

MOTHER ITALY: THE FEMALE ROLE IN THE REBIRTH OF ITALIAN NATIONALISM IN GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO'S *LE VERGINI DELLE ROCCE*

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Sommario

Questo articolo propone una riflessione sull'impatto che l'ideologia nazionalista, sviluppatasi nell'Italia postunitaria di fine Ottocento, ha sulla rappresentazione dei personaggi femminili in Le Vergini delle Rocce di Gabriele D'annunzio. Le tre protagoniste femminili, le vergini a cui si riferisce il titolo, sono state spesso paragonate a Beatrici dantesche o associate a stereotipi che da un lato idealizzano la donna e dall'altro la relegano alla dimensione di oggetto passivo. Questo articolo, invece, per mezzo di una lettura che fa uso di tipologie retoriche suggerisce che le protagoniste femminili del testo sono chiamate ciascuna a simbolizzare un tratto di quella che viene identificata come la donna nazionalista dannunziana, un nuovo soggetto femminile che rifletta i cambiamenti socio-culturali e il ruolo delle donne attraverso una rivalutazione del personaggio femminile a livello testuale.

*Io compresi qual valida incitatrice di energie avrebbe potuto essere
ella che, pur nella sua bontà e nella sua pazienza, possedeva l'istinto
primario della sua razza imperiosa*
(D'Annunzio, 1995:185)

Recent debate on female representation in the Italian nineteenth century literary production has focused attention on the changes in the relationship between men and women. Greater importance has been given to the new role of the latter in a society undergoing a deep economic and social transformation, which began with the

Risorgimento and characterised the post-unification years¹. This new approach has questioned the rigid binary of male-female and public-private spheres², suggesting a permeability of the borders that divide them. Further attention has also been given to the role of the family in the rise of a national-patriotic spirit, through which it is possible to talk of a “nazionalizzazione” and “politicizzazione della donna”, and of this politicised and nationalistic woman’s contribution to “nation-building”³.

This study proposes a re-evaluation of the agency D’Annunzio has embedded in the female protagonists of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*. I propose that this may be considered the first of D’Annunzio’s novels where, after destroying and rejecting⁴ both the stereotypes of “the angel in the house”⁵ and the femme fatale⁶, D’Annunzio suggests a

¹ See Mitchell and Sanson’s introduction to *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy* (1-9) on the interconnection between the new social role of the woman and the economic and political changes during the Italian “Ottocento”, and De Donato “Donna e società nella cultura moderata del primo Ottocento” on the functional role as “cemento sociale” (55) of the Italian woman between family and society.

² On the shift of the female role after the Risorgimento from private to public sphere see Vignuzzi, “La storia come missione familiare”.

³ The politicisation of the woman regards her role as educator and pillar of the family intended as the milieu of the promotion of the new national-patriotic discourse. See Porciani (2002) and Sodini (2006).

⁴ In my current project I argue that D’Annunzio uses nineteenth century narrative female stereotypes such as “the angel in the house” and the “femme fatale” in his trilogy of the *Romanzi della Rosa* as a means to criticise Italian Post-Unification society. D’Annunzio, through the female models proposed in these novels, reveals the untenability of the bourgeois angel (Maria and Giuliana respectively in *Il Piacere* and *L’Innocente*) and at the same time of the evil seductress of the French and English literature (Ippolita in *Il Trionfo della Morte*), setting instead in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* the basis for his new modern female character, which he expounds upon in *Il Fuoco*, as part of the development of an Italian national canon. In particular my investigation focuses on how the angel in the house, the traditional interpretation of the female social role, needs to go through her degeneration as a fallen angel and repudiation, first as an enemy (femme fatale) and then as a non-woman (androgynous), in order to conquer a new status of emancipation and social recognition.

⁵ The stereotype of the “angel in the house” is typical of the second half of the nineteenth century European literature. The expression is originally the title of a poem written by the English poet Coventry Patmore between 1854 and 1862 and dedicated to his wife, considered the perfect spouse according to Victorian standards. Firstly this expression came to be used both with reference to the Victorian ideal of woman, the devoted mother and loyal and perfect spouse. Subsequently, it came to be used to criticise this nineteenth

revised woman's role in the re-establishment of Italy's greatness. In doing so I will look at the way in which the main female characters of this novel are represented with regard to what I consider to be the socio-political intentions that lay beneath the text, paying particular attention to its rhetorical strategies in my reading of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*⁷.

Amy Boylan (2011) points to the distinction between the role of women during the Risorgimento and during the fin-de-siècle nationalist movement, suggesting the idea of a revised role in society. She stresses that during the Risorgimento, women were considered the educators of the children and they were "vigorously encouraged to instil in their sons both the courage and the obligation to defend the nation" (Boylan, 2011:43). The socio-political insistence was concentrated on patriotic values, which the woman had to inspire and teach to her husband and children, and the aim was the liberation of Mother-Italy from foreign invaders present at the time in her territories. However, this approach still sees the woman in a partially passive role, as the education of children is part of those ethical and social duties that social customs impose upon her⁸. Although the importance attributed to her social responsibilities as an educator reveals a "fundamental leap in terms of her sphere of influence"

century female stereotype of the woman in the household, particularly during the first wave of feminism. See Perkins Gilman.

⁶ The theme of the "femme fatale" has been explored by D'Annunzio in the previous novels of the trilogy of the *Romanzi della Rosa* and particularly in *Il Trionfo della Morte*. See Zaccardo (1983) on the evolution from the angelic woman into the femme fatal in Italy. See Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, and Barberi Squarotti, *Invito alla lettura di D'Annunzio*, for a detailed analysis of this female stereotype within D'Annunzio's novelistic production and particularly with reference to the castrating effect of this female type on the male protagonist of the novels, to the point of her evolution into "la Nemica".

