

DOI: 10.19195/2082-8322.11.1

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Free to choose: Female characters in the stories of Grazia Deledda

The last quarter of the 19th century witnessed the phenomenon of the great participation of women in the Italian press. Due to the process of unification, Italy is now perceived as an emerging single market in which linguistic uniformity must be achieved by means of a national, and no longer local, press. The press, therefore, takes full advantage of such a political and historical conjuncture. Italian bourgeois women now represent a further expansion of the reading public, whose particular wants and likes must be charmed by interesting publications, and who must be retained as consumers of newspapers and periodicals. But the role of women does not stop with that of avid readers: women have also become a pool of potential collaborators able to contribute to the compilation of periodicals in particular.

It is within the *space* marked by these virtual *places* — the editorial board, magazines and the individual columns — that decisive matches are played out for Italian culture. Here, while schools have just started the long-term task of the homogenization of the Italian language and culture, the evolutionary lines of the Italian language reach their fruition; here, within the literary field, there is an attempt to establish a balance of power between literary genres; it is here that the agonistic negotiation between the literary traditions of the Italian regions takes place.

As far as literature is concerned, the space framed by newspaper pages affirms the presence of many and very competitive female writers. Their prolific production enralls their readers and publishers alike, but it is especially the quality and novelty of their contributions that captures the attention of new readers. Alongside the waning heroines of 19th-century Italian prose, we see the emergence of different female characters created by female writers. These new characters are depicted as individuals

capable of acting with judgment and autonomy in the plots of stories narrated in the most popular genres of the serial novel and the novella published in newspapers and periodicals. It is precisely in these genres that the difficulties facing the process of women's emancipation has become more apparent as female writers try out new female types, new female characters, a hybrid of the traditional and modern idea of a woman.

Among the various cases of female writers who collaborated with newspapers and periodicals, that of Grazia Deledda seems exemplary for the purposes of this article. The way she appears to us now owes much to a new assessment and a new perspective on her work that has emerged in the last fifty years. Rather than being a regional writer with no particular merits, the Sardinian writer has gained the importance of an icon of modernity also in terms of gender studies. Carolyn Balducci's *A Self-Made Woman: A Biography of Nobel-Prize-Winner Grazia Deledda* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1975), Martha King's *Grazia Deledda: A Legendary Life* (Leicester, Troubador, 2005) and especially Margherita Heyer-Caput's *Grazia Deledda's Dance of Modernity* (2008) and Sharon Wood's *The Challenge of the Modern: Essays on Grazia Deledda* (2007) compose a critical trajectory that re-visits previous criticism of Deledda and projects new light on her work, demonstrating the validity of her much-discussed Nobel prize win.

What appears to be *legendary* to King, for instance, lies in the artistic progression in the life of a young woman who, starting from the remote outskirts of the Italian Kingdom, from her initial collaboration on Edoardo Perino's women's periodicals in Rome — rises to the most authoritative levels of the press of the time (*New Anthology, Nature and Art, Corriere della Sera...*).

For Balducci, King, and, more recently, Maria Elvira Ciusa (*Grazia Deledda. Una vita per il Nobel*, Sassari Delfino, 2016), what makes Deledda an admirable exception, then, is her successful hybridization of two female types: the modern, representative of a woman who has reached the highest levels in her field thanks to her own merits (the Nobel is only one of the steps in a long chain of well-deserved successes) and that of the impeccable but traditional wife-mother. Deledda was both of these, and this is an aspect that sheds light on what her characters will evolve into. Deledda will very soon become a pillar for her family of origin and will never cease to provide for the welfare of her two sisters, thus showing the importance of financial independence arising from her trade as writer. Caring economically for her family meant recognizing the fact that a woman could support herself and her relatives by working as a writer, which is not just a pastime but an actual occupation and job.

In short, our contemporaries have re-evaluated her position with respect to many issues, and Deledda now looks like a marvelous transitional figure capable of containing and honoring the most modern and the most ancient expectations at the same time.

