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WELLINGTON 2013

Of marriages and happy endings

A reading of Clotilde Masci's *Vigilia nuziale*

“Wellington 2013” refers to a series of articles which developed out of papers presented at the conference “New Perspectives on Italian Gender Studies”, held on 15 February 2013 at the University of Wellington in New Zealand.

Abstract

In *Vigilia nuziale*, a 1952 play by Clotilde Masci (1918-1985), the protagonist Cristina, at almost 30 years of age, is about to marry the son of her father's best friend – a man she barely knows. On the eve of the wedding, however, she claims first to her family and then to the police that she stole a ring from the jeweller's. After the confession of the true thief proves her innocence, the play ends with a subdued Cristina asking her relatives for forgiveness, as the wedding preparations resume.

In this article, I argue that the popular culture of the 1950s appears to have had a great influence on *Vigilia nuziale*'s major and minor characters' expectations regarding love and marriage. Ironically, however, Masci is making clear that the “happily ever after” which the popular fiction of the early 1950s promises as part of marriage may apply to very few of its readers – and certainly not to the protagonist of this play. Through this drama, the author comments both on the fairy tale view of marriage as offered in the *romanzi rosa* and *fotoromanzi* of the time, and on the much grimmer reality of marriage as the only viable opportunity for social status for most women in early 1950s Italy.

In a 2008 article, Claudia Bellana and Concetta D'Angeli lament the scarce visibility of women playwrights in Italy, as their texts remain often unpublished or never staged (BELLANA and D'ANGELI 2008, 8). Bellana and D'Angeli were neither the first nor the last to express this sentiment. Sharon Wood, for example, commented on the «very long, if obscure tradition» of women in Italian theatre, when discussing the theatre works by Natalia Ginzburg, Franca Rame, and Dacia Maraini (WOOD 1993, 343). Cinzia Samà, in her article about Ginzburg's comedies, defined the dramatic production by Italian women as “rich and yet

unknown” (SAMÀ 2009, 52). As recently as 2012, as part of a seminar aptly entitled *Dubbi e ipotesi sull'esistenza di un teatro al femminile*, Anna Ossani mentioned that even successful playwrights such as Anna Bonacci (and, I would add, Paola Riccora and Titina de Filippo) constitute isolated role models which are not sufficient to create a tradition of women in theatre in Italy in the 20th century (ABRACADAMAT 2012). Sadly, many works by modern Italian women dramatists remain hidden even if they have been published and staged. Such is the case of the plays authored by Clotilde Masci, one of the most prolific Italian women playwrights of the 1950s.

Clotilde Masci was born in Alba (Piedmont) in 1918.¹ She lived part of her life in Bolzano and Sardinia. She died in Rome in 1985. At the beginning of her career, when she wrote for educational theatre, Masci used the pseudonym of Francesca Sangiorgio, returning to her real name after her first success in the major stage. A biographical note written in 1973 accompanying her last published play stated that by then Masci had written no less than 150 plays for educational theatre (both for single-sex and mixed casts), radio, television, major theatre companies and experimental theatre groups, and that her works had been published in several theatre magazines and well-known publishing companies (MASCİ 1973, 14). Her plays in general were well received and won several prestigious prizes. Masci's first major break-through came in 1950, when she was awarded the IDI (Istituto Dramma Italiano) prize for *Le escluse*. She also received the Ruggero Ruggeri prize several times: in 1960 for *Ritratto di donna*; in 1964, for *Fuori dal tempo*; and finally in 1966, for *Il cavallo della regina Elisabetta*.²

All of Masci's plays, claims an anonymous critic, reveal an interest for one character only, one «whose age and social condition may vary, but is always the same: woman» (PRESENTAZIONE 1959, 18).³ Considering that Masci's playwriting career extends from the post-war years to the early 1970s, it is probably not surprising that she represents women almost always in connection with the institution of marriage. Marriage, in fact, even after the Second World War, through the economic explosion which began in the late 1950s, and during the

1960s, was still considered the best condition for a woman. Margherita Pelaja states that until the 1970s marriage was «the most powerful vehicle of identification for women»⁴ in Italy, as «it was in relation to their married status that women would build their identity»⁵ (PELAJA 2001, 203). During the post-war years, and the 1950s in particular, Chiara Saraceno reports, the nuclear family became the norm; «everyone ‘had to’ get married» (SARACENO 1991, 465). The Catholic Church, for its part, continued to promote for women the role of wife and mother, inside the domestic walls. Pope Pius XII, in 1947, confirmed that the Christian mother should continue to be the pillar of Italian society (CUTRUFELLI 2001, 159).

