La Donna Suicida: Suicide as an Act of Feminist Protest in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Neera's *Lydia*, and Aleramo's *Una donna*.

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BA Comparative Literature, University of Virginia, 2013

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia
in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese

University of Virginia
May 2015

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To this point in time, suicide has been a phenomenon understudied in all fields. History, sociology, and literature alike have struggled with the significance of the self-violent act and the possible implications of its study. Because it is deemed not only uncomfortable, but highly personal, it is difficult to generalize the meaning of real-world suicides. In addition, the highly contentious religious understanding of suicide as a sin in violation of God has made it a topic widely avoided by scholars. The wariness and disdain surrounding suicide stems from the classical world, presumably since the first man (or woman) chose to end his life. In his *Dialogues,* Plato condemns the self-destructive act, "contending that the self-murder should be given an ignominious burial at the farthest corners of the land," and specifying: "I mean the suicide who deprives himself by violence of his appointed share of life" (Rolfs, 14). The classical understanding of suicide as a crime, often punished by confiscation of land and an ignoble burial, was elaborated and made more rigid in the wake of Christianity: "It had been normal in classical times to punish suicides by confiscating the goods of the deceased and denying their bodies the usual burial rites, and…only with St. Augustine, and later Thomas Aquinas, had Christian attitudes become more uniformly hostile and punishments more severe." (Healy, 907). The religious understanding is one of the foundations for an examination of suicide in Italian literature, first presented by Dante in *La Divina Commedia*. In his Catholic approach, violence against oneself was a mortal sin. Suicides like Pier della Vigna were placed in the seventh circle of *Inferno*, their self-destruction the equivalent of violence against God as they willfully destroyed one of His creations. Although the religious implications of suicide are severe, in the Middle Ages the act began to take on a more romantic appeal, the extremity of the

violence becoming linked to nobility in the face of great shame or grief. This has been especially true in Italian literature: although Dante places the suicides deep in hell, he presents Pier della Vigna as a sympathetic and worthy character, one of the few in the deeper circles with whom Dante converses personally. As noted in Daniel Rolf's The Last Cross: A History of the Suicide Theme in Italian Literature, "From the Middle Ages to the present day…numerous writers have openly celebrated self-destruction in association with the highest of man's ideals and aspirations, such as virtue, honor, and above all romantic love" (Rolfs, 27). This more liberal and lenient position on suicide may have led to more literary instances of the act, but it has not yet expanded the amount of scholarship. For this reason, Rolf's work, unique in Italian studies, is an important reference point for me in this examination of three suicides in Italian literature. However, although the work has been quite valuable, it points out an even more gaping hole on the subject of female suicides in Italian literature. Rolf mentions over 75 works in his History, and yet includes not a single female author. In addition, after two of the suicides he mentions from the *Decameron*, not one of the suicides themselves is committed by a woman. Even in the previously quoted description of the Renaissance response to suicide, Rolf's understanding of suicide is tellingly gendered: the act is associated with *man's* ideals (of which honor and virtue are highly important and related to male chivalric roles). Romantic love is the one of these associations that could be attributed to female characters, and Rolfs reverts to that "ideal" in his reading of the three female suicides mentioned, which come from Boccaccio's *Decameron.* In his reading of Boccaccio's presentation of suicide, Rolfs states:

> Boccaccio's dramatic use of the suicide theme throughout his tales emphasizes and pays tribute to this…concept of love as an undeniable force...Love's triumph is of course a happy one when those who oppose its path can be made to yield, but Love will have its

> way even when such is not possible, though in this latter instance its will can be served only by means of the supreme protest of self-destruction. (Rolfs, 34-5)

He then goes on to read two suicides (Ghismonda, the wife of Guglielmo Rossiglione) in terms of this "undeniable force of Love," arguing that the women take their lives in order to join themselves with their lovers and reaffirm ideals of courtly love. This understanding of suicide brings with it a decidedly male history—the anguish of unfulfilled love espoused by Petrarch, or Ariosto's understanding of nobility and honor, for example—which I argue cannot be universally mapped onto the topic of female suicide in Italian literature. Particularly because of the physicality of self-violence and the deeply personal reasons for the action, these instances of female suicide must be cast in a new light. After all, in the first comprehensive sociological work on the topic (published in 1897), *Le suicide,* Émile Durkheim concludes that "the roots of suicide were to be found in the individual's relationship with society rather than in physical factors" (Healy, 906). Because the *italiana*'s relationship with society was (and is) so markedly different from that of her male counterpart, the literary instances of female suicide must be approached differently and with an eye for the gender-specific implications.

Keeping in mind that the act of suicide is so highly personal and specific, and that suicide in works of Italian literature is prolific, it would be foolish to undertake a comprehensive study of the theme of *la donna suicida*. Instead, in this paper, I examine three instances of female suicide in which the protagonist responds through her self-destruction to the system of male-domination which informs her society. In particular, I am interested in those suicides that are presented specifically as what Rolfs calls "the supreme protest," though in these cases, the protest is not against unhappy love, but against an oppressive patriarchy. As Rolfs did, I begin my examination in the Middle Ages, re-reading the story of Ghismonda and Guiscardo.

