

# Decolonial Subversions

2023

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"Madam Mimma"

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## Abstract

The short story "Madam Mimma" by Luigi Pirandello deals with the disastrous aftermath of a poorly achieved Italian national unification (1861). The Italian Parliament's decrees outlawed century-old practices, like that of delivering children by midwives, utterly ruining Mimma's life. In her attempt to become the subject that the *piemontizzazione*<sup>2</sup> she is forced to live in the mimicry condition of the colonized. As a colonized subject, Mimma is expected to acquire a new identity like that of Piemontesa, the obstetrician who came from Piedmont to usurp her job. However, Mimma can never achieve "sameness" with Piemontesa; thus, she loses her job and alcohol becomes her only consolation. This article will read the work "against the grain" through a postcolonial lens, denouncing the creation of Italy's nation-state through Sicily's *piemontizzazione*.

**Keywords:** colonization, mimicry, biopolitics, *piemontizzazione*, *gioco delle maschere*

## Article

"Madam Mimma" is part of a collection of short stories, *Novelle per un anno* (*Short stories for one year*), published in 1937, after their individual publications in different newspapers and magazines, such as *Il Corriere della sera* and *Il giornale di Sicilia*. Pirandello's literary goal was to write a story for each day of the year; the project, though, was prematurely interrupted by his death (Radcliff-Umstead 2013, 344). The story published for the first time in 1912, focuses on the changes in cultural practices that Italy's unification entailed. In any society, cultures, just like classes and races, are unequally ranked and stay in opposition to one another, and in a relationship of domination and subordination (Hall 2011, 39). After Italy's unification, the northern Italian culture became the dominant and the southern the subordinate, further complicating the already present differences between the North and the South.

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<sup>2</sup> Some southern scholars, like Antonio Gramsci, considered Italy's unification to be only the colonization of the south by the region of *Piemonte* (Piedmont) (Fresu 2009, web).

In "Madam Mimma," the ranking of the two different cultures comes to the fore, shown in the devastating consequences that the imposition of the Piedmontese culture had on a midwife's life in a little village in Sicily. Mimma is literally put out of work by the arrival of a *Piemontesa*, a young woman who graduated from the University of Turin and holds a certificate of obstetrics. Through the antagonistic relationship of the two women, the story dramatizes the Pirandellian contrast between *vivere* and *vedersi vivere*, ("to be" and "to appear"), or to what critics have often referred to as *il gioco delle maschere* ("the wearing of masks") (Donati 1988, 33-48). In this story, *il gioco delle maschere* acquires a postcolonial connotation, since Mimma must attain a "mask" to look like her colonizer nemesis, *Piemontesa*, to avoid sure unemployment. This chameleonic feat requires her to lose her identity, which becomes her demise.

The idea of "wearing a mask" in a postcolonial reading reminds us of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. In his book, Fanon asserts that Black people, to be accepted by the white colonizers, consciously and unconsciously learn to perform the colonizers' identity: "the wearing of European clothes ... using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievement" (2008, 25). The performing of the colonizers' identity is necessary to hide cultural and linguistic origins, as well as skin color.

In most of his works, Pirandello brings to light the struggle between the modern subject and the bourgeois societal rules that tend to suffocate her individuality. This struggle forces the individual to "split," to constantly live between the contrasting conditions of *being* and *becoming*, *life* and *form*. For this reason, Pirandello's dramas have always been considered highly philosophical, since they tend to transcend modernity's ideological and political crisis to expose and give universal validity to the ontological and epistemological crisis of the modern human being (Donati 1988, 77-81).

However, with "*Donna Mimma*," Pirandello moves into the representation of a political and historical drama: Italy's unification, and its political and social consequences. This was not totally new territory for him, as he dealt with it in the novel *I vecchi e i giovani* (*The Old and the Young*) (1908). Pirandello tackles Sicilian intellectuals' disappointment with the unification for not delivering what it promised it would. Yet, whereas the novel takes place in the 1880s, "Madam Mimma" deals with the years just after the unification in 1861 when Turin was still the capital of Italy. This allows Pirandello to display Mimma's drama of *being* and *becoming* as a painful result of a poor process of national unification.