What may be unexpected, however, is what Masci’s plays reveal about the condition of marriage for a woman in Italy between the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s. While in her works published in Catholic theatre magazines marriage is still promoted as the best possible arrangement for a woman (*Pallina non vuole marito*, 1953), a tie that binds husband and wife for life (*Qualcosa oltre l’amore*, 1956),⁶ in her works for the professional theatre Masci presents a much more complex, often negative image of what it means for a woman to be married – or, on the other hand, to not be married.⁷

With its cast of nine women, ranging in age from nineteen to ninety, no other play better represents Masci’s views and expectations on marriage than *Le escluse* (1950). Marking the playwright’s debut on the professional stage, this drama clearly stages the contrast between the sad and lonely life of those who have never married, and the bad memories of those who have. Those who are not married wish they were; those who did marry wish they hadn’t. These same feelings return in many of her later plays. Often focusing on one specific female protagonist in each, Masci explored a number of attitudes toward marriage in women: a young widow forced into mourning for life (*Tramonto all’alba*, 1955); an unwed mother who has lost society’s approval (*Un bambino dice ‘grazie’*, 1957); an unfaithful wife who will need to expiate for her sin (*Fuoco sulla roccia*, 1958); an older single woman who regrets her missed opportunity (*I sogni non ci appartengono*, 1963); another older woman caught in an unhappy, stagnant

marriage (*Fuori del tempo*, 1964); a separated woman who can no longer enter into a serious relationship (*Ritratto di donna*, 1960); or an unwilling divorcee who feels she has lost her social status (*Scegliamo la libertà*, 1973).

Vigilia nuziale (1952) considers yet another moment of a woman's life, that which precedes her marriage.⁸ Cristina, at almost 30 years of age, is about to marry the son of her father's best friend – a man she barely knows. On the eve of the wedding, however, she claims first to her family and later to the police to have stolen a ring while at the jeweller's. After the confession of the true thief proves her innocence, the play ends with a subdued Cristina who asks her relatives for forgiveness, as the wedding preparations resume.

Why would a bride-to-be accuse herself of a crime she has not committed? Who would prefer jail to marriage with a solid, if not exciting, medical doctor? Both within the play and outside, Cristina's mental sanity was ever so slightly questioned. Her doctor fiancé diagnoses her with «autolesionismo» (MASCÌ 1952, 53), declaring her to be «una mutilata della vita», with «tutto un mondo psichico in sfacelo» (*ibidem*, 44). Reviewers of the 1952 staging of *Vigilia nuziale* mentioned hysteria as a possible cause for her behaviour (ELLECI 1952; E. P. 1952; TERRON 1952; GIOVANINETTI 1952, 58). I also have discussed elsewhere a possible reading of *Vigilia nuziale* as a pre-feminist staging of a hysterical woman character.⁹

But there are other issues that Clotilde Masci touches on in this drama that offer a significant contribution to the representation of Italian women's lives in the early 1950s as well, issues such as the erasure of the mother, the impossibility of developing artistic tendencies, the prohibition of declaring sexual desire, and the dependence on authority. One very important aspect to this play that also deserves special mention is the influence of the popular culture of the 1950s in the major and minor characters' expectations regarding love and marriage. My contention is that in *Vigilia nuziale* Masci suggests that the "happily ever after" which the popular fiction of the early 1950s promises as part of marriage may apply to very few of its readers – and certainly not to the protagonist of this play. Through this 1952 drama, Masci comments both on the fairy tale view of

marriage as offered in the *romanzi rosa* and *fotoromanzi* of the time, and on the much grimmer reality of marriage as the only viable opportunity for social status for most women in early 1950s Italy.¹⁰

Vigilia nuziale respects the unity of place, time, and action. The play is set in the «camera di soggiorno che funziona anche da salotto» in the Agostini household (MASCÌ 1952, 3). Act 1 takes place around 5:00 in the evening; Act 2 the following morning; Act 3 the third morning. The plot revolves around an engagement ring that is announced as stolen in Act 1 and reported as found at the end of Act 3.

When the curtain opens in Act 1, Cristina is offstage. While her father, Ingegner Agostini, and her grandmother delight over the wedding announcements, unwrap the wedding presents, discuss the menu, and cross people off the guest list, the faithful family maid Carmela warns that Cristina «è nella sua camera, al buio, e dice di decidere noi per tutto» (*ibidem*, 7). Not only may audience and readers be intrigued that even the maid has power to decide matters which concern Cristina; they soon discover that the decisions the family makes for her are not limited to the sort of paper chosen for the wedding announcements, or the design of the *bomboniere*. The family has also decided who Cristina will marry. Giacomo, Cristina's fiancé, is the son of Ingegner Agostini's best friend. The two barely know one another. However, Ingegner Agostini resents the fact that Cristina considers him a "sconosciuto":

AGOSTINI – Come puoi dire che Giacomo è uno sconosciuto? Se cerco nei miei libri di scuola, trovo ancora l'indicazione del giorno in cui, per la prima volta, suo padre ed io sedemmo allo stesso banco. [...]

CRISTINA – Certamente, una data di grande interesse storico. Ma il fatto che tua madre sia stata la più intima amica di sua nonna e che tu e suo padre vi siate scambiati i compiti, nonché strappati i calzoncini lo stesso giorno, sullo stesso filo spinato, non muta il corso degli avvenimenti per quello che mi riguarda. Ci siamo incontrati... Cioè... ci avete fatti incontrare in autunno, in quell'alberghetto di mezza montagna pieno di mosche e di bambini frignanti. Poi lui partì e scrisse (*una brevissima pausa, un risolino*)... quella certa lettera solenne e ponderata. [...]

