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Giacinta Plays Thérèse

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Giacinta Pezzana (1841-1919) is remembered above all for the artistic relationship that she had with the young Eleonora Duse, for her rebellious nature and for her interpretation of Thérèse Raquin in the drama of the same name by Emile Zola. This character became her greatest endeavour from 1879 to 1916. Her interpretation was significant for her performative approach in the context of a "theatre of the character" rather than that of text, as was typical of the 19th century. As well as the usual sources - reviews, testimonies, anecdotes, photographs - in this article I will use references from her letters to friends (such as Giorgina Saffi, a follower of Giuseppe Mazzini; the philanthropist Alessandrina Ravizza; and the writer Sibilla Aleramo) and to various stage personalities of the day.

As Rasi writes in a biographical entry dedicated to Giacinta Pezzana: "No actress of her time, including Ristori, [can] boast such vastness of repertoire". She created it without ever ceasing to follow "the most recent works of drama". Indeed she always searched for characters that put her in tune with emerging social controversy, female subjects above all. We are in the post-Risorgimento phase of the construction of the Italian nation, of definition of citizenship in a male sense, and of the establishment of emancipation movements for civil rights. The theatre-going public is more middle class, comprising women who had attained education and/or work and who demanded an updated stage repertoire. The theatre therefore filled with more autonomous female characters and this had repercussions on the role system: the Servant-girl tended to disappear while female supporting characters emerged, sometimes presenting themes of emancipation.

Giacinta Pezzana used a few topical characters, mostly performed in a critical way, bringing together in their behaviour traits reassuring femininity with elements of revolt towards the past. For example, Giacinta Pezzana asked the playwright Carlo d'Ormeville for "a new type [...] of daughter and wife", in a play that should not be in verse,

because prose "permits free vent to the emotions of the soul". (Naples, May 20th, 1868) She wrote to Luigi Alberti not only in order that he should remove from a drama of his "the pregnancy of Caterina, because this audience is a great lover of morals... in theatre" (Naples, April 26th, 1868), but also to thank him: "after so many adulteresses one will finally see an adulterer on stage. Male writers have the (very natural) habit of always studying, displaying and condemning the sins of the poor weaker sex, in order, I believe, to be even more proud of belonging to the stronger sex!" (Modena, December 21st, 1876)

Significant in this sense is the relationship with Vittorio Bersezio, the author of the *Miseries of Monssù Travet*, to whom she is tied by the work with the Toselli Company based in Piedmont. This experience was decisive in her formation and biography, because of the bonds between dialect and national theatre, between Piedmontism and international horizons, between popular performance and the research of an autonomous language, between social commitment and art, in a movement towards a "true" theatre.

The actress is so "enthusiastic about Travetti, that martyr of bureaucracy", that she would like "a female parallel" and she suggests to Bersezio "a subject for a comedy": a widow, "the head of a shop", who refuses the mutual love of a worthy shop assistant in order only to look after her own three children, bringing them up as workers and citizens. The correspondence with the edifying will of the post-Unity period is evident, but a further, non-conformist dynamic can be traced here as well. Travet's imaginary "sister" doesn't want to remarry perhaps also because she doesn't want to lose her independence, or the status of head of the family. Her acting couldn't annul her deep conviction, recurrent in her letters

that criticised the idealisation of marriage and maternity. Her analysis translated on stage with the small "asides" remarked by Ermete Zacconi or in her typical breaks in the flow of acting. These elements made the character problematic and showed her feminist engagement and her ethical conception of the actor.

Giacinta Pezzana reveals a restless dramatic intelligence and a "sensitive mobility", which hides a need to write in the first person and for the extension of what could become theatre, going beyond poetics and taking up the challenge of a phase marked by crisis as well as by pluralism. She belongs to an era that comes after the "Great Actor" and before the Dusiian revolution, between romanticism and naturalism. She doesn't limit herself to demanding new female figures and intervening with authors on the structure of their texts and characters. She goes as far as to propose, in old-fashioned Italy, a Hamlet *en travesti* and, at the age of thirty-eight, she ties her stage destiny to the old Raquin. The first character prepared for the second.