Although Boccaccio's work contains a number of female suicides (Signora Rossiglione having been already mentioned, as well as the ambiguous possible-suicides of Simona, Lisabetta, and Salvestra), Ghismonda's suicide is one that is clearly borne out of intelligence and courage (as can be seen through her lengthy speech justifying her action) and one that is in protest of her own oppressive patriarch (Prince Tancredi) and through him, of the society at large. Boccaccio is a male writer, but his portrayal of cunning, funny, and multi-dimensional women takes him out of the Petrarchan tradition of the *donna angelicata*, who is objectified and worshipped, yet never speaks for herself. Because of his separation from the tradition of objectification and suppression, his work provides a strong basis for a new reading of the *donna suicida*—one which does not rely on a male-centric understanding of Love. In addition, the character of Ghismonda offers a depiction of the "ideal" female suicide as a form of feminist defiance. Of course, her demise is tragic, as are they all, but her complete self-actualization and her ability to articulate her protest makes her an excellent prototype for the *donna suicida*, which I will then problematize with more modern, psychological presentations of the figure.

After a new reading of Ghismonda's tale, I turn to a Victorian-era work, *Lydia*, written by the female realist author Neera. Lydia's suicide does follow in the steps of Ghismonda, though unwittingly. Her suicide can be read as an understanding of the futility of her aspirations in the face of a patriarchal and frivolous Italian aristocracy, and although her defiance is not articulated as is Ghismonda's, her action is a clear protest against the oppressive social expectations she was expected to fill as a woman. Finally, I will examine Sibilla Aleramo's 1906 work *Una donna*, whose titular character does not successfully complete her suicide, but who defies the same social conventions as her predecessors. After her thwarted attempt at suicide, *la donna* instead

learns how to construct herself through art, finding a way to defy her social expectations while alive (though she may be metaphorically dead to mainstream society).

Examining these instances of female suicide has been, for me, a fruitful way to understand Italian feminism. In a culture that is historically grounded in stereotypical gender roles (specifically those of obedient and self-sacrificing wife, mother, and lover), these fictional women found the only way out of their oppression and the only way to take a stand against it was through a literal self-sacrifice. By denying the world their bodies, they lay claim to their souls.

Ghismonda

Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* is a seminal work of the fourteenth century, a 100-tale novel that takes place amongst the chaos and tragedy of the Black Death. The *cornice*, or frame story, of the work involves a group of ten young *italiani* (seven women and three men) shielding themselves from the plague in an abandoned Tuscan villa. To pass the time in their quarantine, they decide that each member will tell a story each night, their ten-day isolation resulting in 100 *novelle*. Each day's collection of stories is guided by a theme, and Ghismonda's sad tale appears on the fourth day, which concerns tales of love that end in misery. By my reading, however, the story does not end in misery for Ghismonda but in triumph, with her father Tancredi shouldering the misery necessary for the story's thematic conformity. Ghismonda, through both her eloquence and her defiant final action is a remarkably strong character in this tale, her intelligent transgression and her ultimate suicide a response and rejection of her social confinement.

Ghismonda's confinement is based in her oppressed sexuality. The daughter of a prince, she was limited to her role of daughter from birth. Her father doted on her, but kept her too close, neglecting to find her a suitable husband until she was past 'marrying age:' "Costei fu dal padre

tanto teneramente amata, quanto alcuna altra figliuola da padre fosse giammai; e per questo tenero amore, avendo ella di molti anni avanzata l'età del dovere avere avuto marito, non sappiendola da sé partire, non la maritava" (Boccaccio, 261). Ghismonda's father holds her as a prize, and although he seems to cherish her, his desperate hold on his daughter hinders her sexual growth and her understanding as she enters young-adulthood. Tancredi could well be said to be following in the footsteps of Petrarch, holding Ghismonda as a precious belonging, a piece of art forever pure. In fact, Ghismonda's name is not even revealed until after she has taken a lover, implying that her entry into sexuality was her first foray into independence—her first attempt at distinguishing herself from her father's ideal.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses power's (in this case Tancredi's) fervent need to suppress sexuality (Ghismonda):

> To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounce itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences. (Foucault, 84)

In Ghismonda's case, being a woman, she is in fact caught between *three* "nonexistences:" that of her gender, of her desires that her father refuses to acknowledge, and the threat of her termination if she ever acts on those desires. However, Ghismonda is unwilling to let herself be incarcerated by her father's selfish love, and she decides to take a lover. Deciding to act on her desires is Ghismonda's first feminist transgression—in doing so she validates her own feelings in

a way that her father and society have neglected. In her second act of rebellion, she carefully chooses her own partner on the basis of merit instead of on blood or status.

