

PIRANDELLO'S LEGACY IN GOLIARDA SAPIENZA'S NARRATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the influence of Pirandello's works on the Sicilian writer Goliarda Sapienza (Catania 1924 – Gaeta 1996). Criticism on Sapienza has so far focused on identifying major themes and structures of her works, and inserting them in a context of literary and philosophical parallels, inside and outside of Italy.¹ This article inaugurates a new direction in Sapienza studies, consisting in the investigation of her relationship—as actress and writer—to one of her fundamental sources, Pirandello, thus also adding a new important element to the study of Pirandello's legacy. Sapienza's encounter with Pirandello came early in her life, and its effects were long-lasting and significant. Before becoming a writer of novels, poems, film and play scripts, she trained and worked as an actress in Rome, performing in several plays by Pirandello, and she repeatedly cites Pirandello as part of a literary and theatrical tradition that left a substantial mark on her works. References to Pirandello are indeed ubiquitous in her works, diaries and letters, and she often

responds to him as a source of inspiration and a model. She writes for example in her diary: ‘Pirandello sempre vivo qui con noi, nelle nostre storie. Dopo di lui non si può inventare più nulla, e divaghiamo ancora nelle nostre opere insieme a Freud e Marx.’² [‘Pirandello is always alive here with us, in our stories. After him, we can no longer invent anything, and we still wander off in our works together with Freud and Marx’]. And again: ‘Aiuto Pirandello, aiuto!’³ [‘Help me, Pirandello, help me!’]; ‘Ho cercato [...] forse “a modo mio” come direbbe Pirandello’⁴ [‘I tried, perhaps “in my own way”, as Pirandello would say]; ‘ho cominciato a lavorare. Miracolo! Durerà? Con l’aiuto di dio Pirandello forse...’ [‘I started working. Miracle! Will it last? With the help of god Pirandello, perhaps...’].

Critics such as Angelo Pellegrino, Maria Rizzarelli and Argia Coppola have begun pointing out the importance of this cultural and artistic reference, although they did not further investigate it, which conversely this article sets out to do.⁵ Discussing Sapienza’s relationship with Pirandello’s work, for example, Pellegrino notes: ‘Arriviamo così a Pirandello, di cui Goliarda sosteneva di avere appreso la lezione fino alle estreme conseguenze e amava considerarsi modestamente una semplice illustratrice.’⁶ [‘And so we come to Pirandello, whose lesson Goliarda maintained she had learnt to its extreme consequences, and of which she considered herself simply an illustrator’]. Even though, as we shall see, Sapienza’s works constitute something different, and

more, than a simple illustration of Pirandello's lesson, this statement accounts in part for the depth and intensity of such a cultural influence.

Sapienza inherits, and develops with original results, many features and themes of Pirandello's works, in particular from the 'existential phase' of his theatre, comprising, among other plays, *Così è (se vi pare)* (1917) [*So It Is (If You Think So)*], *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921) [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*], *Enrico IV* (1921) [*Henry IV*] and *Vestire gli ignudi* (1922) [*Clothing the Naked*], in which Pirandello unmasks social conventions of bourgeois society and represents the ambiguity of the human condition, split between identity and mask, truth and lies. From a thematic perspective, Sapienza's narrative engages with the theme of madness and obsessions, the performative quality of identity, the impossible coincidence between self and social mask, and a radical criticism addressed at middle-class hypocrisy. In terms of structure, the predominance of monologues and dialogues over action; the philosophical attitude; the foregrounding of the fictional dimension of representation (that is, meta-theatre and meta-narrative), and a related use of theatre and narrative as metaphors of life itself are all elements of continuity between Pirandello and Sapienza.

I start here by providing an overview of Sapienza's artistic production and its connection to that of Pirandello. I then concentrate on Sapienza's role as a Pirandellian actress, and her self-representation as a Pirandellian character,

from which a conflation of life and art, identity and performance, emerges. I conclude by illustrating some important differences between Pirandello and Sapienza, accounting for the latter's significant originality.

SAPIENZA'S WORKS: AUTO-FICTION AND PERFORMATIVE NARRATIVE

Sapienza was born in 1924 in Catania, Sicily, to a family of left-wing and anti-fascist activists. Her mother, Maria Giudice, was a distinguished member of the Socialist Party, as well as one of the most prominent feminist militants of her time. Sapienza worked in theatre and cinema in Rome, before suffering from a serious case of depression and trying, twice, to kill herself. Her memory was disrupted as a consequence of an electroconvulsive therapy to which she was forcibly subjected, and she then recovered thanks to psychoanalysis and through writing. Her artistic activity is situated between the late 60s and the 80s, but her major work, *L'arte della gioia* ['The Art of Joy'], was published posthumously and came to achieve success only in recent years thanks to foreign translations, launching the posthumous publication of more works.⁷ Among these is her volume of play scripts and film synopses, *Tre pièces e soggetti cinematografici* [*Three Plays and Film Synopses*], which came out in 2014.⁸