Yet, on several private and public occasions, the writer explicitly expressed cold or distant positions from the convictions that animated the commitment of the most advanced feminist movements of her time. In 1911, three years after the Italian Women's Congress of 1908, which generated such an intense press debate — on the occasion of a study promoted by the Circolo di Mesagne (Brindisi), Deledda was questioned on the “value of feminism [...] from the intellectual aspect” and “from the social aspect.” Her answer is interesting:

Per rispondere alle due domande sul femminismo, occorrerebbe che io avessi una profonda conoscenza delle principali questioni sociali che agitano l'umanità e una grande preparazione sulle grandi questioni civili ed economiche. Io scrivo romanzi e novelle: quest'è la mia specialità. Trovo giusto e bene che la donna pensi, studi e lavori.¹

While it might be true that, as the editors of the *New Anthology* do not fail to point out, “the very general inquiry could only receive generic answers,”² Deledda's reply in all its broad strokes expresses a clear position: the issue of women's emancipation is a matter she consigns to specialists, economists and sociologists as, in her view, no specific answer to such an issue can pertain to the realm in which female and male writers operate. The singular collective noun of the final sentence, “the woman,” would make us think of a right to study and work, which one must earn progressively by oneself, without making too much of a fuss about it. As further evidence of the coldness with which Deledda looked at the phenomenon of feminist organizations, we can cite a letter of 1893 to Andrea Pirodda. The example is certainly much less decisive than the previous one. It is less lapidary both because it is precocious, and also because it is placed in the context of a private and amorous correspondence. In interpreting Deledda's clear statement in her letter to Pirodda, namely that “[she does] not care a fig for the emancipation of the woman,”³ we need to take into consideration the weight of such correspondence on her marriage aspirations. In the historical and cultural context of this phase of the relationship between the two, the hypothesis that she wants to appear “meek” to her lover-addressee should not be discounted.

¹ “In order to answer the two questions about feminism, I would need a deep knowledge of the main social issues that are shaking humanity and a great preparation on the great civil and economic issues. I write novels and novellas: this is my specialty. I find it right and good that the woman thinks, studies and works,” G. Deledda, “Un'inchiesta sul femminismo,” *Nuova Antologia* 46, 1911, no. 949, pp. 121–128, here: p. 123; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

² Ibid.

³ “La emancipazione della donna poi mi interessa un fico secco. Io vorrei essere tua moglie, domani, e ti dimostrerei come io intendo la emancipazione della donna. La intendo come la intendi tu e spero di intenderla sempre così” (I don't care a fig for the emancipation of the woman. I would like to become your wife, tomorrow, and I would like to show you what I mean by emancipation of women. I see it in the same way as you and I always hope to see it this way) — undated letter to Andrea Pirodda [June 1893], no. 71, in: P. Mura, *Grazia Deledda. Lettere ad Andrea Pirodda (1891–1899)*, doctoral thesis, University of Sassari 2016–2017. My thanks to the author for having allowed me to consult the document.

Despite the just-mentioned evidence of her conservative position, a close reading of Deledda's texts seems to contradict the writer's own statements. The pages of her novels, in fact, are full of female voices often invested with important tasks, with exorbitant narrative responsibilities that drastically veer off from the greater part of the narrative that was contemporary to her production. Deledda elects a great many women as the main protagonists in a large number of novels and novellas (from *Memorie di Fernanda*⁴ to *La chiesa della solitudine*⁵) and they occupy very important spaces, assuming key roles at every turning point of the plot, even when male characters *seem* to hold agency in the story (think of the decisive role of Maria and Sabina in *La via del male*⁶). In *La madre*,⁷ Maria Maddalena, with her thoughts, her words, and her few actions occupies the center of the novel and has the difficult task of dramatically triggering and unraveling the whole plot. If we could synchronically summon these female characters, a remarkable and heterogeneous gallery of women would appear before our eyes: little girls, girls, old women; pusillanimous, implacable, wise; beautiful and ugly; adulterous and chaste; rich, bourgeois, plebeian; blondes, browns and brunettes.⁸ We would have a catalog that can be appreciated even just for the wealth of typologies.

But the abundance of heroines and their narratological role does not suffice in doing justice to what I consider to be Deledda's most sophisticated novelistic operation: by this I mean her analysis and narrative reworking of the social competitiveness existing between genres.

