

Violence and rape in the Italian *fin-de-siècle*: Gabriele D'Annunzio's "La Vergine Orsola"

Michela Barisonzi

Abstract:

This contribution discusses the representation of rape and violence against women in late 19th century Italian literature. In doing so, I focus on a short story, *La Vergine Orsola*, initially written by Gabriele D'Annunzio in 1884 as part of a short story collection titled *Il Libro delle Vergini*, later re-published in 1902 in *Le Novelle della Pescara*. This contribution looks at how the idea of rape is used in this short story as a narrative escamotage to bring to the attention of the reader the question of female entitlement to sexual desire as part of a social critique that D'Annunzio brings forward in his *fin-de-siècle* novels and short stories.

Keywords: D'Annunzio, Female Representation, Rape, Violence

At the turn of the 20th century, we see an increase in the production of fictional writings and *galatei* dedicated to a female audience and characterized by a strong pedagogic focus¹. At the same time, we find novels and medical treatises, such as those of Cesare Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza, where women are still presented in a position of biological and moral inferiority². The rather contrasting female images that emerge from this literature reflect a divided society, marked by the crisis of bourgeois values, the birth of the nationalist movement and the rise of feminism³.

This chapter analyses the representation of female sexual desire and violence against women in the selected short story, looking at how rape is presented either as a brutal crime, possibly the act of a regression to an animal state, or as an almost normalized consequence, and even a deserved punishment for female sexual agency. In the latter case, female sexuality can be considered then as the symbol of women's emancipation and a threat to bourgeois traditional social standards that require repression through rape. As Higgins and Silver

¹ See Helena Sanson and Francesco Lucioli (2016) for a detailed excursus on the rise of these prescriptive and pedagogical works destined to female readers.

² I will discuss in detail the work of Mantegazza (1893) and Lombroso, Ferrero (1903 [1893]) on the female condition in the 19th century.

³ For a detailed analysis of some of these female images see Barisonzi (2019), and Arslan, Romani (2006).

Michela Barisonzi, Monash University, Australia, Michela.Barisonzi@monash.edu

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point out, rape and sexual violence in general “have been so ingrained and so rationalised” (1991, 2) to be perceived as part of society, “inevitable to women as to men” (*ibidem*)⁴. As I will show, in the case of this short story, rape may be then seen as a natural consequence of deviant female behaviour, compared to the accepted idea of female sexuality⁵. As Foucault points out, two of the three aspects that he identifies as constituting the morality of behaviours have a social denotation, and they refer to the “rule of conduct” (1978, vol. 2, 26), and the “conduct measured through the rule” (*ibidem*). Therefore, I will look at how the active sexuality of the protagonist Orsola, arising outside marriage, breaks the social rule of conduct that recognises female sexuality only within the marriage and in terms of procreation. Then, as this *aberrant* sexuality is measured and condemned through the comparison to the rule, rape emerges as a countermeasure to re-establish the rule while defying it, as it implies sex outside the wedlock. Nevertheless, rape is acceptable within the rule, as an exception that proves the rule, and because it is carried out by a man for whom this rule does not apply⁶.

This double interpretation of rape, as a crime or a punishment, reflects then the constant tension between what is socially acceptable and unacceptable in a period of historical transition characterized by the beginning of a new political, economic, and social era in Italy after the Unification. *La Vergine Orsola*, as I will show, then highlights and critiques this dichotomy throughout the events narrated, its setting, the use of female stereotypical characters as well as emerging social types, and its language choices.

1. Primordial instincts, deviancy, and social critique

The choice of setting for this short story, as suggested by the title of the collection *Le novelle della Pescara*, is the Abruzzo region, D’Annunzio’s native land. The meaning afforded to the location in which *La Vergine Orsola* takes place, as well as D’Annunzio’s description and use of Abruzzo folklore and peasant traditions, has been the object of several scholarly studies. According to Bàrberi Squarotti the short story collections of both *Le Novelle della Pescara*, to which *La Vergine Orsola* belongs, and *Terra Vergine*, are an obsessive and visionary cumulation of representations of the degeneration of the human being. Humanity, Bàrberi Squarotti highlights, under the rule of disease, sex and violence is portrayed as a descending into an animalesque state (1982, 41). Bàrberi Squarotti points especially to the “accumularsi ossessivo e visionario dell’imbestialimen-

⁴ See Higgins and Silver’s introduction on re-reading rape (1991).

⁵ I refer in particular to Mantegazza (1893); Lombroso, Ferrero (1903 [1893]), and Von Krafft-Ebing, Chaddock (1893)’s definitions of female deviant sexuality as I will explain in detail in the second section of this chapter.

⁶ On the different treatments reserved for example to male and female adultery see *Codice Zanardelli* (1889), articles 353-358. The code stipulates that while the adulterous woman is punishable with up to 30 months of imprisonment, a man can be condemned only in the case of keeping a concubine in the marital home.

to dell'uomo sotto il dominio della malattia, del sesso, della violenza" (*ibidem*). Sex, disease, and violence are then the preconditions to enter the animalesque regressive status that characterises the protagonists of these short stories, and that becomes a consequence of these degenerative factors. Far from being a *veristic* representation of the human condition, as we find in turns in Verga's *Ciclo dei vinti*, the bestiality depicted by D'Annunzio, as suggested by Bärberi Squarotti's reference to the visionary element, seems therefore to be a consequence of moral and physical decay rather than a form of primordial status from which society develops. Conversely, according to Romagnoli, Gunzber, the return to nature and the "inesorabile sottomissione alla natura, più potente di qualunque individuo" becomes a means to "trascendere se stessi" (1984, 567-568). The triumph of natural instincts becomes a means to establish a "processo di rinnovamento" (ivi, 568) through which D'Annunzio tries to "sfuggire ai limiti dell'estetica borghese" (ivi, 567). A similar idea is brought forward also by Härmänmaa, who suggests that the primitive status of wilderness in D'Annunzio's Abruzzo novels is the result of the author's social critique of his times, a return to mythical origins, and the result of economic concerns (2013, 698). Härmänmaa points to the importance afforded to Abruzzo by ethnographers such as Antonio De Nino, Giovanni Pansa, and Gennaro Finamore at the turn of the century, in line with and as product of the "nationalistic ethos of Romanticism" of the period (ivi, 700). In these works, emerges the idea of a return to the origins, where Abruzzo appears as a "wild and magical 'terra vergine' (virgin land), a myth that had persisted since antiquity" (*ibidem*). According to Härmänmaa then, the return to the author's native land in his works, and especially in *Il trionfo della morte*, is the result of D'Annunzio's rejection of a decaying bourgeois society, and the research for the true soul of the country which can be found only by going "to the roots of the nation, back in time, back to its geographical origins" (ivi, 699)⁷. Consequently, we face a first dichotomy regarding the primitivism depicted in these short stories, a primitivism dominated by natural human impulses. These primordial instincts can be seen either as a loss of morality, or a celebration of human vitality, to which female sexual desire belongs. Therefore, the rape of the protagonist can be read as a way of punishing an animalesque and degenerated female sensuality, or as I suggest, a means to critique such a punishment.

