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Crossing Boundaries of Female Immobility: A Comparative Analysis of Death and Corporality in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*

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Abstract

According to Alison Goeller, the Greek mythological figure of Persephone becomes a symbol for the Italian American woman (Goeller 2003, 75). Goeller resorts to myth to highlight the dichotomous identity of the Italian American woman, at "the center or heart of the family" (Johnson 1978, 237), relegated to a domestic spatial dimension and subordinated to a male figure who "dominates the instrumental and authority roles in the family" (237). Drawing from Rose De Angelis' reading of Mario Puzo's representation of the Italian American woman, this paper attempts to provide an alternative female character of Greek tragedy to juxtapose to the revolutionary character of Lucia Santa in Puzo's 1965 novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim*: Sophocles' Antigone. Starting from the analysis of how both Sophocles and Puzo manage to cross boundaries of female immobility through the creation of revolutionary literary figures, by deconstructing the material and spatial frontier of gender, this paper focuses on the role of death and corporality, attempting to demonstrate that, through the figure of Lucia Santa, the author of *The Godfather* transcends the static representation of women in Italian American literature, thus creating an innovative literary figure closer to Antigone than Persephone.

Abducted by Hades on the shore of the Sicilian Lake Pergusa and taken to the Underworld, the mythological figure of Persephone becomes, according to Alison Goeller, a "particularly appropriate symbol for the Italian American woman" (Goeller 2003, 76)[1]. Focusing on the connections between travel writing and the difficult process of assimilation Italian American women faced in the United States, Goeller — who earlier in her essay had compared the figure of the Italian American woman to "the patient and faithful Penelope" (75) — resorts to myth, and more precisely to the etiological myth of Persephone, defined as a "metaphorical device" (76), to highlight the dichotomous identity of the Italian American woman. In fact, they experience the fracture between two conflicting identities — the Italian and the American — and two spatial dimensions — what Helen Barolini defines as the "domestic fortress" (Barolini 1994, 476), where they are alienated from their bodily dimension and their sexuality and passively relegated, and a mythicized social dimension, which in Goeller's essay is represented by the space of Italy, rediscovered by second- or third-generation women immigrants. The Italian American woman, particularly in Goeller's representation, seems therefore to encapsulate what Barbara Welter in her study on the patriarchal ideology of the cult of domesticity defines as the "four cardinal virtues [of "True Womanhood"] — piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 1966, 152), and even to magnify Betty

[1] I am referring to Ovid's representation of the myth in book 5 of *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 1955).

Friedan's depiction of "the female sex as having as their main function to be ministering angels to the needs and comforts of men" (Jones 1955, 421, quoted in Friedan 1964, 105), becoming a salvific figure "linked to the Madonna" (Johnson 1978, 237)[2].

If Italian American literature has considerably evolved over the years, inscribing itself in the American literary scene during the 1930s — especially with the works of John Fante, Pietro Di Donato and Jerre Mangione (Gardaphé 2004, 53) — "the centrality of the family and the elevation of the maternal role" (Johnson 1978, 235) are *topoi* which have characterized the Italian American literary — and cinematographic[3] — production since Luigi Ventura's novella *Peppino, The Shoeshine Boy* (Barolini 1994, 476), the "first published author of Italian-American fiction" (Lentricchia 1975, 191). Nevertheless, as Rose De Angelis points out in her essay — which compares the dynamics of Italian familial relations in the two different spatial and social dimensions of Italy and in the United States, with regards respectively to Italo Svevo's *The Confessions of Zeno* and Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* — even though it found little space in the literary representation of the Italian American woman, the migratory experience "became [for her] more than just a physical displacement. It began her gradual transition from the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of the male" (De Angelis 1995, 33).