Although they are of the same gender and profession, Mimma and *Piemontesa* could not be more different. Pirandello takes great pains in drawing a very visible and dividing line between the two women. Mimma belongs to an almost ageless, idyllic, and mythical time. A time made of legends, innocence, and decent modesty:

When wrapped in a black, long shawl with a light blue scarf knotted under her chin, Mimma walks through the village's streets, basking in the sun, one could even say

that she does not project a shadow [...]As she walks she has a way to make everything around her look fake: the sky looks as if made of paper, and the sun looks like the star in the *crèche* [...]This is the world she represents to the children when she tells them that she went very far away to buy them [...] to Palermo with a beautiful, white, ivory litter pulled by beautiful white horses, without bells, along the dark streets [...] Mimma feels the sacredness of her work [...] but she covers it to the children's eyes with a veil of modesty [...].<sup>3</sup> (Pirandello 1957, 11 Translation mine).<sup>4</sup>

Pirandello starts depicting Mimma by describing her clothes: the scarf knotted under her chin and the long shawl wrapping around her body.

In nineteenth-century Sicily, these were the traditional clothes that veiled the woman's body. The scarf is knotted under her chin to cover her hair and a good part of her face as her long shawl covers her body. Her body, just like her work, needs to be veiled out of modesty with Mimma's presence, the village becomes softly fake and still like a *crèche*. The word *crèche* evokes the wholeness and holiness of this rural Sicilian village, not dissimilar from the sense of softness and sacredness present in Jean-Francois Millet's peasant paintings. In their respective works, both artists seem to transcend the hardship of the peasants' life through the quietness and blessedness of their representation.

As a result, their rural images become almost surreal, like Mimma, who does not even project a shadow and "makes everything around her look fake." Her world is made of surreal tales like her purchasing children in Palermo to be delivered by "a beautiful, white, ivory litter pulled by beautiful white horses." Through these "white" lies, she tries to protect the children from what she clearly regards as immodest and indecent: their parents' sexual desire. In *Mimma's* life, the only note of harsh realism is the image of the unplanned children further burdening their parents' misery: "It may be a great party for the wealthy families and their newborn babies, and sometimes not even for them. Bringing babies to poor families' houses broke her heart, though" (Pirandello 1957, 14). Mimma's world harks back to ancient times when decency and modesty were shared values that veiled even natural instincts like that of procreation. Pirandello painstakingly paints this bucolic, traditional life in the Sicilian village to contrast it with the progress and modernization that the House of Savoy was intent on implementing throughout Italy as its national economic model (Laicata, 2012, 92).

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from Luigi Pirandello's short story are translated by the author of the article.

<sup>4</sup> "Quando donna Mimma con fazzoletto di seta celeste annodato largo sotto il mento passa per le vie del paesello assolate, si può credere benissimo che la sua personcina linda, ancora dritta e vivace, sebbene modestamente raccolta nel lungo "mant" nero frangiato, non proietta ombra su l'acciottolato di queste viuzze qua né sul lastricato della piazza là. [...] donna Mimma reca un'aria con sé, per cui subito, sopra e attorno a lei, tutto diventa come finto: di carta il cielo; il sole, una sfera di porporina come la stella del presepio. [...] Questo mondo ella rappresenta ai bimbi quando si mette a parlare con essi e dice loro come a uno a uno ella sia andata a coperarli lontano lontano [...] A Palermo, sì, con una bella lettig bianca, d'avorio, portata da due cavalli bianchi, senza sonagli, per vie e vie lunghe, di notte, al bujo. [...] Sente donna Mimma la santità del suo ufficio [...] e agli occhi dei bimbi lo copre con tutti i veli del pudore [...]" (Pirandello 1957, 11).