Sapienza's works can fruitfully be ascribed to the category of 'autofiction'—a combination and contamination of autobiography and fiction.⁹ 'Autofiction' was used initially to designate the impossibility of truth and transparency of meaning in modern autobiographies; it is then used, especially in the Francophone context, to refer more broadly to autobiographical novels featuring an undecidable boundary between reality and fiction. Considerably ahead of their times, Sapienza's novels combine both meanings, as they explore the mechanisms of mediation, distortion and creation at work in autobiographical writing, and embrace a hybrid form of autobiography through which the author manipulates her own story. Within the great variety of topics, styles and literary forms, most works represent female protagonists engaged in troubled and rebellious paths of identity construction and negotiation. These are for example children who are brought up in an anti-conformist environment in fascist Sicily, such as the protagonists of *Lettera aperta* ['Open Letter'] and *Io, Jean Gabin* ['Me, Jean Gabin'] or a queer and anarchist princess, such as Modesta in *L'arte della gioia*, or again convicts and drug addicts in *L'università di Rebibbia* ['Rebibbia University'] and *L'arte del dubbio* ['The Art of Doubt'].¹⁰ Overall, Sapienza shares with Pirandello a profound interest in identity and its conflicting relationship with society, with its related themes of madness, lies and masks. Moreover, she shares with him a centrality of theatre as a structuring metaphor, where reality and fiction conflate and identity

becomes indistinguishable from performance—a situation Pirandello explores to its extreme in *Sei personaggi* and *Enrico IV*.

While Sapienza's theatrical texts overtly focus on the performative quality of identity and its inherent ambiguity, her narrative texts also feature a tension towards theatre. Interacting with others is consistently equated to acting, and identity formation is inseparable from the fictional discourse. As Argia Coppola notes, 'è importante stabilire quanto la cifra teatrale della Sapienza appartenga e condizioni tutta la sua opera letteraria'¹¹ ['it is important to establish to what extent the theatrical imprint belongs to, and conditions, her whole literary *œuvre*']. Similarly, Maria Rizzarelli rightly points out 'l'inconfondibile vocazione performativa della sua scrittura. La proiezione drammaturgica della sua parola, volta ad abbattere le barriere di generi e forme, trova così il luogo più felice per trasbordare quella incessante e drammatica *quête* dell'identità'¹² ['the unmistakably performative vocation of her writing. The dramaturgical projection of her words, aimed at breaking the barriers of genres and forms, thus finds the best place for conveying that incessant and dramatic *quête* for identity']. Sapienza's narrative can thus be defined as performative, in two correlated senses: first, narration is presented as a theatrical performance, an oral speech addressed to the readers who are present in the same space as the narrator; second, narration is the process through which the narrator realizes her own identity formation. In other words, as

Sapienza writes, she becomes a writer, an artist, thus realizing her own new identity. Narration tends to theatre, and identity formation tends to narrative performance, with a coincidence of author, narrator and character.¹³

SAPIENZA AS A PIRANDELLIAN ACTRESS

I want now to explore the theme of conflation of identity and performance, life and art, in Sapienza's role as a Pirandellian actress, but also in shaping her self-representation as a Pirandellian character. Theatre, and the theatrical metaphor so extensively employed by Pirandello, appear to be more than just a cultural source for Sapienza: it is, rather, an interpretative paradigm, a structuring conceptual frame, a lens through which Sapienza makes sense of her own life and constructs her narrative.

Sapienza began acting at an early age, when, under her father's guidance, she practised on the texts of Sicilian tradition, as she recounts in *Lettera aperta*:

Leggevo e imparavo a memoria tutti i lavori teatrali che trovavo per casa. [...] Prendendomi per mano [mio padre] mi portò nel suo studio e mi mostrò Verga, Pirandello, Capuana. Mi lesse il dialogo di Santuzza con compare Alfio facendo le due voci, proprio come un puparo; e lesse anche

il monologo di Ersilia Drei già avvelenata, che viene a morire in scena al terzo atto.¹⁴

In 1942 Sapienza won a scholarship to study at Silvio D'Amico's Academy of Dramatic Arts and moved to Rome. There she started her acting career, which would be interrupted in 1960 due to her increasing impatience with the theatrical environment in Rome and to her incipient psychological crisis. Between 1942 and 1960, she performed in various plays by Pirandello: *All'uscita* ['At the Exit']. Rome, 1942; *Così è (se vi pare)*, in the role of Dina, Teatro Eliseo, Rome, 1942; *Vestire gli ignudi*, in the role of Ersilia Drei, Rome, 1951; *Liolà* [*Liolà*], in the role of Mita, Naples, 1960, meeting popular and critical success. Particularly noticeable was her performance as Ersilia Drei in *Vestire gli ignudi* in 1951, as emerges from a review by Silvio D'Amico which tears the production to pieces, but praises Sapienza's acting:

La cronaca è felice di segnalare la rivelazione d'una giovanissima. Goliarda Sapienza. La quale, nella parte di Ersilia Drei, la moribonda in cerca d'una veste decente per coprire la nudità della sua povera agonia, si è data con un abbandono e, insieme, con una misura, sufficienti a illuminare la tragedia, e a portare gli astanti a un crescendo d'interesse e di commozione.¹⁵

Francesco Maselli, the Neorealist film director and Sapienza's partner for twenty years, describes her acting style as powerful and very personal, close to Stanislavsky's method, according to which the actor goes through deep identification with the character. Sapienza had, Maselli writes, a 'modo di recitare in totale semplicità, [...] sussurrato che arrivava su fino al loggione. [...] Aveva una recitazione violenta, realistica e atroce. [...] lei da sola creava quella modalità interiore, stanislavskiana'¹⁶ ['way of acting in complete naturalness, [...] a whispering that reached the gallery. [...] Her acting was violent, realistic and cruel. [...] She alone created that internal, Stanislavskian modality'].