NONNA – Ma quando chiese la tua mano, fosti d'accordo *anche tu* nel dirgli di sì.

AGOSTINI – E fu un'ottima scelta, *la nostra* (*ibidem*, 10-11, emphasis added).¹¹

Cristina, it would seem, is unable to choose for herself; she is treated like a child. In fact, even though she is almost 30, her family and her maid still refer to her as «la bambina». When she complains about this term, her father replies: «per noi, sei sempre la pupattola rosa alla quale abbiamo insegnato a muovere i primi passi» (*ibidem*, 9). One line in Act 1 summarizes the ambivalence between Cristina's mature age and the total dependence and obedience her father expects of her:

AGOSTINI – Tu non sei più una bambina; hai trenta anni e godi il completo uso della ragione. Quindi, abbi pazienza, ma devi assoggettarti a ciò che io voglio, ordino, esigo che venga fatto (*ibidem*, 19).

Giacomo, who arrives in Act 2, appears as a perfect copy of Ingegnere Agostini.¹² Cristina's father had begun Act 1 worrying about the excessive expenses the family was incurring for the wedding, and obsessively noting even the smallest of purchases in a special notebook. Giacomo explains that for him thrift is a rule of life as well:

GIACOMO – Io ho gli stessi gusti del povero papà. Amo la vita semplice, la cordialità familiare delle buone cose modeste. D'altra parte, vivendo fuori casa, ogni piccola spesa diventa un aggravio forte e si cerca di eliminare tutto ciò che non è strettamente indispensabile. [...]

AGOSTINI – Se hai ragione! È quello che ho detto sempre anch'io. [...] sono contento che tu la pensi come me (*ibidem*, 22-23).

Later, when Ingegnere Agostini, upset at his daughter's theft, suggests that they postpone the wedding, Giacomo only laments the money spent:

GIACOMO – Pensa, Cristina, che tuo padre voleva rimandare il nostro matrimonio "sine die". Dopo tutte le spese che sono state fatte, sia da parte mia che da parte vostra (*ibidem*, 27).

The audience further learns that Giacomo proposed to Cristina mainly because his father and her father were so close, hoping to find «una creatura con la quale sarebbe stato facile intendersi senza troppe parole» (*ibidem*, 25). Giacomo's minimal and prosaic use of language is underlined in several occasions in the play. He recognises that, as a medical doctor, he's used to expressing himself in a

«litania di ricette» (*ibidem*, 34). When they first met, all Giacomo talked about, much to Cristina's dismay, was «della streptomicina, delle inondazioni e del rialzo dei prezzi del dopoguerra» (*ibidem*, 48).¹³

Even Giacomo's depiction of what he expects of a wife consists of a prosaic list of duties which include household chores and the passive acceptance of his own emotional outbursts. He mentions neither the sharing of feelings nor passion:

GIACOMO – quello che cerco, nella donna che sta per diventare mia moglie, è esclusivamente equilibrio, semplicità, bontà, ossia le garanzie certe di una vita serena e ordinata. [...] Questo tu devi rappresentare per me, *anche se non è molto poetico*; [...] una casa in ordine, un pranzo gustoso, e magari la possibilità di scaricarmi i nervi troppo tesi con una magnifica, riposante sfuriatina (*ibidem*, 38, emphasis added).

Joining his prosaic language and his concern for saving money, Cristina correctly labelled Giacomo as «un essere ignoto, tutto prosa giornaliera, come il libro delle spese del babbo» (*ibidem*, 51).

In sum, the sort of marriage which Ingegner Agostini has planned for Cristina – «affidarla a un bravo ragazzo» (*ibidem*, 5) who shares his background, habits, and opinions – corresponds to what Saraceno describes as the typical situation at the beginning of the 20th century in Italy, when marriages were often arranged by the parents. That understanding of marriage in Italy however was changing. For most middle class women born between the two wars (like Cristina), falling in love had become a precondition of any life-long union (SARACENO 1991, 486-487). Saraceno further mentions that the very popular romances by Liala taught young women what feelings they should experience when they did fall in love, and offered them a «complete and precise vocabulary» to express them (*ibidem*, 487).¹⁴ A closer look at the world of *romanzi rosa*, a genre of which Liala is perhaps the best known Italian representative, may be useful to understand the expectations of women aspiring to marriage in the early 1950s.

Most *romanzi rosa* of the time suggest that every girl will find a prince charming, in view of a marriage lived happily ever after. Scholars have noted the well-defined characteristics of the plots of such popular productions: a *romanzo rosa* is always based on the conflictive relationship between a man and a woman. The woman initially rebels against her male counterpart. The inevitable final

marriage between the two sees each of the protagonists having slightly changed their attitude toward the other: the woman has grown less rebellious; the man more considerate (ARSLAN and POZZATO 1989, 1028-1029). There are other traits to the genre as well: the female protagonist is usually an orphan, at least of her mother; there is often another woman involved who, however, either for social reasons or because of her age, has become an unsuitable partner for the man. Finally, the motives for the conflict between the protagonists are often so immaterial as to become unlikely (ARSLAN and POZZATO 1989, 1029).