> Si pensò di volere avere, se esser potesse, occultamente un valoroso amante. E veggendo molti uomini nella corte del padre usare, gentili e altri...e considerate le maniere e i costumi di molti, tra gli altri un giovane valetto del padre, il cui nome era Guiscardo, uom di nazione assai umile ma per virtú e per costumi nobile, piú che altro le piacque...(Boccaccio, 261)

In choosing Guiscardo, Ghismonda shows her own virtue and her own sense of individuality. It is not his wealth or beauty that causes her to choose him, but his inner nobility. In a supremely transgressive act, she chooses him simply because "piú che altro le piacque," that is, she likes him the best. In making this decision for herself, Ghismonda extricates herself from her father's control, instead trusting her own desires and opinions. Ghismonda is the one to make the first move, offering a secret note hidden within a cane to Guiscardo, instructing him how to meet her. The cunning of her plan and her message to Guiscardo reverse the traditional roles of courtship, and place Ghismonda in a new space of autonomy which she had not previously been allowed. She continues this self-discovery in her meetings with Guiscardo, which are facilitated by a tunnel and a cave. The lushness of the cave corresponds to Ghismonda's budding sexuality, a force which her father had attempted to keep in check: "The cave is a picture of nature left to its own devices. It is utterly out of control and completely disordered" (Levenstein, 323). The natural disorder of the cave reveals the impossibility of the sexual regulation which Tancredi tries to impose, and the natural flourishing of Ghismonda's passion. The outdoor meetings of the lovers stand in stark contrast to the enclosed bedchamber, which, as Foucault states, becomes the center of sexual suppression and containment. "Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into

the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule…A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom" (Foucault, 3). This utilitarian unit, the only one in which sexuality is acceptable, is presented in *Decameron* as a place of enclosure. That 'locus of sexuality' is all the more complicated when Tancredi himself comes to Ghismonda's bedchamber and encloses himself within it, the room and the prince becoming a singular symbol of power's desire to control sexuality. "[Tancredi] trovando le finestre della camera chiuse e le cortine del letto abbattute, a piè di quello in un canto sopra un carello si pose a sedere; e appoggiato il capo al letto e tirata sopra sé la cortina, quasi come se studiosamente si fosse nascoso, quivi s'addormentò" (263). Tancredi closes himself within the already closed space, and by hiding himself (seemingly) on purpose, he implies a kind of incestuous desire to be near the bed of his daughter. His desire, however, instead of being incestuous, can be understood simply as one of power. By closing himself in the bedchamber he attempts to desexualize the area, to relish the enclosed space that represents the enclosure and chastity of his daughter, whose sexuality he refuses to acknowledge. His neglect is unable to keep Ghismonda from discovering herself, however, and the scene reaches a head when Ghismonda and Guiscardo enter the bedroom from the cave and have sex on the bed, while Tancredi sleeps at the foot. Tancredi does not reveal himself, but in horror at having witnessed the sexual freedom of his daughter, escapes unseen later and has Guiscardo seized and imprisoned. In this way, he pushes Guiscardo into that space of nonexistence, where, as Foucault says, one: "shalt not go near…shalt not touch…shalt not consume…shalt not experience pleasure…shalt not speak…shalt not show thyself; ultimately…shalt not exist, except in darkness and secrecy"

(Foucault, 84). After the secrecy is discovered, and the lovers no longer allowed their shadowed autonomy, they must be destroyed, and Tancredi goes to his daughter to tell her as much. He laments that she has disgraced herself, and him by her actions, and cries: "'E or volesse Iddio che, poi che a tanta disonestà conducere ti dovevi, avessi preso uomo che alla tua nobilità decevole fosse stato..." (Boccaccio, 264). Ghismonda quickly chides this outburst, reminding him that her choice was careful and discerning, and that courtly ideals dictate that nobility comes not from blood, but from character. In so overturning his lament and concisely pointing out the flaws in his antiquated rejection of Guiscardo, Ghismonda suggests that it is not truly the lower status of Guiscardo that so devastates him, but his inability to control his daughter. In conceiving of her as a perfect statue, to be doted on and admired but never touched, Tancredi had denied Ghismonda her own sexual identity. She expresses this to him as well, exalting the naturalness of her desires, the inescapability of her sexual awakening: "Esser ti dovea, Tancredi, manifesto, essendo tu di carne, aver generata figliuola di carne e non di pietra o di ferro" (Boccaccio, 263). Ghismonda asserts both her own sexuality through this line and her possession of that sexuality. She acknowledges herself as Tancredi's offspring, but in her act of self-defining, she brings herself autonomy from him. Thus, Ghismonda reveals her independence and her self-awareness, both characteristics having been made possible by her sexual liberation.