⁷ In analysing the rhetoric present in the novel I will mainly refer to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Curtius's seminal text, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, for the definition, aims and tools of rhetorical communication.

⁸ From the end of the eighteenth century, with the spreading of Rousseau's ideas on the mother's role in the care of the child, and during the first half of the nineteenth century, the woman became the primary and indispensable source of the children's education towards religious and national values. See Sanson on the growing importance of the mother in the education of the children (2013:44-50), and De Donato on the woman as "oggetto-soggetto educativo" (1983:53-55).

(Sanson, "La madre educatrice", 2013:50) in the first half of the century the woman is still missing a full awareness of her social role.

The female role as educator and mediator of the family, which is in turn the nucleus of society, depends on virtues such as "rispettosità, disciplina, ordine, sottomissione [...] per un verso e di carità, benevolenza [...] per l'altro" (De Donato, 1983:55). These characteristics, attributing to her a submissive and weaker nature⁹, underscore the image of passivity. However, a certain form of female agency arises and it is characterised in terms of willing abnegation to the nation, self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of children to the cause (Boylan, 2011:43). This becomes apparent in the very passage from the Risorgimento's idea of 'defence of borders' to the claim of 'conquest of territory', which characterises the fin-de-siècle nationalist movement. The passage implies the female willingness to sacrifice her husband and sons to the active making of the nation's greatness through conquest. In fact, the defence of the country under foreign attack was an inevitable duty, whereas territorial expansion when there is no threat becomes a choice, not integral to the immediate survival of the country, but animated by nationalist spirit and pride. Boylan suggests that "Mercantini's repeated verses, 'Va' fuori dall'Italia' and Baroni's defensive figures reflect a preoccupation with protecting borders while D'Annunzio's idea of 'liberation' was tied more strongly to imperialist conquest and expansion" (2011:57). She traces a connection between female agency and the military sphere, and between nation and gender, which reveals a shift in female actions as the conquest of new territories requires a voluntarily proactivity within all social parties, including women. The territorial expansion demands a higher level of aggressiveness which expands upon the classic Risorgimento's patriotism. Although this new political course professed by the nationalist movement still "operate[s] within a patriarchal structure" (Boylan, 2011:41), it allows an explanation of the change that female agency and awareness undergo.

⁹ On the female characteristics in the Italian short stories of the first half of the nineteenth century and the socio-political programme of the moderates see also Ghiazza, "La donna nella novella sentimentale".

In the early years of the post-unification era, representations of the female social role are still crystallised within the house as the “angel of the hearth and pillar of domestic order” (Boylan, 2011:43), isolating her from society¹⁰. In literature, female characters both reflect this angelic status or are in direct opposition, that is they come to be associated with the image of the evil seductress, who exercises an annihilating effect on her male companion. In contrast, the innovativeness of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, rests in overcoming both these types (the angel in the house and the femme fatale), and in anticipating the model of the “mother willing or even happy to sacrifice her sons to the nation that emerged just prior to World War I and in the Fascist years” (Boylan, 2011:43).

Finally, the proposal of a new role for the woman, suggested in my reading of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, also needs to be considered in light of the increasing tendency, since Romanticism, to represent the country as a young woman or as a mother. Both of these representations, which are present at various symbolic levels in this novel, contribute in redefining the position of the woman in a nationalist perspective¹¹. In this context, D’Annunzio’s claims “[le] tre sorelle [...] parevano anche preparare il destino di Colui che doveva venire” (D’Annunzio, 1995:4) and “è necessaria una volontà duplice a crear quest’Uno” (D’Annunzio, 1995:165) could be seen as developing a theoretical formulation of a new female role and her agency. This is underlined by the verb “preparare”, which denotes the premeditation of the subject in the action and therefore her willingness to act, and by the adjective “duplice” which expresses the idea of two equally important parties in the action. The three virgins of the title each embody a characteristic of this new female type which reaches its complete synthesis in the female protagonist of the

¹⁰ On the concept of domestic sphere as a separate and exclusively female world see Wilson, *Gender, Family and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860-1945*, and Kerber, “Female worlds, woman’s place: The rhetoric of woman’s history”.

¹¹ As Boylan aptly notes “the personification of the nation as a woman and mother [...] serve not only to reinforce appropriate behaviour for women in the new nation but actually to define the terms of membership in the nation and, importantly, to situate motherhood and national identity within a military context” (Boylan, 2011:44). On the dichotomy motherhood-politics and the female role as mother of the new citizens see also Kerber (1988).

following novel, *Il Fuoco*. In *Il Fuoco* the new role of the woman suggested in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* is condensed in one female character, Foscarina. She is presented as a self-made woman, conscious of her role and her position in society, willing to sacrifice herself physically and psychologically, as required for the male protagonist and his success, which would otherwise be impossible without her active contribution. As underlined by Meda (1993) with regard to the female protagonists of D'Annunzio's tragedies (particularly *Nave* and *Fedra*), also in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* and later in *Il Fuoco*, the new female heroine is "portatrice attiva di azione" (1993:138) and her heroism "pur condividendo con l'eroismo maschile la spinta dinamica al cambiamento e alla trasformazione [...] è caratterizzato dall'accettazione del proprio destino" (1993: 166) which in this case is her total and eager devotion to the national cause.