Piemontesa's world, on the contrary, represents modernity— on which Sicily's colonization is premised— and naturally clashes with the world around her:

This haughty, twenty-year-old *Piemontesa* woman who comes from the continent wearing a short, yellow skirt with a green jacket, hands in her pockets just like a guy. She is a custom employee's sister and is single. She graduated from the Royal University of Turin, which forces you to make the sign of the cross with both hands. Oh God, a young woman, who has not lived yet, going into such a profession! And with such an impudent attitude! A girl knowing these things [...] What a shame! What has become of us! [...] And on her velvet hat, a white feather wavering in the wind. (Pirandello 1957, 14)<sup>5</sup>

The village women's comments introduce Piemontesa, and their choral voice becomes the expression of the colonized world's opposition to the civilizing mission of modernization that the North forced upon the South (Rössner 2013, 314).

The village women oppose everything that comes from her: her clothes, her living condition, her education, and even her profession due to her young age. They call her Piemontesa, her real name, Elvira Mosti, is only inscribed on a plate on her door: "she had that plate with her name and profession hung on her house door. What is her name? Elvira ... what? Elvira Mosti?" (Pirandello 1957, 14). A written name in a quasi-illiterate village is a strident note that connotes the foreignness of the written word's power. More specifically, it connotes Turin's written-based, bureaucratic, and centralized government, marking her not just as an outsider but also as a woman coming from the site of political power. Being aware of her clout, she displays it in her "haughty" and "impudent" attitude which makes the village people resent her, hence her nickname.

Piemontesa's power resides also in tangible signs, like a university degree and her modernity, characterized by her clothes: "a short, yellow skirt with a green jacket ... and her velvet black hat, a white feather wavering" (Pirandello 1957, 14). Both women are described and characterized through their clothing. Mimma's "black, long shawl" contrasts with Piemontesa's "short yellow skirt." Whereas Mimma's clothes cover her body, Piemontesa's expose it; her skirt is probably short enough to show her ankles. The difference in their clothes' colors is important too. While Mimma's shawl is black, the darkest color, Piemontesa's skirt is yellow, the lightest and the most attention-grabbing. Her clothes are scandalous like anything else about her and clash with her surroundings. As Eugenia Paulicelli remarks: "fashion, we might say, is a system of signification as well as an ongoing process of communication which narrates history... fashion does not exist without the notion

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<sup>5</sup> Ora è venuta dal Continente una smorfiosetta di vent'anni, Piemontesa; gonna corta, gialla, giacchetto verde,, come un maschiotto, le mani in tasca: sorella ancora nubile di un impiegato di dogana. Diplomata dalla R. Università di Torino. Roba da farsi la croce con due mani. Signore Iddio, una ragazza ancora senza mondo, mettersi a una simile professione! E bisogna vedere con quale sfacciatagine [...] una ragazza che di queste cose... Dio, che vergogna! [...] Donna Mimma non se ne sa dar pace[...] la vede sculettando per la piazza, a testa alta, le mani in tasca, la piuma bianca ritta al vento sul cappellino di velluto."

of change, and it is for this reason that it has an intimate link with modernity” (2001, 284) and I would add, with power.

Both women make use of fashion’s representative clout to assert their authority within a patriarchal society. Writing about the relationship between women’s clothing and power, Enaya Othman states that “women’s clothing conventions are the product of social and cultural powers that operate to ‘discipline the body.’ Despite this, women [...] choose to maneuver within their society’s standard code of dress for mobility. Thus, the standards for dress do not simply discipline; they are a means by which women can reassign their roles within their communities” (2015, 3). I would argue that both women “maneuver within their society’s standard code of dress for mobility.” Whereas Mimma’s mobility remains within the village’s paradigms and is reflected by her traditional clothes, Piemontesa (re-)assigns herself a new, modern role within the community by wearing outrageously scandalous and transgressive clothes.

Piemontesa’s clothing does not signify only modernity and change, it implies foreignness too. The feather on her velvet hat connotes a northern fashion. As a matter of fact, *il cappello alla calabrese*, a typical southern man’s hat, was reappropriated by northerner stylists after Italy’s unification and transformed into a national image (Paulicelli 2001, 286). In Mimma’s southern village, where women still wear traditional scarves, that hat resonates as foreign and transgressive. The language of clothing, thus, becomes another avenue to establish a national discourse that is dominated by the North. Furthermore, Piemontesa’s fashion is gender-transgressive on two accounts: the wearing of the hat and the keeping “her hands in her pockets, just like a guy” (Pirandello 1957, 14).