In addition to the *romanzi rosa*, many scholars cite cinema and glossy magazines as the «determining influence of the 'sentimental education' [...] of an entire generation» (GRIGNAFFINI 1988, 119). Fairy tale love, with «ill-fated female protagonists, prince charmings, and marriage as the great and final goal for all women»¹⁵ was also at the centre of the newly created and widely read *fotoromanzi*, «the largest factory of emotions and dreams»¹⁶ of the post-war years (CUTRUFELLI 2001, 159).¹⁷ While Cristina does not explicitly mention reading *romanzi rosa* or *fotoromanzi*, other characters in the play refer to popular fiction, making it a subtext which readers and spectators cannot ignore.¹⁸ On the other hand, in the course of the play Cristina reveals that she grew up on «due films al mese, in un locale di seconda visione» (MASCI 1952, 30), thus confirming the influential presence of popular culture in her life. What appears even more important, however, is that Masci not only created a protagonist who has been influenced by the image of marriage offered in popular culture, but that she structured the entire plot of her *Vigilia nuziale* following the characteristics of a *romanzo rosa* as well.¹⁹

Towards the end of the play Cristina's fiancé Giacomo labels as «proiezioni di una vita chimerica» the dreams that Cristina had about her future: «scrigni con gioielli da Mille e una notte, macchine americane, abiti da sera col visone che scivola sulle spalle nude» (*ibidem*, 49). Cristina, «col capo chino», does not deny the accuracy of his description (*ivi*). In principle she is aware that real life does not often match film plots, and that her dreams of being courted by dozens of tuxedoed young men with shiny cars were little more than «le solite sciocchezze»

(*ibidem*, 50). The conflict of the play, however, arises precisely because she is confronted with the fact that there are actual people in her world who do live fairy tale love stories. One is minor character Fiammetta, another young woman on the eve of her wedding.²⁰ The other is Giacomo, her own fiancé.

The theft of Fiammetta's engagement ring, stolen the day before Act 1 from a jeweller's store which Cristina and her grandmother had also visited, upsets the wedding plan of not one, but two couples.²¹ The other bride-to-be declares that she will not marry unless the ring is found (*ibidem*, 16), and her enquiries into the theft lead her to the Agostinis' home. Although Fiammetta Alteri and her fiancé, the marquis De Luiz, appear only briefly on stage in Act 1, their wealth, beauty and presumed happy future life together are an unreachable term of comparison for Cristina and her family.

Seventeen-year old Fiammetta, the audience learns at the beginning of the play, comes from a family in serious financial trouble. One day though she is elected "Miss Sorriso", and soon thereafter becomes engaged to the very rich marquis. Hers is a 1950s dream come true, as the newly-revamped beauty contests, which Fascism had banned in 1938, offered the possibility of fairy tale transformations, promising winners not only monetary gain but also screen tests and the chance of a career in cinema.²² The rags to riches Cinderella story, also adapted for cinema by Disney in 1950, seems to have been particularly appropriate in expressing the dreams of young Italian women of the 1950s, whose imagination was replete with «lives filled with wealth and success, totally different from the destiny reserved for the women of the previous generation»²³ (CAPUSSOTTI 2002, 426). Many scholars in fact consider the Cinderella story the archetypal model from which the *romanzo rosa* derives (ROCCELLA 1998, 13-16).

Through a beauty contest, then, Fiammetta has obtained both popularity and a tall, handsome, wealthy man – if not literally a prince, the 1950s real-life version of one – who is obviously bent on spoiling her. He has presented her with a Cadillac, a Christian Dior dress, and a million lire engagement ring. For their honeymoon, he will take her to Paris, London, and an extended stay in Latin

America. The stage directions reveal that Fiammetta shows «l'aggressività orgogliosa e un po' ingenua del giocatore d'azzardo ancora stordito per l'insperato 'en plein'» (MASCÌ 1952, 12).²⁴ She is «spavalda, stupida e bellissima» (*ibidem*, 17). Her beauty impresses every character in the play: «una splendida ragazza», says Cristina's grandmother (*ibidem*, 11); «quella bella ragazza che deve sposare il riccone», comments Carmela the maid (*ibidem*, 28); «un fior di figliola, la più bella ragazza della città», adds the police commissioner (*ibidem*, 47).