Starting from Foucault's studies (1978) on the rise of the medicalization of the female body, my analysis reflects on how *La Vergine Orsola* depicts and critiques the attempt by the patriarchal society to regulate female sexuality and constrain female desire. 19th century scientific works on female love and deviancy, such as the treaties of Paolo Mantegazza (1893) and Cesare Lombroso (1903 [1893]), as well as 19th century *Galatei*, such as Marchesa Colombi's⁸ *La*

⁷ On the asynchronous recuperation and re-elaboration of the past glories of the country as a strategy to create a new sense of belonging and rebirth of the country see Barisonzi (forthcoming).

⁸ Pseudonym of Maria Antonietta Torriani.

gente per bene (1877), discuss and show the social codification of female roles through a normal-deviant dichotomy. I suggest that this dichotomy influenced the depiction of violence and rape in *La Vergine Orsola* and in proving so, I focus on the way in which this short story presents, and at the same time refutes, the idea of the protagonist as a negative model of conduct who deserves her destiny. In suggesting that female sexuality, deviancy, and rape are used in the text to covertly critique post-unified Italian society and the bourgeois ethics of the time, I also look at Cavalli's definition of the function of literature. According to Cavalli, literature's function is to introduce the reader to an identification without guilt, based on the power of suggestion (2015, 59). Through Cavalli's narrative device of "immedesimazione [...] senza scotto" (*ibidem*) then, *La Vergine Orsola* can create a "confronting situation to problematise and question bourgeois morality" (Barisonzi 2019, 50)⁹. By offering a model (either positive or negative), this short story brings to the reader's attention the ambiguity of female condition in the Italian society of the time, or in Mitchell's words, it highlights the existence of a *woman question* in post-unified Italy. According to Mitchell, the last two decades of the 19th century represent a period of "ambiguity and paradox for many women: legally, economically, and socially, women were subordinate to men and had limited autonomy" (2014, 10), as underlined in the 1865 Pisanelli's Civil Code. Nevertheless, "the climate favoured the emergence of professional, financially independent women, such as La Marchesa Colombi, Neera, and Serao" (*ibidem*). These authors, continues Mitchell, while sometimes openly declaring their ideological opposition to the emerging Italian feminist movement, embedded in their fictional and non-fictional works, more or less consciously, these emerging contradictions around the position of women in society. The works of these female writers, as well as some works of D'Annunzio¹⁰, including *La Vergine Orsola*, can be then considered the product

⁹ This narrative device characterises for example also the depiction of the theme of infanticide in D'Annunzio's *L'Innocente*. While the focus here is on rape, abortion and infanticide are still an important part of the discourse on female sexuality and agency, as I will discuss in the next section of this chapter. For this reason, it is interesting to notice how in the 1884 version of *La Vergine Orsola*, simply titled *Le Vergini*, the name of the protagonist was Giuliana like the protagonist of the 1892 novel *L'Innocente*. Both "Giulianas", like Orsola in the 1902 edition, carry unwanted children that undermine their pre-established roles in society as well as embodying an "otherness" that precludes them from being in control of their own bodies and for these reasons act to interrupt the pregnancy or dispose of the newborn. On the theme of the pregnant body and the foetus as an intruder see Barisonzi (2019).

¹⁰ I refer here in particular to the novels that D'Annunzio wrote between the 1880 and 1900 and that I discuss in the book *Adultery and Hysteria in the Nineteenth Century Novel. The Case of Gabriele d'Annunzio* (2019). As pointed out in this work, the female protagonists of the novels *Il Piacere*, *L'Innocente*, *Il Trionfo Della Morte*, *Le Vergini Delle Rocce* and *Il Fuoco* are "fictional magnifications" through which "the texts expose a reality of social crisis, corruption, and uncertainty" (Barisonzi 2019, 14). They are "the result of both a mimetic reproduction of Post-unified Italian society, as well as an ideological criticism through which the texts" through a chronological and thematic progression "explore and deconstruct common female stereotypes in order to progress towards the definition of a new female model" (ivi,

of a "social discomfort of women that arises with the awareness of the anachronism of female stereotypes and the desire not to renounce femininity" (Barisonzi 2019, 152) as well as an attempt at "regendering female entitlement to sexual pleasure" (*ibidem*) in a society characterised by a "fin-de-siècle bourgeois oppression within a male order that forbids women from fulfilling their desire for both a spiritual and a sexual love" (Ramsey-Portolano 2010, 52). For these reasons, I suggest that *La Vergine Orsola*, in depicting the ideas and traditions of its époque (Cavalli 2015, 71), can be read as a manual of conduct in disguise, which simultaneously critiques the very notions of the female roles it codifies. As gender is conceived as "a product of the social relations of sexuality" (Mitchell 2014, 8) and it is the result of "a politically enforced performativity [...] open to [...] self-parody, self-criticism" (Butler in Mitchell 2014, 8)¹¹, then I suggest that the gender and sexual roles portrayed in *La Vergine Orsola* in terms of what is a socially acceptable sexual behaviour, are indeed open to and the object of criticism in this short-story, as they are the result of a socio-political construct that relegates women to a position of physical and social inferiority. Consequently then, rape emerges in its true function, as an enabler of male control over female sexual desire.

2. La Vergine Orsola and conduct literature: saint or doomed?

As Sanson and Lucioli discuss in their work on *Conduct Literature for and about Women in Italy from 1470 to 1900* (2016), female behavior has been codified for centuries through different typologies of texts and paratexts, such as ecclesiastics, cooking books, and even embroidery patterns. However, it is in the 19th century and especially after Italy's unification that it is possible to identify a substantial corpus of texts in which female conduct more regularly becomes the center of fictional narratives. As pointed out by Hosker, as well as primary education for women, "unification brought with it a heightened awareness of women's socially significant role, as the wives of Italy's rulers, and the mothers of the nation's future citizens" (2016, 160). For this reason, as women "acquired a new dignity, by virtue of their glorified maternal role and its perceived impact on society at large" (*ibidem*), it becomes even more important to codify their behaviours to avoid any threat to the male-dominated patriarchal system¹². Therefore, as Sanson and Lucioli underline, the main characteristics of these post-unification conduct texts rest in their descriptive as well as prescriptive functions. At the same time, they present ideological models, a practical guidance for their female readership, and a cross section of the Italian society at the

15), who is no longer a "static, archaic, mythical obstacle to male development" (Davies 2010, 218) but a positive active member within a new nation building discourse.

¹¹ Mitchell (2014) refers to Judith Butler's definition of gender to underline the ambiguity that arises at the turn of the century around the social role of women.