It is known that since her debut the writer admired and followed the teachings of positivism and believed, therefore, that the biological history of each individual powerfully conditioned not only one's physical traits but also the social destiny of people and characters (emblematic in this direction is the *voice of the blood* that marks the characters of *Stella d'Oriente*).⁹

⁴ G. Deledda, "Memorie di Fernanda," *L'Ultima Moda* 2.09.1888–2.06.1889, pp. 97–136.

⁵ G. Deledda, *La chiesa della solitudine*, Milan 1936.

⁶ G. Deledda, *La via del male*, Turin 1896.

⁷ G. Deledda, *La madre*, Milan 1920.

⁸ On the female characters in Deledda see T. Baumann, "Sardische Frauen. Die weibliche Welt Grazia Deledda," *Italienisch* 48, 2002, pp. 26–42; T. Baumann, *Donna isola. Ritratti femminili nel romanzo del Novecento*, Cagliari 2007, in particular pp. 17–87; A. Guiso, *Grazia Deledda: temi luoghi personaggi*, Oliena 2005; N. De Giovanni, *L'ora di Lilith: su Grazia Deledda e la letteratura femminile del secondo Novecento*, Roma 1987. The recent miscellaneous volume *L'invenzione delle personagge* (eds. R. Mazzanti, S. Neonato, B. Sarasin, Rome 2016) contains much food for thought on both methodology and on the image of heterogeneous female characters of modernity.

⁹ See G. Angioni, "Grazia Deledda, l'antropologia positivista, la diversità della Sardegna," [in:] *Grazia Deledda nella cultura contemporanea*, ed. U. Collu, Nuoro 1992, pp. 299–305; D. Caocci, "Prefazione," [in:] G. Deledda, *Stella d'Oriente*, vol. 1, Nuoro 2007, pp. 7–21.

Free will can barely function within these teachings as determinism suppresses any individual attempt to gain new identity and position within society.¹⁰ But whenever free will is presented in the novels, it is always exercised by female figures.¹¹ I am thinking here of the chain of decisions taken rationally and responsibly by Maria and Sabina in *La via del male*, a novel dedicated to Paolo Orano and Alfredo Niceforo, two young scholars who were linked to Lombroso's theories. By contrast, in the same novel, we witness the uninterrupted shipwreck of Pietro Benu, the male protagonist. Pietro, beset by hereditary tares, is forced into a pre-sociological dimension and becomes a prisoner of feral, irrational impulses. The Lombrosian model that Deledda impeccably applies in the construction of male profiles does not work as well on female characters. Deledda, a novelist who was strongly influenced by French Naturalism — Émile Zola's cycle in particular, and psychological novels (especially Paul Bourget's) — seems to have a hard time conjuring up a Lombrosian model for her female characters.

Evidence of this emerges from the evaluation of some of Deledda's heroines and their relationship with their sisters. Sisters are female creatures, that is, who not only share the same hardware (their inherited biological heritage) with the heroine, but also significant parts of their software (all that we call culture). With some approximation and with equal audacity, I state that the degree of physical and behavioral resemblance of female characters put in relation in Deledda's novels is *inversely proportional* to family and biological proximity. Sisters in the strict sense seem to allow the writer to investigate the mystery of the different destinies of individuals whose biological matter is the same, and who are inserted in the same geographical and cultural milieu. Sister characters also allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of a methodically cultivated talent, the weight of the different experiences and the different nature of such characters. Sisters in the strict sense are often represented as distant worlds, as if they were mutually opposing poles.

In Deledda's corpus, we can see different types of sisterly relations. Already in the very first story published by Deledda in the summer of 1888, *Sangue sardo* (Sardinian blood), the portrait of the sisters Michela and Mary is instrumental to the narrator's

¹⁰ Suffice to note, at a very advanced phase of the elaboration of positivist thought, the anthropological assumptions underlying the legal conclusions of Enrico Ferri, a pupil of Lombroso and one of the most influential exponents of this way of thinking. His *Sociologia criminale* (Turin 1892) claims that there is no such thing as free will in a criminal act and focuses its attention on anthropological factors (organic constitution, psychic constitution, bio-social conditions), physical ones (geographic environment and climate) and social ones (religion, population density, etc.).