Transgression, as a symbolic violation of the social order, is usually the language of a subculture, though. The dominant culture is predicated on signs that are unconsciously accepted as the “normal common sense” rule of behavior; hence, they cannot be transgressive (Eldridge 1996, 11). Her transgression, thus, needs to be read as unintentional and part of her modernity. Or, better said, as Antonio Gramsci affirms that there is not just one common sense; rather different “common sense” systems which are often in opposition and contrast with each other (1971, 325). Pirandello’s story fully displays the negotiation that necessarily takes place when two different “common sense” systems collide. At the end of the story, Piemontesa changes her dress code for mobility and to better enter a business relationship with the village people, to her own economic advantage.

As Mimma soon discovers, Piemontesa’s modern clothes and customs are not the only surprise that she has in store for her. From the mayor, she finds out that she can no longer practice her profession because of the new law passed by the Parliament of Turin:

Here it is, Mimma! Do you see? We got another letter from Turin. There is nothing to do. You are forbidden to practice your profession.

I, forbidden?

Yes, because you do not have a degree. My dear Mimma, the law [...] Which law?  
The new law?

The new law? No, the law is not new. We have known you for such a long time here that we trusted you and allowed you to practice in flagrant violation of the law. These darn formalities [...] and before, you were the only one delivering children [...] But now it's different. That new woman came, and she found out that you have no degree and she denounced you to the people in Turin. Now you can no longer work. You must go to the University of Palermo to get the degree. (Pirandello 1957,17)<sup>6</sup>

The new law that came from Turin changed the cultural practice of delivering children, which became a scientific practice, requiring a university degree; thus, Mimma can no longer practice. As the mayor informs her, the law is not new. Yet, she had been allowed to practice in "flagrant violation of the law" because everyone in the village trusted her and her experience. To fight for a share of the market, though, Piemontesa upholds the law and forces the mayor to act upon the "flagrant violation." Mimma has no choice but to comply with the new law and get a university degree.

With unification, education became one of the most pressing issues for the government. Although Cavour gave great importance to agriculture, as an essential part of the Italian economy, he was very aware of the risk that Italy might be excluded from those "*moderni perfezionamenti*" ("modern improvements") (Laicata 2012, 90). By "*moderni perfezionamenti*," he meant the learning and practical applications of science and technology, necessary to become a developed and modern country. One of Cavour's main points for Italy's economic development model was the "spreading of education," starting with the managing class (Laicata 2012, 90-92). The North became the designated and privileged center for the teaching of science and technology, with Turin and Milan hosting the most esteemed schools of Engineering, leaving southern universities in a subaltern position.

In modernity, science becomes "the ultimate signifier" (Hall and Jhally 2002, DVD); thus, it is not surprising that the domination of the northern culture is predicated precisely on the scientific discourse that originated in northern universities. Along this line, Michel Foucault defines as *biopolitics* the power that the state exercises on its citizens' lives through the scientific discourse that both controls citizens' behavior and, at the same time, justifies that control (2003, 139). Hence, historically each nation-state has assumed the right to discipline its people into docility to achieve efficiency in any given production system. A university

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<sup>6</sup> "Ecco qua, donna Mimma! Vedete? Un'altra carta anche a noi, dalla Prefettura. Per voi, sì. Non c'è nulla da fare, purtroppo. Vi s'interdisce l'esercizio della professione.

A me?

A voi: perchè non avete il diploma, cara donna Mimma! La legge!

Ma che legge? [...] Legge nuova?