¹² For a detailed discussion on motherhood and nationalism in post-unified Italy see Barisonzi (2019) and Banti (2011).

turn of the century, with its habits, traditions, and social roles (2016, 12-13), which are all elements that can be identified also in *La Vergine Orsola*. When considering 19th century social roles, for example, it is important to note how Orsola is both an unmarried mature woman¹³ and a teacher, two of the new female types that, according to Hosker (2016), emerge in the conduct literature of post-unified Italy¹⁴. These typologies replace the figure of the Renaissance widow as a threat to the patriarchal order because they are free from the marriage ties and the sexual and social roles that these ties implied for women. As Hosker points out then, on the one hand, these new female types underline the rise of new social realities. On the other hand, they bring attention to the role of women, beyond the traditional images of mother and wife. As Hosker points out, “if the inclusion of ideologically unorthodox figures [serva, zitella and maestra] points, to some extent, to the emergence of new demographic realities, it is also a sign that women writers [and in my reading D’Annunzio too] were challenging the longstanding tradition, according to which women were defined by marital status alone” (2016, 161). Therefore, it is no coincidence that in its representation and, as I aim to prove, covert social critique of post-unified Italy, *La Vergine Orsola* introduces a protagonist that is both a spinster and a teacher (the new female social types), as well as presenting traits of the traditional stereotypes of the angelic woman and the lay nun, which will be analysed in the following section.

In addition to presenting these new social figures, conduct texts often use exemplars constructed upon the images of the Virgin, the Martyrs, and the Saints¹⁵, to further reinforce the traditions and customs of the society in which they are produced. As Paternoster points out, conduct books “tend to be particularly moralising. They use values to justify conventions as compulsory” and “this happens in two ways: values contribute to the conventionalisation process of specific norms, and they also help to maintain the moral order generally by

¹³ Her description seems in line with the description of what Marchesa Colombi in her work of conduct *La gente per bene: leggi di convenienza sociale* defines as “signorina matura” (1877, 57), as she is 27 years old and therefore fits in this category for which the age bracket is 25 to 34 years.

¹⁴ According to Hosker, “female writers cast their nets beyond the canonical trio of virgins, wives, and widows, making space in conduct literature for non-conformist women such as the *serva* (the domestic servant), the *zitella* (the spinster) and the *maestra* (the primary school teacher, a working woman who was usually husbandless)” (2016, 161). Interestingly, as Botteri notices, before the turning of the 19th century “oltre alle cortigiane, forse solo i mestieri della comare o della balia [sono] stati oggetto di rilevanza sociale e di conseguenza di alcuni trattati sulla figura professionale e sulla loro arte, in quanto legata ad una funzione indispensabile e di primaria utilità in quella società: la procreazione” (2016, 347-348).

¹⁵ On the importance afforded to martyrdom and the use of religious exemplars during the Risorgimento and in post-unified Italy, see Riall (2010). Moreover, it is important to remember that it is in 1854 that Pope Pious IX promulgates the dogma of the Immaculate Conception further reinforcing the symbolism attributed to the figure of the Virgin Mary. Finally, according to Sanson, Luciola several scholars have linked the origins of conduct literature to the “rules and orders that governed monastic life and which encouraged discipline of the body and of the mind” (2016, 17).

raising moral awareness" (2019, 434)¹⁶. Significant then, is the title of our short story¹⁷, which, through the word *Virgin*, implies the idea of a pure, virtuous and angelic woman, referring to her chaste condition, as well as suggesting an initial assimilation of the protagonist Orsola to Saint Ursula and the Virgin Mary¹⁸. Notably, the term *vergine* is present not only in the title of this short story, but it is used to refer to Orsola ten times during the narration, including at the very beginning of the narration when the female protagonist is introduced as "La vergine Orsola" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 2). Two significant further examples that set the tone in this sense are:

Orsola ricadeva stesa, con il capo abbandonato, scoperta la gola e il petto, mostrando degli occhi solo il bianco nel gran pallore, sorridente a qualche cosa invisibile, in un atteggiamento di vergine martire. (Ivi, 12)

and

Ma la vergine sorrideva, sotto un turbamento improvviso di tutto il suo sangue; li chiamava a sé, confondeva i loro nomi che le si affollavano alle labbra, tendeva loro le mani. A uno, a due, a tre, i bimbi si avanzavano, volevano prenderle le mani per metterci la bocca sopra, ridicevano le parole di augurio imparate a casa, ingoiando per la furia le sillabe. (Ivi, 22)

Both scenes have a religious undertone, the first resembling an ecstatic vision, the second, evoking Jesus' words "Let the children come to me" (Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14 and Luke 18:16).

This first impression of devotion and sanctitude of the protagonist is reinforced even further by the reference to the priest with which the story begins¹⁹, and the description of Orsola's room covered by images of saints where the insistence on the accumulation of sacred imaginary underlines the devotion of the protagonist:

Nell' interno, su le pareti, pendevano grandi medaglie sacre d'ottone, immagini di santi. Sotto un vetro una Madonna di Loreto tutta nera il volto il seno le braccia, come un idolo barbarico, luceva nella sua veste adorna di mezze lune d'oro. In un angolo, un piccolo altare candido portava un vecchio crocifisso di madreperla. (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 3)

¹⁶ On the conventionalising function of conduct texts see also Paternoster (2019).

¹⁷ In the original version of 1884, the title of this short story, *Le Vergini*, was already including the reference to the virginity and sanctitude of the protagonist.

¹⁸ Significantly, in the official hagiography of Saint Ursula, not only the saint is a virgin that has devoted herself to God and is killed because of her refusal to break this promise and get married, but she is also accompanied in her travels by a group of virgins (11.000) that are killed too. Further, Saint Ursula is the protector of educators and Orsola in this short story is a teacher.

¹⁹ The narration opens in *medias res* with the description of the village priest exiting the church to visit the house of the protagonist and bring her the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. There is an insistence on the description of the priest, the solemnity of the atmosphere, the contrast between his purple vestments and the white of the snow, which symbolise the imminent death and the purity of Orsola.

