

NOTES AND GLEANINGS / NOTE E CURIOSITÀ

SHADES OF AMBIGUITY: MARIA MESSINA'S WRITING DURING THE FASCIST ERA

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Sommario

*Malgrado siano stati scritti durante gli anni di totalitarismo fascista, i migliori romanzi di Maria Messina non sono mai stati studiati alla luce di questo rilevante contesto storico. Senza prendere in considerazione la loro situazione storica, le opere di Messina sembrano sfuocate e confondenti. Ma quando sono analizzate in relazione all'epoca, le opere assumono un significato nuovo e profondo. Questo articolo esamina l'ambiguità della rappresentazione dei ruoli, delle aspirazioni e della caratterizzazione delle donne e degli uomini nei romanzi *La casa nel vicolo* (1921), *Un fiore che non fiorì* (1923), *Le pause della vita* (1926) e *L'amore negato* (1928). Richiamando le dottrine fasciste del periodo, l'articolo dimostra come Messina usava l'ironia, la parodia e la caricatura per rivelare i suoi veri sentimenti spregiativi verso il regime fascista, nascosti sotto una facciata pro-fascista.*

Since the rediscovery and subsequent re-publication of Maria Messina's writings in the 1970s, many critics have written of her contribution to women's literature of the early Twentieth century.

Born in 1887 in Palermo, Messina lived an itinerant lifestyle, moving around Italy with her school inspector father and her mother. In 1909 she began to write short stories which were published by Treves, Sandron, Bemporad, Vallardi, Le Monnier.

In 1914 the early signs of multiple sclerosis set in, which would gradually worsen until she was totally paralysed. In spite of this handicap, Messina wrote steadily, producing roughly 28 works between 1909 and 1929. She died in 1944 in Pistoia.

Especially in her early works, Messina's formation was Veristic. Her first short stories have as their subject the Sicilian peasant or townsfolk and their struggle for survival or dignity. Later works however, take on board psychological, Decadent and symbolist aspects, at times recalling D'Annunzio, Fogazzaro, Ibsen, Neera.

Her best works, constituted by her novels, were written after 1920. They attracted, for a minor writer on the literary scene, relative interest. Messina was reviewed by Borgese, Donadoni, Arcari, while Ada Negri wrote the preface to one of her collections of short stories. Messina also corresponded regularly with some important Italian literary figures: Verga, from 1909 to 1920, and Alessio Di Giovanni, from 1910 to 1940.

But despite this relative success, her works slipped into obscurity after she stopped writing. Critics have offered various explanations for this, but only one, Vincenzo Leotta, sees in her fall from favour the influence of Fascism. Messina's works, concentrating on the Vinti and Umili of society, were incompatible with the "retorica esaltazione" of Fascist doctrine, promoting virility and heroism.

Leotta's mention of the Fascist regime as a presence in Messina's life and art is an isolated case in the criticism of her writings, and is confined to this one statement. Despite the fact

that Messina wrote her best works from 1920 to 1929, covering the period of the rise to power of the Fascist regime and of the implementation of its doctrines, no critics have examined the effect of this regime on her writings.

Many critics have commented on the situation of the woman in Messina's works from the viewpoint of feminist criticism (Maria di Giovanna, Clotilde Barbarulli and Luciana Brandi, Maria Attanasio, Patrizia Fusella).

However, few have observed or analysed the strongly discernible ambiguous and ambivalent attitude that exists within Messina's works towards woman, her identity and her position in society. Close analysis of the novels and careful attention paid to themes, characterization and plot structures reveal conflicting tendencies and progressions. Women characters slowly progress towards greater emancipation and independence, but this progression culminates in a seemingly inexplicable denouncement of the career woman. There is also a progressive weakening and elimination of the authoritative male figure, being replaced by a strong female character in the authoritative role.

Other ambiguous tendencies are also present. On the one hand, Messina appears to accept and transmit Fascism's idealisation of the traditional role of wife and mother and the glorification of rural and traditional ways of life. On the other hand, she subtly denounces Fascist doctrine by dismantling and ridiculing the notion of the virile male, a cardinal symbol of Fascism.

When taking into account the dominion of Fascism over all forms of personal liberty and expression, indeed all aspects of life during the time that Messina wrote her principal works, this inherent ambiguity is more easily understood.

