



Female Authors under the Mask of a Male Pseudonym - Some Approaches to Revealing Authors' Gender

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DOI: 10.26417/ejls.v3i1.p69-76

Abstract

A patriarchal society has very clear and rigid norms. Its frame does not allow one to move out of it, and a mode of behaviour which attempts any change is severely punished. This kind of society has strict written and unwritten rules, and it seems that the second kind are more harmful and painful for the individual than the first. In 19th century, European society was strongly patriarchal, and a phenomenon which confirms this is the fact that many female writers published their works under a male pseudonym. A patriarchal system attempts to prevent women from any artistic and scientific form and expression, as they are labelled as less intellectually able or talented, but by choosing a male pseudonym they found a way to reach their goal. An author writes about what he knows, what surrounds him and/or what he notices, feels and thinks. Considering that a patriarchal society system is highly defined, female and male points of view, their angles of reflection and aims are obviously different. In novels, choice of character and situation and the description of such, can easily reveal an author's gender. These approaches will be illustrated by analysing the work of Vincenza Speraz, who lived in North Italy between the 19th and 20th centuries, and published her works under the pseudonym Bruno Sperani.

Keywords: pseudonym, female writers, analysis, an author's gender, literature

Introduction

The city of Milan between the 19th and 20th centuries was a national cultural centre, even if bounded by the rules of European patriarchal society (Duby, Perrot, 2009). This period is described as one marked by a progressive bourgeoisie, a culture opening itself to positivism, socialism and emancipation (Zancan, 1998). It was

presumed necessary that women have a part in cultural and social life, and some female writers and journalists had their share of popularity through writing about the conditions of women at the time – difficult employment, hard physical work, subordination in society and family, prostitution, rape (Ciopponi, 2006). It seems that the impact intended was not so successful because some of them, as Vicenza Speraz, alias Bruno Sperani, choose to write and publish under a male pseudonym (Ciopponi, 2006).

The primary reason is that patriarchal censorship applied to supposed female values and qualities denied *a priori*. It was Sperani's desire to publish her works without the scissors of censorship, to have as large an impact on the public as possible and to transform a mute scream into an authoritative voice. This ambiguity begins before the act of writing itself: by choosing to give a voice to what is untold by using a writing style typical of male writers. A reversed image and the procedure of counterpoint provide the necessary distance from the primary issue, as they reveal an entire horrific reality and the necessary absence of emotions in relational evaluation. Yet the choice of theme and description, the directions of analysis of the arguments on display cannot conceal the author's gender.¹ The writing style of the time in which Sperani was active was descriptive; it does not avoid detail and offers ample introspection, which make it easier to explain the approaches which reveals the author's gender. Sperani's novel *Macchia d'oro* (*The Gold Stain*) is the one selected for analysis, first published in a periodical as a popular serial² and in 1901 as an integrated novel: it was then to be received in silence and consigned to oblivion due to its inconvenient and inappropriate ideas.

Due to the argument presented in this paper, reporting and quoting relevant parts of the plot was unavoidable.

Choice and description of character

The writing style of Sperani has all the characteristics of her time, but it is necessary to take into consideration that she was also a journalist and translated Zola and Andersen which were definitely an influence on her (Fonda, 2000). The main characters form a triangle: Corrado, the husband, Elena, his wife and Luciano, friend to Corrado and Elena's lover. Two secondary characters compliment these relations: Giulia as Elena's best and only friend, and Stella, the daughter Elena had with Luciano. The relation of forces between the characters is typical for the time but the way in which they are depicted offers the key to understanding the author's gender. Elena is the focal point, and the descriptions of other protagonists are offered exclusively through a female perception.