The audience could then expect that Orsola will be used as a positive model of conduct²⁰ and this expectation is supported by two additional elements. Firstly, in the same short story collection there is a second story called *La Vergine Anna*, which effectively presents the life of a saintly woman blessed by a miracle²¹. Secondly, at the very start of the narration, Orsola, who was dying from typhus, miraculously recovers after receiving the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, a proof of her blessed status, openly stated in the text through the comparison of Orsola and her sister Camilla to martyrs and saints:

Come le martiri gloriose della leggenda, come Santa Tecla di Licaonia e Santa Eufemia di Calcedonia, le due sorelle avevano consacrata la loro verginità allo Sposo Celeste, al talamo di Gesù. (Ivi, 15)

and

Avevano mortificata la carne a furia di privazioni e di preghiere, respirando l'aria della chiesa, l'incenso e l'odore delle candele ardenti, cibandosi di legumi. Avevano stupefatto lo spirito in quell'esercizio arido e lungo di sillabazione, in quel freddo distillio di parole, in quell'opra macchinale dell'ago e del filo su le eterne tele bianche odoranti di spigo e di santità. (*Ibidem*)

Nevertheless, in the description of Orsola's bedroom we can find a first covert sign of criticism. By defining the statue of Mary as a barbaric idol, the text raises the idea of faith based on a form of "cristianesimo ispirato da un sottostante filone pagano" (Romagnoli, Gunzberg 1984, 566), that resembles more an irrational fervor. In doing so, not only the text already undermines the idea of Orsola being a positive model of conduct, but also challenges the chastity-sexual awakening dichotomy that I will discuss in the following section, as said dichotomy, based on the social unacceptability of sexual awakening, is constructed on a distorted idea of religion. This type of devotion, which is embodied by Orsola's sister Camilla, reveals a more medieval focus on the condemnation and punishment of the flesh, to save the soul rather than salvation through faith in God's forgiveness and redemption. Consequently, this idea of religion coincides more with a form of superstition that dominates people's entire existence, an irrational religious fervor, that according to Spackman (1989) is depicted and condemned at the same time through the association of illness and Christianity, and that not only characterises *La vergine Orsola*, but is present throughout D'Annunzio's works including *Il piacere*, *Il trionfo della morte* and *La figlia di Iorio*²².

²⁰ Sanson in her Introduction to Sanson and Luciola, clearly underlines the "clear religious undertones" (2016, 30) that characterise women's conduct literature in defining female role in society.

²¹ As pointed out by Gunzberg, *La Vergine Anna* is an example of religious fervour where devotion "pervade totalmente e in un certo modo regola la vita dei personaggi" (1984, 565).

²² According to Romagnoli, Gunzberg "è significativo a questo proposito notare la progressive assimilazione dell'irrazionale da parte di D'Annunzio fin nel tessuto della sua scrittura, soprattutto nel *Trionfo della morte* e nella *Figlia di Iorio*, pubblicati a distanza di dieci anni [...]"

Orsola's sanctitude, however, is immediately undermined by the same miraculous recovery that could have been considered proof of her blessed status, with her recovery being accompanied by the insurgence of a voracious appetite. Orsola's appetite is initially depicted as a common consequence of recovering from typhus: "era la fame canina nella convalescenza del tifo, quella terribile avidità di nutrimento vitale in tutte le cellule del corpo impoverite dal lungo malore" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 9)²³. However, this hunger soon becomes an evident metaphor for her desire to feel alive and leads to her subsequent awakening to a yet unknown sexual desire, in open contrast with the traditional idea of chastity associated to sanctitude. The definition of her appetite then, while seemingly used to offer a medical explanation for Orsola's bodily reactions, can also be seen as an attempt to medicalise her body to re-establish a control over it²⁴. As Diasio points out, the female body is the "luogo per eccellenza dell'identità collettiva" (2000, 24) on which society must exercise a coercive power. Therefore, the body of Orsola, which through the illness has escaped social control to the point that not medicine, but only a miracle has been able to save her life, can be now controlled again through the medical labeling of its reactions during convalescence²⁵. At the same time, however, Orsola's appetite is defined almost as a primordial instinct belonging to the animal world. Significant is the use of adjectives such as "canina", "bestiale", "prensili" and the direct simile with a glutton monkey:

Ella aveva fame, aveva fame. Una bramosia bestiale di cibo le torturava le viscere vuote, le dava alla bocca quel movimento vago delle mandibole chiedenti qualche cosa da masticare, le dava talvolta alle povere ossa delle mani quelle contrazioni prensili che hanno le dita delle scimmie golose alla vista del pomo. (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 8-9)

The reference to an animalesque behaviour acquires here a double meaning that reflects the dichotomy underlying in the study of this short story. On the

il fanatismo religioso è vividamente ritratto [...] è il tessuto stesso del drama" (1984, 566). Similarly, Spackman discussing the pilgrimage to Casalbordino in *Il trionfo della morte* underlines how "D'Annunzio employs a rhetoric of sickness in order to critique Christianity" through the association of "Christianity with illness, idiocy, and ignorance" in which "'naturalistic' mode is adopted not to give an accurate, scientific description of peasant society but to degrade and critique an ideology" (1989, 115).

²³ According to Cavalli the detailed description of sickness in D'Annunzio's short stories is "uno dei rari casi italiani, per non dire l'unico, di adesione piena al Naturalismo, sia per quanto attiene alla visione dell'uomo come essere precario e animalizzato, sia per quanto riguarda le modalità di rappresentazione, ovvero un'attenzione addirittura di tipo scientifico nella descrizione di malattie, piaghe, atteggiamenti brutali di un'umanità tanto vicina alle bestie da confondersi con loro" (2015, 40).

²⁴ On the use of medicine as a form of societal control and the female body see also Foucault (1988)'s *Madness and Civilization. A history of Insanity in the Age of Reason*.

²⁵ For a similar use of medicalisation of the female body in relation to sickness and recovery see Barisonzi (2019) and in particular the chapter on *L'Innocente*.

one hand, the reference to animals is in line with the description of an Abruzzo of the origins. In this mythical and archaic land, the primitive and animalesque compulsions are used to create a contrast with a degenerated bourgeois morality of façade. Therefore, Orsola's "bramosia bestiale" (ivi, 8) (in terms of food or later in terms of sexual desire) is legitimised as natural and genuine²⁶. On the other hand, there is a direct reference to the 19th-century idea of female inferiority that positions women closer to animals in the evolution ladder²⁷. The diffusion of Darwin's anthropological theory sees the arising in the 19th century of both a recognition of man's animal origins, as well as the need to distancing from them by exalting the superiority of the human race. Men tend then to attribute traits of bestiality to social outcasts like the "degenerato" and "selvaggio" types (Roda 1984, 37), justifying this connection to animality in terms of flawed or missing evolutionary steps. Consequently, the use of an animal-oriented lexis to describe Orsola's appetite, together with her gender's genetic inferiority, and her arising sexual desire, becomes a means to establish her deviancy. Her appetite acquires a negative attribution, hinting at her imminent degeneration, and prefiguring the need for Orsola to be reconducted within social norms.