In *Le Vergini delle Rocce* the female characters are therefore considered to represent facets of the new nationalist woman as they become the protagonists, together with the male hero, in rebuilding and regenerating the greatness of the country. The author, charging the chosen sister with the task to become the mother¹² of the hero of the nation (the primary narrative thread of the novel is the male protagonist's return to his homeland in order to find a spouse to provide an heir to him and his cause), suggests the idea of a specificity of roles in the nationalist apparatus both for women and men. Banti in his study of the development of the Italian nation from post-unification to Fascism underlines this correlation between gender and roles and defines the nation as a "comunità sessuata, funzionalmente distinta cioè in due generi diversi per ruoli, profili e rapporto gerarchico" (Banti, 2011:VII). The characteristics, which define each of the three virgin sisters, Violante, Anatolia and Massimilla, and which are proclaimed in the prologue by each girl

¹² On the dichotomy motherhood-womanhood and the primary role of the woman as mother of the new Italians in post-unification see Livi Bacci, *Donna, Fecondità e Figli: Due Secoli di Storia Italiana*, and Fanning, "Maternal prescriptions and descriptions in Post-Unification Italy".

(strength, support, pride and dedication)¹³ correspond to the characteristics and tasks attributed to the nationalist women, identified by Banti in his definition of the gendered nation. He argues:

Alle figure femminili si riservano compiti di natura diversa: di assistenza, di aiuto e di sostegno psicologico agli uomini della nazione [...] sono donne che nel essere madri sanno sacrificare quanto di più sacro e prezioso struttura i loro affetti: sanno offrire con coraggio alla patria i loro mariti, i loro figli [...] perché sanno che quella perdita è la loro offerta votiva sull'altare della devozione patriottica". (Banti, 2011:40)

The word “vergini”, present in the title and used in the narration to refer to the three protagonist sisters, also represents a prominent feature of the nationalist woman, and belongs to the patriotic discourse as “alle figure femminili si chiede anche un comportamento sessualmente virtuoso, scandito da una rigorosa castità monogamica” (Banti, 2011:40-42). This aspect, in line with the patriarchal bourgeois ideas of morality of the end of the century¹⁴, was developed at the outset of WWI and during Fascism in the theme of the “Italice Vergini”, whose honour must be protected first from the Austrian invaders and later from racially inferior men¹⁵. The new female type represented in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* could then be considered integral to a new political scheme, which arises from the Risorgimento, but is put into effect at the end of the nineteenth

¹³ “[Massimilla] nessuna fede al mondo vincerebbe d’ardore la mia fede nell’ascoltare [...] io sono colei che ascolta” (D’Annunzio, 1995:8), “[Anatolia] la mia forza [...] potrebbe guidar sicura” (D’Annunzio, 1995:8-9), “[Anatolia] io potrei estrarre dalla profondità della sua incoscienza le energie occulte, ignorate come i metalli nelle vene della pietra bruta” (D’Annunzio, 1995:9), “[Anatolia] il mio cuore è infaticabile. Tutti i dolori della terra non riuscirebbero a stancare il suo palpito” (D’Annunzio, 1995:9), “[Anatolia] non ho paura di soffrire” (D’Annunzio, 1995:9), and “[Violante] ho su la mia anima lo splendore dei destini grandiosi e tristi” (D’Annunzio, 1995:10).

¹⁴ See Mosse, “Nationalism and respectability” (1982), for a detailed study on the relationship between respectability, sex and nationalism in the fin-de-siècle.

¹⁵ On the defence of female honour as defence of the purity of the Italian blood see Banti, *Sublime madre nostra* (2011:173-175).

century and marks the first decades of the twentieth century, evolving into Fascism¹⁶.

In spite of disagreement among scholars regarding D'Annunzio's affiliation with the Regime¹⁷, his contribution to the construction of the nationalist canon through his literary production and conduct is undeniable. *Le Vergini delle Rocce* is indeed widely regarded as his political manifesto and the author himself defined it a "libro di prosa poetica che sarà un grido di guerra per i popoli latini"¹⁸ (D'Annunzio), a call to political and military action. As pointed out by Lorenzini in her introduction to the 1995 edition of the novel, *Le Vergini delle Rocce* can be considered a propagandistic oratory in which the political aspect is merged together with D'Annunzio's aesthetic conception of poetry and beauty. As a form of rhetorical communication, it aims to persuade and inspire the country to regain its past position of power in Europe, looking to the Roman Empire as a model to create a colonial domain. As a political-rhetorical speech, however, it may appear to be based only on two of the three elements that are classically ascribed to rhetorical discourse¹⁹, the speaker and

¹⁶ Banti, in *Sublime madre nostra*, points to the creation of a national-patriotic discourse, which arises during the Italian Risorgimento, and its amplification during the post-unification, through what he defines as an "estetica della politica". Moreover Banti, stating that "Mussolini e gli altri membri della commissione [...] impiegano la concezione genealogico-parentale della comunità nazionale che appartiene *ab origine* al discorso nazional patriottico italiano" (2011:151), underlines how in the nationalist discourse that characterises the period between 1861 and 1945, the "matrice morfologica originaria del discorso nazionale" (2011:VIII), remains based on the three "figure profonde" he identifies in the Risorgimento's discourse, that are nation as a family, nation as a communal sacrifice, and nation as a gendered community. A similar idea of a gendered nation is expressed also by Boylan (2011), who points out that such an image, present at various levels both in literature and plastic arts, is "indicative of a way of thinking about the nation and the national identity that begins in the Risorgimento and endures in pre-WWI nationalist contexts" (Boylan, 2011:40).

¹⁷ See Hughes-Hallett (2013), Spackman (1996) and Merola (1979) for a more detailed analysis of D'Annunzio's contribution to the rhetoric and ideology of the regime.