Goeller's starting point in her association of the mythological character of Persephone — daughter of Zeus and Demeter who becomes the queen of the underworld after her abduction — with the figure of the Italian American woman is the cultural and social confusion around the "traditionally assigned female roles" (Goeller 2003, 74), arising from a dichotomous process of assimilation — simultaneously characterized by an unconditional trust in a prosperous future[4] and "shame and doubt about their heritage" (73)[5]. However, the premise for my attempt to highlight the connections between Puzo's female characters and Sophocles' Antigone is a narrative one. In both Sophocles and Puzo's works, the deconstruction of the material frontier between social and private spatial dimensions — which in the case of the Italian American woman determined a "sharp segregation of roles in the Italian family" (Johnson 1978, 238) — is contingent upon the death of a male subject belonging to the structure of the family; Antigone's brother Polyneices — whose body is exposed in public shame as per the edict of Thebes' new ruler Creon — in Sophocles' tragedy

2 See, for example, the description of Maria Bandini in John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*: "her name was Maria, and so was the Savior's mother, and she had gone to that other Maria over miles and miles of rosary beads" (Fante 1983, 32).

3 For further information about the representation of the family and Italian American women in cinema, see De Stefano 2010.

4 In her study on the representation of the rhetoric of mobility in Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, June Dwyer affirms that "many immigrants adopt the fairy-tale quest narrative that there is gold waiting for them in the streets of America" (Dwyer 2003, 50).

5 This element particularly permeates Fante's production, as remarked by Gardaphé, who identifies the Italian heritage as the "impediment that continually keeps Fante's protagonists from identifying themselves completely with mainstream US culture" (Gardaphé 2004, 60), thus determining a sense of subordination and shame. Nevertheless, we can also trace the presence of this element in Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. The author states in fact that the novel was originally "written to show [his] rejection of [his] Italian heritage and [his] callow disdain of those illiterate peasants from which [he] sprang" (Puzo 1997, 7).

and Lucia Santa's husband in Puzo's novel. Inaugurating the narrative flow of both fictions, this event comes to embody a narrative tool employed by both authors to transcend the static representation of female characters, with Antigone defying Creon's laws and burying the body of her brother, and with Lucia Santa finding herself economically independent in the American social dimension. Thus, both characters, crossing the liminal dimension between the domestic and the public, materially deconstruct the spatial frontier of gender. If death in Sophocles' tragedy appears as a functional instrument to transcend the static representation of the female protagonist, the tragic passing of Lucia's husband in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* primarily serves as an authorial expedient to inaugurate the process that Lucia undertakes through the narrative, "overthrow[ing] the public power symbol of *capo famiglia*[6] and establish[ing] herself in the dual role of protector as the public and private head of the household" (De Angelis 1995, 39). If, on the one hand, one may argue that the death of the paternal figure is a *leitmotif* of Italian American literature[7], on the other, the work accident that causes the death of Lucia Santa's husband — drowned together with four other workers and "untold tons of bananas down into the river mud" (Puzo 1997, 47)[8] — being represented by the Italian American author in few tragicomic and grotesque lines, simultaneously becomes the element that enables Lucia Santa to inscribe "herself within the public sphere of the male world" (De Angelis 1995, 39) and the authorial instrument employed by Puzo to distance himself from his precursors. The death of the paternal figure not only enables Lucia Santa to take "the first step out of the private sphere" (33), but it also activates a process of redefinition of hierarchical roles in the dimension of the family which makes the protagonist realize that her husband "had given them more dead than alive" (Puzo 1997, 47) — a process that utterly differentiates Lucia Santa from the static traditional figure of the Italian American widow that passively accepts her fate[9] or the figure of the abandoned woman who patiently awaits in prayer[10] the return of the "provider and protector of the family" (Johnson 1978, 237).