If Orsola is initially presented as a saint-like figure and her illness and death will return her to God, it is then the recovery that soon becomes the turning point in her status of grace. According to Fusaro sickness is a means to neutralise the "carica pericolosa e sovversiva del corpo femminile: scarno il corpo femminile non è più seducente" and "debole e vulnerabile, infine, il corpo è più facilmente sottomesso" (2007, 201). Similarly, Curreri points out how "la malattia rende il corpo trasparente, lo sgravia della sua materialità e della sua specificità sessuale" becoming a "metafora che [...] interviene per esorcizzare la paura del corpo femminile" (2008, 35-36). Therefore sickness, and the quasi-death that characterises the initial description of Orsola, serves to put the woman into the otherworldly dimension where the Angels, Saints, and the Virgin reside, confirming and reinforcing the initial attribution of sanctitude and the angelic status of the character²⁸. Nevertheless, the unexpected healing signals the beginning of Orsola's fall from being an angelic woman to the status of *femme fragile* first, and doomed sinner after. Spackman defines convalescence "a space in-between", a "third term in the rhetoric of sickness and health" which becomes "the vehicle

²⁶ Merlino highlights how, in the short stories collection of *Terra Vergine*, sexuality is presented as a natural and physiological element with no negative attribution. Although Merlino concentrates his analysis on the portrayal of men rather than women, pointing out the use of the semantic spheres of the animal kingdom and plants to exalt "sessualità mediante la messa in rilievo della naturalità delle pulsioni" (2015, 34), I claim that a similar approach can be found in the representation of some female characters of these short stories, as well as in those of *Le Novelle della Pescara* and especially Orsola.

²⁷ See Mantegazza (1893) and Lombroso, Ferrero (1903 [1893]) on women's evolutionarily inferiority compared to men.

²⁸ On the function of death in the neutralization of female sensuality and her re-positioning under the male control see Curreri (2008). See also Spackman (1989) on the idea of sickness and repulsing deformations, to castrate the erotic discourse.

for a series of in-between states" (1989, 42). This in-between state coincides in terms of female stereotypes with the *femme fragile* because, as pointed out by Wieber "the *femme fragile* operated as a construct of femininity that mediated the two opposing qualities of innocence (saintly angel) and fearsomeness (*femme fatale*)" (2011, 70) in a continuous articulation and renegotiation of the *fin-de-siècle* cultural and historical values. Finally, as suggested by Lombroso, Ferrero in *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (1903 [1893]), women's delicate health supports the theory of a moveable boundary between the "normal" woman and the "deviant", "criminal" woman. Therefore, Orsola's passages from health to sickness and then from illness to recovery enable her conversion into a deviant woman.

The juxtaposition in the narration of the characters of Orsola and her sister Camilla²⁹, also seems to validate the idea of Orsola's fall. Camilla is a virtuous and devoted woman that dedicated her life to serve God through prayer, assisting the sick and teaching catechesis to children. She condenses in her fictional character all the traditional catholic views and socially accepted roles for an unmarried woman. Therefore, the awakening to sexual desire that Orsola undergoes during her recovery appears at first unnatural and deviant by contrast with Camilla's modest behaviour. Further, Camilla's judgment of Orsola's behaviour during her convalescence:

Camilla vedeva tutte queste strane predilezioni della sorella, con una specie di diffidenza ed anche di rammarico sordo, ma taceva. (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 21)

Camilla trovò la sorella ancora addormentata con accanto lo specchio, con ne' capelli le spie. — Oh, Signore Gesù! oh Signore Gesù! [...] Tu ti perderai, sciagurata, tu ti perderai — irruppe la devota, additando lo specchio sul letto. — Tu hai tra le mani lo strumento del demonio... Ed eccitata dalla prima invettiva, ella seguitava, sollevava la voce, gittava le frasi ardenti della predica con grandi gesti nell' aria, incalzava nelle minacce dei castighi eterni [...]. (Ivi, 28-29)

and

Sotto lo sguardo freddo e scrutatore di Camilla. (Ivi, 47)

convey the scientific beliefs of the time about unnatural female sexual desire as a form of deviancy. Renowned scientists of the period, such as Mantegazza

²⁹ The name Camilla returns in literature both in Virgilio's *Aeneid* and in Boccaccio's work *De mulieribus claris*. In both these works, she is presented as a virgin and a model of virtues. Further, Boccaccio specifically uses Camilla as a model for her strong will in refusing physical pleasures (being it food or sex), calling for young women to follow her example: "A questa io vorrei, che guardassino le fanciulle del nostro tempo: e considerando quella vergine già in compiuta età [...] premendo cacciare con la fatica i piaceri del disordinato appetito, e gli dilette e le delicatezze, e rifiutando le artificiose bevande, con costantissimo animo rifiutò non solamente il toccare degli uomini, ma eziandio de' giovani di sua etade" (1836, 96-97).

and Lombroso in Italy, and Von Krafft-Ebing, Chaddock in Europe, described normal female desire as a form of courtship, weak and passive, lacking any sexual component. According to these studies therefore, women should focus on sentiment rather than the sexual gratification, which characterised male desire, and in women is a sign of deviancy³⁰.

According to Foucault, the description of female sensual desire (here hinted through Orsola's discovery of her own body by means of the mirror) as a diabolic product reflects the Catholic precepts, which "laid down the principle of exclusively procreative ends within that conjugal relationship" (1978, vol. 2, 14). Therefore, Camilla would embody the Catholic teachings of "strict abstinence, lifelong chastity, and virginity" (*ibidem*) while in contrast, Orsola represents the sinner to be doomed. Further, the insistence on the semantic sphere of vision through the terms "vedeva", "sguardo" and "scrutatore" in the passages above, can then be considered a way to create a parallel between Camilla, the public opinion of the period, and the reader, all judging spectators of Orsola's story. In this way, such correspondence would reinforce the idea of this short story as a manual of conduct in disguise, where Camilla represents the positive model for unmarried women and Orsola a model of immoral conduct to be avoided.

3. Rape and relationships of power

In line with the conduct manual, rape, which is committed towards the end of the narration and only alluded to but not described, could be seen as a punishment for Orsola's deviant behaviour. Orsola is punished for her immoral sexual desire for a soldier, Marcello, for whom her rapist, Lindoro, works as a messenger. The divine nature of such punishment seems to be suggested by several elements. Firstly, the expression "costui fu il galeotto" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 44) talking about Lindoro's role in the relationship between Orsola and Marcello, is a clear reference to Dante's *Inferno* verse "galeotto fu il libro" (*Inf. V, l. 137*). Lindoro, like the book and Galehaut, is the intermediary in a doomed relationship³¹. At the same time, the word *galeotto* in Italian is also used to refer to prisoners and more in general scoundrels, implying a negative connotation attributed to the rapist, and therefore a covert condemnation of the act. Second and most importantly, Orsola sees Marcello for the first time while spying on the prostitutes of the brothel, and then she seeks his physical contact when attending church during religious celebrations. The brothel-church binary that

³⁰ Mantegazza points out how female love and desire focuses on feelings rather than the sexual pleasure as "l'uomo nell'amore cerca prima di ogni cosa la voluttà, la donna prima d'ogni cosa vuol la conquista del cuore" (1893, vol. 2, 9). Similarly, according to Fusaro, Von Krafft-Ebing, Chaddock in *Psychopathia sexualis* considers female desire as "un appetito debole" as the woman is "naturalmente passiva" (2007, 216).