It is important to note that although Ghismonda's elegant speech makes up most of the text of her novella, Guiscardo is only given one sentence, a classical utterance on the unstoppable force of Love (here again, that gendered understanding analyzed by Rolfs). The overwhelming focus on Ghismonda implies that this story is *her* story: this is not the story of the ill-fated Romeo and Juliet, but instead the story of a woman who, through love, finds her independence. Ghismonda reflects this interpretation in her speech, refusing to apologize or to

deny her actions. She faces her father/accuser with strength and dignity, revealing a new sense of autonomy and self-awareness that she had not previously been able to express: “Per che, non come dolente femina o ripresa del suo fallo, ma come noncurante e valorosa, con asciutto viso e aperto e da niuna parte turbato, cosí al padre disse: --Tancredi, né a negare né a pregare son disposta, per ciò che né l’un mi varebbe né l’altro voglia che mi vaglia; e oltre a ciò in niuno atto intendo di rendermi benivola la tua mansuetudine e ‘l tuo amore” (Boccaccio, 265). She does not need her father’s forgiveness because she finally has an understanding of herself. Ghismonda’s incredible speech does not hinder Tancredi’s fury, however, and as Foucault states,

> For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death…[later] It was no longer considered that this power of the sovereign over his subjects could be exercised in an absolute and unconditional way, but only in cases where the sovereign’s very existence was in jeopardy: a sort of right of rejoinder…if someone dared to rise up against him and transgress his laws, then he could exercise a direct power over the offender’s life. (Foucault, 135)

Tancredi, again acting as the “sovereign power,” sees Guiscardo as a threat to his very existence, and therefore finds him worthy of death. In breaking the control Tancredi had over his daughter, in allowing her autonomy and enlightenment through exploration of her own sexuality, Guiscardo had transgressed on what Tancredi still revered as a possession, his prize, his livelihood. Therefore, he orders Guiscardo strangled, and requests that his heart be cut out and brought to the prince. In a final attempt to exercise control over his daughter, to “cool her passions” and therefore constrict her sexual autonomy, he sends the heart to Ghismonda in a golden chalice. Ghismonda, seeing the chalice and perhaps understanding that she will never escape her father’s ardent desire for control, weeps for the first time. Then, in an incredible act of

fortitude and stoicism, she empties a potent poison into the cup and drinks it, along with her own tears and the blood of her lover. Here Ghismonda again asserts control over her own body and desires, both through the act of taking her own life, and through the symbolic corporeality of her mode of suicide. In literally consuming a physical part of her lover, she confirms her identity as a sexual being, *fatta di carne*. This action is Ghismonda's final rebellion; she is not ashamed of her actions or her sexuality, but instead escapes to the place where she can join her soul with Guiscardo—that is, the place where she can be liberated. When her father comes weeping to her bedside as she dies, there is a distinct role-reversal. Tancredi, having lost the control over his daughter, now loses control of his emotions, while Ghismonda, finally self-actualized, is able to speak to him in a controlled and relaxed way. Through her suicide, "justice is further served…in that the opponents of Love are either punished with the loss of someone dear to them, or at least exposed for their ignorance and cruelty" (Rolfs, 35). Tancredi is the recipient of this punishment for his ignorance not just of the power of Love, but of the power of his daughter. In her self-destruction, Ghismonda exposes the cruelty of Tancredi's patriarchal desire for control, and also receives her ultimate liberation from it. Through her death, she continues in her feminist transgression, distancing herself from those controlling powers which sought to confine her and finding her autonomy in death.

Lydia

Ghismonda's assertion of her autonomy and Boccaccio's inclusion of such an outspoken and self-actualized female character informs the image of the suicidal woman for years to come. Female writers are scattered throughout the Italian literary canon, but the first "feminist" authors do not appear until nearly the 20th century. Neera, born in 1846, is a precursor to these feminist writings, her works not necessarily transgressing or rejecting the patriarchy, but her attention on

the female condition and experience an early means of calling the social norms into question. Neera is often described in biographies as matter-of-fact and highly maternal, her call to women being a radical embrace of femaleness through the act of procreation: “Donne; più nobile missione delle scienze e delle lettere, amore più alto di quello dell’arte e della patria, voi avete la missione di rifare la stirpe di Adamo, voi dovete sentire l’amore immenso di questa umanità che soffre. Non invidiate la gloria dell’uomo, voi che avete quella di collaborare con Dio!” (*Dizionario*, 238)(Valisa). Although her non-fiction writings centered on maternity and a strict division between male and female, her novels express the plurality of the female experience, with Lydia a prime example. As Mariarosa Mettifogo states, “The flamboyant and upper-class Lydia bursts onto the scene as a very non-Neeran character, self-confident, frivolous, defiant, and provocatively fashionable” (19). Through *Lydia*, Neera presents the experience of the *italiana* through the lens of the Victorian aristocracy, Lydia’s frivolity and oppression representative of the female condition in general.

Society’s control over Lydia is expressed not through a particular family member, as is Ghismonda’s, but through her own (societally imposed) ignorance. Lydia is a member of aristocratic Victorian Italian society, with her understanding of society founded completely in fashion, frivolity, and the series of balls she attends as a young woman. Lydia is raised “nell’adorazione del lusso e della bellezza” (Neera, 39), and her life is full of fanciful material goods, including a jeweled revolver that she places on her shelf to admire its shine and a doll which Lydia is said to resemble: “una rosea bionda cogli occhioni provocatori; col petto riccamente imbottito; le braccia tonde, nude, lisce come raso; le gambucce aggraziate di donna fatta...la bambola chiusa nella scatola giapponese aveva fatto bene la sua lezione; Lydia le assomigliava un poco” (Neera, 37). Throughout the work, these two toys are symbols of Lydia

herself: valued for their beauty and femininity, and meant to be pleasurable *ninnoli* without any purpose. Lydia, as a female member of the aristocratic class, finds herself equally as neglected and devalued, finding her only purpose to be the game of court life—flirtation, cosmetics, and costume. Lydia is unable to assert—or even to explore—her own individuality, as she is deeply embedded in the social norms and expectations of aristocratic life.