Thus, if death, though differently in the two works, comes to embody a narrative tool to give voice and space of action to Antigone and Lucia Santa, allowing the dematerialization of the frontier of gender, we should keep in mind that the very act of crossing the boundary between the domestic and the public materially present in space, entails the spatial movement or displacement of a body. In other words, we need to recognize the centrality of corporality in both Sophocles' and Puzo's works. This was the premise of Adriana Cavarero's reading of *Antigone*, which, exploring the conflicting relation between female corporality and the political order of the city of Thebes, highlights that Sophocles' "play crucially recounts the story of a body" (Cavarero 2010, 45). However, once the structural division of social space and of gender roles is questioned — as it happens in both Sophocles' *Antigone* and

6 Head of the household.

7 See, for example, the representation of Geremio's death in Pietro Di Donato's semi-autobiographical novel *Christ in Concrete* (Di Donato 1993, 14-18) — an event that does not only inaugurate the narrative, but which continuously reemerges through Paul's imagination and Annunziata's prayers.

8 A death that parodically echoes Geremio's death in *Christ in Concrete*.

9 See, for example, Annunziata in *Christ in Concrete*.

10 See, for example, Maria Bandini in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*.

Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* — as underlined by Henri Lefebvre's analysis of the corporeal response to the process of spatial alienation, "we also encounter a strange substitution concerning sex" (Lefebvre 1991, 309) that becomes, as highlighted by Friedan, "the arena for the struggle for dominance and control" (Friedan 1964, 255). In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Lucia Santa, as De Angelis points out, "brings sexuality into the realm of the Italian female" (De Angelis 1995, 38). "Shattering the Old World view of the Italian woman" (33) — thanks to the newly gained financial independence that enables her corporeal rewriting "into the public realm of the male world" (38) — Lucia thus rediscovers the sexual dimension she had been deprived of. For Lucia Santa, who "overturns the traditional rules of courting and assumes the male role of aggressor" (38), the rediscovery of sexuality becomes the means to assert her right to belong to the social dimension from which she was alienated before her husband's death. Lucia, in fact, speaks of love as "the hot flesh, the burning loins, feverish eyes and cheeks […] [and] the feel of turgid, spongy flesh" (Puzo 1997, 48) differentiating it from "the spiritual love of young girls or priests […] [or] the emotion for heroes in romances that could be told to a young girl" (48). Lucia, as De Angelis points out, "acknowledges and satisfies her sexual appetite, defying the masculine taboo on female sexuality and establishing the Italian woman as a sexual being" (De Angelis 1995, 38). Nevertheless, if, on the one hand, both Antigone and Lucia Santa manage to cross boundaries of femininity through death and corporality, on the other, as highlighted by Dorothy Willner in her redefinition of female figures in Sophocles' Theban cycle, although they "transcend the role given to women, [re-inscribing themselves in a political space of masculinity,] they do not actually violate it" (Willner 1982, 70). Notwithstanding the juxtaposition between the disruptive process of deconstruction of the frontier between the private and the public and the dismantlement of the boundary between the male and the female in Sophocles' play and Puzo's novel, the Greek and the Italian American heroines, subverting the traditional norms of female conduct, do not violate their femininity, which instead, being reflected in the corporeal dimension, becomes the very element that enables the dematerialization of the frontier of gender itself.

Lucia Santa, therefore, "destabilize[s] the order of Italian society, predicated on patriarchal authority, and propose[s] new affective relationships and forms of social organization in the New World for those women with some measure of financial freedom and the interest in defining themselves in new ways" (De Angelis 1995, 40); women, whose "voices […] [in America are] filled with hope, with a vigor never sounded in their homeland" (Puzo 1997, 19). Puzo's revolutionary female character becomes a new literary figure, which, transcending the static representation of women in Italian American literature, crosses boundaries of female immobility and deconstructs the material frontier between the private and the public. By highlighting the connections between Lucia Santa and Antigone, this paper has aimed to provide the latter as a more suitable figure to compare to Puzo's innovative female character than that of Persephone; a revolutionary figure that, "although female, is a hero", a "role […] allowed a few women in Greek tragedy" (Willner 1982, 59).

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