Her underlying message appears to be an attempt to undermine the precepts of Fascism by showing that they are reprehensible. She achieves this by using a mix of satire,

caricature and irony. The ambiguity of her discourse arises from the layers and shades of meaning that make up her stories. Her message is clearest when one considers the sequence of four of her novels, *La casa nel vicolo*, *Un fiore che non fiori*, *Le pause della vita* and *L'amore negato* and analyses them as a group.

It is in *Un fiore che non fiori* (1923), her fourth novel, that the first solid evidence of the existence of Fascism is to be found. The protagonist, Franca, and her friend, Fanny, have formed a group of girls and they themselves are known as the "Duci"¹. In addition, they have compiled a "Decalogo" of rules for their group, which recalls the "Decalogo del milite fascista" compiled by Mussolini². These signs act as pointers to the historical reality of Fascism; it is the novel's content which shows us Messina's attitude towards it. (The choice of names starting with F for the female protagonists, as well as two F's in the title, could be another subtle hint of the undertones of Fascist references in the novel).

In this novel, as in the two that follow, there is a dual construction of the female figure, constituting the creation of emblems rather than characters in Messina's plots. Each of these emblems is representative of a social type and implies a particular moral and ethical association.

Franca represents the emblem of the modern, progressive woman desirous of change and innovation. She has short hair, short skirts, plays tennis and has had a string of affairs. Responsible for moulding her into this form of woman was Fanny. Now, Fanny has been forced to marry a respectable but boring man by her parents and has ended her flighty ways, becoming herself a "respectable" and responsible wife and

¹ M. Messina, *Un fiore che non fiori*, Treves, Milano, 1923: 53.

² Bruno Giordano Guerri, *Fascisti*, Mondadori, Milano, 1995: 96.

mother whose life revolves around her man, her baby and her mother-in-law. Fanny has turned into the emblem of the ideal traditional mother, as promoted by Fascist doctrine.

Another emblem is Fanny's aunt Fabiana, who upholds all these traditional values and in addition is a staunch Catholic whose life revolves around Mass, charitable acts and her visits to the priest. She also represents the ideal moral virtuous woman, as outlined by Fascist precepts.

Incapable of finding acceptance or serenity within this rigid ethically composed society, unable to attract the love of the man she loves, Franca eventually withdraws from society and pines to death. The ostensible message to be gleaned from this novel is, conform or be cast out.

Yet the underlying message belies the simplicity of first conclusions. What emerges is a picture of overwhelming hypocrisy within the societal microcosm in the novel. The first instance of hypocrisy is the about-face of Fanny. It was she who converted Franca from "normal" to modern, yet it is she who later ostracises Franca for failing to join the ranks of "normal" traditional wives. Another instance of hypocrisy is the emphasis on virginity and purity. A girl in Franca's group of friends attracts the scorn and contempt of all for having eloped with her lover. Franca herself is labeled as promiscuous for having conducted several affairs, despite the fact that she has never actually so much as kissed a man. This label is another factor leading to her eventual ostracism.

Messina places emphasis on the unjust and hypocritical double standard which condemns women's sexuality, while condoning and approving the sexuality of men. In *Un fiore che non fiorì*, it is remarkable that every single male character in the cast is lascivious, lustful or adulterous. The actions of some of them, whose attentions are uninvited by Franca, compromise further her situation. Within the microcosm of the novel, the behaviour of these men is considered normal and acceptable.

It reflects a historical reality of Messina's time of writing: the "codice penale" of the era laid out different codes of behaviour for men and women. Adultery by a woman was punishable, but punishable for a man only if he was "notorious" for keeping concubines³. Messina's novel condemns this double standard through the reaction of Franca, whose withdrawal and self-imposed death can be seen ultimately to be a rejection of the society in which she lived.

Messina's penultimate novel, *Le pause della vita* (1926), also contains emblematic female figures representing two opposing types. The protagonist, Paola, represents a modern young girl striving for emancipation and autonomy, while her mother, Signora Tina, is the traditional figure of woman who upholds the values of the past. Messina calls into play in this novel contrasts between past and future and between urban and rural life. Both these dichotomies were features of Fascist propaganda. Fascist ideology glorified the past, in an effort to instill good traditional values in the populace, and it glorified the countryside as part of its demographic programme to step up procreation in the peasant class.

