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Maria Del Sapio Garbero*

Shakespeare in One Act. Looking for Ophelia in the Italian Wartime Context

Abstract

Hamlet was one of the major Shakespearean plays which featured in the nineteenth-century repertoire of the Italian actors, Gustavo Modena, Ernesto Rossi, Tommaso Salvini, Adelaide Ristori – the *mattatori* (as they were called) who toured with their acclaimed Italian Shakespeare all over Europe, London included (not to mention North and South America), and who, with the *grand* pathos of their acting, contributed to establishing Shakespeare's 'tragic character'. *Hamlet* continued to occupy a first-rate position in the Italian Shakespeare canon in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, well through the violent deconstructive aesthetics prompted by Marinetti's futurist theatre on the one hand, and a nation-based theatrical culture ushered in by the Fascist *régime* on the other. However, life was not easy for the Shakespearean tragic character, and for historical dramatic forms altogether. At the beginning of that century, as part of a poetics aiming to "prostitute all classic art on the stage, performing for example all the Greek, French, and Italian tragedies, condensed and comically mixed up, in a single evening", the futurist avant-garde came to fantasize a concise Shakespeare in one act. "Boil all of Shakespeare down to a single act", Marinetti advised ("The Variety Theater", 1913, in Marinetti 1972: 121). But what about Ophelia in this perspective? Drawing on the wartime context of the Fascist *ventennio* dominated by the male-gendered avant-garde poetics of Futurism as well as by an equally masculine ambition to construct a theatre for the masses, I will speculate on the ways in which Ophelia survives as an erased or grotesque figure, before exploring the role played by a thwarted Ophelian subtext in Alba de Cespedes's novel *Dalla parte di lei* (1949).

Keywords: Shakespeare; Ophelia; war; love; gender; Italian Futurist poetics; Fascist theatrical culture.

"Boil all of Shakespeare down to a single act"

Trying to assess the attractiveness, or conditions of survival, of a tragic, fragile heroine like Ophelia in the cluster of upturning events which revolutionized the context of Italian life in the first half of the twentieth century, in the realm of both politics and aesthetics, raises quite a few issues. One might start by quoting two entries from the outrageous "Futurist Man-

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ifesto" first published by Marinetti in French in *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909 and then reprinted the following month in his Italian journal *Poesia. Revue Internationale*:

> 9. We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying, and scorn for women.
>
> 10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academics of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice. (Marinetti 1972: 42)

What happens to theatre and what about Shakespeare, Hamlet, and Ophelia in the context of this celebration of war and in this totalizing war-like conjunction of art and action, aesthetics and sexual politics, provocatively fostered by Marinetti and his group of artists (poets, painters, playwrights) as a 'futurist' project for the new century?

To answer these questions in the space available for this paper is far from an easy task. However, if not to disentangle them, it can be useful to pose them as a preliminary argument, before dealing with the migration of the Ophelia theme from tragedy into the derisive poetry of variety theatre and then as a poetical and self-empowering, albeit submerged, subplot in Alba de Céspedes' novel *Dalla parte di lei* – "Her side of it", one might translate (Nerenberg 2000: 232) – , a novel in defence of women published in 1949, in the aftermath of the Second World War, and set in Rome in the years of war and Fascism.

In order to understand the status of a character such as that of Ophelia in those years, we must go back in time a little. The life of the theatrical Shakespeare in Italy began with the production of *Hamlet* in 1801. With *Othello* and *Lady Macbeth*, *Hamlet* was one of the three Shakespearean plays which featured in the nineteenth-century repertoire of the Italian actors, Gustavo Modena, Ernesto Rossi, Tommaso Salvini, Adelaide Ristori – the *mattatori* ['limelight stealers'], as they were called – who toured with their acclaimed Italian Shakespeare all over Europe, London included (not to mention North and South America), and who, with the *grand* pathos of their acting, contributed to establishing Shakespeare's 'tragic character'.

Hamlet continued to occupy a first-rate position in the Italian Shakespeare canon in the course of the twentieth century and during Fascism. A less sublime *Hamlet* domesticated by Ruggero Ruggeri, one of the outstanding interpreters of the bourgeois, sentimental drama, remained on stage from 1915 until 1933 (Livio 1989: 23), well through the violent, deconstructive aesthetics prompted by Marinetti's futurist theatre on the one hand, and a nation-based theatrical culture ushered in by the fascist *régime* on

the other, during the two decades which started with the 1922 March on Rome and culminated in the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

However, the Shakespearean tragic character, together with the tragic form in general, had paradoxically come to an end in the utterly tragic years which witnessed two worldwide conflicts. Indeed, in Italy, for reasons which I believe must be taken into account for the purpose of depicting my 'wartime Ophelia', the tragic form had been toned down, and not simply by the register of sentimental bourgeois drama. Historical dramatic forms, and Shakespeare with them, eagerly catalogued by the futurists under the label of "passéist theater" ("The Futurist Synthetic Theater" 1915, in Marinetti 1972: 124) were altogether distanced if not contrasted by the joint action of both the aggressive themes of a national epos and the avant-garde corrosive agency of irony and the grotesque. "Our Futurist theater jeers at Shakespeare", the futurists remarked, while conceptualizing their "synthetic deformations" – based on the "vital" and "muscular" energy of synthesis, dynamism, speed, actuality, simultaneity, improvisation, danger, the a-logical, the unreal ("THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF NOVELTY", in 1972: 126-7) – in terms of a compelling patriotic commitment of theatre and their art at the eve of the Great War: "As we await our much-prayed-for great war, we Futurists carry our violent antineutralist action from city square to university and back again, using our art to prepare Italian sensibility for the great hour of maximum danger. Italy must be fearless, eager, as swift and elastic as a fencer, as indifferent to blows as a boxer . . ." (123).