³¹ In Dante's *Inferno*, Paolo and Francesca, condemned for their adulterous love are placed in Hell among the lustful sinners. Significantly, the reference to the Galehaut book is present also in D'Annunzio's novel *Il Piacere*, see Barisonzi (2019) and Borelli (2017).

is put forward would then allude to the sinful nature of Orsola's desire and her deviancy. It is no coincidence that in Lombroso, Ferrero's work *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (1903 [1893]), criminal women and prostitutes are often assimilated through their sexual deviancy³². Orsola would then not only be culpable for her sexual desire but also for transposing the function of the brothel to the sacred space of the church. She is a sinner beyond redemption and for this reason she is firstly punished with rape and then, as her deviancy descends into the crime of abortion, she is punished with a horrific death, as a consequence of her provoked miscarriage.

Nevertheless, rape is not a mere divine punishment for an immoral behavior. As D'Cruze points out "sexuality is a crucial arena for the expression and contest of patriarchal power relations by gender and age, and violence is one means of appropriating and consolidating power within those relations" (1992, 378). Orsola condenses in herself the two emerging social types of *zitella* and teacher, that by existing outside marriage and motherhood, represent a threat to the established patriarchal order. These two types defy the traditional roles of women as they exist outside of the male control. The teacher acquires a certain level of economic independence and through work exists outside the house. The spinster, as Marchesa Colombi points out, gains a greater level of social independence:

A trentacinque anni, una signorina deve [...] uscir sola, ricevere e far le sue visite e le sue commissioni, viaggiare sola se ne ha la necessità, avere le sue carte da visita. (1877, 59)

Consequently, they are no longer the "pillar of the house". Further, and more importantly especially in the Italian *fin-de-siècle*, imbued with nationalism ideology, where mothers have the solemn task to procreate soldiers for the greater glory of the Mother Land (Banti 2011; Barisonzi 2019), both these new female types become the antithesis to motherhood. As Mantegazza states in *Fisiologia della donna* "la donna è imbevuta tutta quanta, dai capelli alle unghie dei piedi, di maternità, ed è tanto più perfetta quanto più è madre" (1893, vol. I, 123), therefore the teacher and the spinster also defy the very idea of womanhood. In *La Vergine Orsola*, rape can then be seen as a means to socially re-affirm male power over the teacher-spinster Orsola, by regaining control of her body and sexuality. Rape is no longer a divine punishment. Conversely, it is an instrument of social critique as through the narration of Orsola's rape, the text covertly exposes the fallacy of a social system that forbids female sexual desire outside procreation, and it does so by constantly undermining those aspects that at first reading could be considered proof of Orsola's damnation for her sexual desire.

First, the convalescence, which represents the line between life and death, and which was supposed to signal the fall of Orsola into sin and eternal dam-

³² According to Lombroso, Ferrero "Come già ci indicava la precocità mestruale e della deflorazione [...] una sensibilità maggiore sessuale in confronto alle normali esiste in alcune ree ed in alcune prostitute" (1903 [1893], 396).

nation, is also a means through which the character comes back to life and becomes a narrative agent within the story. Orsola's quasi-death experience and convalescence can then be read as a process of rebirth. The idea of rebirth is suggested in the text through the references to Orsola's life before the sickness as a "vita anteriore" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 9) and also through the detailed description of her body's recovery in terms of regeneration of tissues and organs as underlined by the verbs recompose, renovate and regeminate: "un sangue novello si produceva: [...] i tessuti irrigati dall'onda tiepida e rapida si colorivano ricomponendosi, si rinnovellavano [...] e sul cranio i bulbi capilliferi rigermogliavano [...] da quel riordinamento delle leggi meccaniche della vita" (ivi, 13). As a new woman, Orsola is free from social and gender role obligations, which are developed/acquired, not innate. As Bàrberi Squarotti (1982) and Cavalli (2015) point out, while physiology and attention to physical details are typical of Italian Realism, in D'Annunzio's works the description of a physical disease is never the mere observation of a natural phenomenon. It becomes a means to investigate the psychological traits of the characters, introducing and discussing more poignant themes, as is the case in Orsola's awakening to sexual desire. Orsola, through her recovery emerges as the center of attention, an agent of her actions and ultimately as a heroine, whose positivity or negativity is left to the judgment of the reader. The insistence on Orsola's plagued body first, and blossomed body and sexual desire later, are used then to give depth and primacy to this female character³³. It is possible here to see similarities between Orsola and Ippolita, the female protagonist of *Il trionfo della morte*, and Orsola and Giuliana, the female protagonists of *L'Innocente*. The three women are all convalescent and follow a process of sexual awakening after falling ill and recovering. Through their convalescence these heroines regain ownership of their own bodies. This brings them to an awakening to sensual desire³⁴, moving them away from their initial stereotypical roles of mother, wife, and devoted virgin, crystallised by the disease as a metaphor for male control (Curreri 2008). This awareness and awakening, in the case of *L'Innocente* and *Il trionfo della morte* leads to adultery, which is used as a means to debunk the imposed social roles of mother and wife, where female sexuality is not recognised outside procreation. Significantly, in both novels, the female characters are depicted as agents in their adultery, rather than passive receivers of their lovers' will. In the case of *La Vergine Orsola*, both in the 1884 and 1902 versions, this awakening sees the protagonist breaking

³³ Examples of the decaying body are "le labbra nerastre e i denti incrostati dell'inferma" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 3), "due piedi gialli, squamosi, lividi nelle unghie, che al tatto davano un ribrezzo di membra morte" (ivi, 7) and "Quasi tutti i capelli le erano caduti nella malattia; [...] il teschio ne traspariva, e da tutta la restante aridezza della pelle lo scheletro traspariva" (ivi, 10), while following her convalescence Orsola regenerates: "i tessuti irrigati dall'onda tiepida e rapida si colorivano ricomponendosi, [...] sul cranio i bulbi capilliferi rigermogliavano densi" (ivi, 13) and "Il pallore trasparente e il sorriso davano una grazia nuova, una nuova giovinezza ai suoi ventisette anni" (ivi, 26).

³⁴ On disease and sexual awakening see also Barisonzi (2019).

her vow of chastity through which she had devoted her life to God. The consequence of the awakening in both novels and the short story, however, coincides with the disruption of the patriarchal order that places women in a position of dependence, highlighting the "unfeasibility in a *fin-de-siècle* Italy that aspires to modernity" of "the traditional idea of the devoted mother", and "Madonna-like figures with no sensual desire" (Barisonzi 2019, 175).

Further, if the disease is not used as a degenerating but a regenerating factor, a similar interpretation can be afforded to the zoomorphic traits that are used referring to Orsola's appetite. While for Bärberi Squarotti (1982) the animal-like traits used in D'Annunzio's short stories aim to signal the regression to a state of bestiality, according to Cavalli, in these short stories, such terms are used as a metaphor for celebrating the primitive and exciting impetuosity of life (2015, 41)³⁵, in this case Orsola's rebirth. The protagonist's "bramosia bestiale" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 8) for food first and later her curiosity towards her own body and the sexual practices of the nearby brothel, are to be seen then, according to Cavalli's interpretation of primitivism, as a representation of the individual in a stage in which external factors, such as social and religious codifications of what is morally acceptable, have not yet conditioned the character's perception of the self³⁶. In this sense, the short story recognizes the female natural entitlement to sexuality, critiquing its denial by society, and its conversion into a degenerative trait when arising outside the procreative milieu of marriage.