Giacinta Pezzana was tired of the role of loving woman and of the usual female repertoire. She didn't accept these limitations of role even in life. "Oh, if I were a man, how I would like to throw myself headfirst into this holy work of the people's regeneration": with this appeal, in a letter to her husband Luigi Gualtieri of March 18th, 1863, she concluded with an account of how, during a performance, "sad dejected nervous", she had found enthusiasm by joining in the songs of the republican audience, much to the consternation of the other actors concerned at her "audacity". She will feel the same sorrow for her own oppressed sex at the outbreak of World War I. Her Hamlet was charged with political motives: on the one hand for his nature as a character that contains in itself "the seed of all social

issues", because as in the *Divina Commedia* "everything is considered and nothing resolved"; and, on the other hand, for the recourse to cross-dressing, which monopolised attention and provoked visceral reactions: from defying her to perform to using her as a banner against prejudices.¹ Searching for "new creative horizons", attracted by the idea of surprising the audience and "challenging male brains", Giacinta Pezzana believed the cross-dressing to be legitimate because "in the field of art, intelligence doesn't have a sex", just as Hamlet's filial love doesn't. Dominating the role without "any virile brutality", she thought the greater "mobility of a woman's face" could better render Hamlet's numerous alternating impulses. Only a mature actress could confront the interpretative difficulty posed by this complex "character" of unresolved youthful traits, as Schlegel remarked.

Giacinta Pezzana loved the impulses of life in Shakespeare's theatre. She loved the fact that "the sublime contends with the ridiculous for the highest place" and certainly also for the use of cross-dressing. Her height and thinness fated her from the start of her career to interpret male characters. In maturity, the actress "has personified well" and has something virile in her face and voice. This is underlined by her refusal to consider women as the weaker sex, her resentment towards the luxury and fatuousness of fashion, and also by her role as effective head of a family, leading actress and political militant. Therefore her Hamlet didn't have the androgynous traits that would have been assumed twenty years later by Sarah Bernhardt: her build imposed a greater constriction, and, given the youthfulness of Hamlet, she had to compress her breasts with a ten metre long band of fabric.

1. *Amleto. Conferenza tenuta da Giacinta Pezzana Gualtieri in Buenos Aires - La donna*, 1882.



Film directed by Nino Martoglio, 1914

Little is known of Giacinta Pezzana's Hamlet, as no pictures remain, although the actress kept the costume until her death. But alongside predictable observations (her ability in duelling or in expressing "the symptomatological image of madness"), there is a precious one from Rasi that relates the way in which the utmost traits of "softness and vigour of her talent" were revealed in her work, those traits that must have coloured her Piedmont girls with sweetness, and her tragic heroines of devouring passions with fragility, with a "laughter bathed in tears" and a "silence more eloquent than the word". These changes and effervescence also animated her correspondence.

Her meeting with Zola's drama - a meeting which influenced her so much -

brings to the fore the theme of cross-dressing in a broad sense. The strong discrepancy in age and the "non-feminine" power that unfolded in this character, created such a distance that her daughter Ada Gualtieri supposed that Thérèse Raquin in Paris had been played by a man. Both characters substantially enlarged her repertoire, widening the range of both those passions she performed and her reputation for artistic experimentation. The central theme was revenge, invoked by the ghost of Hamlet's father and, in *Thérèse Raquin*, by the continual memory of her son Camille, killed by his wife (Thérèse as well) and her lover Laurent, in a feigned boating accident.

For Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* as a play was: "*un drame de la double vie des personnages et des milieux [...] moderne et réel*" (a true and modern drama presenting the double life of the characters and their environments).² Mother Raquin, old and later paralysed, is as if buried alive inside a horrendous house-shop, where a double reality is lived: by day everything seems to run as smoothly as always, while by night the couple obsessively relives the scene of the crime. The old woman, immobile and mute like a puppet, waits for her revenge.

The plot is Grand Guignolesque, but rightly Zola spoke of "*vide de l'intrigue et [...] minutie des détails*" (lack of intrigue and precision of details). The French critics received the drama with perplexity, noting a discrepancy between the intentions of the author and the result. But *Thérèse Raquin* could stimulate the creativity of particularly good actors with dramaturgical tendencies, like Giacinta Pezzana and Eleonora Duse, who confronted each other in the historic first Italian staging, at the Fiorentini of

Naples in July-August 1879. Giacinta Pezzana's power in performance transformed old Raquin into the protagonist, in a drama of staring and stillness, while Eleonora Duse found in neurosis, the modern feminine aspect of tragedy.

Giacinta Pezzana chose this much-debated drama for various reasons. The first reading disgusted her, but she could not manage to forget the "apocalyptic" character, with whom at the end she "falls in love". Therefore she gave the more mature role to herself and the leading part to the young Eleonora Duse. Giacinta Pezzana wrote about her choice to Antona-Traversi, who was writing a play for her, *Stabat Mater*:

You must entrust your work to me, but not trust only in me. I have to reach the author, not him search for me! So, a simple title, which won't create apprehension either in myself or in the others: a title, which doesn't smell of Pezzana... It's a coquetry in art, and it was this coquetry that pushed me, in Thérèse Raquin, to not play Thérèse (even though I was only thirty-seven at the time) and to choose the mother". (Catania, 15th November 1895)