At the turn of the first decade of the twentieth century, as part of a poetics overtly inspired by the disruptive laughter of the variety theatre and aiming to "prostitute all classic art on the stage, performing for example all the Greek, French, and Italian tragedies, condensed and comically mixed up, in a single evening . . . – put Duse, Sarah Bernhardt, Zacconi, Mayol, and Fregoli side by side on the stage" ("The Variety Theater" 1913, in 1972: 21), the futurist avant-garde came to fantasize a concise Shakespeare in one act. "Boil all of Shakespeare down to a single act", Marinetti advised (ibid.). He knew that the variety theatre had fulfilled and even outdone that indication, when the comedian Petrolini (whose *tournées* were box office events abroad, England included), produced his synthetic *Hamlet* in some fifty lines, performed (as the comedian recounts) for the first time at the Eden Theatre, Naples, in 1912, and created in collaboration with Libero Bovio, who also suggested the musical accompaniment of the funeral march from Errico Petrella's acclaimed opera, *Jone* (Petrolini 1936: 119-20), a circumstance evoked at l. 6 ("suono ad orecchio l'intera Ione" [I can play by ear the whole Jone]), where it also stands for a displacing rhyme, if not a *double-entendre* on its eponymous heroine. For all its brevity, Petrolini's miniaturized *Hamlet* made blatantly evident, "in the terms of the farcical and the absurd", we might say

borrowing from Alessandro Serpieri, "the epistemological checkmate" which is at the core of the play (1997: 10; see also Serpieri 1986: 183-91).

And Ophelia? She still features among its characters, but she is figured as if in the process of being erased or breaking into pieces in the way she is handed over from the realm of the *grand* tragedians (Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini) to that of the comedians (Petrolini in league with the Danish ill-fated "prence", 2004: 59): thus epitomizing a dismissed 'passéist' and superfluous role in a triumph of dismantling nonsense and whimsical rhymes. Interestingly, Ophelia is made to rhyme with "celia" ("making fun/scoffing at") – a term loved by Petrolini in its interrelations with death, and which he adopted to comment on the tragicomic quality of his art: *Un po' per celia e un po' per non morir* (1936):

Io sono il pallido prence danese,
che parla solo, che veste a nero.
Che si diverte nelle contese,
che per diporto va al cimitero.
Se giuoco a carte fo il solitario
suono ad orecchio tutta la Jone.
Per far qualcosa di ameno e gaio
col babbo morto fo colazione.
Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini
stanchi di amare la bionda Ofelia
forse sul serio o forse per celia
mi han detto vattene, con Petrolini, dei salamini.
(*Amleto*, 1-12; Petrolini 2004: 59)

[I am the pale Danish prince / the soliloquant in black rags, / who amuses himself with grave issues, / who finds sport in the graveyard. / If I play cards I do the solitaire / I can play by ear the entire Jone. / To enjoy myself in the gayest of ways / I have breakfast with my daddy who is dead. / Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini / fed up with loving the blonde Ophelia / perhaps seriously, perhaps for fun / told me to go with Petrolini, the fool comedian.][1]

One might perceive the echo of the Shakespearean 'nunnery scene' in the way Petrolini authors this generic passage of Ophelia from the embrace of tragedy to that of the grotesque in ll. 9-12:

Hamlet. Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? . . . If thou dots marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry; be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, farewell. Or

[1] All translations from Italian in this essay, if not attributed, are mine.

> if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go – and quickly too. Farewell. (3.1.121-41)[2]

But Petrolini's shortened ventriloquized Hamlet conveys and sweeps away in one stroke a piece of the history of performance, traditional theatrical genres, and the tradition of romantic love, in the way he is exonerated – by the group of *grandi attori* – from his part as Ophelia's irresolute lover, thus enhancing to the extreme Ophelia's Shakespearean role as a tool in other people's game. Indeed, in Petrolini's re-adaptation of Hamlet's 'farewell' to Ophelia she is emptied of any residual agency. She is all in the flash of a caricatured puppet-like figure, conjured up solely to officiate sardonically her dismissal as the heroine of a private sentimental or tragic plot, namely her ultimate rehearsal as a void and vilified signifier in a male-controlled realm of aesthetics and in the story of a dismantling appropriation of Shakespeare. In this sense Petrolini's figuring out of Ophelia might well be one of those "flashes of revealing cynicism" and "emergent new sensibility", which Marinetti so appreciated in the variety theatre: an electrified antidote, for him, to "the contemporary theatre (verse, prose, and musical), . . . stupidly [vacillating] between historical reconstruction (pastiche or plagiarism) and photographic reproduction of our daily life; a finicking, slow, analytic, and diluted theater worthy, all in all, of the age of the oil lamp" (Marinetti 1972: 116-17).

