

The Paradox of Identity:
Women as Hidden Authoritarian Figures in Luigi Pirandello's Literary Works

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On June 28, 1867 in Sicily, Italian author and playwright Luigi Pirandello was born in a town called Caos, translated *chaos*, during a cholera epidemic. Pirandello's life was marked by chaos, turmoil, and disease. He literally entered into a world of chaos. Dictated to by a tyrannical father and cared for by a meek mother, Pirandello developed an interesting view of marriage, women, and love. The passivity of his mother and eventual paranoia and insanity of his wife, Antoinette Potulano, created a premise for his literary women. As he formulated and evolved his impressions of the feminine identity from what he witnessed between his parents and experienced with his wife, the "Master of Futurism" examined the flaws of interpersonal communication between genders. He translated those experiences into his literature by depicting institutions such as marriage negatively in his early works and later shifting the bulk of his focus to gender oppositions. Pirandello explores the conundrum between men and women by placing his female characters into paradoxical roles. This thesis challenges previous criticism that maintains Pirandello's women are "dismembered," weak, and deconstructed characters and instead concludes that, although Pirandello's literary women are mutable figures and his literature contains patriarchal elements, a matriarchal society dominates Pirandello's literature. Given the parallel between the women in his literature and life, Pirandello employs elements of mutability, madness, "conformity," and manipulation to exemplify women as authoritarian figures over men.

As a literary artist Pirandello worked in a variety of genres, including plays, poetry, short stories, and novels. His women are developed and portrayed differently within each genre. Thus, this thesis focuses on Pirandello's plays *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922), *Henry IV*

(1922), *Each in His Own Way* (1923), and *Naked* (1923). It also analyzes three of Pirandello's early short stories contained in *Loveless Love* (1894) as well as two of his novels, *The Late Mattia Pascal* (1904) and *One, None and a Hundred Thousand* (1933). This array of texts allows the thesis to capture the evolution of his literary women and the dominance and manipulation his women have over society and the male characters. Elements used in the works, such as mutability, are not portrayed as a weakness for Pirandello's women but as strength. Furthermore, terms used by Pirandello to describe the women in his works such as "creatures," which would normally be construed as derogatory, actually display the women's power and otherworldliness.

Based on his life and literary achievements, it is the belief of this thesis that Pirandello felt trapped and dictated to by women, a point which can be supported through the parallels between the women in his life and in his literary works. Feminine influence was inescapable for Pirandello. He both feared and revered femininity. His mother, wife, and country laid the foundation for his perception of the feminine. History has often referred to Italy as a woman, and like Pirandello's women his country was a mutable yet dictating entity in Pirandello's life. Italy had a significant influence over Pirandello's father, beliefs, and livelihood. Pirandello's father, Stefano, was the embodiment of patriarchal Italy and ingrained the traditional Italian ethos into his son. However, that patriarchal ethos was entrenched in matriarchic conventions. "Lady Italy" dictated the Pirandellos' livelihood, marriages, and actions. Thus, Luigi Pirandello's seemingly patriarchal upbringing was dictated by the wiles of a metaphorical national woman.

Divided into four chapters, this thesis outlines and chronicles the transitions of the Pirandellian feminine identity. An important aspect evaluated in the thesis is the degree to which Pirandello's transition in portraying female chaos was intentional. Chapter one provides a succinct overview of the role of women in Italian history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The role of women in Italian history is important in understanding the fluctuation of Pirandello's impressions. Pirandello was born in 1867 and died in 1936; thus he had the opportunity to witness the evolution of women's roles throughout modern history. From the 1890s to the 1930s, the decades in which Pirandello wrote some of his most influential literary works, his image of women evolved.