¹¹ And this would be decidedly anti-Lombrosian if we consider that the well-known criminologist believed that women's lower propensity to commit crime was caused by their characteristic lack of courage, physical strength, and intelligence. Cf. C. Lombroso, G. Ferrero, *La donna delinquente. La prostituta e la donna normale*, Turin 1893 (an outline of the essay already appeared in the article published by Lombroso and Salvatore Ottolenghiin, *Giornale della Reale Accademia di medicina* 9–10, 1891).

construction of a clearly meta-literary narrative discourse laden with sociological inferences. Sisters are presented in all their differences: Michela is brunette, Maria is blonde; the former is ambitious, while the latter remains serene in the face of her mediocrity and her destiny as a humble peasant. These two sisters take on different roles because Michela is modern and tormented by her French readings of, for example, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, while Maria's archaic and mild nature is epitomized by her passion for Walter Scott's novels. But, it should be noted, modernity and tradition can have two female paladins, literally siding one against the other only because the narrator distances herself from the genre of the historical novel, which was enjoying a new lease of life in the literature of Sardinia in the late 19th century. The polar diversity of the two sisters — set against the positivist model — evidently derives from cultural and non-genetic facts as the story is entirely constructed within the literary space and with a completely literary subject. Much the same can be said for the novels *Fior di Sardegna* (Perino, Rome 1891), which tells the story of the education of three sisters in a town called X, but located in the center of the island; and *Colombi and sparvieri* (Treves, Milan 1912), set in the remote and primitive village of Oronou, portrays the great distance between Banna and Columba, the protagonists of a story that has many events in common with what happened to the writer and her sister Nicolina.¹²

Canne al vento (Treves, Milan 1913) is about four very different sisters: Ruth, Ester, Noemi, and Lia. The first three bow to the will of their tyrannical father, Don Zame, accepting the cloistered regime of his house protected from the outside world. Lia is the most determined of the three, and the only one able to exercise her will to escape, thereby triggering off all the events in the novel.

A second kind of relationship that distances and brings together female characters must be traced back to the same attitude toward the creation of doubles of the first type. However, this time it is not a question of proximity that can be identified on a content level, but rather on a narratological one. Nor are we dealing here with the ties between relatives in the collateral line, as is the case for sisters (second-degree relatives) and cousins (fourth-degree relatives), and on which our previous considerations were focused. In this case, we are dealing with a different, more extreme type of sorority because it involves the narrator and the author along with all the characters.

The most evident case of solidarity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist is that of *Cosima*, the novel published posthumously in 1936.¹³ If we recall that Deledda's Christian name is more precisely Grazia Maria Cosima Damiana, then the protagonist can be considered as the author's double. However, a twofold decrease

¹² This is one of the several cases of sorority appearing in her novels that concern the writer's family and her real relationships. The episode and its literary metamorphosis are masterfully reconstructed by Luciano Marrocu in his recent *Deledda. Una vita come un romanzo*, Roma 2016, pp. 56–59.

¹³ G. Deledda, *Cosima*, Milano 1936. As regards this, see the critical edition edited by Dino Manca (Sassari 2016), which restores the text of the only manuscript of the novel.

in degree has taken place, which precisely goes to show the reduction in importance that occurs in the transition from the highest creative instance, that is, the author, to the lowest one, that of the character who lives a wholly literary life: in between there must be a mediating instance, one that is acquainted with many details, but endowed, nevertheless, with a consistency far lighter than that of the author and far more cumbersome and authoritative than that of any character.

One might object that such proximity is a constant feature of the autobiographical genre and that this specific and particular realization in *Cosima* adds little novelty to the genre. But this is not the only case in which such incongruous alliances occur between what is in the text and what inhabits the real world, between creatures who narrate and creatures who are narrated. There is a series of early and late cases, among which suffice to mention one of the most blatant and precocious narratives: *Vendette d'amore*. The process of incorporating a series of facts external to the narration within a textual segment is very clear and has explicit purposes of recantation. It serves as a catalyst for the writer to publicly declare the new sense the story of *Vendette d'amore* assumes when, and if, it is compared to Deledda's own previous production and also to the production of other regional authors with whom the author in that season measures her craft.¹⁴

The protagonist of the story, Rosetta, is an educated character caught in the process of metamorphosis from the ancient to the modern: from a phase of life in which she passively undergoes the truncated rules of her community, to another one, in which she feels she can exercise all her freedom. This is partly the reason why she appears dressed "metà signorile, metà in costume" (half elegantly, half in traditional clothes).