Beyond the coquetry, beyond the attraction for what had never been done, there operated in Giacinta Pezzana an interest in the tragic in everyday life. Above all she saw the character's concentrated and extreme passions. This interest is revealed in her letters to Alessandrina Ravizza, in which crime reports are the object of passionate discussions. In 1891, the two friends did their best to organise a benefit performance in Milan, that would mark the return of Giacinta Pezzana to the stage (she had left it in 1887) beside Eleonora Duse and Ermete Novelli. Having dropped the idea of re-proposing *Thérèse Raquin* (now defined by herself as "a museum piece") the actress thinks of a new drama, inspired by a trial in

2. E. Zola, *Préface à l'adaptation théâtrale du roman in Thérèse Raquin*, Fasquelle, Paris 2001 [1873], pp. 289-295.



Giacinta Pezzana in *Thérèse Raquin*, act 4, when the paralysed Raquin suddenly stands up

Photo: Alvino

progress: the murder of Captain Fadda of which his wife and lover are accused.

Most of all *Thérèse Raquin*, thanks to its tragic structure and its quality as a modern drama in a lower-class setting, allowed Giacinta Pezzana to make good use of her multiple identity as an actress: her career formation in dialect theatre, which required comic abilities; the Great Actor approach to the character understood as a real psychological entity, gifted with a humanity "mysteriously similar to one's own"; a romantic base that led her to see the character as an enigma; and the adoption of the naturalistic code, as an instrument of essence, suitable to reconcile popular tradition and experimentation.

The actress gave life to a devastating journey - from affability, to harrowing pain, to a terrible crisis - managing to create the unforgettable icon of implacable and mute punishment, with gleeful eyes fixed on the guilty couple. Various testimonies (Ceccoli Gentile, Corsi, Alisoff, Boutet...) give witness to this. First Thérèse Raquin puts away "the tableware and the linen, chattering serenely with her son and daughter-in-law", "more attentive to folding the napkins well, than to the conversations in which she takes part"; in the second act "we see her at the table with the same old friends, crying while sipping the coffee and becoming very emotional remembering her son's death", to the point where she covers his portrait with kisses, lying down on the floor.

Then, in the third act, woken by the noise that comes from the married couple's room, she listens to their words and understands that her son has been assassinated. For some moments she remains standing, petrified in the doorway, the eyes exorbitantly dilated, the face contracted in pain, the hands trembling. After a few moments that seem extremely long, as if struck down, she collapses all of a sudden "like a mass of rags", screaming "murderers!" The fourth act is dominated by her immobile and dumb figure, who "passes on stage like a nightmare".

The actress found herself "ill at ease" in this state of absolute immobility, until she felt "the artistic impulse of that quiver of the head that allowed her to turn it tragically and threaten [the murderers] with her stare". (Letter to Boutet, Rome, February 1900) "All the interior life is concentrated in the eyes, that blaze with a wild fire, the body is completely still, the lips mute; only the neck shakes... Half dead as she is, she follows with attention the existence of the living and she sees how from their crime springs, by a natural process, the punishment". When eventually the two lovers kill themselves at her feet, imploring mercy, the paralysed woman "all at once gets up, as if by sudden magical strength, and with a tongue that still stammers, pronounces with implacable diabolic joy: 'Mercy?! Did you have any for that poor child whom I adored?'... " Then, becoming aware of the murderers' death, she lifts their arms, letting them fall back to the floor and shouts with a spine-chilling voice: "They have died too soon".

This performance of constriction given through the immobility of the body and loss of speech, can be re-read as a proof of accomplished performative rewriting and as an extreme lesson in stage presence. The energy produced by the bound, out of balance, body of a young woman creates a

mesmerising stage presence, while the expressionism of acting imposed by the subject of the drama demanded the substantial qualities of the great popular theatre tradition. A theatre that negated acting itself was taking shape, developing certain modes of dialect theatre. The revelation of the actor behind the character and her greater presence led to a climax of silence that produced meaning. The introversion of acting found an expressionistic form in the grimace, according to the taste for exasperation also typical of dialect theatre. Even the understanding of montage technique was enthroned: typical of Giacinta Pezzana was, according to Rasi, the research of "surprises and effects", creating with breaks in the rhythm "vertiginous overturnings of the epic montage and the registers used", with sudden close-ups or cries that catalyse the attention, so that the outbursts of passion, the tragic *dénouements*, explode from stillness rather than being prepared.³

Two tragedies were interwoven: the metamorphosis of the mother in vindictive fury, performed by Giacinta Pezzana, and the neurosis produced by a monotonous and hopeless life, interpreted by Eleonora Duse. As Primoli writes, this experience profoundly marked the young actress: intimidated in front of the older expert, at rehearsals "*elle avait joué sotto voce pour ainsi dire, avec sa grâce réservée et pouvait sembler insuffisante*" (she had played so to say *sottovoce*, with her reserved grace, and could have seemed deficient), but later she knew how to react:

In the great scene between the two women, Eleonora, carried away by passion, dared to raise her head: she felt then that Pezzana was staring at her with her lioness eyes, and that she

3. P. Puppa, *Giacinta Pezzana: scrittura e recita, in Parola di scena. Teatro italiano fra '800 e '900*, Bulzoni, Roma 1999, pp. 247-269.

seemed to experience more satisfaction than envy facing her pupil in this way. For herself, she was aware of the revolution happening in her; she exchanged dialogue with her antagonist that cut the air like a knife blade: Zola would have been pleased. Staring each other in the eyes, frothing at the mouth, both were sublime and it was impossible to say which of the two triumphed over the other.⁴

For her part, while filming the cinematographic version of *Thérèse Raquin* with Martoglio (1916), Giacinta Pezzana spoke of seeing her "pupil" Eleonora (and not the actual actress Maria Carmi) in the part of the young Thérèse.

With this performance Giacinta Pezzana makes a significant improvement: she doesn't place herself as the interpreter of the character so much as an actress of the human experience, conferring centrality to the subjectivity in the acting and therefore to her art. Her Raquin is an extraordinary proof of her acting skill, in which a non-psychological conception of the character is revealed. Because of this, paradoxically, it is *her* character: since it expresses to the highest degree her "frenzy of resistance" in life, together with the search for an original and meaningful language.

To say that the character was damaging for her career, because it tied her prematurely to a role for a mature actress, is just anecdotal. Her box office takings permitted her some "intellectual luxuries" (such as the Dantesque presentations, as a forerunner for one-woman-shows) and she was consecrated in her distinction as an actress and for her power on stage. It is thus symptomatic that Gabriele D'Annunzio wanted her to interpret Candia della Leonessa in *La figlia di Iorio* and then Donna Aldegrina in *La fiaccola sotto il moggio*: "Will I have the joy,

4. G. Primoli, *La Duse - Revue de Paris*, 1897, p. 495.



F. Scarpelli, portrait of Giacinta Pezzana, *Avanti della Domenica*, n. 5 (Feb. 1906)

finally, to hear Giacinta Pezzana in my verse?" wrote the poet to Boutet. And Giacinta Pezzana had explained to Sibilla Aleramo that his figure dominated "just with his presence". (Rome, March 3rd, 1906)

However, Giacinta Pezzana herself was aware of the fact that her Raquin wasn't just a heavy popular drama. In 1903 she thought of a new staging directed by André Antoine. "Feverish with hope", she mobilised the Saffi's network of friends in France and sent presentation materials (articles, biographies, photographs), but the economic demands of the famous founder of the Théâtre Libre constituted for her an insurmountable obstacle. (Letter to Maria Fortis, Rome, February 28th, 1903) Then the death of Zola put an end to this dream, nurtured with "the scruple of a forbidden love". (Letter to Giorgina Saffi, February 8th, 1903)

Zola's drama even influenced her own dramaturgical conceptions. If previously she had searched for characters such as wives,

mothers, widows, later her interests went toward extreme characters full of passion and tragedy. During her Sicilian exile she wrote a drama, *Amori!* (Loves!), that tells of Nedda, a flirtatious girl who abandons her fiancé, causing his death, and for this is killed by his mother. She deeply appreciated, in a letter to Sibilla Aleramo, the drama of the feminist Virginia Olper Monis, *Il castigo* (The Punishment): "It's about a woman who feels the pressing need to tell how she had poisoned her husband, but all this in a morbid state of psychic phenomena, that Zola described powerfully in the novel *La Bête Humaine* (The Human Beast). [...] Only Duse can render that type of exceptional difficulty. I'm thirty years too old! Otherwise I would really have liked to do it." (Rome, March 3rd, 1906)

Thérèse Raquin becomes mother of a family of (not always performed) characters with the help of her previous repertoire. For example the clothing of Zola's character is distinguished as little as possible, only enough to evoke the simple tunic that covered her Medea, with a further contrast in the heaviness of the make-up, to render the face corpse-like and unreal.

If Hamlet was a fatigue to be sustained only occasionally, Raquin, besides being a resource, was a work made up of a rigidly fixed score, with numerous ingredients put in a straight line. An effective symbol of mythic production, she repeated this play so many times that she suffered from synovitis in the knees as an indelible physical sign. But we mustn't forget that her long artistic life can't have been without changes. The youthful interpretation must have been electric, provoking the shock of her mute presence; while the later photographs that

remain show how the diminution of energy was compensated for by the precision of her postures: a natural result of being constructed meticulously.

Translated from Italian by John Dean
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