In several autobiographical passages, Sapienza recounts her long, intensely physical training in acting, which she started in Catania and then continued in Rome. As a child, she follows the instructions of the puppet master Commendator Insanguine: 'Un attore deve seppellirsi, tacere un lungo periodo, per digerire bene le battute e lasciare che la voce, le intonazioni decantino dentro di lui come il vino'.¹⁷ ['An actor must bury himself, stay silent for a long time, in order to digest the lines fully and let the voice and its intonations decant within himself like wine']. Her account shows her understanding of acting as merging the identities of actress and character, where indeed the boundary between performance and identity is blurred, as the actress physically incorporates the character:

Tutti i pomeriggi andavo dalla signora Melissa e scivolavo nella sua voce bassa come un pozzo, con tale intensità che [...] mi girava la testa.

Camminando trattenevo il fiato, poi lo espiravo per ispirarlo fino a gonfiare il torace. [...] gridavo le battute con la voce fonda della signora Melissa.¹⁸

Nel portone ogni notte le donne sedute in terra, una stretta all'altra, pregavano, gridavano, invocavano nomi. I vecchi, seduti coi cappelli in mano, tacevano, e io [...] ripetevo con le donne, seguendo i gesti di disperazione con tutto il mio corpo, le loro invocazioni, i loro gridi. Dovevo imitarle perfettamente, essere un puparo ed entrare nella loro carne, nella loro voce. Presto sarei stata una di quelle ossesse, in una compagnia vera, accanto ad un attore vero come Marcellini.¹⁹

SAPIENZA AS A PIRANDELLIAN CHARACTER

In Sapienza's semi-autobiographical narrative, acting is not only what she does as an actress, but also a metaphor for the subjugation to social expectations. This is particularly evident in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*

['Midday Thread'], in which she describes a process of compliance with external expectations, which slowly but fatally annihilates her as an individual:

Cominciai a marciare intorno intorno e tutti applaudevano e ridevano... la recita andava bene, la memoria funzionava ma, man mano che dicevo le battute e marciavo sentii le mie gambe al ritmo della marcia diventare rigide, di legno, scricchiolavano e anche le braccia... la carne stoppa... le gambe scricchiolavano sempre più forte e caddi a terra rotta in pezzi.²⁰

Moreover, Sapienza often refers to her talent for acting and entertaining as a form of prostitution, carried out in order to attract love and attention.²¹ As such, acting becomes a metaphor for the manipulation of the self to conform to other people's expectations.

In her self-representation, Sapienza as an actress becomes herself a Pirandellian mask, trapped in a conformist role—that of the successful actress. In a 1956 newspaper article entitled *Goliarda Sapienza pirandelliana e no*, we read: 'Spesso le chiedono di interpretare altre commedie di Pirandello. Goliarda Sapienza risponde: "No". A malincuore, ma con atto di modestia. Affrontare un'interpretazione pirandelliana non è cosa di tutti i giorni.'²² ['She is often asked to act in other plays by Pirandello. Goliarda Sapienza replies: "No". Reluctantly, but as an act of modesty. Engaging in a Pirandellian role is not something you can do every day']. This 'interpretazione pirandelliana'

leaves room for ambiguity, as it may refer to Sapienza interpreting the role of a Pirandellian character in a theatre, but also to Sapienza as a person interpreting the role of the successful actress, in everyday life. Testimonies and reviews of the time indeed depict Sapienza as weary of celebrity and reluctant to immerse herself fully in the role of the famous actress, to the point of declining Luchino Visconti's offer to join his company. Maselli describes her attitude as a 'vocazione alla lateralità'²³ ['propensity to marginality'], and D'Amico laments Sapienza's hesitancy towards her acting career: 'Perché mai questa attrice, che i buongustai conoscono da un pezzo ma il gran pubblico no, si contenta da anni delle sporadiche apparizioni sullo schermo, senza ancora decidersi per la grande scena di prosa?'²⁴ ['Why does this actress, whom the experts have known for a long time but the larger public does not, content herself with rare appearances on screen, without finally deciding on the major theatrical stage?'].

Ultimately, acting becomes an unbearable mask for her, which she decides to take off. In *Lettera aperta* she recounts how in the early '60s she withdrew from the social figure of 'the actress', and began instead a personal search for identity through writing.

A Roma [...], entrai nel compromesso, mi rattrappii nel servaggio di avere successo ai loro occhi, di piacere. Credevo alla loro serietà e alla mia, e per venti anni rimasi anchilosata a servirli, a dire parole ambigue. [...] e

cominciò una lotta di venti anni fra questo bambino e il grande conformista nascosto nelle mie vene, [...] spingendomi alla morte vera, in clinica. Là mi svegliai cadavere con quei due dentro di me che ancora lottavano e non riuscivano a mettersi d'accordo. Davanti a tanta lotta cominciai a dubitare di me, degli altri. Pensai di dover fare un po' d'ordine, lavarmi la faccia, soffiarmi il naso, rovesciare il cassetto, mentendo o no.²⁵

The expression 'mentendo o no' ['whether lying or not'] refers to the literary enterprise that she is carrying out in *Lettera aperta*, a not strictly truthful account of her life, in order to reconstruct a new identity for herself, after abandoning the career of actress and falling prey to depression. Her writing remains suspended between truth and lies, between autobiography and fiction, but in the act of writing she seeks an authenticity that breaks the mask and brings about a renewed agency. If Sapienza is a Pirandellian character, through writing she decides to become the author of herself:

Oggi, 10 maggio 1965, compio 41 anni ed ho quasi finito questo mio libro che se riuscirò ad impararlo a memoria—io non so improvvisare: ho fatto l'attrice e devo, per parlare, avere un copione—sarà il mio parlare a voi. Oggi rinasco o forse nasco per la prima volta. Ho un anno, solo un anno.²⁶