¹⁸ Letter to the French translator Hérelle, quoted in Rhodes, *The Poet as Superman* (1959:162).

¹⁹ See Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and in particular, chapters I and II of book 1, for the topics of accusation and the means of persuasion. In *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, the accusation is against the post-unification government and the democratic direction taken by the country, considered responsible for the political-cultural degradation of the country and accused of having betrayed the ideals of the Risorgimento's movements. The means of persuasion

the text, while the third element, that is the audience within the narrative, is notably missing. The readership that the narrating voice addresses and that it is intended should be persuaded by the rhetoric, is a small élite group of intellectuals, not a mass audience. However, given D'Annunzio's popularity at the time, and his manipulation of his own image, this may just constitute a narrative device, a form of sophistication to entice a wider audience. In this novel the idea of masses as an instrument to produce an action, as one finds in his theatre, is missing. On the contrary the novel presents the persistent idea of the masses as degenerate plebeians, who are contributing to the corruption and inanity of the country. The narrator deliberately refrains from addressing this social class, choosing instead to talk to those whom he considers élite, free from a capitalistic logic and devoted to higher ideals of nobility, art and beauty. However, the rhetorical function of moving the audience is still accomplished at a metanarrative level as the reader becomes the audience, who is thought to perceive itself as part of this Nietzschean élite and to accept such a leader who guides the country out of its stagnation²⁰. Moreover, "the reliance on a mythic interpretation of history" (Boylan, 2011:54) present in the novel, becomes a "strategy he [D'Annunzio] uses to lead his audience to think and feel in unison, collectively, to want to be part of the identity it creates for them" (Boylan, 2011:54). The mythological references are an instrument to

instead refers to the character of the speaker and the evocation of emotions, in this case patriotic sentiments, in the audience.

²⁰ Although sensitive to the importance of the public from a commercial perspective, D'Annunzio revealed an aristocratic and negative interpretation of the role of the masses in his previous works and especially in the trilogy of the *Romanzi della Rosa*. Conversely, *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, through the superimposition of the readership and the élite, represents a moment of transition in D'Annunzio's relationship with the masses leading towards its re-evaluation, which appears firstly in the Cisalpine sonnets of 1896 and then in the novel, *Il Fuoco*, and in his theatrical production. As pointed out by Zanetti (2011), from 1896 an intuition "folgorante di una ricezione di massa segnata non dalla comprensione concettuale ma dalla potenza esaltante e estetica del ritmo" (2011:36) appears in D'Annunzio's works. The masses can be now addressed and guided by the "poeta-vate" through the theatrical representation, which is converted into a musical ritual where the interpreter becomes the means for the "nuova simbiosi fra il poeta e la massa [...] transfer della folla stessa, l'incarnazione del suo 'espoir'" (Zanetti, 2011:39).

awaken [men's] emotions²¹, in line with Aristotle's requirements for rhetorical communication and the mythical element acquires therefore a political connotation²², fundamental in setting the basis of the Italian nationalist canon and expansionist program²³.

D'Annunzio's condemnation of the Italian fin-de-siècle society and his invocation for the restoration of the greatness of the country²⁴ was a sentiment shared by many intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century²⁵, who, as Ledeen notes, shared with D'Annunzio the desire to "ridare al governo forza d'attrazione e capacità di catalizzare le passioni popolari verso imprese a carattere nazionale" (Ledeen, 1975:84)²⁶. *Le Vergini delle Rocce* can then be considered as

²¹ Merola refers to Mosse's idea of "aesthetics of politics" where the participation of the masses becomes of primary importance (see Merola, 1979:9-10). This participation, according to Mosse, requires the conversion of political actions into dramatic actions and consequently there is the tendency to use the mythological sphere to move the emotions of the masses and by focusing these on an ideal of beauty, control them. See Mosse, *La nazionalizzazione delle masse*, (1975:14-28).

²² Ledeen states that "lo stile politico di D'Annunzio – [...] la politica del mito e del simbolo – è diventato una norma del mondo moderno" (1975:11-12).

²³ See Meda (1993:85, 138-139) for a detailed analysis of the interconnection between political themes and myth in D'Annunzio's theatre. Notably, while in *Fedra*, as Meda points out, the "utopia colonialistica [è] trasferit[a] nel mondo degli dei e degli eroi" (1993:139), in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* the myth is projected into the present to support the expansionist desire.

²⁴ In this regard, Hughes-Hallet points out that "many of Cantelmo's sentiments are quoted word for word from articles and essays d'Annunzio has previously published over his own name" (2013:216).

²⁵ The denunciation of the crisis at a literary level is present not only in parliamentary novels or novels with manifest political intentions but also, for instance, in the novel of adultery as pointed out by Ganeri and Fiandra. According to Ganeri the theme of adultery becomes itself a means to denounce the political stasis of the post-unified country as "Mentre la storia parlamentare, come accade ufficialmente, con Agostino Depretis, dal 1882, mescola gli schieramenti partitici, vanificandone le contrapposizioni, nel campo della letteratura si diffonde un'imprendibile frustrazione, che produce e riflette, sul duplice piano del pubblico e del privato, un'inquietudine contraddittoria. In quanto significante di destabilizzazione, insieme romanzesca, sentimentale e ideologica, se l'adulterio diventa, per questo, antesignano, più o meno consapevole, dell'ambiguità modernista, al contempo esso rivela, assai più di altri temi, uno stato d'animo diffuso anche nella politica post-unitaria: quello della paralisi" (2012:11).