> Sballottata dalla bambinai alla governante, dal maestro di piano al maestro di segno, senza un filo di connessione, senza una misura, con molti insegnanti, ma nessun educatore...Era figlia de' suoi tempi: aveva il dangue misto, parte di decadenza aristocratica e parte di insolenza borghese arrivata in alto. Molto intelligente, chiudeva in sé i germi del bene e del male, ma nessuno svillupato, nessuno dominante. La superficialità della sua educazione soffocava in lei ogni tendenza individuale. (Neera, 39)

Lydia is here described as having many tutors but no educator—that is, although she had been taught the manners of the court, she is completely ignorant of herself or her own ability. This seems to be a characteristic of the women in *Lydia*; the title character's mother ("grassa borghese, romantica e indolente" (Neera, 35)) is another woman who has been devalued and reduced to uselessness by her position as a woman in society. The mother is said to spend her days reading in an armchair, blowing the occasional kiss toward her daughter as she frolics through the house.

> In the novel, Lydia's mother's reading habit, together with her congenital indolence, are seen as the cause of her detachment from her daughter's upbringing; and Lydia, with her 'romantica e indolente' mother, no father, and just a weak uncle to watch over her, grows up free and careless, without a proper moral and intellectual system of values. (Santovetti, 395)

Her mother is another byproduct of the oppressive society in which Lydia is raised: instead of living a fulfilling life, she is a complete escapist, burying herself in novels in an attempt to fill her days with something worthwhile. Lydia's mother is also like the revolver, set on a shelf and unable to fulfill her potential, until she eventually dies (poignantly) of progressive paralysis. In truth, society has paralyzed her, left her unable to live a vibrant life according to her own wishes until she has no choice but to fall into disrepair. Lydia, also in a presumed attempt to find some meaning in her life, begins to extract fulfillment from courtly life—the only life she has ever been offered. Lydia (albeit unknowingly) commits a feminist transgression by becoming the seductress of the court. Her obvious intelligence is so suppressed that she can use it only to excel at the games of flirtation, and she quickly becomes the center of every man's attention. She seems to do so not because of a desire for a mate, however, but just for the enjoyment of the game. "Taking as her motto 'divertirsi!', Lydia plays with men and love until what starts as a game becomes an inescapable reality…[but] Lydia's transgression limits itself to words and gestures, as she has never even granted a kiss to one of her suitors" (Ramsey-Portolano, 56). It is clear that Lydia is not awaiting some all-powerful Love, but is merely unfulfilled and bored by the frivolity of her life, frustrated by her ignorance of herself and the world. Soon, she is ostracized by the society, her advanced age and reputation having made her an unacceptable woman, by their definition. Because the courtly life of pleasure is all society offered her, she becomes entangled in it until her actions make her an outcast; all in the hopes of finding herself: "La sua posizione in società era bizzarra. Indipendente e non maritata; vergine e già oassata attraverso la corruzioni della fantasia; non avendo mai concesso un bacio, eppure vituperata dalla fama" (Neera, 93). Although Lydia does not explore her sexuality, she tries to discover and define herself through her witty flirtation. Lydia is unable to gain satisfaction in the life she has

been given and yet unable to surpass it without being shunned. Although she learns the rules of the court and her dictated social role, she has no understanding of herself within the context of such a world. When her aspirations and "un-feminine" romantic aggression cause her to be ostracized, she is launched into a world of which she knows absolutely nothing.

Lydia's life of frivolity brings to mind another famous literary heroine: Emma Bovary, of Flaubert's realistic work *Madame Bovary*. Emma also lives a life of excess and enjoyment, never able to understand herself or her unhappiness. In her re-reading of Emma's suicide, Jacqueline Paskow states, "Instead of shaping a world through artisanal or artistic production or even reproduction…she endeavors to shape others' actions according to her desires. She particularly tries to seduce men, whom she regards as having more power than herself." Like Lydia, Emma Bovary attempts to assert her own independence through her interactions with men, not understanding her compliance with the social norms that have kept her oppressed. Paskow continues "[Madame Bovary's] suicide, then, may be seen as a confused effort to corrode and pulverize the whole obdurate, unloving world" (338). Through her rebellious self-destruction and her refusal of the world and gendered expectations offered her, Emma exerts her power over it. This, too, is the fate of Lydia. Never taught that she could *create* herself, Lydia is forced to live with the constructed self that society offered in shiny wrapping, a society which requests that all women be the same:

> Constant references are made in the text to 'men' and 'women' as undifferentiated groups of anonymous individuals who look and behave alike, as if uncritically adhering to given models of masculinity and femininity, suggesting that mass culture operates the most pervasively in its capacity to homogenize sexual behavior and thus to reduce the margins within which individuality of character can emerge. The idea is powerfully introduced at

> Lydia's first ball, where the heroine quickly disappears in a crowd of 'pretty artificial flowers.' (Mettifogo, 21)

In an attempt to find her own identity, stand out from the sea of homogenous and decorative 'flowers,' and make some mark, Lydia turns to seduction. She takes on the typical role of a man in courtship, transgressing her gender in order to gain some semblance of power and importance. When Lydia is in her thirties, she finally hopes that she has found some sense of identity by adhering to the path set down for her by society: wife. She falls in love, for once fulfilled not by games, but by her own emotion, and it is through this love that she finds a new sense of happiness (all the while conforming to the patriarchal social norms to which she knows no alternative). However, she soon learns that the man to whom she is betrothed is still entangled in the game; the lover of one of Lydia's friends he is merely a devious man in search of money. At this news, Lydia is devastated—for once, she felt that she had escaped the confines of her gilded prison, only to be reminded that the society into which she was born holds no fulfillment for her. However, the experience of love and heartbreak give Lydia a self-awareness which is not found throughout her youth. Unfortunately, this self-awareness drives her to suicide:

> Lydia commits suicide, revealing first to a friend: 'Ho provato ogni cosa. Perchè dovrei rassegnarmi? Perchè dovrei lottare? Non ho nessun ideale che mi sostenga; non ho nemmeno più la possibiltà di godere...' Lydia succumbs to societal pressure to fulfill certain roles because, as her words suggest, she does not have an ideal to support herself against such pressure. (Ramsey-Portolano, 56)

Realizing that her station in life as a woman (and particularly one of the upper class) offers no purpose, Lydia asks "why should I fight?" With no passion, no education, no ability to create, Lydia is left with only one option: to leave the society which has left her so unequipped and

unsatisfied. Like so many women, Lydia is "made vulnerable to manipulation, misery, and self-destruction by the pathetic ignorance of the world and of themselves, an ignorance forced upon them through domestic segregation, a misleading education, and the lack of positive female models" (Mettifogo, 77). Her mother's neglect, herself a victim of the paltry society, the complete lack of education and understanding of the world outside the court, as well as the hateful reactions of her community when she dared subvert her limited expectations force Lydia into a painful ignorance of the world and herself. When she is finally confronted by something meaningful (that is, her love and subsequent heartbreak), it is too late for her to understand how to cope. She realizes her own uselessness, a uselessness thrust upon her by a society that wants nothing more from its women. We can here recall again the tragic Emma Bovary: "Death as Emma conceives it is the extreme realization of a state of utter will-lessness or of supreme will-filness" (Paskow, 336). Like Emma, Lydia realizes her complete powerlessness, her lack of will in a society which asks nothing of her—asks that she *be* nothing—and in her only available act of willfulness, she kills herself using the revolver that "sembrava un gioiello" (Neera, 187). In so doing, Lydia makes a powerful statement against the culture which oppressed her; she puts the revolver to use, a *ninnola* crying out for a purpose as she finally allows the toy to fulfill its own.

Una donna

Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna* is often described as the first feminist Italian novel, its appearance in 1906 a reminder of the long-term oppression suffered by women in Italy. The work is semi-autobiographical, and while the protagonist does not successfully commit suicide, her attempt and later fleeing of her home and family reflects the same feminist protestation that is present in the stories of Ghismonda and Lydia. Aleramo's *donna* escapes the fate of the other

two *donne suicide* through her art, her writing giving her the purpose that Lydia so desperately craved and allowing her to escape the self-destruction of Ghismonda.

It is clear from the title of Aleramo's novel and the namelessness of the protagonist that she wishes for her story to be the story of any and every woman. And indeed, any woman (including Lydia) would benefit from the semi-autobiographical novel that paves the way for a genre commemorating the individual female experience. Like the other two stories examined here, *Una donna* is a story of growth, of a female's desire for self-actualization. "Indeed if the novel has a single, identifiable subject, it is the formation of consciousness, the slow, uneven development of one woman's awareness" (Caesar, 82). Because it is autobiographical and written in a retrospective first person, we are able to see with remarkable clarity the intellectual and spiritual journey led by *donna* (as I will refer to the novel's protagonist). This autobiographical narrative style offers a glimpse into the psyche of the protagonist that we are not allowed in Boccaccio's or Neera's works, but the style is not the only significant feature that distinguishes *Una donna*. The protagonist is the only of the three who does not physically commit suicide, though the book does end with her disappearance. These two features, the autobiographical point of view and *donna*'s ultimate survival, are inextricably connected: the very act of writing the first-person narrative saves *donna* from the same fate as Lydia. Returning to Lydia's final lament: "Non ho nessun ideale che mi sostenga," we can see that it is the lack of ideal, of purpose, that drives Lydia to her death. In *Una donna*, the title character is nearly driven to the same suicidal action, but in writing a journal, in writing *herself*, she finds identity and satisfaction that gives her life meaning and enjoyment. *Donna*'s unhappiness, like Lydia's, does not begin until adolescence. She begins the novel, "La mia fanciullezza fu libera e gagliarda" (Aleramo, 1). In that state of genderlessness, in which she has not yet had the expectations of her