Vigilia nuziale certainly portrays Fiammetta and Cristina as opposites: Fiammetta is young, silly and beautiful; Cristina is older, perceptive, and plain. «Tu non sei bella [...] sei come mille, centomila altre ragazze. E forse anche un poco meno», admits her grandmother (*ibidem*, 33). On the other hand, in addition to both being on their wedding eve, there are parallels between the two female characters. Like Cristina, Fiammetta is also infantilised. While Cristina is called «bambina», her fiancé repeatedly calls Fiammetta «bamberottola» (*ibidem*, 13; 14; 16; 17). The resemblance and difference between Cristina and Fiammetta are also pursued through an echoing of the same words and gestures by Giacomo and De Luiz. The marquis puts his hand on Fiammetta's shoulder «con gesto di padrone soddisfatto», telling her «Avrai tutti gli anelli che vorrai» (*ibidem*, 14). Giacomo puts his hand on Cristina's shoulder as well, tells his fiancée he will do «tutto quello che vorrai» and «celiando» calls her «Altezza» (*ibidem*, 24). The play concludes with Giacomo telling Cristina: «col tuo anello, potrai fare tutti i giochetti che vorrai» (*ibidem*, 57). The difference in wealth, and the awareness that Fiammetta will become a marquise, while Cristina will only jokingly be called "Your Highness", highlight once more the difference between Fiammetta's and Cristina's future married status.²⁵

This comparison between the two young women on the eve of their weddings embitters Cristina, as she has before her a living example of one who – thanks solely to her physical beauty – has found prince charming, a wealthy marquis who will love and spoil her: «Voi avete il coraggio di buttarmi fra le braccia di uno sconosciuto, mentre lei... lei... Un uomo che l'adora, la Cadillac, il viaggio in America...», Cristina complains to her relatives (*ibidem*, 19). Cristina sees that

the happy ending that Fiammetta undeservedly acquired is denied to her only on the basis of external appearances and not intrinsic worth.

Probably even more important for Cristina, however, is the discovery that Giacomo had a previous relationship. Not that she resents the fact in itself. Indeed, she seems to envy «l'amore senza matrimonio... le avventure...» which are part of a man's life and denied to women (*ibidem*, 36). That which surprises – and upsets – Cristina most is that Giacomo describes the relationship using terms of fairy tale enchantment, in which he plays the role of a prince, and a poet.

Romantic language and love declarations do not seem to be part of Giacomo's vocabulary when he first appears on stage. Prosaic Giacomo does not officially believe in fairy tale love. Talking to Ingegnere Agostini, Giacomo makes fun of popular magazines, their language, and their depiction of love:

GIACOMO – Spero che tu non ti stia dando alla letteratura a fumetti. [...] L'amore... il mistero... le zone d'ombra... Scommetto che stai per aggiungere 'l'anello che unisce due vite' (*Ride*). È straordinario il peso che hanno gli anelli nelle romanticherie (*ibidem*, 26).²⁶

Moreover, when talking with Ingegnere Agostini about his past affair, Giacomo adopts an unsentimental tone and uses terms appropriate to his medical profession. Explaining that he still suffers for the end of that story, he diagnoses it as a case of poisoning: «Tutti i postumi delle intossicazioni lasciano per qualche tempo uno stato morboso» (*ibidem*, 26).

However, when later he confesses to Cristina his previous relationship, the story Giacomo tells and the language he chooses could find their proper place in that same «letteratura a fumetti» which he has so much derided:

GIACOMO – Ebbene, sì, sì, ho amato una donna, l'ho amata come un pazzo, come un cretino, come un collegiale. Una donna meravigliosa, con degli occhi tanto magici da trasformare un povero medico condotto in un Jaufré Rudel vicino a morir d'amore. Ma... era ricchissima, aveva marito, ha dovuto tornarsene lontano... Ah, è finito tutto e non ci vedremo mai più, mai più... (*ibidem*, 38)

In the version of the story which he reserves for Cristina, the poisoning has become an enchantment. Giacomo can still feel the magic charm that

transformed him into a prince and poet – the opposite of the miserly village doctor who expresses himself in the style of medical prescriptions which he reserves for Cristina. And then, in an unexpected role reversal, he, the doctor, tells Cristina: «Tu mi guarirai» (*ibidem*, 39). In Giacomo's fantasies, in other words, although he plays the role of the prince, Cristina appears to break the enchantment, to work as the antidote to magic, to cure him back to the prosaic husband he will be for her thereafter.

In Cristina's world, then, fairy tale love stories continue to exist – but for someone else, not her. Being neither rich, beautiful, nor young, she is expected to accept a passionless marriage as a suitable arrangement. As her grandmother wisely comments, «È triste la vita per le donne sole, specialmente se non sono ricche e non hanno una posizione indipendente» (*ibidem*, 33). Others, however, like beautiful Fiammetta or her own fiancé, are allowed to live out their fantasies of love.