²⁶ Ledeen here refers to the interventionist groups at the outset of WWI and in particular to the Futurist movement and its Manifesto (1909), where war is represented as a way to regain

a conveyor of these new and increasingly manifest political criticisms, and anticipates the themes of D'Annunzio's future political works, the *Discorso della siepe* (1897) and the *Orazione per la sagra dei Mille* (1915)²⁷. Giglioli in this respect (referring to D'Annunzio's parliamentary experience in 1897-1900) talks of a "trajectory, perceived as exemplary, [which] marked the experience of the entire pre-war generation of Italian intellectuals, torn between exceptionalism and avant-garde" (Giglioli, 2013:516). This idea of a political-ideological trajectory, through which the intellectuals of the fin-de-siècle contributed to the formation of a nationalist canon, in the case of D'Annunzio can then be traced back to *Le Vergini delle Rocce*. Notably, rhetorical tools such as the use of classical reminiscence and references to blood line, used throughout *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, are present in the *Discorso della siepe* and the *Orazione per la sagra dei Mille*, showing the continuity of D'Annunzio's political-ideological orientation and aims.

In the trilogy of the *Romanzi della Rosa*, mainly through the device of irony, D'Annunzio had already revealed the inanity of a self-indulgent upper-middle class and a bourgeois logic of reification. *Le Vergini delle Rocce* goes further, both suggesting and promoting a theoretical solution: the creation of a superhuman leader, with the help of a new female model embodying the nationalist woman. The female protagonist of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, as we shall see, overcomes the apathetic bourgeois female and the libertine aristocratic type, criticised in the *Romanzi della Rosa*, and combines in herself the new importance given to female dignity²⁸, the idea of

international importance, to break with the inanity of Italy and as a patriotic means to complete the national liberation started during the Risorgimento.

²⁷ These works are prominent symbols of D'Annunzio's political experience in 1897, and his military ideology which will determine his military adventures during WWI, and the conquest of Fiume. See Woodhouse (1985), Giglioli (2013) and Banti (2011) for the analysis of the political-ideological relevance of the two speeches.

²⁸ De Donato, in "Donna e società nella cultura moderata del primo Ottocento", points to the decay of family values and marriage institution, which are considered the main obstacles to the development of the Italian society in the nineteenth century, and how this comes to be contrasted by "la moralità e la serietà nuove della donna" so that "diventa luogo commune parlare della sua 'vera dignità'" (1983:18).

complementarity of the sexes and the recuperation of her role as Muse, who is no longer passive.

Claudio Cantelmo, the male protagonist of the novel, is charged with the task of leading the country out of its political impasse. Embodying traits attributed to the Roman progeny such as purity, nobility and genetic beauty, he seeks to achieve his task through the search for an equivalently “pure” female, among the three noble sisters in the title of the novel. Together they are to produce the nation’s heir, a Nietzschean saviour for Italy: “preparare il destino di Colui che doveva venire” (D’Annunzio, 1995:4). This search for love and a life companion embraced by the male protagonist, both reflects the superimposition of romantic love with patriotic love, and the importance given in the patriotic discourse to the trinomial love-marriage-reproduction as a central axiom in the preservation and continuation of the bloodline and the nation as a familial community²⁹.

As suggested by Pearce (2009), this need for a regeneration of the country and the idea of a very literal renaissance, is a consequence of D’Annunzio’s encounter with the “wilderness”, that is the degradation of Rome in the 1880s. Pearce underlines the double nature of the city which is presented as a “stupendous spectacle strewn with the mighty monuments of the Past” and contemporarily as “a wilderness from which nothing now springs but grass, fever germs and noble thoughts” (Pearce, 2009:26). This image of a sterile city is particularly present both in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* and *Il Piacere*, where the protagonist exposes a suffocating Rome, populated on the one hand by a perverted upper-class (devoted only to sex, gambling, abuse of alcohol and the keeping up of an appearance of pomp) and on the other the “bruti”, the masses relegated, together with the weak government, to the background. It is then during the period spent in Rome, that D’Annunzio became aware of the unfulfilled ideals of the Risorgimento and the need for a hero to “breathe new life into Italians, new life as the heir” (Pearce, 2009:26).

²⁹ On the role of love and marriage in the construction of the idea of society as a familial community, see Banti, *Sublime madre nostra* (2011:38-39).

In *Le Vergini delle Rocce* one finds that classicism and militarism are intertwined in the text to reinforce its political message. According to many scholars such as Merola (1979), Segre (1993) and Bärberi-Squarotti (1979) this return to classicity is a response to the realisation of the empty logic of reification, and myth becomes a means both to contrast a disappointing modernity and to underline its crisis. Bärberi-Squarotti takes this theme a step further, as he suggests the image of the “Artifex”³⁰, defined both as “colui che si è assunto il compito di riassumere e di compendiare, sull’orlo del silenzio definitivo, tutto il passato dell’Arte e tutto il presente ancora praticabile della Bellezza” and “chi si propone quale profeta della liberazione (estetica) futura, di un riscatto dell’Arte e della Bellezza in una nuova forma” (Bärberi Squarotti, in Merola, 1979:83). Similarly, in my reading of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, the “Artifex”, in this case Cantelmo and his future son, become the heroes of the national rebirth and are charged with the task of rescuing the military and territorial glory of the country, annihilated by a lethargic and corrupted government. It is possible to identify a transposition of the image of the “Artifex” to a nationalist level as the “Artifex” in this novel is no longer the rescuer only of art and beauty but also of the glory of the country at a military and political level. In this context the three virgins of the novel, are recomposed in one, the “Koré, la Vergine archetipa” (Meda, 1993:76), becoming the “Genetrix”, the companion and complementing figure of the new “Artifex” in his mission. I use here the term “Genetrix”, according to its Latin meanings of “mother”, “cause”, and “origin”. The new nationalist woman that is proposed in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* is at the same time the mother of the future hero, the personification of Mother Italy and above all the origin and cause of the rebirth of the country as its primary agent together with the male companion.