Corrado's character is represented as a typical male force, led by the needs social rules allow. He had lost his money gambling, did not marry Elena out of love but for the money she has, accepted his friend's daughter into the home only because Luciano provided money for her, and is set to continue gambling. "Corrado Montese

apparteneva a quella categoria di uomini che disprezzano in fondo tutte le donne, accordando una sorta di rispetto alle rigide perché le giudicano insensibili e quindi impeccabili” (Sperani, 1900b, p. 300). “Corrado Montese belonged to that category of men who in the end despise all women, having a sort of respect for those who are rigid, as they can be judged as insensible and therefore impeccable”. He is also unfaithful to his wife as his society allows male infidelity. The description of his “female politics” reveals the author’s gender, because it offers a female point of view collocated under a male’s name. Sperani wrote (Sperani, 1900b, p. 300):

Modello di figlia, mi ha sposato per obbedienza; e modello di donna nella famiglia; ma incapace di amare, incapace di dare l’ebbrezza della passione a un uomo di sentimento. Trascurava la moglie, la tradiva con donne indegne, senza il più piccolo rimorso, stimandosi nel proprio diritto e al sicuro d’ogni rappresaglia.

A model daughter, she married me for obedience; and she is a model woman in the family; but unable to love, unable to provide the thrill of passion to an emotional man. He neglected his wife, he cheated on her with ignoble women, without a single regret, congratulating himself on his right and secure from any revenge.

Luciano, Corrado’s friend and Elena’s lover, is a rich and famous opera singer, in love with the fame and luxury he can afford, and tender enough with Elena to make their relationship seem like love. In crucial moments he reveals a sense of the practical, but the author here condemns his acts as egoistic. He combines the utilitarian and profitable in all: gives his natural daughter Stella to Corrado and the money for her upbringing yet conceals the fact that Elena is her natural mother as he fears how knowledge of this might affect his career. While absent for several months, he sends letters and money, but when he discovers the misery his daughter lives in, he takes her away without regret. This kind of character is represented from a very concrete point of view, who, as revealed by a female pen, is judged as insensible and egoistic; the letters he sent during the period of absence are further evidence: “Qualche altra parola affettuosa e di rimpianto era sparsa, qua e là nella lettera, come una elemosina, in mezzo all’espansione grandiose dell’egoismo soddisfatto” (Sperani, 1900b, p.304). “Some tender word and some of regret were scattered here and there in the letter, as charity, in the midst of a great expanse of satisfied egoism”.

The author’s attention is primarily concentrated on the female protagonist Elena. Through descriptions and by presenting the actions of these characters it is very easy to decipher author’s gender. The descriptions of the states of mind and introspection of the female protagonist are particularly helpful. The descriptions of subordination and submission are clearly written by a person who had the occasion to experience them in society. Elena had “una bellezza regolare, casta e semivelata” (Sperani, 1900a, p. 241)/“a regular beauty, pure and half veiled”. She was a petty bourgeois whose intimate drama no one could ever imagine or discover. The author discovers her

gender through a very significant description of Elena's clothes and the way the protagonist senses them, revealing a professional intelligence here as Sperani was also a fashion journalist. At the time clothes were a sign of social rank, and this was highly defined. Due to her husband's "illness" (a gambling addiction) the family is poor, but thanks to the money Luciano sends for their daughter, and an extra but significant amount for clothes both for the child and Elena, the protagonist lived a constant imbalance between what she knew she was, what she could be and what she had to be due to the promise the two men in her life had made. At a certain moment she ceases wearing the clothes which were representative of a rank higher than her own, and begins to dress like a poor petty bourgeois, which is what she feels and knows herself to be. The social factor is not so relevant in this particular case as the psychological function manifested in this change of clothes signifies hypocrisy first the silent rebellion of the protagonist later. Her insignificant role in the family and her subordination, combined with an absence of understanding, is underlined at the moment she realises that her husband did not understand a thing when she when she began to exclusively wear the clothes appropriate to their financial situation.