Because Giacomo refuses to play the role of prince or poet for Cristina, it would seem that Cristina's story, as opposed to Fiammetta's, is very different from the plot of the ever-popular 1950s *romanzi rosa* or *fotoromanzi*. But a closer look at *Vigilia nuziale* reveals that Masci has used the main elements of the 1950s popular romance fiction to construct the story of Cristina as well. As in the best tradition of the genre, Cristina is an orphan, having lost her mother at a young age. Giacomo saves her from spinsterhood; he offers her marriage and status, if not love. The gender conflict which characterizes the *romanzo rosa* genre is clearly at the centre of this play as well: Cristina rebels at the idea of an arranged marriage, and Giacomo has not fallen madly in love with her. Moreover, between them haunts the ghost of his real true love, who however, being already married, cannot bring about for Giacomo a happy ending. Finally, this gender conflict comes to a head at the end of Act 2: having failed to seduce Giacomo with her physical attributes (he makes fun of her when she parades her new voile dressing gown), Cristina attempts suicide, thus presenting herself as a patient in need of medical help. Only then will Giacomo devote his professional and personal attention to her. At the beginning of Act 3, presumably after having

spent the night together, the protagonists reach an understanding: Cristina declares she is born anew (*ibidem*, 48); Giacomo expresses his care for her (*ibidem*, 51).

If such a situation corresponds to the classical ending of a *romanzo rosa* – the woman is less rebellious; the man more caring – there should be no need for further action; Cristina and Giacomo are destined for marriage anyway. But just when it seems that the play will close on a happy note, the action continues. Even after admitting to Giacomo that she did not steal the ring, Cristina tells the police commissioner she did. And later, after the real thief confesses and the ring is found, Cristina still expects to be taken away to the police station for obstruction of justice.²⁷ Spectators and readers can't help but be left with the impression that even after Cristina has slept with Giacomo, she is trying very hard to avoid marrying him; she is making herself unsuitable for the union – for any union – by doing time in jail.

Advice columns of the 1950s reveal that Cristina would not have been alone in her distress over entering a passionless marriage (MORRIS 2007, 314). Those same columns, however, may have advised her that «any marriage is better than none» (*ibidem*, 315), especially in a case such as hers: not young, not beautiful, not rich, with no particular skills or education.²⁸ One wonders if Cristina felt that prison actually was the only way out for her, and what such an attitude reveals in terms of her future married life.

Earlier in Act 3 Cristina had admitted that she once had dreamed of «decine di giovani che si disputassero la mia mano... teste lucide su mirabili frak... e magari, fughe su macchine più lucide delle teste». She later reduced that dream to a more realistic someone «che mi volesse bene sul serio» (MASCİ 1952, 50). Finally, by the time she is ready to go to the police station she has realized that any dream of love has been denied her. Such a love may exist in films and the popular press. It may even be real for others. But not for her. Ironically, however, at that point, instead of denying dreams altogether, Cristina calculates that she would rather go to jail and continue to fantasize than accept the life of house work and her husband's «sfuriatine».

Thus, spectators and readers may get the impression that Cristina does not consider jail such a terrible place after all. In fact, in a certain sense, it has been a part of her life all along. Ingegner Agostini, for example, proudly states that they tried to create «come un muro fra [Cristina] e la vita... una trincea... un riparo...» (*ibidem*, 10), implicitly suggesting that her youth was spent inside, and that once she leaves home, life will represent a battle to be fought. More importantly, as she was growing up, Cristina remembers, the atmosphere in her home was of «silenzio, sempre, e tristezza, ed economia» (*ibidem*, 49). But while on the one hand she wishes she could have money, nice clothes, and young men courting her, on the other hand she is accustomed to silence, sadness, and enclosure. She has discovered that enclosure allows one the opportunity to look within. While she may lament her upbringing, in which she was given little more than food and shelter, at the same time Cristina seems to consider fortunate such recluses as nuns and lifers, as they have no obligations and can let their imagination develop their inner world (*ibidem*, 30). At least in a jail cell Cristina would have the chance to be on her own. Her married life promises little more.

Vigilia nuziale does not touch on the marital life of the protagonists, although the police commissioner optimistically concludes: «Ne abbiamo viste di peggio [...]. Forse saranno più felici di tanti altri» (*ibidem*, 55). Masci does offer an inkling, however, of Cristina's life after the wedding. In the final scene, as she is about to enter what is usually considered a more adult, responsible state in a woman's life, Cristina is, on the contrary, treated increasingly like a child. «Timidamente» she approaches her father, who once again calls her «bambina mia» and asks for a kiss. Her fiancé calls her «sciocchina», «le dà un buffetto sulla guancia», and mentions «i giochetti» she will be able to play with her wedding ring (*ibidem*, 56-57). In marriage, Masci implies, Cristina will regress to a state of childish obedience, while her husband takes on the controlling role of her father. Not exactly a finale that one would expect from a *romanzo rosa*, even if the story does end with the upcoming marriage of the protagonists.