Pirandello witnessed the impact of a variety of political changes and the influences of Mussolini on his country. He was raised with idealistic views of Italy as a young and hopeful nation and was brought up to believe in his country's struggle for progress, pride, and equality. However, the values and patriotism that Pirandello was raised with were usurped, and Pirandello saw his country change its identity. "Lady Italy" was periodically reconfigured. The thesis draws from several studies that illustrate the fluctuation of Italy and its women, including Christopher Duggan's *The Concise History of Italy*, the compilation of essays in *Fascism and Theatre*, Berghaus' *Italian Futurist Theatre*, and Fiora Bassanese's *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*. These works not only outline Italian history, but also other facets shaping Pirandello's image of women, such as the political phenomenon of fascism. Pirandello's political and cultural experiences spawned several of his philosophical perceptions, such as the idea of the unidentified self, which centers on the idea that people do not truly know themselves because they hide behind a variety of masks in order to fit into society. The theory of the unidentified self can pertain specifically to Pirandello's women and is analyzed throughout the thesis. It is illustrated by the opposition between men and women in Pirandello's literature. Pirandello's philosophies are a product of his cultural background and mindset and of a decade full of political change and turmoil. This chapter shows how culture establishes Pirandello's theories, and those theories contribute to his views on women.

Pirandello's culture creates only half of Pirandellian femininity. In order to draw connections between the women in Pirandello's life and his literary women, chapter two creates a portrait of the women that surrounded Pirandello. His mother, wife, daughter, and Marta Abba were his quintessential images of femininity and exemplified different aspects of womanhood. Some critics argue that Pirandello's literature maintains two types of women, the mother and the woman. However, this thesis argues that Pirandello's literature contains a variety of feminine figures all depicted from aspects of those women. Pirandello's pessimistic views of love and women were molded by the insanity, attempted suicide, meekness, and inspiration exhibited by the women in his life. Furthermore, Luigi Pirandello believed that "true" communication and interpersonal relationships, because of the unidentified self, were impossible between men and women. He believed that men and women could not fully understand each other because they did not know themselves.

In addition, this chapter will focus on the relationships Pirandello had with each of these women. Relationships are a major crux in Pirandello's literature. Men and women appear to be unable to inhabit the same space and maintain happiness in the analyzed works. The section reviews Pirandello's parents' marriage, Pirandello's marriage, mother-daughter relationships, father-daughter relationships, and Pirandello's love interest, Marta Abba. Within his culture marriage was a business arrangement. Pirandello's parents' relationship solidified a negative image for the author at an early age. In his early compilation of works in *Loveless Love*, Pirandello depicts a dark image of marriage and gender opposition. The characters are never happy together, and they cannot understand one another, an idea that is reflected in his parents' marriage. As a result, Pirandello's thoughts and emotions were in constant conflict. His parents'

relationship laid the foreground for gender opposition in his works and expressed Pirandello's emotional discord.

Another element derived from Pirandello's parents' marriage was the weak or deconstructed female figure in Pirandello's works and the theme of loveless love. Pirandello's father made it difficult for him to relate an emotional sense of love with marriage. Mary Ann Frese Witt examines Pirandello's views on motherhood and associates those views with Pirandello's relationship with his father. Stefano Pirandello was not influenced by the idea of love. He believed a woman's role was simply that of a mother. His inability to express positive emotion caused Pirandello to have strong distrust for his father and a deep attachment to his mother. In his youth, he began to form his conception of the trapped woman, the mutable figure, and of the conundrum between men and women. His mother was a figure with no definition or identity beyond her household, which is a common characterization among the mothers in Pirandello's literature as well as a common theme. They are merely shadows and lost figures. In his literature, the mother's meekness is projected to the children and enables the children's character flaws. Undoubtedly, Pirandello's mother's situation fueled her son's infatuation with the feminine figure.