Another argument which reveals the author's gender is the choice of the secondary character Giulia, the best and only friend the main protagonist has. The author intentionally inserts an opposite female character, but keeps an open communication between the two. If Elena thought she had real love with Luciano, and if there was only the slightest possibility he would marry her, Giulia suffered for her unfaithful husband, but then became disillusioned. Giulia had the courage to ask for a divorce but became a widow before the legal procedure was complete, on the other hand, Elena never even imagined a similar solution. Giulia decided to never get marry again, and lived in good conditions with her daughter by her own means. On the other hand, Elena dreamed to be the wife of her lover (Sperani, 1900b).

These two images of two different female types reveal the author's "insider" eye of a wider set of psychological and social problems. One character has the intelligence to understand social realities and to find a tolerable solution between personal desires and legal and social boundaries. This is a character who obtained what she wanted through communication and willpower without scandal. All these aspects portray a survivor and a sober mind. The other character displays an impossibility to act, constant and suffered subordination, and, from a certain point of view, the humiliation of not being considered a person. The inability to pronounce, to speak, not even to fight for herself and her position in her family, shows a powerless character: a loser who lost herself. A balance between written and non written social rules, on one side, and the expectations of family, which can or cannot be fulfilled, on the other, was a constant challenge for women in a patriarchal society (Porciani, 2006; Ciopponi, 2006). Through these two characters it is possible to presume that it was more difficult for the women of that time to win and change the expectations that a patriarchal society had for them, than to change written and unwritten laws.

Choices and description of situations

The main situation and its description are represented by the forces around Stella, the natural daughter. The male characters act in the harmony of friendship and personal and mutual benefits. Elena, on the other hand, who also benefits from this situation, annihilates herself in a self-destructive and masochistic manner. Yet it is through the description of Elena's feelings and introspective thoughts that the author's gender reveals itself. Elena's first reaction, which was a clear sign of the beginning of her self-destruction, occurred when she faced the gap between the luxury her lover lived in and the misery her family lived in, underlined by the fact that her husband kept losing important amounts of money Luciano regularly sent for the maintenance of his daughter. She left the transfer of shame the situation brought, because "... la vergogna di suo marito ricadeva irrimediabilmente sopra di lei"/ "...the shame of her husband irremediably fell on her" (Sperani, 1900c, p.68). The social subordination the protagonist experiences, and her personal incapacity to speak out her thoughts and feelings, grows by automatically assuming the failures of others.

Elena's fall and psychological breakdown are portrayed through her thoughts on men, love and motherhood, or, better yet, fatherhood. The beginning of her downward spiral was her sudden realisation that what she thought was real love was in fact a misunderstanding which lasted far too long, which completely changed the view she had on a significant part of her life. At this moment she becomes aware of the total absence of her feelings for these two men. Sperani uses this protagonist's introspection for the presentation of her personal-female and revolutionary thoughts about society and about the patriarchal system in general. The author's ideas that reveal her gender can be read in two important passages the protagonist's mode of reasoning is made evident.

The first considers the relationship between women and work. A hundred years ago the idea that many women be allowed to work was a mere dream, as well as the possibility and the choice not to depend on anyone but on herself without "fathers and masters", or as Elena felt and stated "owners" (Porciani, 2006). The lack of work possibilities at the time was directly connected with the dominant patriarchal view on women, as less or not at all talented and less or not at all intelligent (Filippini, Scattigno, 2007). A restrictive ambient, as the one cited here, had, as a collateral effect, very limited learning options and school careers for women, which directly restrained professional possibilities and choices (Porciani, 2006).

... essere sola con i suoi figlioli: lavorare per mantenerli e educarli a modo suo senza intervento d'altre volontà (...) chiamarli col suo casato (Sperani, 1900d, p.159).

... being alone with her children: work to maintain and to educate them, in her way without the intervention of another's will (...) name them with her family name.

Si vedeva in un paese nuovo, in una bella casa, affaccendata a preparare il lavoro alle abili operaie, mentre i suoi figli facevano i conti, riscuotevano i pagamenti, e Stella imparava a lavorare alla scuola (Sperani, 1900d, p.160).