STAGED AND SOCIAL SUICIDES

Sapienza's self-representation as a Pirandellian character is particularly evident in her recounting of her own failed or staged—she never clarifies the ambiguity—suicide attempts, and in her similarly unclear 'decision' to go to prison, which she equates to a social suicide. Physical or social suicide is a recurring theme in Pirandello's *œuvre*, as a coveted but ultimately impossible way to escape everyday imprisonment in a falsifying role. In *Il fu Mattia Pascal* [*The Late Mattia Pascal*] (1904) the protagonist eschews his unsatisfying life by ridding himself of his identity and taking up a new, invented one, that of Adriano Meis, only to discover that he cannot defy his mask without entirely excluding himself from society. In *Vestire gli ignudi* the unlucky protagonist Ersilia Drei tries to kill herself, and her act spurs a debate over the reasons that caused it, which are progressively revealed as a sum of inextricable lies. Similarly, the protagonist of *Enrico IV*, who after hitting his head believes he is the Emperor Henry IV, continues to play the role of an alienated man even after coming to his senses, thus committing a full social suicide in order to escape a harsh reality.

Sapienza's works display an intense fascination with the theme of staged suicide, part of a wider interest in staged identities and actions. In *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, for example, she recounts her own two

suicide attempts, which are presented alternately as intentional and accidental, aimed at causing death and aimed at starting a process of self-regeneration. In *L'arte della gioia* the protagonist Modesta plans to fall in a well, making sure she would be promptly rescued, in order to improve her desperate situation in the nunnery. At the moment of implementing her plan, however, she unintentionally slips into the well, hence blurring the line between staged and real suicide attempt. In *L'università di Rebibbia* we read of Barbara, a convict who cuts her wrists hoping that she would be released on probation. Suicide features prominently in the play *La rivolta dei fratelli*, in which Kriss is said to have staged a suicide attempt: 'Finto suicidio! Solo Kriss può avere delle idee così vitali!'²⁷ ['A faked suicide attempt! Only Kriss could have such lively ideas!']. In the same play, Massimiliano, the 'father' of the commune, actually kills himself in a highly theatrical way, as the others find him half naked in his room with the word 'vergogna' ['shame'] written across his chest. Likewise, the whole play *Due signore e un cherubino* ['Two Ladies and a Cherub'] is centred on two mature women's decision to commit a joint suicide.

It is interesting to note that, among Sapienza's several references to Pirandello, many are related to the theme of suicide, either physical or social, showing the centrality of Pirandello's work to her conceptualization of this theme and shaping of her self-narrative. She writes for example in her diary:

Allora ci volli morire, come direbbe Pirandello, ma oggi no.²⁸

Devo andare avanti, anche per un motivo etico. Non voglio essere l'ennesima 'maledetta' che suicidandosi dà ragione al sistema [...]. E poi c'è anche una seconda ragione, tutta siciliana. Il dottor M. di Messina (mio analista selvaggio, vedi *Il filo di mezzogiorno*) aspetta di vedere coronare dal successo la diagnosi da lui emessa nel lontano '62—l'ho visto nei suoi occhi ogni qualvolta l'ho incontrato: 'Goliarda diventerà pazza o si suiciderà o andrà a cercarsi la morte correndo in motocicletta'. [...] Ora—come direbbe Pirandello, o qualsiasi contadino della mia isola—finché il dottor M. non muore, neanche io posso.²⁹

Moreover, when discussing her motivations for stealing jewellery from a friend—which led to her incarceration—she invokes Pirandello to explain the impossibility of disentangling them:

Fra le tante motivazioni che mi hanno spinto in quel posto, alcune sono state comprese [...], le altre ci vorrebbe un Pirandello per andarle a scovare una per una. Il Pirandello che c'è in me ha capito—a posteriori—che cercavo un funerale, cosa che ho avuto in pieno.³⁰

Cosa che non sospettavo, quando ho acceso la miccia, tutto Pirandello si è scatenato intorno a me e *come un suo personaggio* cerco faticosamente di capire il perché delle reazioni impensate di tanti amici ormai lontani, che sono tornati accanto a me a chiedere, esigere di spiegare loro il perché del mio gesto.³¹

We are here fully on a Pirandellian stage, with Sapienza as a Pirandellian character surrounded by her friends who, like the characters in *Vestire gli ignudi* or *Così è (se vi pare)*, try to penetrate the truth of her actions, and invariably fail. Sapienza's novels and plays, as well as her autobiographical accounts of her motivations, remain immersed in the same ambiguity between reality and fiction, person and character, normality and folly that characterizes many of Pirandello's works, which she explicitly uses to frame her own narrative.

LA GRANDE BUGIA

I want now to discuss an example of the articulation of Pirandellian themes in one of Sapienza's own plays, *La grande bugia* ['The Big Lie']. Sapienza's plays featured in the collection *Tre pièces*—which is still awaiting a dedicated study—actually constitute the part of her artistic production where Pirandello's influence is most evident.