Pirandello's relationship with his wife also developed his soured perception of marriage. Pirandello's marriage to Antoinette Potulano was a business arrangement wrought by her and Pirandello's fathers. They had a tumultuous and chaotic relationship. During Potulano's childhood, her father kept bars on the windows, sheltered his children, and raised Antoinette with the Sicilian ethos of women as mothers, virgins, or whores. Her father's paranoia and tyranny shaped her mental state. Her insanity grew after the collapse of the family sulfur mines, and she lapsed into a severe paranoid disorder with her outbursts usually projected on Pirandello. Her

madness dictated what Pirandello did and did not do. Pirandello, adhering to his traditional beliefs, took care of his wife for fifteen years until he could no longer control her. Pirandello's wife significantly impacted his image of women and represents the "mad" women within his literature. Ironically, the women's madness is not a weakness but an element of control. The women, mad or not, control the men's actions just as Antoinette dictated Pirandello's actions.

Mother-daughter relationships are also a common occurrence in Pirandello's literature. Due to Antoinette's madness, the mother and her daughter, Lietta, did not have a typical mother-daughter relationship, and it was their tumultuous dynamics that Pirandello witnessed. Her accusations such as father-daughter incest, caused Lietta to attempt suicide. Motherhood is never right within Pirandello's works. Mothers often manipulate their daughters and try to live vicariously through the children. Within this thesis the mother-daughter connection is important. Several of the plays analyzed in this thesis deal with mother-daughter relationships, including *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Henry IV*, and the short stories in *Loveless Love*. This relationship establishes the premise in Pirandello's literature that women, not men, dictate women's character and are a deconstructing force. Power is maintained and constructed by women, and Pirandello's literature shows a battle between them.

On the other hand, father-daughter relationships are also important in Pirandello's literature. Pirandello appears to have had a complicated relationship with Lietta. There is evidence of their true relationship and their "accused" relationship throughout Pirandello's literature. Though his wife's accusations had no merit, they still put a strain on his and his daughter's relationship. Within his literature and plays, fathers appear incapable of relating to their daughters. Likewise, Pirandello had a similar issue and felt distanced from his daughter. His role as a father is important to his portrayal of fathers within his literature. This thesis

outlines the “old world” view of Italian fatherhood, its impact on Pirandello’s relationship with his daughter, and its literary influences.

The actress Marta Abba completely reshaped Pirandello’s thinking on love and the theatre; she was his muse. After a decade of his wife’s madness, Abba provided friendship and a sense of clarity in Pirandello’s life, helping to alleviate some of Pirandello’s pessimism. It is the opinion of this thesis that Pirandello’s relationship with Abba helped define his view of women as powerful. It is evident that Pirandello toyed with the idea of feminine power before Marta Abba; however, her presence appears to strengthen the development of the feminine identity in his work. Pirandello created characters for Abba, and it was his experimentation with the feminine form that led him to develop dominating female figures. Pirandello’s later literature and the characters he creates for Abba are stronger and more defined, and their empowerment is more evident. Though some critics may suggest that Pirandello’s literature identifies the human condition, it is the view of this thesis that he explores the relationships between men and women. He was fascinated by gender differences and interaction. Pirandello’s love letters to Abba humanize Pirandello and provide insight into his thinking as well as illustrating his thoughts on the feminine identity.

The third chapter in this thesis further illustrates Pirandello’s fascination, curiosity, fear, compassion, and sympathy toward women. It bridges the connections between the women in his life and literature. This chapter maintains that Pirandello’s literary women are not weak characters and refutes arguments that state otherwise. Criticism including Günsberg’s *Patriarchal Representations: Gender and Discourse in Pirandello’s Theatre* and those contained in *Luigi Pirandello: Contemporary Perspectives* support the overall goal of this thesis. Since the general consensus views Pirandello’s women as trapped within a patriarchal society, this thesis

uses elements from this criticism to support its claims that Pirandello's women are actually stronger figures than the men. Ironically, it is female conformity that makes Pirandello's women stronger. While the men in Pirandello's literature try to repel their culture, the women embrace it. Though the women are mutable figures within his literature and have transforming identities, they are the controlling force for the men. The women develop the culture and manipulate male actions. Pirandello, whether knowingly or not, created a patriarchal society within a matriarchal society. The matriarchal society actually runs everything behind the guise of a patriarchal setting.

