la sua esperienza e i suoi desideri, non ha luogo in questa società, modellata dal desiderio maschile e dall'essere corpo di uomo". In a society dominated by male ambition and desire, the expression of women's feelings and desires and of an intelligence true to their emotions becomes distorted or silenced. The protagonists of both novels enact a final act of emancipation by leaving their homes and families to start a new life, refusing to allow their existences to be conditioned by their experiences of sexual violence.

The literary examples of rape examined above offer occasion for reflection on how this issue has been intimately tied to the understanding of women's position within society. With the *fin de siècle* male-authored perspective on women's role in society as inevitably linked to their biological function as mothers, rape figured as a narrative device for illustrating how deviance from this victimised and desexualised figure led to alienation and death. Whereas Capuana's novel offers an early example of attention to issues surrounding female sexuality as cause for repressed trauma, D'Annunzio's short story solidly places the blame on women for deviating from the prescribed roles. The twentieth-century woman writer narrates rape as a form of patriarchal control of women. Through the narration of experiences of sexual violence, the novels by Aleramo and Maraini offer a critique of patriarchal society's attempts to control women's bodies and lives. While rape represents a devastating event from which there was no return to normal life for its victims in the works of *fin de siècle* male writers, for twentieth-century women writers it represents a momentary interruption on the female protagonist's road to self-discovery and fulfillment. These shifts in the literary portrayal of experiences of rape reflect the changes taking place throughout the period examined regarding how women came to view their options, as no longer controlled by men's perceptions and actions but rather by women's choices.

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