La grande bugia opens the collection, and already from the title we are presented with a reference to fiction and lies. The play, published posthumously and never performed, circulated initially under a different title, *Il prezzo del successo* [‘The Price of Success’], which emphasised instead the negotiation between the individual and society.³² From different angles, both titles immediately suggest the Pirandellian quality of the play, which the text then confirms. *La grande bugia* tells the story of a famous actress, Anna, who throws a party to announce her decision to retire from the cinema industry, as she feels too old and wants to rest. Alessandro, a young screenplay writer, joins the party, hoping to convince Anna to play the role he wrote specifically for her. When Anna reveals her decision to stop acting, she sets in motion a process of mutual accusations and revelations among the guests, in a psychological climax which ends with her surrendering to her friends’ demand that she keeps acting. The initial order is recomposed, but the protagonist, ultimately defeated, is forced to keep wearing the mask of a successful actress. The whole play is dense with meta-theatrical elements, exploiting the theatrical metaphor to expose the mechanisms of masks and roles that imprison the characters. Rizzarelli writes:

I protagonisti sono chiamati così a raccontare la propria storia e, nel contempo, a indossare e nascondere la propria maschera, a interrogare e decostruire la propria identità. Altro elemento comune, e basso continuo, è

la concezione della scena come ‘sala operatoria’ in cui si porta allo scoperto, si illumina e si tenta di estirpare il cancro della menzogna che ammorba i rapporti umani.³³

In the opening scene, Anna is sitting on a sofa, in her living room, reading the script written for her by Alessandro. The situation is overtly meta-theatrical, with an actress reading a part written for her and also inspired by her. Interestingly, the role of Anna was inspired by Anna Magnani, the famous Italian actress, for whom Sapienza specifically wrote the part, although Magnani refused to play it. In Alessandro’s play, Anna is at the same time the source of the character, and its performer. The boundary between reality and representation, identity and performance, is already irrevocably blurred:

Quando ero viva ed originale non mi volevano, ora che tutto in me è diventato meccanico mi ammirano.

Non mi convincerà a rinunciare al mio viaggio... A volte perdo la memoria in scena... Esagerata! Senti senti... e ho l'impressione di non essere altro che una statua di cera. L'ho sognato anche... Hai capito? Questa sogna pure! Dov'ero? Sì, ecco! Vediamo il sogno.

Ho sognato che ero diventata una statua di cera e che mi esponevano nel ridotto fra le fotografie, i costumi e le parrucche del museo del teatro...

(un altro fulmine illumina la tenda. Anna si leva gli occhiali e lo segue con lo sguardo. Poi a bassa voce accarezzando il copione, chiuso, sulle ginocchia)

Pirandello, D'Annunzio, Ibsen. Non si staccano da lì. Un pizzico di Freud naturalmente... deve essere giovane, se ci ha messo questo pizzico di pepe e... però, non è male...!³⁴

Alessandro's script represents an actress who is forced into a mechanical role, which clashes with her authenticity and vitality. Through Anna's comments, Sapienza creates a distance from this kind of play, which is deemed to replicate the work of Pirandello, D'Annunzio and Ibsen. As the play continues, however, Anna finds herself closer and closer to the character envisaged for her by Alessandro. She feels trapped in her role as a famous actress, and is tired of obsessively manipulating the signs of age in order to play the roles of younger women. Nonetheless, she is not allowed to rest by those who love her, and in the end she is trapped in the role of an old, famous actress who plays the roles of younger women.

Pirandellian intertextual references are here multiple and dense, drawing especially on the relationship between character and performance staged in *Sei personaggi* and *Enrico IV*. I want here to focus on two, perhaps less immediate, connections. The representation of a character

interpreting a script that is at the same time written for her and inspired by her features in *Vestire gli ignudi*, in which the writer Ludovico reads Ersilia's story in a newspaper and, unconvinced of its veracity, decides to invite her to spend time with him and offers to re-write her story, including her future. Ersilia then would become both source and actress of the story he writes for her, and she finds herself negotiating her own story with Ludovico, working on the contrast between what happened and his imagination of it. When Ersilia's situation deteriorates and the future imagined for her by Ludovico is no longer possible, she states: 'Ma le giuro che avrei fatto di tutto, io, per esser quella che lei s'era immaginata! – Per lei sì, per lei sì, per lei potevo: perché si trattava di vivere nella finzione della sua arte!' (*Mn* III, 187) ['I swear I would have done anything to be the one you had imagined!—For you yes, for you yes, for you I could; because it would have meant living in the fiction of your art!']. This is precisely what Alessandro demands of Anna, that she live 'nella finzione della sua arte', as one of his characters, but in this case Anna is forced to accept, and the future arising from it is not one of liberty and joy, but rather one of falsehood and oppression. The performance of a role written by others, Sapienza shows in *La grande bugia*, cannot but reproduce mechanisms of inauthenticity that constrain individual identity and agency.

The second Pirandellian element worth mentioning here is the theme of age. In *La grande bugia*, Anna's distance from the role she is called to play centres on a difference in age—she feels tired of wearing a burdensome mask of youth.

E mi sono vista, seduta tra la gente giovane: non ancora ridicola, ma quasi, già col mento sempre in aria per stirare le rughe del collo, le sopracciglia immobili per le rughe della fronte [...]. Non voglio finire nel ridicolo! Sono vecchia. E questa mia vecchiaia me la voglio tenere per me e per quei pochi che, amandomi, non si spaventeranno delle rughe.³⁵

However, those who should love her do not actually accept her, and after the crisis she is forced to keep wearing her mask. The theme of a discordance between pretended youthful appearance and old age is a recurring one in Pirandello's work, for instance and most notably in his essay *L'umorismo* (1908) [*On Humour*], where he uses the image of an old woman, dressed up and covered in make-up in the attempt to look younger, to exemplify the humoristic contrast between being and appearance. The same humoristic figure features in Pirandello's historical novel *I vecchi e i giovani*, in which the old politician Francesco D'Atri is ridiculed by the narrator for dyeing his hair and beard yellow and for marrying a woman much younger than himself.