Non nuova, no! Ma noi qua, c'eravate voi sola, da tant'anni; vi conoscevamo; vi volevamo bene, avevamo tutta la fiducia in voi, e abbiamo perciò lasciato correre; ma siamo in contravvenzione anche noi, donna Mimma! [...] Finchè c'eravate voi sola... Ma ora è venuta quella là; ha saputo che voi non avete il diploma; e visto che qua non è chiamata da nessuno, capite? Ha fatto reclamo alla Prefettura, e voi non potete più esercitar, o dovete andare a Palermo, davvero questa volta! All'università, per prendere il diploma anche voi, come quella" (Pirandello 1957, 17).

degree might be easily construed as a way to acquire the needed docility through discipline. It is not accidental that within institutions of higher education, the different fields of knowledge are often referred to as 'disciplines.'

Obstetrics focuses precisely on biological reproduction. The power over life, or biopolitics, would be incomprehensible, however, without capitalism, which needed "the insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of the population to economic processes" (Foucault 2003, 141). Once Italy's liberal and capital-driven government took power, Mimma's field of knowledge needed to be controlled. A very effective bureaucratic apparatus assured the implementation of new laws directed to discipline knowledge. Bureaucracy is the hallmark of modernity having an indissoluble relation with modern capitalism and the nation-state; as such, it became the *fulcrum* of the *Piemonizzazione* (Dandeker 1962, 7). It is with great humoristic sarcasm that in *The Leopard* Giuseppe Tommasi di Lampedusa describes the Piedmontese Chevalley as "congenitally bureaucratic" (2007, 168). Writing about bureaucracy and modernity, Max Weber argues that "the constitutive feature of modern capitalism is the institutionalization of rationality in all social institutions. Rational capitalist enterprise, the rational-legal state as well as scientific reasoning and capital accounting would be impossible without bureaucracy" (1961, 207-9).

For Weber, the rationality of modern bureaucracy stands on both the knowledge of the files and rational discipline. The first depends on the mastery of the information completely stored in the state apparatuses rather than on tradition or charismatic inspiration. The second depends on an efficient bureaucratic administration based on law. Decisions are thus subjected to scrutiny through a regular chain of command (Dandeker 1962, 9-10). Bureaucracy sets up a different relationship among the people of the village, where traditions and or charismatic inspiration must be eliminated. The mayor is compelled to enforce the law in his village once Piemontesa denounces Mimma's violation. Had the mayor not acted to discipline her, he would have been disciplined. The story perfectly shows the Italian kingdom's preference for a strongly centralized and hierarchical administration that left very little autonomy to local officials. The Historical Right Deputies, who were the masterminds of this "liberal dictatorship" justified it out of the necessity to avert anarchy in the southern regions (Romano 2003, 95).

To survive, Mimma needs to comply with the new law and decides to go to Palermo to get her degree, even if hesitant because of her old age. Michael Rössner rightly observes that, in the years at the University of Palermo, the only thing Mimma really learns is to try to be like Piemontesa. To achieve this feat, she becomes like the parrot-like lady in the Pirandello essay *On Humor*, who makes a fool out of herself to try to be the young woman she no longer is. Mimma, though, parrots the colonizer to the point that she loses her identity and becomes a caricature (2031, 316).

When she comes back home after two years of studying, the village people are taken aback by her transformation, and she is brutally mocked, "Mimma [...] what? With the hat? Yes, with the hat! Run, come, and see her. She had just arrived from Palermo with the hat,

with that big hat! Holy Mary! She looks like a monkey! One of those monkeys who dances on the concertina at the fair! Everyone in the street looked at her. All the street boys are running after her beating rocks" (Pirandello 1957, 27)<sup>7</sup>. The choral representation of Mimma's mocking is cruelly powerful, with her people getting out of their abodes and pointing at her laughing while sharing their viciously dehumanizing comments, comparing her to a monkey.