The concept of “Genetrix” as the origin allows a reflection on the importance of the idea of the nobility of birth³¹ and the superiority of

³⁰ See Bärberi Squarotti in *Gli Inferi e il labirinto* for a detailed study of the “Artifex” as D’Annunzio’s reaction to what he perceives as the death of beauty and art during the end of nineteenth century.

³¹ The importance attributed to this social class reflects the process of “riassetamento simbolico” in which “una parte almeno della nobiltà ridefinisca la propria identità e il

bloodline, which are intertwined with the topos of the golden age as the founding myth of Italian greatness, a golden age which, in my reading, should be perceived as inclusive of both the Renaissance and the Roman Empire³². Expressions such as “la loro grazia e il loro orgoglio” (D’Annunzio, 1995:3), “le più belle e le più ardenti [...] nell’estrema discendenza di una razza imperiosa” (D’Annunzio, 1995:3), “[le] loro ascendenze remote” (D’Annunzio, 1995:3), “il sangue eloquente nelle vene delle loro belle mani ignude” (D’Annunzio, 1995:4) and “le tre principesse nubili aspettavano quivi l’amico [...] l’unico erede di un nome non meno antico e non meno insigne del loro. Aspettavano così un loro eguale” (D’Annunzio, 1995:5), embrace and expound these ideals of lineage, blood ties and Roman origins, elaborated during the Risorgimento, which, as suggested by Banti, become the basis of the fin-de-siècle nationalist canon³³.

Notably, these expressions refer primarily to the female characters, directly mentioned as in the last example or indirectly through the metonym of the hand and the possessive “loro”. Even in the last sentence, where the subject is the male protagonist, his nobility of

proprio ruolo politico in funzione e in ragione della nascita dello stato nazionale” (Sodini, 2006:108).

³² Venturi (1980) suggests that D’Annunzio’s topos of the golden age must be connected specifically to the Renaissance and not with classic Arcadia. Conversely, Imbriani (2006) points out that the co-presence in the novel of both Socrates and da Vinci and the importance attributed to them allows a synthesis between Antiquity and Renaissance. In my reading, as mentioned, I suggest a different identification of the golden age both as the Renaissance and the Roman Empire. In the text the considerations on the figure of Socrates together with the reference to Jesus Christ are used as examples of intellectuals and orators, both unsuccessful, and not as representatives of an idyllic past. The classic Greek Arcadia is here replaced by the Roman Empire as an attempt to give a stronger and more historical lineage to the actual nation and to support the expansionist campaign. The cult of the Roman Empire and Renaissance is symbolised in the novel by the presence of ancient roman villas, the prestigious and mythical ancestors of the main characters and the references to Leonardo da Vinci. Claudio Cantelmo is himself the descendent of a noble and heroic dynasty led by Alessandro Cantelmo, a favourite of Leonardo da Vinci and a knight under the Sforza, who combines purity of bloodline, and artistic and military virtues embodying the topos of the Renaissance as the Early Modern Italian golden age.

³³ According to Banti, “Fondamentale, nella costellazione mitologica nazional-patriotica, è la descrizione della nazione come una comunità di parentela e di discendenza, dotata di una sua genealogia e di una sua specifica storicità [...] da qui il ricorso frequente a termini come ‘sangue’ e ‘lignaggio’” (2011:15).

lineage is compared to the nobility of the virgins, who remain the point of reference. More importantly, the man is defined as their peer, “un loro eguale”, not only removing the idea of female inferiority but also suggesting the idea that if there is equality between the two genders, it is the man striving to be equal to the woman and not vice versa, shifting the pre-eminence to the woman. There is an exaltation of the female bloodline and the female agency, as she becomes a fundamental part of the nationalist scheme. Anatolia’s words “mi agita questo desiderio di creare, di divenir per l’amore Colei che propaga e perpetua le idealità di una stirpe favorita dai Cieli” (D’Annunzio, 1995:9), reveal her conscious willingness to participate, as an equal creator, in the construction of a better future for her country.

The image of the mother, commonly associated to the nation in post-unification iconography, acquires in the novel a triple connotation. As a fundamental link in the propagation of the genealogy, D’Annunzio proposes in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* three types of mothers, namely the physical mother, the “mother in her potentiality”³⁴ and the mother nation. While the first figure, a symbol of a decaying society, is presented through the lenses of hysteria and mental disease, the “mother in her potentiality”³⁵ represents D’Annunzio’s new idea of the woman, who is at the service of Mother Italy. Following Curtius’ classification of rhetoric topoi, it is possible to identify in the presence of the physical mother and the young future mother, the topos of the “Old Woman and the Girl”, common in ancient and medieval rhetoric (1973:92-105). The former female character, represented by the ill and aged mother who is also a metaphor for the Italian socio-political stasis, is completely exhausted in this novel. In this sense I consider *Le Vergini delle Rocce* a logical discursive conclusion to the process of deconstruction of the female literary stereotypes typical of the second half of the century, carried out in the trilogy of the *Romanzi della Rosa*. In this trilogy, following

³⁴ I refer here to Aristotle (2014)’s metaphysical concept of potentiality and actuality.