sex thrust upon her, *donna* is able to first find joy. Her childhood is marked by an adoration of her father and the absence of her mother (a mother as unhappy and aimless as Lydia's), and a distinct desire to remain genderless. She cuts her hair, goes to work with her father, and seems to ardently fear puberty, without grasping exactly what the development of her femaleness means. She begins to work in her father's factory, still escaping her destined role as a woman, until she has the reality of her womanhood brutally pushed on her. The interaction with one of her father's employees seems to begin innocently:

> So soltanto che negli istanti di depressione succedenti al parossismo, una voce calda e giovanile, insistente, al mio fianco, mi sussurava parole di ammirazione sempidita, e quell'unica voce continuava, m'investiva coll'accento della passione. Ed incominciai a rispondere, con una incredulità che persisteva in me, e insieme una speranza che mi s'imponeva ardentamente: divenni dolce, remissiva. (Aleramo, 25)

The man's persistence and her instinct to become submissive and quiet reveal the dangerous subtleties of the patriarchal society in which she lived. The flirtation soon becomes extreme, and *donna* finds herself forcefully pressed against a bench in her father's factory, her clothes ripped, the man taking possession of her body as though she had no right to it of her own. After, still shaken and violated from the event, she thinks that she must belong to him: "Appartenevo ad un uomo, dunque? Lo credetti dopo non so quanti giorni d'uno smarrimento senza nome. Ho di essi una rimembranza vaga e cupa" (Aleramo, 27). The confidence with which he assaults her and takes ownership of her causes *donna* to herself believe that perhaps what she has experienced is love, as degrading as it may seem. The expectation of her gender is to be possessed, to be made a wife (and thus "save" her from her own sexuality), and through this brutal act she loses

autonomy over her own body. She is given in marriage to her rapist by her father, and desperately tries to find meaning in her new life of domestic confinement:

> Io volevo credere alla mia felicità, presente e avvenire; volevo trovare bello e grande l'amore, quell'amore dei sedici anni che riassume alla fanciulla la poesia misteriosa della vita. E nessuno, vicino a me, mi guardava negli occhi, entrava nella mia anima, mi diceva le parole di verità e di forza ch'io avrei ancora saputo comprendere. (Aleramo, 32)

She had completely lost the carefree androgyny of childhood, instead forced into her expected role as woman: obedient wife and submissive plaything. In the above passage, however, she expresses the extreme loneliness of that position: with no one to listen (and truthfully, who would care?) to her innermost thoughts and emotions, *donna* finds herself lost in her own femaleness, which she was never able to explore freely or to enjoy, unsure of who she is or what she wants and knowing only that her femaleness leads to violence and oppression. Because of the nature of the retrospective narrative, *donna* has an unusually clear vision of her plight, and this psychological view is very important to the understanding of her ability to escape the fate of Lydia. In fact, Lydia's fate is similar to that of *donna*'s mother, who is committed to an asylum (that age old symbol of female confinement) after a suicide attempt. Looking at her feeble mother, *donna* recognizes her own fragility as a woman, her own state of confinement.

> Io la osservo con tenera mestizia, con un senso vago di timore per me stessa, riconoscendomi fragile come lei, chiedendomi se veramente io avessi maggior fortuna e non m'illudessi fidando nell'amore, com'ella s'era illusa. (Aleramo, 29)

Donna reflects on her mother's self-sacrifice, her rejection of self-awareness in exchange for her conformity to her maternal obligations, and she wonders if her mother's fate is the fate of all women. Through art, however, she finds a way to escape that tragic fate. In the confines of her

home, her "stanzetta," the diminutive word itself expressing her confines, *donna* searches desperately for purpose. She finds it first in the birth of her son, using her role as mother to give her life meaning, to offer her self-identification. First through her pregnancy, she is given the ideal that Lydia lacked: "Lentamente ascoltai in me destarsi gli istinti di madre; sentii che mi sarei votata a quel piccolo essere che si formava nel misterio...Avevo, alfine, uno scopo nell'esistenza, un dovere evidente" (Aleramo, 44). Finally, *donna* found *uno scopo,* an purpose, in her life, a reason to continue on in her miserable incarceration. When her son is born, she is able to take some joy in him, but there is still something missing. Although she has fulfilled her societal obligation as mother, *donna* has yet to discover herself.