Undoubtedly, starting with the second decade of the century, when the iconoclastic futurist evenings (the so-called *serate*) were launched in Italian theatres, modernization and renewal in Italian culture were one with the aggressive futurist aesthetics as well as the prevailing empire-building discourse of the *régime* with which the futurist celebration of speed, machine, and war finally merged during the *ventennio*.

"Yes, our nerves demand war and despise women, because we fear supplicating arms that might encircle our knees on the morning of departure", Marinetti proclaimed ("Let's Murder the Moonshine" 1909, in Marinetti 1972: 46). And also (in his "Manifesto of Futurism" 1909): "We say that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath . . . is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samotrace*" (41).

It is not our concern (in the context of this article) that, for all the futurist speaking of a 'synthetic theatre', experiments with the modern concepts of speed and machine achieved full realization mainly in the visual arts. Suffice it to mention Balla's painting "Velocità astratta" [Abstract

[2] Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is quoted according to Shakespeare 1990.

speed] (1913), where the conjunction of speed and machine seems to embody the sweeping pace of a war machine.

What we are mainly concerned with bringing to the fore is that modernity in art was also a gendering business, a violent gender-coded re-articulation of the relationship between the sexes, which, as we see, was connected to "le mépris de la femme" [scorn for women, 1972: 72] or, as Marinetti took pains to better explain later in 1915, in "War, the World's Only Hygiene", to the downgrading, enslaving and paralyzing bourgeois Leitmotiv of love, from which literature – as well as a (male) modern subjectivity – awaited its deliverance:

> This hatred, precisely, for the tyranny of *Amore* we expressed in a laconic phrase: "scorn for women".
>
> We scorn woman conceived as the sole ideal, the divine reservoir of Amore, the woman-poison, woman the tragic trinket, the fragile woman . . . .
>
> We despise horrible, dragging *Amore* that hinders the march of man, preventing him from transcending his own humanity, from redoubling himself, from going beyond himself and becoming what we call *the multiplied man*. . . .
>
> We are convinced that *Amore* – sentimentality and lechery – is the least natural thing in the world. There is nothing natural and important except coitus, whose purpose is the futurism of the species.
>
> *Amore* – romantic, voluptuary obsession – is nothing but an invention of the poets, who gave it to humanity. . . . And it will be the poets who will take it away from humanity. (1972: 72)

1. The Love Issue

Intended by the futurist avant-garde as a degrading agent of the virile virtues of men, and addressed as a constitutive part of a campaign towards the forging of a "mechanical being", with a "metallic" sensibility, or what was foretold as "the creation of a nonhuman type", with no "moral suffering, goodness of heart, affection, and love" (Marinetti 1972: 90-3), and ready to face any challenge or risk – science, war, death –, the love issue, it is interesting to discover, enjoyed high currency during Fascism.

Quite unusually for the leader of a State, but not surprisingly for a leader well aware of the importance of theatre as a tool of mass communication and propaganda, Mussolini – he himself not a stranger to playwriting (see especially his play with Forzano, *Cesare*) – willingly ventured into the realm of aesthetics. Not only did he promote the much acclaimed international Volta Congress (Gordon Graig was among those who participated) in order to put forward his idea of "a theatre of the future, a modern theatre *of* and *for* the masses" (Schnapp 1993: 92), not only did he promote a series of

initiatives aimed at implementing a mass theatrical culture (Theatrical Saturdays, Thespian Cars, a disseminated network of amateur theatre companies, the so-called *filodrammatiche*, etc.), but he also entered more specific issues regarding contents and form such as the long engaged futurist attack on love, and the love triangle, as privileged literary subject-matters, which he likewise seemed to decidedly abhor: "That's enough with the notorious 'triangle' with which we have been pestered so far. The number of triangular options is to be considered exhausted. Do commit yourselves to giving dramatic form to collective passions, and then you will see the stalls packed with people".[3]

What we see here, I want to highlight, is that the synergy between the futurist avant-garde and Fascism is articulated by means of a shared sexual politics. In fact, the futurists had long maintained that the "tyrannical" centrality of *romance* (or "le clair de la lune"), with its related "rancid" sentimentality and slow narrative of the love triangle, was to be discarded as a residuary bequest of the bourgeois drama, or to be conceived of as merely incidental with respect to the more important present "tremors of the crowds": speed, machine, the colonial adventure, war ("Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights. The Pleasure of Being Booed 1911-15", in Marinetti 1972: 113-15; see also Livio 1976: 45-6).