³⁵ The idea of potentiality becomes a metaphor of “attesa” and “ricerca” through which the three sisters (similarly to Anna and Bianca Maria in *La città morta* as pointed out by Meda) reveal a “tensione verso la realizzazione del sé, cioè della totalità della personalità” (1993:76) and of their role in society.

the contemporary female representation schemes, D'Annunzio has presented female disease and particularly hysteria as the product of the clash between the individual and society, and as a parabola of a socio-political void in the post-unified Italy. The medicalization of the female body, as in the second and third book of the trilogy, which was common in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the elaboration of the female as a sexual-pathological subject (as the corruptor of the male's values) have been necessary steps in demystifying female types. These types, which converged in the old mother of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, are no longer correspondent to the characteristics required in the nationalist woman. On the contrary, the new active woman, the "mother in her potentiality", of which the sisters are facets, becomes the mother to the nation's heroes, who in turn are sacrificed to Mother Italy's greatness. The three daughters represent that transformation from age to youth pointed out by Curtius. The old infertile mother, metaphorically sterile in the male line as she has transmitted her mental disease to her male heirs, and cannot therefore represent a valid future for the nation, is replaced by the young mothers in "potentiality", "preserving the function of the late Antique superhuman redemptress" (Curtius, 104) symbolised by this topos. The passage from the Old Woman to the Young Girl is, moreover, functional to the political message that sees the new heroes of the nation projected into the future, while the past, despite being a model to aspire to, has become anachronistic.

The idea of a superhuman woman, who will redeem the glory of the country, supports the idea of the importance of the new female role in D'Annunzio's nationalist ideology as the female character becomes the equivalently superhuman companion and mother of D'Annunzio's Nietzschean heroes. The male character no longer elevates himself through the contemplation of the passive angelic woman, through which he is able to carry out the solitary task of leading the world, as he now finds a correspondent heroine, who will actively help him in carrying out this task. Barilli, in *D'Annunzio in prosa*, had already introduced this idea of gender equality in the context of D'Annunzio's novels *Il Piacere* and *Il Trionfo della Morte*, re-defining the idea of femme fatale and her function in the narrative discourse and removing the evil effects on the male character, while

elevating her to the role of “degnà compagna dei nostri eroi” (Barilli, 1993:72). However, Barilli’s gender equality is based mainly on the recognition of the women’s entitlement to feel pleasure as an active subject in the love relation and it is therefore limited to the sexual sphere³⁶. In my reading of *Le Vergini delle Rocce* I take this re-evaluation of the woman’s agency further, suggesting a shift from the personal to the social dimension in which the woman becomes a willing active member, at her man’s side, in re-establishing the power of her country. This new female character is no longer “centro e vittima di intrighi e disavventure da cui doveva essere salvata” (Meda, 1993:138) like the “angel in the house” or a castrating enemy of the man like the “femme fatale”. The woman’s new agency, postulated in *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, and her “potenza di fecondazione” (Lorenzini, 1989:282) in the creation of the hero of the nation, anticipates the “donna dionisiaca” (Meda, 1993) of D’Annunzio’s theatre, as, according to Chomel, it is her “nuova carica di volontà e di determinazione” (1997:16) that distinguishes her. Chomel (1997) contrasts the innovative D’Annunzian theatrical female to the female characters of the novels, still considered aligned to the traditional stereotypes of the angel and the femme fatale. Although I agree with her identification of these stereotypes in the protagonists of the *Romanzi della Rosa*, and despite recognising the undeniable difference with her theatrical counterpart, I suggest a new and different female type in the novels, starting from *Le Vergini Delle Rocce*, that adheres to D’Annunzio’s socio-political ideas at the turn of the century.

The characteristics of the new nationalist woman proposed in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* can be found particularly in the prologue through the unspoken words that the male protagonist attributes to the three sisters. These proclamations “il piú dubitoso degli uomini ritroverebbe al mio fianco la sicurezza” (D’Annunzio, 1995:9), “le

³⁶ Barilli (1993) demystifies the stereotype of the femme fatale depicted as a maneater and a nymphomaniac, suggesting that this character has no negative connotation, able to conjugate sensual pleasure and mundane life; she desires to live every moment of life intensely with no moral constrictions like her correspondent male party. Barilli speaks of a new moral for D’Annunzio, based on eros and sexual satisfaction, without reference or connection to procreativity. For a detailed analysis of the femme fatale’s character in D’Annunzio’s work, see also Praz, *The Romantic Agony*.

mie mani sanno avvolgere la benda intorno alle piaghe e strapparla di su le palpebre oppresse” (D’Annunzio, 1995:9), and “mi agita questo desiderio di creare, di divenir per l’amore Colei che propaga e perpetua le idealità di una stirpe favorita dai Cieli. La mia sostanza potrebbe nutrire un germe sovraumano” (D’Annunzio, 1995:9), represent a climactic showing of strength, courage and conscious self-sacrifice, necessary in becoming the Mother to the superhuman leader of the nation. Once again the female is here represented as an active individual, she gives strength, she cures the wounds of her male companion but also pushes him to regain freedom, and she consciously becomes the mother of the nation’s rebirth. This woman is no longer the inert bourgeois angel, hidden in the house and inexistent to society, as can be seen at a textual level through the expressions such as “al mio fianco”, “le mie mani sanno” and “mi agita [...] Colei che propaga e perpetua”, which disclose this movement away from a passive, minor female character to an active woman, determinedly embracing her role and duties. Noticeably, the Italian terms “divenir” and “sostanza”, in light of Aristotle’s metaphysics, reveal the actualisation of the “mother in her potentiality”, stressing even more this idea of activity. This novel not only sets forward a new model of the woman but also supports a functionally positive female reintegration in the socio-literary context in contrast with the misogynist trends of the end of the century³⁷. As suggested by Boylan, “images of maternity serve not only to reinforce appropriate behaviour for women in the new nation but actually to define the terms of membership in the nation” (Boylan, 2011:44).