Not only are Rosetta and Ausonio, her lover, separated by wealth and "genetic" differences, but their relationship is also hindered by many other obstacles "di fortuna, di idee, di convenienza" (of luck, of ideas, of convenience).

The reasons for the continuous allusions to the protagonists and the environments of the previous Deledda stories and novels are revealed during the first argument between the two. Ausonio expects Rosetta to behave toward him as established by common rules and to behave like other heroines in love. When he is unexpectedly and unpredictably abandoned, he accuses her of breaking her promise with words that intertextually call into question Deledda's first story:

Non ricordi dunque che nelle tue vene scorre il sangue delle forti fanciulle sarde? Le quali muoiono anziché mancare al giuramento!¹⁵

¹⁴ See D. Caocci, "Prospettive e ripensamenti nelle prime opere di Grazia Deledda (1888–1891)," [in:] *Dalla quercia del monte al cedro del Libano. Le novelle di Grazia Deledda*, ed. G. Pirodda, Cagliari 2010, pp. 123–135.

¹⁵ "Don't you remember that in your veins flows the blood of strong Sardinian girls? The blood of those girls who would rather die than break their oath!" — G. Deledda, "Vendette d'amore," *Vita Sarda* 3.05.1891–4.07.1891, p. 8.

Ausonio's mental horizon is one laden with expectations designed according to the anthropological and novelistic stereotype that much Sardinian literature supports and encourages — the story, not by chance, is dedicated to Enrico Costa, one of the greatest authors of historical and “romance” novels. Such expectations are also in line with a significant part of the stories previously compiled by Deledda. Rosetta is a sister who is in great harmony with the present-day Grazia and a sworn enemy of the Grazia of three years earlier. Her reply unmasks the weakness of consolidated Sardinian behavioral clichés. The right to a less obvious identity is affirmed: “Sardinian blood!” immediately says the female protagonist of *Vendette d'amore*. Her answer accomplishes a twofold task: it evokes the first narrative proof of Deledda and it parodies folk rhetoric about the Sardinian fetish for keeping one's word in every circumstance, but especially in affairs of the heart. In fact, soon afterwards, Rosetta reconfirms her rejection of ancient mores and states: “i tempi di Ela sono così lontani, se pure esistettero mai, fuorché nella mente della mia amica Grazia, che del resto non ci crede nemmeno lei!” (Ela's time is so far away, if indeed it ever existed, except in the mind of my friend Grace, who, moreover, does not even believe in it herself!).

The tiny creature in the story that emerges from the written page takes on the role of the reader of another story and, parodying it beautifully, draws it into her own world with the aim of showing the outmoded ideological take of her “colleague” and antagonist. Rosetta is targeting Ela — her homologue and, at least in the small field of Deleddian evidence in the short story genre — claims to be friends with the one who generated them both from the same matter. The youngest “sister” with a ventriloquist's voice becomes the bearer of the new course undertaken by Grazia; she abandons her elder sister in her remote time and makes a pact of “sorority” not only with the author and the narrator, but also with the public, first of all, that is, with the heads of the newspapers, with whom the writer maintains collaborative relationships and, secondly, with the readers of those magazines.

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Summary

Grazia Deledda's strategies of female characters' construction and agency are at the core of this essay. The goal is to investigate how the Nobel prize winner shapes the identity as the actions of her female characters in a decidedly eccentric manner if compared to contemporary Italian narrative. The path of the essay is chiefly chronological as it starts from her first short stories (1888), published in the context of widely circulated periodicals, to ends with *Cosima*, the autobiographical novel published in 1936, the year of Deledda's death. A typology of her characters emerges in relation both to the cultural assumptions that strongly influence the first production of Deledda as well as to the heterogeneous literary models with which the writer weaves a dense and uninterrupted dialogue.

Keywords: Grazia Deledda, literature, Sardinia, writer