Since Pirandello worked in many mediums, it is important for the thesis to establish how themes evolve from different genres. The first section of this chapter is dedicated to Pirandello's novels, *The Late Mattia Pascal* and *One, None and a Hundred Thousand* and to the short stories in *Loveless Love*. The image and symbolism of women is the specific focus of the chapter. The four different images analyzed are the mother figure, the woman, the saint, and the whore. This thesis draws connections between these four images and his wife, mother, daughter, and Marta Abba. The women in Pirandello's literature are metaphorically naked, an idea that reverts to Pirandello's image of his mother. His literary women are undefined, changeable figures. Pirandello also establishes the conundrum of society as a woman and women as creators of society. In addition, the terms used to categorize Pirandello's women within these four concepts are defined by society and adhered to or manipulated by women. Only men reject society in Pirandello's literature, a rejection which relates to the concept of men being nonconformists. Men cannot change or manipulate the woman's image because it is the image deemed to her by other women.

Furthermore, Pirandello presents a replica of Dante's Beatrice within his literature, connecting her with his real life muse, Marta Abba. The thesis also examines and introduces the idea of women as a mirror image of the men. Duality is a major theme in Pirandello's literature and the women are counterparts to the men. The second section in this chapter addresses the same concepts explored in the first, except it focuses on Pirandello's plays *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Henry IV*, *Each in His Own Way*, and *Naked*. Though the sections in this chapter mirror one another, the role of theatrical conventions alters the perceptions and composition of the women in the plays, highlighting the women's dominance and flaws more as a result. Dialogue reveals more about the feminine identity and its relation to society. This chapter and its sections rely on criticism, literary essays, and the primary sources themselves to support its claims.

The third chapter also examines the creation of Pirandello's feminine identity. Though some may disagree, Pirandello's works appear to contain a highly feminine voice. Pirandello's belief that characters are a manifestation of the author implies that his female characters are a part of his subconscious. They are "pieces" of him. Pirandello was physically and mentally trapped by women. Therefore, he places his male characters in a cat and mouse game with his feminine figures. Pirandello deals with the struggle between genders and finding an identity suitable to gender conventions. Women have several identities, whereas the men in his works have one identity which is in some way broken. His men struggle for a voice in society similar to Pirandello's struggle for a voice among the women in his life.

The fourth chapter of this thesis notes that Pirandello's women take on the role of a creator. Women are the Fates that determine the males' destinies. The theories of this thesis come full circle with chapter four exploring Italy as a woman. Critics such as Maura O'Connor

establish Italy as a woman and show the disfigurement and deconstruction of Italy which parallel the transformations undergone by Pirandello's literary women. Italy's mutability allowed it to give birth to some of the most prominent social and cultural developments of the Mediterranean area. However, Italy also underwent a recurring death with each cultural shift. It is entrenched in a long and chaotic history of dominating empires and "dismembered" cultures. Numerous civilizations have called Italy home. Like Pirandello's women, Italy and men are in constant conflict and struggle for power. Italy maintains its power while men succumb to it. Though women appeared to have a stagnant role in Italy, Italy herself was instituting change. Men were subjected to the change of their culture and land, which was in essence a woman. For instance, Pirandello agreed to an arranged marriage because of his cultural beliefs. He lost everything because of a flood that destroyed his family's sulfur mines. Pirandello, for better or worse, was conditioned to follow "Lady Italy" and she in turn dictated his life. From the beginning, Pirandello was a subject of Italy and a prisoner to femininity.

By calling women "creatures," Pirandello broaches the idea that if women manipulate nature, are a type of creature, and Fates who control the destiny of men, then they could be viewed as creators. The theory of creation ties into the metaphor of Italy as a woman. Women are already figures of creation because of their ability to give birth. Pirandello's view of women as creators solidifies female dominance within his works. Pirandello's literary women are more than fictional characters; they are representations of the women in his life, including his mother, wife, and country and are creators of identity, chaos, and madness.

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