She saw herself in a new country, in a nice house, busy while preparing work for skilful working women, while her sons keep accounts, cash in payments, and Stella learns a profession at school.

The second issue that reveals the author's personal and direct participation in this argument, as well as her gender, is represented by the question of fatherhood. Elena's internal monologue reaches a crescendo in which her reasoning is brought to an extreme conclusion – that fatherhood must be abolished. The rational drama of this female protagonist ends in an irrational and fatal conclusion. The logical function of reasoning is exact in that it follows facts collateral to the effects of a patriarchal society and family system, but the author underlines a typical female emotional reaction to a determined situation. The very beginning of this polemic on fatherhood begins with thoughts on self-sufficiency, money and work, immediately including men as an integral part of the problem. Elena's wish was: "...non vedere mai più quei due uomini e togliere i suoi figlioli alla potestà paterna, fonte di ogni male per essi e per lei" (Sperani, 1900d, p.160) "...not to see those two men ever again and to take away her children from paternal authority, the cause of all misfortune for them and for her". This reasoning shows the anger of a subordinated being, of someone who never felt allowed to be a person, treated as a being of self-sufficient integrity, a being with reason, talent and emotions. Fatherhood in this example is offered as an artificial social convention, not as a part of a natural human course. The fact that the protagonist never felt as a person, makes it a logical course of thinking in which she transfers this personal perception to her children. It seems inevitable that, in this very case, fatherhood is nothing much or less than a restrictive and irrational cage, which brings misery to the rest of the family. The author's thoughts expressed through Elena directly elaborate the relation between motherhood and fatherhood, and the emotional force that arises from these lines shows the author's personal involvement in this question. "I figli sono della madre: sono miei, miei: io ho sofferto per essi: io ho rischiato la mia vita: io sola. Che centrano quei due egoisti?" (Sperani, 1900d, p.160-161) "The children are their mother's: they are mine, mine: I suffered for them: I put my life at risk: only me. What do those two egoists have to do with this?" It is clear from these sentences that the author knows what she is writing about from personal experience. The biological element in this issue proves that the gender of the author can only be female. Sperani herself, at a young age, was forced into marriage and left her children with her husband in Piran, in order to have a life of her own and not be treated as a thing or property. This novel is a sort of autobiography, and this is the reason why, in those the pages in which Elena reasons on herself as a non person and on motherhood, it is clear that behind the male pseudonym there must be a female writer. These pages answer the question why Sperani left her three children and husband. Certain situations in the novel are clearly fictional, but the main course of

thought is personal and derives from personal experience. Sperani had no other choice if she wanted to be self-sufficient and to have and take responsibility for her own choices. To survive this existential situation Sperani had to leave her children, and fight her entire life to have the freedom to be master of herself alone. On the other hand, the protagonist of her novel is weak, not even able to pronounce her elementary thoughts and feelings, as many women of the time suffered submission in silence. Female rebellion against the conventions of the time were paid at an inhuman price, and the autobiographical lines of this novel are a proof and an open denunciation of the injustices of a patriarchal society.

The trigger for Elena's breakdown and her significant monologue is represented by the solution Luciano found for their daughter, when he finds out that Stella lives in misery and takes her away with him. As always, even in this situation no one asked Elena for her opinion. It is for this reason that Sperani includes in Elena's discourse the question of law. The two men

... vogliono essere padroni di miei figli?! E la legge riconosce il loro diritto? (...) Dovrebbero vietare a tutti gli uomini indistintamente di riconoscere per loro propri figli delle donne. ... i figli sono delle loro madri e che i padri non dovrebbero avere alcun diritto su loro. (...) Sanno forse quando sono padri se le donne non glielo dicono? (...) Una legge giusta sarebbe quella che abolisce la paternità. (...) Essi vogliono la minore responsabilità possibile con la maggiore autorità (Sperani, 1900d, p. 160-161).