Arslan and Pozzato suggest that *romanzi rosa* provide regulations of relationships between the sexes from a social, economic, and individual point of view. Like myth and fairy tales, they offer examples of models of reorganization when society is going through a time of crisis and transformation (ARSLAN and POZZATO 1989, 1031-1032). The post-war years and the early 1950s are undoubtedly such a time for Italian women, in which the economic and social advantages of being married make space for individual preferences. Masci's *Vigilia nuziale* stages the case of a woman who has been instructed by popular fiction and films to expect not only material benefits from her married status, but also sentimental and sexual gratification. She grudgingly accepts to marry the man that her family has chosen for her, but is unable to attract his attention until she shows herself to be in a weak mental state. Her final lies and desperate attempts to escape from marrying her fiancé, with whom she has sexually engaged, may indicate her foreknowledge of a married life of frustration. The final marriage which the play announces, and which was saluted as a happy ending by the 1952 reviewers (POSSENTI 1952; TERRON 1952), satisfies all characters involved except for the protagonist, who seemed to have preferred to go to jail rather than marrying her prosaic fiancé. In other words, Masci, it would appear, has cleverly used the structure and the characteristics of the post-war popular fiction love stories in her 1952 play to show how even a final marriage does not necessarily constitute a happy ending for women. At the same time, she suggested that no viable alternatives to married life were available. The depiction of female characters and the concerns regarding women's lives expressed in *Vigilia nuziale*, as well as in all of her works, mark Clotilde Masci as one of the most remarkable voices in the field of post-war women writing – a voice that like that of so many other women dramatists is still waiting to be rediscovered.

Notes

- ¹ Masci's year of birth appears as 1918 in contracts which she signed with the Ancora publishing company. Bernard, however, gives 1913 as the year of her birth (BERNARD 1993, 205). Since Masci defines herself as being a little over twenty during World World II (SANGIORGIO 1950, 45) and appears to be around thirty in 1950 (TERRON 1950), 1918 seems to be the more plausible date.
- ² For more information on Masci's life and works, see CAVALLARO 2011, pp. 246-262. For a list of her works, see pp. 388-389.
- ³ «Un personaggio che ha tante età, tante condizioni, ma è sempre quello: la donna». All translations in this article are mine.
- ⁴ «il più potente veicolo di identificazione femminile».
- ⁵ «era in base allo stato civile che le donne costruivano la propria identità».
- ⁶ Co-authored with Gici Ganzini Granata and based on Ganzini Granata's all-womens play *L'amore difficile* (1954).
- ⁷ Masci was not the only woman writer of her time to portray married life under a negative light. Anna Nozzoli has argued that several of the female characters of Elsa Morante's *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948) appear «hopelessly consecrated to the role of wives and mothers, prisoners of the space which history allocated them» [votate irrimediabilmente al ruolo di mogli e madri, prigioniere del luogo loro assegnato dalla storia] (NOZZOLI 1978, 140). Sandra Carletti has shown how the protagonist of Alba de Céspedes' novel *Dalla parte di lei* (1949) perceives the growing lack of communication between herself and her husband as «a situation which is not only hers, but is shared by women all over the world» (CARLETTI 1996, 153). Rebecca West has discussed the protagonists of Natalia Ginzburg's *È stato così* (1947) and Alba de Céspedes' *Quaderno proibito* (1952) as exemplary of the post-war years: caught between generations, they are unsatisfied with the traditional roles passed on by their mothers, yet unable to dismiss them (WEST 2006, 28-31).
As for literary representations of a woman's hope to escape the condition of spinsterhood, a famous example is Anna Maria Ortese's *Interno familiare*, from the collection *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (1953). On a Christmas day the unmarried protagonist of Ortese's story is allowed to live just for a few hours the hope for what Andrea Baldi has called «an illusion of rebirth» [un'illusione di rinascita] (BALDI 2000, 90) and Lucia Re defined «a kind of resurrection or redemption» (RE 2012, 7), when she hears of an old suitor's return to Naples and envisages the possibility that she herself could finally marry.
- ⁸ *Vigilia nuziale* premiered at the Teatro Olimpia in Milan on May 19, 1952, under the direction of Vincenzo Tieri. Gabriella Danesi played the role of Cristina. Paola Borboni was her grandmother, Filippo Scelzo her father, Corrado Annicelli her fiancé, and Mario Scaccia the police commissioner. In a later staged reading in Cagliari, Nini Sacerdoti was Cristina, Aldo Ancis her father, Maria Pilo her grandmother, and Sergio Geronimi her fiancé. *Vigilia nuziale* was staged again in Rome at the Teatro Millimetro in 1956, under the direction of Marcello Moneta. Dina Genni played Cristina in this later staging. The drama was also translated into Spanish and staged in Buenos Aires on October 30, 1954.
Vigilia nuziale was also broadcast by the second radio channel of RAI on 28 October 1954.
In addition to the text published in the theatre periodical «La commedia», to which I refer here, the play is archived in typescript form at the SIAE in Rome, with two alternative (later erased) titles: *Vigilia di nozze* and *Cristina*.
- ⁹ See my article *From fairy tale to hysteria: women in Italian theatre in the early 1950s* in the forthcoming volume *Fare le italiane*, edited by Virginia Picchietti and Laura Salsini.
- ¹⁰ See CULLEN 2014 for a discussion of the conflict between the stories published in «Grand Hotel» (Italy's most popular *fotoromanzi* magazine), and the reality of courtship and marriage which emerged from the magazine's advice columns.
- ¹¹ Carmela also later comments: «Dev'essere un gran bravo ragazzo, il nostro fidanzato» (MAsCI 1952, 33, emphasis added).
- ¹² The alliteration in both of their names, Agostino Agostini and Giacomo Gioretti, contributes to reinforce this sense of closeness.