A rather isolated example of an experimental theatre of and for the masses called for by Mussolini was Blasetti's titanic open-air production of *I8 BL*, whose main character is the truck, *I8 BL,* which we see heroically bulldozing the enemy lines on the advertising poster (see Schnapp 1993: 89-125). After all, critics agree (Pedullà 1994: 211-25) that for all Mussolini's policy regarding a mass theatrical culture, there was no adequate production of theatrical scripts (or a proper Fascist theatre), in keeping with the kind of art for the present he forcefully advocated in his discourses to the artists: "it is necessary for the Italian authors, whatever their art and form of thought, to be true and profound interpreters of their time, which is that of the fascist revolution".[4] All in all, theatre continued to rely on classics or on melodrama.

[3] "Basta con il famigerato 'triangolo' che ci ha ossessionato finora. Il numero delle complicazioni triangolari è ormai esaurito. Fate che le passioni collettive abbiano espressione drammatica, e voi vedrete allora le platee affollarsi" (*Mussolini parla agli scrittori* 1932, qtd in Pedullà 1994: 211).

[4] "Occorre che gli autori italiani in qualsiasi forma d'arte o di pensiero si manifestino veramente e profondamente interpreti del nostro tempo, che è quello della rivoluzione fascista" (qtd in Pedullà 1994: 217). See also the increased efforts made by the Ministero della cultura popolare [Ministry of Popular Culture] to foster a theatre for the masses, and hence the writing of Italian theatrical scripts connected with the actuality of present times, which meant, "inspired by a conception of life which is proper to Fascism and to the ethics of Fascism" ("si ispira alla concezione della vita che è propria del Fascismo, si ispira alla morale del Fascismo", "Discussione sul teatro alla Camera" 1938, qtd in Pedullà 1994: 217.

But this prompts us to pose our initial cluster of questions as even more cogent. What about Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, and the Ophelian theme, in a context in which theatre was so strongly conceptualized as a tool of cultural revolution and social formation, or simply chosen (to put it in the terms of contemporary lexicon) as the place *par excellence* in which "collective passions" and "tremors of the crowds" (Marinetti 1972: 113-15) could be triggered?

As a classic, Shakespeare had been an uninterrupted presence on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian stage, and continued to be so. *Hamlet* remained in the repertoire of such famous actors as Memo Benassi, Renzo Ricci, and others (see Bartalotta 1986), while also featuring successfully, if derisively, as the ill-fated "prence", in Petrolini's fifty-line parody. However, Shakespeare's undiminished popularity in Italy between the two 'Great' wars, at a time when a nation-based theatrical culture was forcefully ushered in by the *régime*, was mainly linked to his Roman and Italian plays, increasingly exploited as a reservoir of national pride and Caesarean rhetoric. Indeed, the 'universality' of Shakespeare was revisited and appropriated through the 'universality' of Rome and *romanitas*, or more precisely through such defiant and virile values as the will to power; a drive significantly coincident, as it appears to me, with the Nietzschean heroic individualism prompted by the futurist programme.

A case in point is Giuseppe De Lorenzo's edition of *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* dated 1924, hitherto surprisingly ignored by criticism on the reception of Shakespeare in Italy in those years. In line with a few other Shakespeareans (see mainly Piero Rebora), he strongly contributed – via Shakespeare – to the rhetoric of the universality of Rome created in Fascist discourse as part of a recovered sense of inheritance and nationhood, not to mention the related growing imperialist claim of the *régime*. For Shakespeare, De Lorenzo asserted in his introduction, "Rome represents and almost summarizes the moral order of the world". And still: "For Shakespeare . . . all that is beautiful and great is Roman; one can truly say that the spirit of ancient Rome appeared to him as the highest manifestation of humanity on earth".[5] De Lorenzo did not miss the opportunity to finalize to this end *Cymbeline*'s westward flight of the Roman eagle, whose Shakespearian *translatio imperii* intention he repurposed for the benefit of a phallic image of Rome (De Lorenzo 1924: x):

> A questa Roma, la più fulgida espressione della spiritale essenza dell'universo, Shakespeare s'inchinò, riverente e amante, a segno tale, che prima

[5] "Roma rappresenta e riassume quasi in sé l'ordine morale del mondo". "Per Shakespeare veramente si può dire che, che tutto ciò che è bello e grande, egli è romano ancora; e che a lui lo spirito di Roma antica è apparso come la più alta manifestazione dell'umanità sulla terra" (De Lorenzo 1924: x, xi).

> di ritirarsi dall'arte, nella penultima sua opera, il Cimbelino, volle celebrare un'auspicata alleanza tra la Britannia e Roma, con la splendida visione del sole occiduo britannico, nei cui raggi, . . . penetra e s'immerge col suo superbo volo possente l'aquila romana.
>
> [To this Rome, the most luminous expression of the spiritual essence of the universe, Shakespeare reverently and amorously bowed, so much so that before retiring as an artist, in his penultimate work, *Cymbeline*, he advisedly celebrated a longed-for alliance between Britain and Rome, by means of the magnificent vision of the British setting sun, in whose radiance the Roman eagle penetrates and dips into in his proud and powerful flight].