... they want to be masters of my children? And the law recognises their right? (...) They should indiscriminately prohibit all men to recognise a woman's children as their own. ... the children are their mother's and a father should not have any right to them. (...) do they know if they are fathers if a woman does not tell them so? (...) A right law should be one which abolishes paternity. (...) They want less possible responsibility with the more authority.

Sperani explicitly exposes way her views on patriarchal society and law in this passage as rigid and unnatural institutions. The most important thing she mentions is a woman's word on who the father is, but at the time it was the only source of a presumed paternity. This problematic shows the weakness of the patriarchal system, because as the only solutions here were the written and unwritten rules created by to keep women under control.³ On the other hand the question is: why do women let them to do so, but this can be an argument for another paper.

While Elena was sorting Stella's luggage, and after she saying her goodbye, the fact remains that Stella will never know who her mother was: a paralyzed protagonist. Luciano thought how this woman cold, but Elena's emotional crescendo brought no storm to clear this situation; it brought the implosion of a protagonist who will die in silence. The cause of death will be: Paralisi cerebrale. Ne muoiono tanti, a tutte le età. Sono esseri deboli, o creature dissanguate dai patimenti; basta una piccola scossa a

troncare il filo della loro vita” (Sperani, 1900d, p.176) “Cerebral paralysis. Many die of this, at all ages. They are weak beings, or bleed to death by suffering; a little commotion is enough to cut the string of their life”. Sperani’s protagonist, unlike the author, is weak and this kind of writing procedure is typical for the time. Yet as partially biographical, in this context, the death of the protagonist represents the death of a part of Sperani when she left her children from her first marriage, despite the fact that she was to live life she had always aspired to.

The title of novel *The Gold Stain* is the quintessence of the main problems which marked the female condition in the society of that time. The author wrote from personal experience and was able to identify what was key to this problem. The adjective “gold” has an obvious and direct reference to finance and the material conditions of women a hundred years ago. As financially dependent and unable to choose, their life and eventual rebellion demanded sacrifices. Yet, on the other hand, they were not responsible for this: apparently and only in appearance, they only had to enjoy their condition. The “stain” is the effect which the one-way written and unwritten law had on women. It is not the case that Sperani described her female hero as a person who never had any sense for pecuniary matters, but had to act and to live within boundaries of patriarchal law, unable to change her condition.

Conclusion

To decipher the gender of an author hidden behind a pseudonym is possible by using a few methodological approaches which assist such an analysis. Firstly, it is necessary to take into consideration the time and space of a literary work. In the example presented in this paper the cited co-ordinates are Italy between the 19th and 20th centuries. This means southern Europe and a patriarchal society undergoing significant historical changes such as the first ideas of socialism, the rise of the working class and the tangible beginning of the women’s battle to obtain equality in cultural, social, legal aspects as well as those of labour; in other words, in all fields that important to a civilisation. The next step is to consider the writing style of this chronological moment and geographical location. In the example presented in this paper, the writing style provided us with rich descriptions and psychological introspection, which allows a clear approach in uncovering the author’s gender. A further analysis of the protagonists, how they are depicted and the choices of situations as well, can undoubtedly reveal who is hiding behind a pseudonym. In our example the author chooses a triangle – two men and a woman, and puts the female protagonist at the centre. Through detailed descriptions of the female character, a personal and tangible participation is clearly present, which puts light on the fact that the author can only be a woman. The detailed descriptions of situations and of the interior monologue of the female protagonist, which discuss motherhood, fatherhood, laws, financial conditions and female reality leaves little doubt as to the author’s gender. Through this analysis it is possible to individuate this personal experience by

arguing the questions and problems offered here, as they are highly emphasised, making them unavoidable.

Every author writes about personal experience through personal perception, and due to the direct emotional and intellectual participation in an issue, it is unavoidable for him or her to reveal his or her true nature and his or her position in society and/or family. No matter the mask of a pseudonym, *if we called a rose by any other name, it would smell just as sweet.*

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