Finally, the three daughters represent contemporarily facets of the personification of Italy itself, the glorious nation favoured by the Gods, but secluded in a garden of magnificent but anachronistic past memories³⁸. The image of the garden has been the object of various

³⁷ See Ackley (1992) and Rogers (1966) for an analysis of misogyny in the fin-de-siècle literature and Schopenhauer’s *On women in Essay and Aphorisms* (2004) and Möbius’s *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* (2000) as examples of intellectuals’ works [alimenting] influencing the theory on women’s inferiority in this period.

³⁸ Vignuzzi, in “La storia come missione familiare”, points to the difference between the ancient and almost mythological past on which the traditional European notion of nation is based, and the historical and more recent past of the country with its disillusion and degradation. According to Vignuzzi consequently, “anche se immaginata in relazione a un

studies and Venturi points to a direct connection between the garden and the three virgins “le quali [...] vivono la loro vita iperreale solo dentro il paesaggio a loro confacente che è la vasta e corrotta landa desolata del giardino simbolico” (Venturi, 1980:211). Although he suggests a negative symbiosis between the ruins in the garden and the lifeless female characters, it seems to me that the relationship between the female characters and the garden may be viewed as a symbol of the bond between the virgins and the national soil of a glorious past, which must be brought back to life by the nationalist hero. In this sense when the male protagonist leaves Rome, he is embarking on a quest. The journey is to rediscover and bring back to life the past glories of the country with few remaining signs of such a memorable past. Rome is then the symbol of the contrast between the glorious past, “quella raggianti corona di ville gentilizie a cui nulla è paragonabile nel mondo delle memorie e della Poesia” (D’Annunzio, 1995:43) and the product of the democratic devastation, defined as “una specie di tumore biancastro sporgeva dal fianco della vecchia Urbe e ne assorbiva la vita” (D’Annunzio, 1995:43). The garden on the other hand, is a synecdoche for a bucolic countryside, still uncontaminated by the corruption of the bourgeoisie and therefore home to a new beginning³⁹. It is at the same time a ‘hortus conclusus’, a ‘locus amoenus’ and “luogo dello spirito” (Venturi, 1980:199).

Imbriani observes in D’Annunzio’s work an awareness of Saint Catherine’s life and writings with particular reference to the images of mystic gardens⁴⁰, which stresses the suggestion of an even stronger

passato antichissimo, la Nazione provoca fratture con il passato” (2006:181), and in this sense, I talk of anachronistic memories.

³⁹ The three virgins become the three Fates, they control life, they hold in their hand the destiny of humanity and they can create a new world by giving birth to the new hero.

⁴⁰ According to Imbriani, in *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, it is possible to find constant references to Saint Catherine’s *Letters*, as proved by the numerous quotes contained in five of D’Annunzio’s notes in the novel’s draft. Imbriani points in particular to the image of the garden, present in Saint Catherine’s *Letters* and reposed by D’Annunzio especially in the prologue of the novel, stating “gli appunti della collezione Gentili testimoniano una conoscenza tutt’altro che superficiale degli scritti cateriniani: il ‘sangue’ da un lato e il ‘giardino’ dall’altro sono i temi dominanti della lettura compiuta dal narrator delle Vergini” and “Di particolare interesse è la ricerca di passi legati al tema del giardino” (Imbriani, 2006:51-52).

connection between the garden and the three virgins. Each virgin, “ciascuna chiusa nel suo giardino” (D’Annunzio, 1995:4) comes to personify a mystical garden herself. Violante with her statuary beauty is the garden of contemplation. Anatolia, whose strength “è l’ultimo sostegno d’una rovina solitaria” (D’Annunzio, 1995:8) is the garden of consolation. Finally Massimilla, with her religious devotion, is the garden of meditation. The garden, however is not only a spiritual refuge but it becomes contemporarily the starting point of a new action. As Imbriani notes, it is the point of conjunction of active and contemplative life “nell’aspirazione del protagonista a generare il futuro re di Roma” (Imbriani, 2006:43). The three virgins are then also the guardians of this garden, where from the past values and the greatness of the nation that they represent, the heir and hero, the saviour of the nation can be created. Images such as “da tempo io ho dunque sulla mia anima lo splendore dei destini grandiosi e tristi” (D’Annunzio, 1995:10) or, “ma eccomi umiliata, priva dei miei regni! La fiamma del mio sangue impallidisce e si estingue” (D’Annunzio, 1995:10) and in particular the term “kingdoms” underline the superimposition of the three virgins with the country. In this way the Mother-Nation and the biological future mother of its heroes are co-present in the same characters, introducing one another and mirroring each other as is, according to Banti and Boylan, emblematic of the national-patriotic literature of the period. Moreover, the three sisters as future mothers are not only givers of biological and ideological life but also future lovers of the male protagonist, revealing in this way a biological and ideological nature. The three protagonists are, at a narrative level, real characters, who at the same time represent idealisations of roles and qualities of the nationalist woman, and who become personifications of the nation, Mother-Italy, revealing a triple level of existence.

Le Vergini delle Rocce forms the basis of D’Annunzio’s political manifesto, on which he expanded in his future works. It is a discourse towards a new, “greater” Italy, replacing a disappointing post-unification nation with one inspired by past glories. The novel and particularly the prologue may then be seen as the foundation of the textual propaganda and aesthetic of politics. *Le Vergini delle Rocce* embraces this task through the Risorgimento’s topoi of lineage, pure

blood and Latinity and in this context D'Annunzio puts forward a new model for the national woman. The female is no longer Dante's Beatrice, a contemplative tool, but an active woman, the mother and creator of Italy's heroes.

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