But what is even more important to notice is that the greatness Shakespeare attributed to Julius Caesar with his verses "Death makes no conquest of this conqueror: / for now he lives in fame, though not in life" (*Richard III*, 3.1.87-8, qtd in De Lorenzo 1924: xi) is appropriated to construct the mythology of Italy, as that of a nation forever capable of picking itself up from the floor of the ruins of fratricidal strife and marching anew as a disciplined, close-knit army of soldiers to reaffirm its greatness in the spirit of Rome: "the ironed shoes of [those young soldiers] had something rabid about them",[6] De Lorenzo writes, supporting and interspersing his argument with a long quotation from an Italian novel by Panzini (*Il mondo è rotondo*, 1920), "but soaring over that row of soldiers a winged voice seemed to say: Caesar, Caesar, the soldiers of Italy are passing".[7]

What ensues is the celebration of a presumed Shakespearean model of Romanness and superior humanity crystallized in the patrician Roman self-killing; an exemplar masculine capacity to decide of one's life which is also voiced, as De Lorenzo reminds us, in *Hamlet* by Horatio, when he says, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane" (5.2.321), and which in the context of his introduction to Shakespeare's two tragedies is proposed to elicit contemporary patriotic heroism.

2. Ophelia in the Prati Neighbourhood, Rome

It is as part of this shared patriotic endeavour that the "young modern male" was also figured as "gaily" pointing a revolver against "the grand romantic Moonshine", the marshalling metaphoric representation of "the disease of *Amore*" in Marinetti's "War, the Only World's Only Hygiene" (1972: 93). Is there a way for a female Ophelia-like character to survive in this to-

[6] "[Le] scarpe ferrate avevano un non so che di rabido" (De Lorenzo 1924: xv).

[7] "[M]a sopra quella fila pareva levarsi una voce alata che diceva: Cesare, Cesare, passano i soldati d'Italia" (De Lorenzo 1924: xv).

talizing masculine (or patriarchal) script? And what is left of her private subjugated lot, if not of her sentimental plot?

In this second part of my essay I would like to speculate on the way in which the evocativeness of the Ophelian imagery in Alba de Céspedes's *Dalla parte di lei* is exploited, against the grain, to raise questions concerning women's thwarted stories, and more specifically a poetics, as well as a politics and a policing, of female language.

Alba de Céspedes (1911-97), who has only recently started to enjoy the appreciation she deserves among Italian critics (see Zancan 2005; De Crescenzio 2015), was one of the most translated Italian authors in her time, a figure of cultural resistance during and beyond Fascism, and a precursor of themes cherished by feminist thought and practice. Between 1943 and 1944, she participated in the antifascist radio programme "Italia combatte" ["Italy fights"], broadcasting from Radio Bari, from an area already liberated by the Allies, to Central and Northern Italy, which were still occupied by the Nazi army. For the occasion Alba adopted the pseudonym of "Clorinda", the woman warrior of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. "I am your Clorinda . . . Your Clorinda is calling" ("Sono la vostra Clorinda . . . vi parla la vostra Clorinda"). In a sense she continued to talk to those who were still trapped in the occupied zone when, soon after the war, in liberated Italy, she wrote on behalf of Ophelia / Juliet / Desdemona / Eleonora / Alessandra in *Dalla parte di lei*, perhaps looking ahead at a different futurist scenario, freed from all violence, whether that be between countries, sexes, affections, or in *ars amandi*.

The novel was written between 1945 and 1948 and published in 1949. But a second abridged edition of it was published in 1994, seemingly based on the author's own cuts amounting to more than a hundred pages, and actually corresponding to the abridged English edition published in New York in 1952 with the title *The Best of Husbands*. Surprisingly, what is dropped out among other things in this second edition is most of the Ophelian motif: which survives as if under the sign of a double erasure, a doubly hindered story which is what this article is all about. For obvious reasons the edition I am using is the 1949 one, even though I quote alternatively from the approved 1952 American translation when the original text remains untouched.[8]

There is a call for translation, interpretation, and rewriting of Ophelia's "half-sense" (4.5.7), in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / the hearers to collection", 7-9), which is one with the dangerous space opened by mad Ophelia's disseminative poetics, or else by her disquieting language of flowers; an invita-

[8] The translation of the quotations from the 1949 edition is mine.

tion to "botch up" her secret meaning ("They aim at it, and botch the words up fit to their own thoughts", 4.5.9-10) which, in my view, represents the disturbing analogue of Hamlet's mandate to Horatio to report his "cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (5.2.343-4). There is a desire to "botch up", to heal and make good Ophelia's fragmented speech in later women's *re-collection* of her story (see Del Sapio Garbero 2002), as well as a drive to make sense of Gertrude's 'sin' of adultery within the frame of a revisited mother-daughter plot. In the similar masculine context of a Bolshevik/Modernist Russia, Marina Tsvetaeva reunites Ophelia's voice to her own poetical *persona* and makes her speak on behalf of Gertrude, as her indignant advocate (see the poems "Ophelia. In Defence of Gertrude", "Ophelia to Hamlet", "Hamlet's Dialogue with His Conscience"). This is also what happens in Alba de Céspedes's novel *Dalla parte di lei*, a story set in Rome in the years going from the late thirties – from pre-war Fascist Italy, to the reorganization of a free parliamentary life in 1945; that is, in the years of a war which evolved, in its later phase, into a war of resistance against Fascism and the Nazi occupation.