Signora Tina, with her love for the countryside and for the traditional way of life, represents official doctrine. Paola instead rebels against these values, yearning for the bright lights of the city and the liberation that the future can bring her. More significantly, she rejects the notion of marriage, desiring only to be free.

In this respect Paola's character can be interpreted as a flouting of Fascist policy. Not only does she fall pregnant out of wedlock — an immoral act in the eyes of Fascism — but her baby dies, an unpardonable offence in the Fascist regime which promotes the birth of babies to become soldiers of the nation.

³ Piero Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare: ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il Fascismo*, Guaraldi, Rimini-Firenze, 1975: 121.

Ultimately, she rejects the marriage which could make of her an honest woman, preferring to become a nun. In the light of Fascist doctrine, which instituted a tax on celibacy to promote marriage, this is an undeniable sign of Messina's attitude towards the precepts of the regime.

The figure of Signora Tina, symbol of Fascist hierarchy and order, contains in itself a mockery of Fascist rule and the notion of *pater familias*. All significant figures of male authority have been removed from the novel. Signora Tina's husband abandoned the family years ago, and the putative head of the household, his brother Federico, is in a subordinate position to his sister-in-law, Tina.

Having removed the strong male presence from her novel and replaced him with a female head of the household, Messina has created a matriarchal institution, which is repugnant to Fascism⁴. Thus, even while appearing to uphold Fascist doctrine in the figure of Signora Tina, she is undermining it. The character of Signora Tina is more strongly drawn than Paola's. It is an intriguing character sketch, because she is so consistently rigid, severe, unyielding and ungenerous as to be unlikable. In this regard, her function as symbol of Fascist ideology can be understood: she is an unloveable figure, and this is another pointer to Messina's attitude towards Fascist policy.

It is while analysing Messina's last novel, *L'amore negato*, that the undertones pointing to Fascism in her third novel, *La casa nel vicolo*, can be retroactively discerned. When read on its own, *La casa nel vicolo* presents no signs of a reference to the historical context. It is only in retrospect that the sum of small hints made along the way can be made.

⁴ "[...] il matriarcato è poco virile e meno fascista" (Mario Palazzi, *Autorità dell'uomo*, in "Critica Fascista", quoted by Piero Meldini, cit: 209).

Several ambiguous elements are most evident in this novel. Here again we find the dual construction of opposing female types. The protagonists are two sisters, Miriam and Severa. Miriam (whose Biblical name is a variant of Mary and denotes modesty, devotion and sacrifice) represents the good, virtuous, helping, nurturing woman, desiring only to marry and raise a family. Severa, whose name speaks for itself, is hard, cold, unscrupulous, ruthless and ambitious. She is modern and independent and like Paola, spurns the idea of marriage in favour of a career.

As a type, she brings to completion a figure of woman which has gradually been forming throughout Messina's novels. From the first novel, *Primavera senza sole*, through to the last, each has contained some character, whether peripheral or principal, who has desired autonomy and has wanted a career. But despite the realization of this dream, the fact that Severa has achieved her goals and has made a success of her career, fulfilling, in a sense, the dreams of her predecessors in Messina's other novels, her character cannot be seen as having made a success of her life. She fails in her career, she fails to inspire the love of the man she loves, and ends up so alone and bereft that it appears that Messina's novel is a treatise on Fascist doctrine, a Fascist Aesop's fable. Indeed, Miriam represents the ideal Fascist woman, whereas Severa's unlikable personality and ultimate failure, both as a woman and as a career woman, denote the antithesis of the ideal and the punishment that ensues for non-conformism.

Thus far, one can understand the simplistic equation: good Fascist woman is rewarded, while bad career woman is punished. Only, the equation is not complete. The first sign that Messina may not have intended to uphold Fascist doctrine, is that Miriam's virtue goes clamorously unrewarded. Not only does she lose her fiancé, who leaves her because she has no dowry, but ultimately, she remains totally barren and sterile.

Her life is as empty and insignificant as her sister's. This too, is no Fascist fable.

The other ambiguous element is the negative light in which Severa appears. Why, after five novels in which the protagonist desires economic independence and freedom, should the woman who achieves her dreams be made to seem so negative? For indeed, Severa's character is unlikable, violent, if not monstrous (she forces her family out of their home; she causes the death of her young brother, she denies financial assistance to Miriam and causes her to lose her fiancé for lack of a dowry).