- ¹³ Cristina's interest in the beauty of language emerges, for example, when she explains what she does when her migraines become too painful: «Mi sforzo a pensare ad una parola bella, molto bella, e me la ripeto cento, mille volte, finché tutti gli altri pensieri sono stati assorbiti dalla luce di quella parola» (*ibidem*, 23-24). Upon learning of this technique, Giacomo suggests that she should waste less mental energies and take a pain killer.
- ¹⁴ For a recent work on Amalia Liana Negretti Odescalchi Cambiasi (1897 – 1995), known as Liala, see SERGIO 2012.
- ¹⁵ «eroine sfortunate e principi azzurri e con il matrimonio come grande obiettivo finale per tutte».
- ¹⁶ «la più grande fabbrica di emozioni e di sogni».
- ¹⁷ «Grand Hotel» published over a million copies per week in the mid-1950s, each copy estimated to have been read by 6 people. «Bolero Film» and «Sogno» followed closely behind (VENTRONE 1988, 603).
- ¹⁸ Giacomo ironically mentions «la letteratura a fumetti» (MASCI 1952, 26) and Fiammetta declares herself a reader of «molti libri gialli» (*ibidem*, 14).
- ¹⁹ On the other hand, the line pronounced by the protagonist's father in Act 2 of *Vigilia nuziale*, «questo matrimonio non bisogna farlo» (*ibidem*, 26), and another character's reference to «un ratto alla Don Rodrigo» in Act 1 (*ibidem*, 16), may suggest a comparison with the *Promessi sposi*. As in Manzoni's novel, Masci's drama stages the story of two betrothed on the eve of their wedding. The announcements have been sent; the presents are beginning to arrive. But an unexpected event creates a crisis, and the wedding appears in danger. The predicament is solved thanks to an intervention of the authorities, and the wedding can go on as planned. The twist which Masci created in this play, however, is that the person who acts to prevent the wedding is the future bride herself.
- ²⁰ When they enter the Agostini's home, Fiammetta declares that «in una piccola città come la nostra ci si conosce a memoria tutti quanti» (*ibidem*, 13). That the families knew each other was obvious from their gossip concerning the debts incurred by the Alteris, which Ingegnere Agostini looks down upon. Even the grandmother reveals that Fiammetta used to make telephone pranks and «una volta Cristina si offese molto» (*ibidem*, 7).
- ²¹ It may be significant that there is no specific mention in the play of Cristina having an engagement ring herself. When at the end of the play Giacomo warns her that they need to return to the jeweller's to try on a wedding band, he is implying that it will be the only ring Cristina will have.
- ²² See GUNDLE 2007, especially pages 116-141, for a discussion of the post-war beauty contests.
- ²³ «esistenza ricche di denaro e di successo, radicalmente diverse dal destino riservato alle donne della generazione precedente».
- ²⁴ Taking up the card gambling metaphor again, in Act 2 Cristina wishes her relatives would have spent more money on her, on her clothing, for example, to give her the same opportunities that Fiammetta had. Her grandmother reminds her that no matter what, Fiammetta played having the advantage of being very beautiful, an advantage Cristina could never have (MASCI 1952, 32-33).
- ²⁵ In a time when photographs play such a crucial role in women's images, as Piccone Stella suggests (PICCONE STELLA 1981, 33), the comparison between the two women is pursued also through the different kind of public images they would deserve. «Tutte le riviste pubblicarono la mia fotografia quando venni eletta Miss Sorriso», Fiammetta remarks with satisfaction (MASCI 1952, 13). Cristina, on the other hand, can only hope to obtain a mug shot: «Quando le metterò le manette, le farò anche fare una bella fotografia, che lei potrà mandare, con tanto di dedica, ai parenti, amici e consanguinei», the police commissioner promises her (*ibidem*, 46).
- ²⁶ At this point, Giacomo is unaware of any ring-related issue that may have something to do with Cristina or even Fiammetta. It will be the maid who lets him know of the theft, having heard about it in the streets. His comment, however, would certainly resonate with the other characters and the audience.
- ²⁷ Unfortunately for her, however, the police commissioner who could arrest Cristina, and thus make her marriage to Giacomo highly unlikely, comes from the same little Sicilian village

where Giacomo is the local doctor. The commissioner decides to ignore Cristina's obstruction of justice, and leave her in the care of her doctor fiancé.

Continuing in the *Promessi sposi* structure, this last attempt would correspond to Lucia's vow not to marry, from which Fra Cristoforo absolves her. It seems significant that the stage directions instruct the police commissioner to leave Cristina free to marry «con un largo gesto di ironica – ma bonaria – assoluzione» (*ibidem*, 55), which would befit more a religious than a civil authority.

²⁸ While this is not explicitly stated in the play, there is also no reference to any studies Cristina has done, or any job she could do if she did not marry.

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