I purport to show how Ophelia's depreciated role as the heroine of sentimental drama in de Céspedes's times undergoes a re-signification in the prose and everyday life context of her novel, which turns into an empowering transgression of boundaries: the law of language, a normative practice of love, the jurisdiction of truth. In fact, the novel is vibrant with the story of a protagonist who finds in Shakespeare's tragic heroines, and mostly in Ophelia's tragic love, a model for a peculiarly female form of unheeded resistance not only against the shallowness of women's everyday life during Fascism, but also against the patriarchal culture as such.

On opening de Céspedes's novel, one is amazed to see that its first pages and the grey apartment house in Prati neighbourhood, Rome, where Alessandra, the protagonist (and implied narrator), lives, are teeming with women finding in romance, often of an adulterous kind, and no matter if in some cases degrading, the only identitarian paradigm available to them. Indeed, romance and romance storytelling fill the void of their life, as if to offer, in the way it is handled by the author, an intentional contrastive view of the futurist and *régime* argument on this topic – the other side, or 'the women's side of it'.

War and death are not absent in this novel but, through the Ophelian suicidal imagery, they are refocused from a different perspective. For, even when Fascism was defeated and the war ended with the liberation of the country by the Allied Forces, the death toll remained high. In *Il Messaggero*, the paper where the novelist Alba de Céspedes had started a career as a journalist in the Thirties, suicides of both sexes were reported as a daily occurrence. Women took their lives for love, a betrayed or opposed

love, or to escape a grim conjugal bond. Many of them killed themselves by gulping down – or melting into Ophelia's 'element', a liquid, a vortex or gush turned evil – chlorine bleach, petrol, ink, water, blood. Many of them drowned themselves in the Tiber in Rome.

There is an Ophelia-like drowned woman in de Céspedes's novel *Dalla parte di lei*. This is Alessandra's mother, Eleonora, thus named – after Ibsen's famous heroine – by Alessandra's grandmother, an actress who had renounced the stage for the family, and from whom she has also inherited a highly symbolic box with the theatrical garments of Juliet, Desdemona, and Ophelia. The life of Alessandra's mother is suffused from the start with colours the protagonist wants to reverberate on her own. The aura of a longing literary figure that Eleonora is given in the novel (Ibsen's Nora, Shakespeare's heroines, and mostly Ophelia as a representation of tragic unfulfilled desire), is the way through which Alessandra, the daughter, forcefully validates a female lineage which escapes the confinement of the feminine within the maternal reproductive function assigned to it by the patriarchy; a function which in Irigaray's terms "de/subjectivizes" women (see 1991: 34-46), in so far as they are denied a symbolic identitarian system of their own, and which was reinforced even more in Italy during Fascism. This is clearly evidenced in the depersonalizing role women were called upon to play in a patriotic policy of population increase, even without considering the ideology which forced upon them the requirement of continually posing before the strongly masculine gaze of that culture.

So, what about Eleonora, and why Ophelia? A piano teacher who contributes with her private lessons to the poor budget of her shabby middle-class family, a person in love with literature, art, and love, Alessandra's mother is the poetic creature of an ill-matched couple, her father depicted as prosaic and unintellectual. Like all the men in the huge grey apartment house in Prati where they live, he is away most of the day, and not only during office hours. This strengthens an exclusive mother-daughter bond (see Torriglia 2000) and a silent sense of intimacy for Alessandra with the other women of the neighbourhood, during those moments when the jurisdictional gaze of men wanes and they can abandon their 'good' pose. Hers is an intimacy with their solitude and prohibited discontent ("Yes, we were a gentle and unfortunate race", de Céspedes 1952: 31), but also with their secret loves whose tales, to Alessandra's eyes, defy anonymity and enrich them with a narrative of their own.

Still, it was outrageous in a novel published in 1949 Italy, when women (by the Fascist penal code) could still be jailed for adultery, that the protagonist might side unconditionally with her mother when she falls in love with Hervey Pierce, an artist of gentle breeding. Her cherishing an adulterous feeling does not disqualify her as a suitable mother. Quite the opposite.

She is given a sacral aura. She is a mystic, a saint. "The sight of my mother in love was the sweetest I had ever seen" (1952: 51). When her mother realizes there is nothing in her poor wardrobe for her momentous concert at Villa Peirce, the adolescent Alessandra euphorically presides over the making of a new dress from the veils preserved in her grandmother's box. "We must make my mother a dress with the veils of Ophelia", she says to their friends Fulvia and Lydia (52); an endeavour which turns out to be the staging of a joyful bridal rite. And when her mother, regretting that she cannot take her daughter with her, drowns herself in the Tiber, she defiantly appropriates both the mourning space and the *post mortem* monumentalizing intention which in Shakespeare's play are litigiously held by Hamlet and Laertes. In a burial with maimed rites as in Shakespeare, but which, in my view, is a radical reworking of the cemetery scene, she visualizes one's gender location as that of an army in front of another, thus pointing at a war within the second Great War which was approaching, and which is doomed to go on unperceived by men, were it not for the erratic intermittence of disturbing crime news.