Her character is painted with such impersonality and unreality that it appears incredible. It is exaggerated to the extent that we cannot take it seriously, and at this point we begin to perceive it as a caricature. We believe no longer that it is a monster, but rather, as a construct aimed at making a particular point.

At this stage we must remember the central figure, Don Lucio, of Messina's third novel, *La casa nel vicolo* (1921). The plot of this novel regards two women, sisters, whose lives revolve around a single man, husband of the elder. His megalomaniac, egocentric and omnipotent character has the power to slowly erode their personalities, forcing them to become slaves to his will. He rapes them, confines them to the house and causes the death of his only son. This image of a strong, authoritative *pater familias*, who rules the lives of the people within his household, might indeed seem to be the norm in Messina's historical context. Indeed, it was enforced by law⁵.

But Messina's representation is not just of an authoritarian and strong-willed male; she is representing an instance of

⁵ Only in 1974 was *patria potestas* granted equally to men and women; until that time it belonged exclusively to men (Camilla Ravera, *Breve storia del movimento femminile in Italia*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1978: 253-254).

domination that is morally wrong and reprehensible. Don Lucio's money is gained from usury and exploitation of poor people; his power in the house is acquired by emotionally subjugating his women — raping his sister-in-law and preventing the possibility of her ever finding a husband and establishing a legitimate household of her own; his power over his daughters is maintained by denying them education. The figure drawn of him is of a demonic being, who grants financial assistance to others in return for their souls which he keeps in his eternal debt.

Far from the figure of the virile male, protector of his house and nation and procreator of the species, Don Lucio in his raping and childkilling capacity is the antithesis of the Fascist ideal. His is the figure of male authority taken to its grotesque limits and hereby rendered repulsive. His character too is a caricature, which derides Fascist ideals.

What follows in Messina's subsequent novels is a confirmation of the denunciation of virility found in *La casa nel vicolo*. All men in central roles or positions of authority are eliminated. Those that remain are ridiculous, like Fanny's lipping husband in *Un fiore che non fiori*, or weak and submissive, like Zio Federico in *Le pause della vita*. *L'amore negato* has a whole array of deformed and emasculated men: the little brother is retarded; the father of Miriam and Severa, Maestro Santi, has a wasting disease which prevents him from supporting his family; his friends, prior to his marriage, were facially scarred and unable to marry, or forced to support a sister and mother and hence unable to marry, while the third lived alone, "un po' misantropo". None of these could be described as virile. Notably, Marco, the young man who constitutes Severa's love-interest, or love-object, is in a subordinate position with respect to her. He is her employee, destitute and dependent. Messina's removal from power of the

dominant, potent male could not express in stronger terms her rejection of Fascism and its principal premise.

The irony of Messina's constructs — all covert, because her intent is not perceptible at first reading — demonstrates a case of anti-Fascism masquerading as pro-Fascism in order to convince Fascism of its *bona fides*, whereas in fact, it is anti-Fascism waiting to be decoded. Messina was not alone in using irony during the years of Fascism: it was common in poetry of the period to parody the official regime and its principles using this device⁶.

That this strong ironic presence has never been perceived by previous critics is surprising. The ambiguities in Messina's texts are such that without considering the effect of Fascist doctrine, they are difficult to interpret. The shades of meaning layered one on top of another in her writings acquire greater significance when the external political, social and cultural force of Fascism is taken into account. It is also remarkable that with the exception of Leotta, no critic has viewed Messina's writings within their historical context. Considering that she wrote her major novels between 1920 and 1929 — the years of the ascent and intrusion of Fascism into every facet of every individual's life: civic, religious, moral, educational, even sexual — it would seem astounding that a social observer such as Messina would fail to take this force on board and assimilate it in some form in her writings. That she did not fail, that her major works are so impregnated with signs and symbols — whether ambiguous and open to interpretation or not — mean that Messina can and must be regarded as a significant voice and critic of her times,

⁶ "Uno dei modi del rifiuto mascherato della realtà ufficiale fu l'uso della parodia, dell'ironia [...] Si dettero casi frequenti di rovesciamento, in senso polemico e allusivamente avverso al regime dominante [i quali] [f]urono talvolta, anch'essi, di civetteria conservatrice" (Franco Fortini, "Il sarcasmo antinovecentesco e il dialetto", *I poeti del Novecento*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1983: 106-107).

of one of the most portentous and tumultuous periods of the history of twentieth-century Italy.