A significantly different representation of old age emerges from *L'arte della gioia*. Here, Modesta rejects altogether the notion that a certain appearance is suitable in old age, and reclaims the right to behave in complete independence of the expectations of others. In the concluding part of the novel, Modesta, who is now in her fifties, is walking in the sunny port of Catania with her twenty-year-old nephew Carluzzu. Overcome with joy at the two having had the same thought at the same time, she jumps into his arms, ignoring what people may think of the scene, when an old man actually smiles at the unusual couple. Modesta's view is clear, and is one of rebellion: 'Anche la parola vecchiaia mente, Modesta, è stata rimpinzata di fantasmi paurosi come la parola morte per farti stare calma, ossequiosa di tutte le leggi costituite.'³⁶ ['Even the term "old age" is a lie, Modesta. It's been crammed with scary ghosts, like the word "death", to make you be quiet, deferential to the established rules.']*³⁷ Differently from *La grande bugia*, which—like Sapienza's other plays—is fully inscribed within a Pirandellian dynamic, the anarchic spirit informing *L'arte della gioia* addresses the core of the conflict between the individual and society by engaging in a struggle in the name of authenticity, empathy and agency. Sapienza's semi-autobiographical works display a similar tension, as the narrator seeks to deconstruct the series of oppressive masks imposed on her as she was growing up and to re-establish contact with her own desires and with others. This takes us to a final,

fundamental consideration of the ways in which Sapienza's narrative departs from Pirandello's world-view, and the way in which she re-elaborates his legacy to achieve original results.

CONCLUSIONS: SAPIENZA, *PIRANDELLIANA E NO*

As we have seen, Sapienza incorporates the main themes and tensions characterizing Pirandello's work, and specifically an interest in identity and its masks and the relationship between the individual and society, with both authors relying extensively on the theatrical metaphors of acting, performance and mask.

In Pirandello's works, the mask represents the necessary and unavoidable mediation between the self and others. Pirandello's representation of identity never transcends a psychological individual dimension, so that his masks assume a timeless, metaphysical quality. If socialization and inauthenticity are co-extensive, for Pirandello rebellion is useless, for no emancipatory outcome can derive from it—and this is equally valid for his novels, such as *Il fu Mattia Pascal* and *Uno, nessuno, centomila* (1926) [*One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*], and the plays collected in *Maschere nude* (1958) [*Naked Masks*].³⁸

On the other hand, the narrator of Sapienza's semi-autobiographical works and Modesta in *L'arte della gioia* give voice to a strongly subversive desire,

which seeks to contest social conventions, reinstate a corporeal presence and establish empathetic relationships with others. Sapienza's representation of identity—and its conflict with itself and with society—is inserted into a personal history and a social order, which is first and foremost a gendered order. This is arguably related to Sapienza's feminist and Marxist background, so that individual alienation and oppression is understood in historical and political terms, rather than in psychological and metaphysical ones, as it is in Pirandello.

Sapienza's narrative thus involves a rebellious spirit, which in Pirandello's representation of a-historical masks remains desperately and angrily doomed to fail. Through her narrative, Sapienza deconstructs oppressive social norms and strives to recuperate a sense of the self that may enable agency—precisely what women have historically been prevented from exercising. As Sidonie Smith notes, significantly resorting to the theatrical vocabulary of the mask, in the context of marked social oppression, such as the one based on gender, 'the unified self disperses, radiating outward until its fragments dissipate altogether into social and communal masks. Thus woman's destiny cannot be self-determined, and her agency cannot be exercised.'³⁹ Against the dispersion of identity 'into social and communal masks', Sapienza's narrative grounds rebellion in the live matter of the body, a situated and desiring body, which introduces a discontinuity in the representation of a

self irredeemably split between authenticity and performance—however limited and precarious this flicker of authenticity may be. This fundamental difference between Pirandello and Sapienza is accurately captured by Pellegrino, who notes how Sapienza’s characters ‘non sono più le nevrosi della ragione pirandelliana, spesso pure forme logiche e mentali più che personaggi, ma figure fatte di corpo e sangue, corpi vivi insomma, di quella carnalità che mancò sempre al suo grande maestro’⁴⁰ [‘are no longer the neuroses of Pirandello’s rationality, which often are purely logical and mental forms rather than characters, but flesh and blood figures, live bodies, characterized by a carnality that her great master always lacked’].

Sapienza thus goes beyond Pirandello in that she reinstates a bodily presence, the source of a strong emancipatory desire. Participating in women’s struggle to become subjects, the representation of identity provided by Sapienza appears incommensurable with the trajectory of the modern subject, for there is not the sense of a previously universal and rational subject falling apart, but rather the coming to being of a new subjectivity. In other words, the path of self-reconstruction undertaken by Sapienza diverges from the inescapability of Pirandello’s mask, for it aspires to access agency where this has never been exercised before. Writing becomes for Sapienza a space where she can turn imposition and oppression into active creation and self-creation, as the narrator of *Lettera aperta* declares at the end of her journey: ‘Vi lascio per

un po': con questo poco di ordine che sono riuscita a fare intorno a me. Vorrei tacere per qualche tempo, e andarmene a giocare con la terra e con il mio corpo. Arrivederci'.⁴¹ ['I leave you for a while, with this little order I managed to create around me. I would like to stay silent for a while, and go and play with earth and my own body.']