> Since my mother had taken her own life she could not be admitted to the basilica itself. The priest came out in black vestments and eyed us half with compassion and half with suspicion, perhaps because he knew my mother had thrown herself into the river. . . . I found myself between Lydia and Fulvia, for we had instinctively fallen into two separate groups, of men and of women . . . Indifferent to what [the priest] was saying, I stared at the group of men on the other side of the coffin. . . . I stared intensely at [them] and had an urge to tell them to go away and leave us alone. We were divided like two armies preparing to join combat, and between us, in the coffin, lay the body of one of our dead.
> My mother was buried in unconsecrated ground; but to me her presence made it holy. The gravediggers draped the blanket of roses over the coffin, tucking it in all around. And my father looked on without showing anger or scorn; his jurisdiction over her was finished. (96-7)

What is most interesting in de Céspedes's novel, I argue, is that the author presents us with a narrative which stealthily patches together in the single character of the innocently adulterous Eleonora the traits of Gertrude and Ophelia. As in Marina Tsvetaeva's poem "Ophelia. In Defence of Gertrude" (1923), the two figures are no longer aligned on the basis of a prohibited female knowledge, the one the mirror of the other's guilt or wretchedness, but on the basis of a defence of passion as opposed to a misogynistic idea of chastity:

> Prince Hamlet, you defile the Queen's
> Womb. Enough. A virgin cannot

Judge passion. Don't you know Phaedra
Was more guilty, yet men sing of her,
And will go on singing. You with your blend
Of chalk and rot, you bony
Scandalmonger, how can you ever
Understand a fever in the blood?
(Tsvetaeva 1984: ll. 5-12)

By making her Ophelia take the field in defence of Gertrude, Tsvetaeva forcefully enacts in her poems the political project later advocated by Irigaray of recognizing "the woman in every mother" (1991: 42). Alba de Céspedes never hints overtly at Gertrude in her novel, but her protagonist similarly releases the banned desire of a mother figure, thus constructing the maternal not as a disabling mirror of guilt, or abjection, one might say borrowing from Kristeva (1980), but as a site of resistance and as an engendering matrix of an alternative female iconography: "In truth, she had brought me to the world with our talks near the window, while she read me poetry with her soft voice, told me fables, introduced me to the love tragedies' heroines".[9]

Through the oppositional function assigned in this way to Shakespeare's tragic heroines, the protagonist of *Dalla parte di lei* passionately claims for her mother the role of a language-giving figure, not just a dispenser of life but of signs – like the daisies the mother scatters in the Tiber, in Ophelia-like manner, a few days before drowning in it – and which is the means for the daughter to conceptualize her life and desires differently, however destructive all that may be in the censoring patriarchal culture of the *régime* and of the post-war period.

What I have not said so far, and what is kept secret from the reader until the last of the 549 pages that make up the novel (in its first 1949 edition) is that Alessandra's life story is born out of a memoir she has written in prison after she has killed her much loved husband, the 'best' of husbands, with the intention of setting her "cause aright" (*Hamlet*, 5.2.343) in front of a jury, obviously a wholly male one in the historical context of the novel, but actually with the intention of disputing, as Tsvetaeva had also done with *Hamlet*, men's jurisdiction over truth and over her truth as a woman. "In my opinion no man has the right to judge a woman without knowing of what totally different stuff she is made. Why should a jury composed entirely of men decide whether or not she is guilty?" (de Céspedes 1952: 55), she says in the course of the novel, when the reader does not yet know she is referring to a real jury.

[9] "In verità ella m'aveva dato la vita coi nostri colloqui accanto alla finestra, con la sua voce morbida che leggeva le poesie, raccontava le favole, mi presentava le eroine delle tragedie d'amore" (de Céspedes 1949: 116).

Shall we imagine a suspicious Horatio-like figure reading Alessandra's improbable appeal or perhaps, hope for more persevering interpreters (than those imagined by Shakespeare in Act 4, scene 5) in 'botching up' a meaning out of a woman's story? For, Alessandra's story is an elusive story, as she takes pains to underline at the end of it, a story which could be collected only by someone willing to piece it together, from as a slow, digressive, and decentring report as the life of a woman is:

> Now that I am in prison, waiting for my lawyer to present an appeal, I want to tell the whole tragic story from my point of view. I don't know if the judge of the higher court will have time to read my account. It is a long one, I admit – as long, hour by hour and day by day, as the life of a woman. Seldom can one pick out one simple cause for her sudden rebellion. (de Céspedes 1952: 342)

A complete contrast to, one might think, the conciseness required by the languages of both law and art in those times.

Alba de Céspedes wrote her novel in the aftermath of Fascist Italy, and before the higher court Alessandra has no extenuating circumstance to allege as a justification, on her behalf (*Dalla parte di lei*), if not the ordinary disseminated circumstances of a woman's life, a dissemination well represented in Ophelia's unshaped language of flowers in the mad scene.