In this instance, even the mirror that Camilla discovers near a sleeping Orsola, and which prompts her condemnation and predictions of eternal damnation, could then be a metaphor for the way in which the text reflects on its contemporary society. The bourgeois values of façade, where patriarchalism and religion impose sexual taboos and moral conventions to keep women under control, are reflected in the negative connotation of the mirror, which is used as a means to show this distorted ethics to the reader, creating a contrast between imposed views and female natural entitlement to pleasure³⁷. While according to Camilla the mirror is a "strumento del demonio" (ivi, 29) alluding to the deadly sin of lust, the mirror can also be seen both as a mirror of society's decadence and prejudices, as well as a way inwards into Orsola's psyche when she awakes to vitality and sensual pulsion. The mirror is the tool through which Orsola gets

³⁵ Cavalli talks of a "primitiva e esaltante irruenza vitale" (2015, 41).

³⁶ I refer here to the idea, put forward by Spackman, of convalescence functioning as a "tabula rasa" (1989, 38) that creates a rupture with the past as "[t]he child and the convalescent have nothing to remember" (*ibidem*).

³⁷ As Barilli points out, in D'Annunzio's works the reader can see a demystification of the negative connotation attributed to his female protagonists. Conversely, there is the recurrent idea of female entitlement to pleasure with no moral constrictions as it is the case for their male counterparts. Further, according to this scholar it is possible to see, through the construction of his female characters, how "D'Annunzio proverà sempre sentimenti altissimi per le donne, facendosi promotore della causa della loro emancipazione" (1993, 76) by establishing a "nuova etica, di cui gli eroi dannunziani sono portavoce, prevede un rapporto di parità tra i sessi, tra uomo e donna" (ivi, 75).

to know her new self. This is indicated by her curiosity towards her own body: “Ella aveva ora una curiosità grande di guardarsi nello specchio” (ivi, 26), and the recurrent comparison of the mirror to a mass of water, which can be seen as symbolic of the amniotic fluid from which Orsola is reborn:

[...] si piaceva di allontanare lentamente lo specchio e di veder sparire l’immagine in quella luce un po’ glauca come in un velo d’acqua marina e quindi riemergere. (*Ibidem*)

and

Orsola saliva fin là, attratta da una irresistibile curiosità di vedersi nuda. La sua persona tutta ancora fresca di goccioline sorgeva nell’offuscamento dello specchio come in un verdazzurro fondo marino. Ella si guardava sorridendo. Il sorriso, ogni movimento dei muscoli pareva far tremolare tutte le linee della nudità nello specchio come quelle di una immagine dentro le acque. (Ivi, 50)

If female sexual desire is natural, then rape is not a punishment, but an overt display of gender power, and the text further exposes and critiques it both through the character of the rapist, Lindoro, Orsola’s response to the rape, her abortion, and her death. Initially, Lindoro resists the “tentazione di cogliere quel fiore ch’egli apprestava al piacere di un altro” (ivi, 46), due to fear and cowardice, as he is aware of his social subordinate position compared to Marcello, Orsola’s lover. Nevertheless, he overcomes his fears when Orsola suddenly shows modesty through the gesture of buttoning up the open neck of her camisole. This gesture in Lindoro’s eyes becomes an admission of frailty and defenselessness through which the woman indirectly re-affirms her position of inferiority and Lindoro’s male superiority as underlined by the passage:

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 trattenne il bruto. (Ivi, 52)

In this passage the recognition of rape as a means to establish a gendered relation of power is then symbolized by the expression “riconosceva nel mezzano l’uomo” with which the text refers to a position of superiority of the man, reinforced by the expression “orgoglio maschile”. A similar use of rape is present in other Italian short stories of the period and in particular in Capuana’s *Tortura*. In *Tortura*, as Pagliaro points out, the “cultural mentality [...] expressed in Teresa’s interior monologue” shows a naturalization of rape through a culture of acceptance that sees rape as “a sexual instinct exploding as a consequence of the rapist’s repressed desire” and depicts male “force and aggression” as “natural and that acceptance is her [the female victim] duty” (2021, 317). In this way, as D’Cruze (1992) and Jackson (1978) underline, sexual violence is not simply a subversive or deviant act perpetrated by a social outcast, as suggested by Roy

Porter (1986) in his studies on the historical meaning of rape³⁸, but the ultimate expression of culturally accepted power schemes between men and women, where female evolutionary inferiority is widely accepted³⁹.

While rape is not described, what follows in the narration is the representation of the post-rape trauma that alters Orsola's subjectivity and agency⁴⁰, relegating her to a form of temporary mental illness: "una specie di ebetudine le teneva ancora la memoria" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 53) and:

Orsola passò in mezzo a tutti quei romori e quegli odori forti, stordita. Cominciava alfine uno sbigottimento vago a sommuoversi dal fondo, a torcerle la bocca nel riso, nelle parole, a impedirle la lingua. (Ivi, 55)

Orsola's reaction, the mental blank on the event as an unconscious attempt to block the painful memories and the slow realisation of what had happened, triggered by the crowd and noises surrounding her, reproduce in detail the rape victim's response to such a trauma. Nevertheless, her growing sense of Catholic guilt:

Ella non sapeva più sfuggire a sè stessa: le moriva la voce fra i denti, l'angoscia le serrava la gola, il fantasma del peccato enorme e irrimediabile le si drizzava dinanzi. (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 56)

and her "ebetudine" and "stordimento" can be considered once again as a form of control and constraint of the female character and her entitlement to her own sexuality. On the one hand, the status of temporary mental confusion can be seen as a form of medicalisation of her body that does not belong to her, and therefore she is denied the ownership of what happens to it. On the other hand, the religious reference to the deadly sin "peccato enorme e irrimediabile" represents a form of social control, being the Church one of "the systems of power that regulate" the notion of sexuality (Foucault 1978, vol. 2, 4). Therefore, presenting both Orsola's hebetude and her sense of guilt, the text overtly exposes these forms of control. Further, as Pagliaro points out in analysing rape in Capuana's works *Tortura* and *Giacinta*, "the very fact that rape provokes a mental illness is a form of denunciation, calling attention to the gravity of the crime" (2021, 315).

³⁸ According to Porter, rape is an attempted rebellion against class hierarchy, and it can be explained in terms of a socially disruptive action of marginal men who have not found a position in the patriarchal traditional structure through the roles of husband and father (1986, 235). Lindoro's description could then be initially consistent with this theory as he is presented as an outsider: "uno di quegli uomini che paion cresciuti su, come funghi, dall' umidità della strada immonda [...]; di quelli uomini bigi, che s'insinuano per tutto" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 42).