This paper represents an initial exploration of some fundamental elements—thematic and structural—that connect Sapienza to Pirandello. There are several other aspects connecting Sapienza to Pirandello that I have only mentioned tangentially here: the theme of madness, the criticism of middle-class conformity and family, the Sicilian tradition, the predominance of words over action—but I hope I am inaugurating a new, important field of investigation in the study of Sapienza's works and Pirandello's legacy.

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- 1 Fundamental references include: Giovanna Providenti, ed., *‘Quel sogno d’essere’ di Goliarda Sapienza. Percorsi critici su una delle maggiori autrici del Novecento italiano* (Rome, Aracne, 2012); Monica Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza* (Milan, La Tartaruga, 2012); A. Bazzoni, E. Bond and K. Wehling-Giorgi, eds., *Goliarda Sapienza in Context. Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Literature* (New Jersey, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, forthcoming 2016); Charlotte

- Ross, 'Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions: Multiple Selves, Gender Ambiguities and Disrupted Desires', *altrelettere* (2012) <www.altrelettere.uzh.ch> [Last accessed 19 July 2014]; Claude Imberty, 'Gender e generi letterari: il caso di Goliarda Sapienza', *Narrativa*, 30 (2008), 51-61; Maria Belén Hernández, 'La fortuna literaria de Goliarda Sapienza', *Arena Romanistica*, 5 (2009), 140-52.
- 2 G. Sapienza, *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa. Taccuini 1976 – 1989* (Turin, Einaudi, 2011), p. 120 (October 1980). Translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 135 (April 1989).
- 4 Letter to Giulio (surname not known), Ponza, 26 July 1965. Sapienza's unpublished letters are kept in the Sapienza-Pellegrino Archive in Rome. I would like to thank Goliarda Sapienza's husband, Angelo Pellegrino, for providing me with a copy of the epistolary.
- 5 See Angelo Pellegrino, 'Introduction', in G. Sapienza, *Destino coatto* (Rome, Empiria, 2002), pp. 5-7; Argia Coppola, 'La rivolta dei fratelli. Un dramma di Goliarda Sapienza', in Providenti, *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 205-19; Maria Rizzarelli, 'Goliarda Sapienza, *Tre pièces e soggetti cinematografici*', *Arabeschi*, 5 (January-June 2015), 170-1.
- 6 Pellegrino, p. 6.
- 7 G. Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia* (Turin, Einaudi, 2008).

- 8 G. Sapienza, *Tre pièces e soggetti cinematografici* (Milan, La vita felice, 2014).
- 9 See Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: Une aventure du langage* (Paris, Seuil, 2008) and ‘Autofiction vs autobiographie’, *Tangence*, 97 (2011), 11-24; Marie Darrieussecq, ‘L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux’, *Poétique*, 107 (1996), 369-80. For a discussion of autofiction in the Italian context, see Carlo Mazza Galanti, ‘Autofinzioni’, *minima&moralia*, 8 July 2010. <<http://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/autofinzioni/>> [Accessed 28 March 2016].
- 10 G. Sapienza, *Lettera aperta* (1967) (Palermo, Sellerio, 1997); *Io, Jean Gabin* (Turin, Einaudi, 2010); *L'università di Rebibbia* (1983) (Milan, Rizzoli, 2006); *Le certezze del dubbio* (1987) (Milan, Rizzoli, 2007).
- 11 Coppola, p. 206.
- 12 Rizzarelli, p. 171.
- 13 It is interesting in this respect to note that Sapienza's own life and work have become the source of inspiration for other artists, especially in theatre. See *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, <<http://goliardasapienza2013.weebly.com/inspired-by.html>> [Accessed 10 December 2015].
- 14 *Lettera aperta*, pp. 151-52. ‘I used to read and memorize all the plays I could find at home. [...] Holding my hand, [my father] took me to his

studio and showed me Verga, Pirandello, Capuana. He read to me the dialogue between Santuzza and Alfio, doing both voices, just like a puppet master; and he also read the monologue of Ersilia Drei, who, already poisoned, comes to die on stage in the third act.’

- 15 Silvio d’Amico, ‘*Vestire gli ignudi al Teatro Pirandello*’, *Il Tempo*, 5 May 1951, p. 3. ‘We are happy to report the revelation of a very young actress. Goliarda Sapienza, who, in the role of Ersilia Drei, the dying woman in search of a decent dress to cover the nudity of her poor agony, gave herself with simultaneous abandon and measure, sufficient to illuminate the tragedy and take the audience through a climax of interest and emotions.’
- 16 Francesco Maselli, quoted in Maria Serena Palieri, ‘La Sapienza e lo scrivere’, *L’Unità*, 26 July 2003, p. 23. <<http://cerca.unita.it/ARCHIVE/xml/95000/91219.xml?key=PALIERI+MARIA+SERENA&first=201&orderby=0&f=fir>> [Accessed 10 December 2015].
- 17 *Lettera aperta*, p. 156.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 153. ‘Every afternoon I went to see Ms Melissa and slid into her voice as deep as a well, so intensely that my head was spinning. Walking, I held my breath, and then exhaled and inhaled again, inflating my chest. I shouted my lines with Ms Melissa’s deep voice.’

- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 155. ‘Every night in the hall the women, sitting on the floor, close to one another, prayed, shouted, invoked names. The elderly, sitting with their hats in their hands, remained silent, and I repeated with the women, following their gestures of desperation with my whole body, their invocations, their cries. I must imitate them with precision, be a puppet master and get into their flesh, their voice. Soon I would be one of those possessed women, in a real company, with a real actor like Marcellini.’
- 20 G. Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969) (Milan, La Tartaruga, 2003), p. 118. ‘I began marching all around and everybody clapped and laughed... the show was going well, my memory was working, but, as I was saying the lines, marching, I felt my legs stiffen at the rhythm of the march, like wood, they creaked, and so did my arms... flesh like coarse fabric... my legs creaked more and more and I fell on the floor, broken into pieces.’
- 21 *Lettera aperta*, p. 65. ‘Il bambino è il primo operaio sfruttato, dipende dai grandi e sempre, per un tozzo di pane, si abbassa a divertire, leccare le mani dei padroni, si lascia accarezzare anche quando non ne ha voglia: così comincia la prostituzione.’
- 22 ‘Goliarda Sapienza pirandelliana e no’, *Corriere d’informazione*, 13-14 July 1956.
- 23 Palieri, p. 23.
- 24 D’Amico, p. 3.

- 25 *Lettera aperta*, pp. 158-59. ‘In Rome, I entered a compromise, I was trapped in the need to be successful in their eyes, to be appreciated. I believed in their seriousness, and mine, and for twenty years I remained stiff, serving them, saying ambiguous words. And a twenty-year battle began, between this child and the great conformist hidden in my veins, driving me to actual death, in a clinic. There I woke up a corpse, with those two still fighting in me and not coming to an agreement. In the face of such a struggle I began having doubts about myself and the others. I thought I should tidy up things a bit, wash my face, blow my nose, empty the drawer, lying or not.’
- 26 *Lettera aperta*, p. 146. ‘Today, 10 May 1965, I turn 41 and have almost finished this book, which, if I learn it by heart—I cannot improvise: I was an actress and to talk I must have a script—will be my talking to you. Today I am born again, or perhaps I am born for the first time. I am one year old, just one.’
- 27 ‘La rivolta dei fratelli’, in *Tre pièces*, p. 110.
- 28 *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa*, p. 117 (October 1980). ‘Then I wanted to die, as Pirandello would say, but not now.’
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 166 (July 1989). ‘I must go on, also for an ethical reason. I do not want to be another “wretch” who by killing herself proves the system right. And then there is also a second, very Sicilian reason. Dr M. from

Messina (my wild therapist, see *Il filo di mezzogiorno*) expects to see his diagnosis from '62 come true—I saw it in his eyes anytime I met him: “Goliarda will become mad or kill herself or look for death on a motorbike”. Now, as Pirandello would say, or any peasant from my island—until Dr. M. dies, neither can I.’

- 30 Letter to Sergio Pautasso, Rome, 27 October 1981. ‘Among the many reasons that led me to that place, some were understood, the others need a Pirandello to individuate them. The Pirandello who is in me understood—a posteriori—that I was looking for a funeral, which I have had, fully.’
- 31 Letter to Adele Cambria, 23 October 1980. My emphasis. ‘I had not anticipated it, but when I lit the fuse, all of Pirandello rampaged around me, and *like one of his characters* I try hard to understand the reason for the unexpected reactions of many friends, long distant, who came back to ask—to demand that I explain to them the reasons for my actions.’
- 32 According to Pellegrino, the title *La grande bugia* was used by Sapienza as an alternative to *Il prezzo del successo*, and he chose it as the final title when curating the volume. This information was provided by Pellegrino in an e-mail exchange, 23 September 2015.
- 33 Rizzarelli, p. 170. ‘The protagonists are called to tell their story, and to wear and hide their mask at the same time, to interrogate and deconstruct

their own identity. Another common element, and background tone, is the conception of the stage as a surgical room, where the cancer of the lie that infects human relationships could be uncovered, illuminated and possibly eradicated.’

- 34 *La grande bugia*, in *Tre pièces*, pp. 19-20. ‘*When I was alive and original they didn’t want me, now that everything in me has become mechanical, they admire me. He will not convince me to quit my trip... Sometimes I lose my memory on stage... So excessive! Listen... and I feel like I’m nothing but a wax statue. I even dreamt it... Got it? She even dreams, this one! Where was I? Yes, here! Let’s see the dream. I dreamt I had become a wax statue and they exposed me in the foyer, alongside the pictures, the costumes and the wigs of the theatre museum... (another flash of lightning illuminates the curtain. Anna takes off her glasses and looks at it. Then, in a low voice, touching the script on her knees) Pirandello, D’Annunzio, Ibsen. They remain stuck there. A pinch of Freud obviously... he must be young, if he put this spicy pinch and... actually, it’s not bad...!*’. Italics reflect the original.

- 35 ‘*La grande bugia*’, pp. 85-86. ‘I saw myself, sitting with young people, not ridiculous yet, but almost, already with my chin up to smooth out the wrinkles on the neck, my eyebrows motionless to avoid forehead wrinkles. I don’t want to end up being ridiculous! I’m old. And this old age of mine

I want to keep it for myself and for those few who, because they love me, will not be scared of my wrinkles.’

- 36 *L'arte della gioia*, p. 481.
- 37 G. Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*, trans. by Anne Milano Appel (London, Penguin Books, 2013), p. 632.
- 38 For a political critique of Pirandello's understanding of identity, see Gian Franco Venè, 'È l'alienazione che condanna gli uomini alla loro classe sociale', in G. F. Venè, *Pirandello fascista: la condizione borghese tra ribellione e rivoluzione* (Venice, Marsilio Editori, 1981), pp. 103-12.
- 39 S. Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 13.
- 40 Pellegrino, p. 7.
- 41 *Lettera aperta*, p. 59.