Alessandra cannot give us her truth, 'her side of it', by pithily framing her story, according to the aesthetics of the futurist avant-garde. She can only provide a very long account in the confessional mode, in which the retrospective narrative of her mother's unique legacy ("My story was all in the box where my mother jealously kept Juliet's and Desdemona's veils")[10] is interwoven with the detailed narrative of the events subsequent to her mother's death: her university studies and her part-time job as a secretary, her increasing awareness of the existence of a differently policed discontentment, of other *scontenti* [discontents] who in a whisper are called 'communists' and who are occasionally arrested, her falling in love with Francesco, an academic and an opponent of the *régime*, his fascination with the "young girl whose mother had killed herself for love" (1952: 334), their marriage, his imprisonment, her decision to side (like a courageous Desdemona) with her husband's cause in the Resistance during his absence, her hardships during the war, Francesco's return home after the defeat of Fascism, her having to compete with politics for Francesco's love, the sense of having been betrayed in the sacral idea of love she has inherited from her mother, the endless wall of Francesco's back every night, her mute in-

[10] "La mia storia era nella scatola dove la mamma conservava gelosamente i veli di Giulietta e di Desdemona" (1949: 210).

vocation every night, her deluded quest for absoluteness, and the moment she empties the revolver into his back, he who was the 'best' of husbands. Is such a shot in de Céspedes's novel harking back to the futurist revolver pointed at the "romantic Moonshine" (Marinetti 1972: 93)? Be that as it may, Ophelia has stopped killing herself, as the Ophelia imagined by Heiner Müller in *Hamletmaschine* (1984).

What remains to be said is that Alessandra's gesture has been obsessively fantasized in the previous pages as a combat between the poetical/pictorial image of her mother, "graciously posing" ("graziosamente atteggiata", 1949: 541), wavering on her green bed from beneath the transparent water, as in Millais's painting of Ophelia, and that of herself as an unsatiated mad dog living on scraps of food, a *hydro*phobic animal antagonist to Ophelia's element, water. "I no longer felt the river run like a fluid bond between my mother and me",[11] she obliquely warns pages earlier at the first dawning of delusion, as if to say that her unanswered craving self, although empowered by her mother's Shakespearean identifying images, can no longer be contained by them. Alba de Céspedes's heroine is going to get rid of her mother's poetical if tragic box.

In fact, while bringing to light Ophelia's distress, thus complementing with a gender perspective and in yet another, different geography her dangerous "half-sense", de Cespédes renounces, with a final unexpected flick of the tail, the beauty of her suicidal watery image, thus reopening the question of both the Shakespearean maternal legacy and of Ophelia's difficult demand for understanding.

But this other surfacing plot can be fully accessible only to readers who are lucky enough to get hold of the rare 1949 edition of the novel where it can be read, as we have argued in this article, as a crucial Shakespearean intertextual trace; the auratic tragic heroine's narrative which envelops and nurses the feminine trope of suicide it unexpectedly subverts, and which – in conjunction with the problematized maternal legacy – structurally and dramatically underpins the author's poetics in this novel, and the whole content of the story. Curiously enough Alba de Cespédes herself decided to partly expunge it from the abridged edition she prepared for the American publisher with the title *The Best of Husbands* (1952), while working out similar cuts on the original 1949 copy later discovered by Mondadori and used for the 1994 edition.

Was Alba de Céspedes yielding to Emilio Cecchi's criticism who, on its first appearance, had appreciated the novel, but with one important exception regarding precisely the protagonist, whom he considered a self-my-

[11] "Non sentivo più il fiume scorrere come un fluido legame tra mia madre e me" (1949: 323).

thologizing and fatiguing "sentimentale" [sentimentalist]? (See Ghilardi 2005: 109). Cecchi was far from sharing the set of issues the futurists campaigned under the banners "mépris de la femme", and "let's murder the moonshine", but he was undoubtedly using an overcharged, male censoring term when considered in the light of his wartime masculine poetics. Even more curiously, however, is the fact that so far women's criticism (see Torriglia 2000; Åkerström 2004), has ignored, at least to my knowledge, the novel's oppositional Shakespearean silver thread and the reverberating role it plays on its themes and symbolism – the love issue, the love triangle, the death by water, the identifying mother-daughter bond – eventually welcoming the novel's later abridgements under the auspices of the stylistic law of restraint and an achieved mature writing (Ghilardi 2005: 106-23).

Avoiding death in the twentieth-century Italian wartime context was not easy for Shakespeare's Ophelia. In the revolutionized framework of literary genres and gender roles brought about by diverse forms of modernisms, and most aggressively by the futurists' poetics, Ophelia seems to succumb with her proverbial evanescent and uninfluential plot. Yet she resists with her Otherness, her disquieting and dangerous "half-sense", her unexhausted demand for understanding, which invites and defies the law of language, the jurisdiction of truth, and rearticulates her appeal as she migrates across different geographies and a multiplicity of (genre) boundaries: tragedy, poetry, variety theatre, romance, novel.

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