³⁹ See Schopenhauer's *On women in Essays and Aphorisms* (2004 [1851]) and Möbius's *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* (2000 [1903]) as further examples of intellectuals' works influencing the theory on women's inferiority in this period.

⁴⁰ On sexual trauma and subjectivity see Brison (2002) and Martín Alcoff (2018).

Finally, the idea of power relationships is underlined through Orsola's decision to have an abortion and her subsequent death. Orsola's choice to have an abortion is not a sign of her degeneration, but rather comes as a rebellion to the idea of committing suicide as "in fondo a lei una sorda ribellione di vitalità cominciava a levitare" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 70). Suicide is initially presented as the only possible solution for unmarried pregnant women, as underlined by the fate of the other women in the village:

Non c'era più scampo. La figlia di Maria Camastra aveva bevuto il vetriolo ed era morta così, con un bimbo di tre mesi nel ventre. La figlia di Clemenza Iorio s'era precipitata dal ponte, ed era morta così, nella fanga della Pescarina. (Ivi, 69)

However, death as the only option for pregnant single women becomes yet another form of violence against women and a means to control their sexuality. Suicide, although self-imposed, underlines women's relegation to a passive social role. If they cannot serve their purpose of devoted wives because no longer pure before marriage⁴¹, they are removed. Ghiazza (1983), in her studies on female adultery in the Italian Ottocento short stories, highlights how suicide is the only viable narrative solution for the adulteress character once the adultery is over⁴². As the woman is a passive character both in the marriage and the adulterous relationship⁴³, given the impossibility of reintegration in the social standard of marriage after being abandoned by her lover, the female character needs to disappear. Rape (and pre-marital sex) contains a similar element of social rupture, as it represents a transgression of the social norm that recognises female sexuality only within the marriage and for procreative purposes. As Wanrooij points out in his work on 19th-century sexuality, "as the 'value' of a woman was based on the 'possession' of honour, it did not matter very much whether the sexual acts had been extorted or consensual. Sex itself was seen as a form of perversion and its effects could be compared to contagion" (2001, 139). Therefore, suicide should be the only viable solution in these cases too, as suggested by the fate of the girls mentioned by Orsola. According to Scarpi, death is a rite of passage, the "condizione posta per la ricostruzione dell'ordine, di contro alla trasgressione" (1980, 86). While in this case Scarpi refers to the themes of adultery and incest, present in various of D'Annunzio's works, it is possible to apply his definition and model of *Family-Incest-Death-Order* also to rape, as incest like rape can be reconducted to the idea of transgression of the social norm. In line with the works of Scarpi (1980) and Ghiazza (1983) then, as Orsola dies from the concoction used to provoke the abortion, the death of the female protagonist enables the re-establishment of the order broken by her

⁴¹ On physical virginity as a primary component of women's social role and "ethical self" in the Italian *fin-de-siècle*, see Pagliaro (2019) and Mantegazza (1875, 102-116).

⁴² See Ghiazza (1983).

⁴³ "L'adulterio non cambia sostanzialmente le cose: le sposta soltanto ad un altro livello [...] riproducendo significativamente, nella nuova situazione, gli stessi meccanismi del suo [della donna] stato precedente" (ivi, 158).

awakening to desire. The sinner is punished, and the conduct text has achieved its function. Nevertheless, Orsola's attempted rebellion to this fate, through the abortion and the rejection of the idea of suicide, shows the text's implicit condemnation of this social practice.

Finally, abortion too, comes as a form of violence against the woman's body as it is the only alternative to death for Orsola, in order to regain control of her body after the rape. As Loconsole points out with reference to Mellusi's theories of degeneration and atavism based on the idea of "falsa civiltà", abortion becomes "the only possibility to escape" a "masculine conception of honor" imposed on women whose only way to escape dishonour and social judgement is "by destroying the proof of guilt [...] through abortion or infanticide" (2019, 368). On the one hand, abortion is presented as a conscious choice of the protagonist that defies the idea of motherhood as women's defining essence and primary social duty. According to Loconsole, "[v]oluntary termination of pregnancy, conscious birth limitation and infanticide became the main tools through which women tried to emancipate their own condition of female mammary socially recognized as mother only" (ivi, 362). On the other hand, however, abortion is another way of controlling the female body and the social threat that illegitimate children represent to the patriarchal society⁴⁴.

4. Conclusion

This text engages in a discourse that places emphasis on female emancipation and the need to go beyond a narrow morality typical of the Italian patriarchal society of the 19th century. In *La Vergine Orsola*, rape, abortion and death have a dual function. At a first reading, and in line with the fictional conduct works of the period, they aim to captivate a primarily female audience, presenting an example of unacceptable conduct, punished with the rape and death of the female protagonist. At a deeper level, however, this short story aims to covertly engender a shift in society's understanding of these themes. Abortion is used to undermine the idea of a female sexuality entirely dependent on a reproductive function, while rape brings attention to the insurgence of an independent female desire. As such desire is considered a threat to the patriarchal society and its male dominance, then rape and death both become means of control over women in a similar way that diseases such as hysteria and the medicalisation of the female body are used to counteract such sexuality in the works of other writers of the period as well as in other works of D'Annunzio.

This short story then contributes to the Italian *fin-de-siècle* discourse on femininity, challenging the idea of female sexual confinement to the marriage and

⁴⁴ The illegitimate child embodies the rupture of the social order as well as representing a possible threat in terms of lineage when it comes to subdivision of land and inheritance among heirs. See also Barisonzi (2019) on the way in which uterine surgery is depicted in *L'Innocente* and the effects that should have and has on Giuliana's body.

the procreative functions. By condensing traditional female stereotypes, such as the angelic woman, the *femme fragile* and doomed sinner in the female protagonist, the text inevitably reflects on the qualities and functions commonly attributed to women in society. Contemporary scientific theories and religious beliefs on female sexuality, motherhood and deviancy are questioned through Orsola's awakened desire. The text undermines the traditional idea of the unmarried woman as a Madonna-like figure with no sensual desire, as sexuality should be entirely oriented to the reproductive function, and therefore inconceivable for a virgin/*zitella*. Finally, Orsola's fundamental innocence, and her recuperation as a martyr model in line with the manuals of conducts explored at the beginning of this chapter, is ultimately affirmed through the persistent use of the term virgin to refer to Orsola even after the rape: "avvolse la vergine violata" (D'Annunzio 1908b [1902], 67) and "la sposa violata del Signore" (ivi, 85). This underlines how her purity is not contingent to her physical virginity and that she is not responsible or deserving of the rape as a punishment. By removing the idea of rape as a consequence of her awoken sexuality, then the text affirms the woman's entitlement to sexual pleasure and its naturalty.

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