Throughout the book, there is great emphasis placed on the passing of time through descriptions of weather and seasons, detailed descriptions of the quotidian, and a clear record of days and dates in the retro-autobiography. This focus on the slow passage of time expresses the painfully slow progression of days, months, and years, as *donna* continues to live, confined in a home with an abusive husband, living only for the love of her infant son. Soon, she turns to that same consolation as Emma Bovary and responds to a suitor (though their flirtation never becomes physical). She attempts to find meaning in that other role that society offers women: lover. Finding that role equally as unfulfilling and suffering intense abuse from her husband because of her transgression, *donna* seems ready to fall into the fate of her predecessors:

> Tornai in sala. Nella credenza v'era una boccetta di laudano, quasi piena. La trangugiai per due terzi, fino a che l'amaro non mi chiuse la gola. Mi stesi sul divano. E rapidamente mi sentii invasa da un dormiveglia leggero, da un riposo di tutte le membra...Quando il mio marito rientrò, non so se dopo un ora o poco meno, il mio sopore dapprima gli parve simulato; e riprese, con minor violenza, ad insultarmi...Dovette cadergli a un tratto lo

> sguardo sulla boccetta rimasta sul tavolo. Si chinò su me, comprese. Afferrò il vetro col resto del veleno e si precipitò in strada mentre io accoglievo vagamente il pensiero che ogni aiuto sarebbe stato vano. (Aleramo, 67)

Donna swallows two thirds of a bottle of pills an lies down on the couch, hoping for an eternal relief from the cruelty and self-neglect that she experiences in her home. She apologizes to her son before she attempts suicide, telling him that she is exhausted and can simply no longer tolerate the imprisonment and abuse. As she fades away, she takes pleasure in this act, knowing that nothing her husband says will be able to reach her once she is dead. We can imagine that Ghismonda and Lydia had this same moment of relief as they closed their eyes: finally, they were free from what society had to say. *Donna*'s attempt fails, however, and she is revived by a friendly doctor, and forced to reexamine her life. After this attempt at self-destruction, *donna* turns to something that Lydia was never able to try: self-creation. Because of her mistreatment and her struggle to conform to society's standards, she, like Lydia, suffered from complete ignorance of herself and her place in the world. Through writing she is able to explore her psyche and to understand who she is and who she wants to be. She begins to journal, to document her life and emotions. This document gives her purpose and validity, it reminds her of her own worth and humanity. It gives her something to look forward to, to expand upon, to create. Like Boccaccio's *brigata* saving themselves from the plague through their stories, *donna* saves herself from the horror of the world through her journaling and her self-exploration. As she creates the journal, *donna* creates herself, finding identity and confidence in her art. "Words become the means of consolation and communication, the negation of her isolation, and an affermation of her spiritual freedom" (Bassanese, 51). She is able to use her writing to escape from the confines of her domestic home, to broaden her mind and her world, and create a world within her own

mind, in which she was welcomed and understood. By finding this self-understanding, she gains the courage to leave. Although the writing gave her purpose, it also made her realize the inadequacy of her life, and it gave her the courage to find a life that she truly wanted. In the throes of her suicide attempt, *donna* was unsure that she was worth a life of happiness, or strong enough to escape her current state. In writing herself, she finally believes that she *can* escape, and that she *deserves* to escape.

In a kind of suicide, *donna* must give up her maternal rights in order to leave. Her husband refuses to let her take the child, a legal separation is impossible, and she has no hope of gaining custody due to the legal restraints and customs of the period. Her cruel husband tells her these things with the hope that the guilt over of her expected role as woman will keep her in his home, but *donna* is already too self-aware to believe his manipulative threats. Although she deeply laments the loss of her son, she knows that their separation was for their own good: "Come avevo potuto? Oh, non ero stata una eroina! Ero il povero essere dal quale una mano di chirurgo ne scelle un altro per evitar la morte d'entrambi..." (Aleramo, 161). To save herself (and therefore to save her son), *donna* knew that she must leave him behind. She metaphorically kills the "old" her, the her that everyone had wanted and expected her to be, the her that was submissive and prayed for happiness in a miserable home. Through her disappearance, the suicide of the Lydia inside her, *donna* is finally able to find peace.

> Guardando in faccia la vita e la morte, non le temo, forse le amo entrambe...Tutto si sovrappone, si confonde, e una cosa sola, su tutto, splende: la pace mia interiore, la mia sensazione costante d'essere *nell'ordine*, di potere in qualunque istante chiudere senza rimorso dli occhi per l'ultima volta. In pace con me stessa. (Aleramo, 164)

The peace that the protagonist finds in the conclusion of *Una donna* is the peace and self-worth that we should wish for all of these female characters, and all females in general. Ghismonda, Lydia, and Aleramo's alter-ego were raised in a society which undervalued and underestimated their power. Through their transgressions, be it their sexual liberation and bending of social norms or their decision to self-create instead of self-sacrifice, these women assert their importance and their autonomy. Their stories are gendered and highly informed by the cultural and historical relationship that Italy has to its women, and this fact is important in reading their suicides. These suicides, be they literal or metaphorical, cannot be condemned as sins, nor can they be accepted as conformity to ideals of honor and Love. Instead, their suicides are feminist protests: rejections of a world and a society that offers them nothing.

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