The comparison to a monkey, dancing on the concertina, is very telling of the people's perceptions and opinions of her transformation. In their eyes, Mimma lost herself and is forced to perform her new identity to be able to survive, just like the monkey performs on the concertina. The village folks' laughter also has a disciplining function, though. According to Mario Guarna, laughter can be an instrument to repress individual attempts at revolt and to shutter any form of individual resistance to and revolt against society's norms (2010, 88). The people's laughter demonstrates that they already accepted Piemontesa as the norm of whom Mimma is only a pale imitation. Another important element in the paragraph is the hat, or, more precisely, the fact that Mimma is wearing it. The wearing of a hat, instead of the traditional scarf, becomes the tangible sign of her transformation and modernization: "All the other girls who studied with her wear it, and of course, she must wear it too" (Pirandello 1957, 28)<sup>8</sup>. However, Mimma wearing the hat in her village is a strident note for the people who ridicule her for wanting to be what, in their perception, she is not. In her parroting Piemontesa's modern ways, Mimma appears as "a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 1999, 83).

Bhabha names "mimicry" that mode of colonial discourse that is predicated on the difference between the colonizer and the colonized, "Mimicry is, then, the sign of double articulation [...]and discipline that 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also a sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres to the dominant strategic function of the colonial power [...]" (1999, 83). Ultimately, mimicry sets up a discursive practice through which the colonized is called, maybe even required, to live according to Western paradigms. The colonized, though, is never allowed to achieve "sameness" to the colonizer. The colonized people's identity always keeps sliding away from that of the colonizer, never quite being like the colonizer.

The wearing of the hat through the streets of her village is a perfect example of mimicry, and "it is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double [...] becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence" (Bhabha 1999, 123). *Mimma* becomes the "disciplinary double" that threatens the North's "reforming, civilizing mission" because she cannot be but a 'partial presence.' Consequently,

<sup>7</sup> "Mimma [...] che? Col cappello? Ma sì, correte, correte a vederla! È arrivata or ora da Palermo, col cappello, con un cappellone grosso così, Madonna santa, che pare una bertuccia, di quelle che ballano sugli organetti alla fiera! Tutta la gente è scasata a vederla; tutti i ragazzi di strada l'hanno accompagnata a casa battendo i cocci, come dietro alla nonna di carnevale. Corrono dietro a lei che batte pietre" (Pirandello 1957, 27).

<sup>8</sup> "Tutte lì che studiavano con lei, lo portavano; e anche lei, dunque, per forza" (Pirandello 1957, 27-28).

she cannot fully and effectively acquire new knowledge on delivering children, “She looks at her expert little hands [...] Mimma looks at them with pity and tears in her eyes. Could her little hands know how to move now as they did before? Now her hands feel tied up by all the new scientific notions. They shake and they no longer *see*” (Pirandello 1956, 25)<sup>9</sup>. Mimma’s new unstable identity makes her doubt both her past and new knowledge and expertise. Mimma’s natural knowledge contrasts with her scientific one, creating two antithetical systems unable to incorporate each other. Her expert hands lost their empirical touch, needed in her previous natural system of knowledge, becoming blind and ineffective. Mimma’s new scientific knowledge, however, is futile, too, since it collides with the old, resulting in paralyzing confusion. In the end, Mimma will not be able to perform what she is required to do because her hands and mind get tangled up by the two systems.

Parallel to Mimma’s transformation, Piemontesa undergoes her own, too, usurping Mimma’s identity to better replace her professionally. Returning to her village, Mimma finds out that Piemontesa is wearing the same clothes she used to wear. Moreover, she tells the children the same folk tales *Mimma* used to tell them which caused Piemontesa to mock her, “She no longer wears her hat, but she wears a shawl and a blue scarf. What is she saying to the children? She is saying that she buys them in Palermo. With the litter? Ah, traitor! She does this just to steal the bread right out of my mouth! Just to conquer the hearts of these poor ignorant people” (Pirandello 1957, 28)<sup>10</sup>. Rightly, Rössner observes the modification of the woman from the North as an example of mimicry that leads Piemontesa to become a hybrid personality. Both women live in “the tension between an ‘original’ which is no longer an original and a ‘translation’ which never becomes a stable result” (2013, 317).

Piemontesa needs to translate from one culture to the other to successfully displace Mimma and “conquer the hearts of these poor ignorant people” (Pirandello 1957, 28). Piemontesa understands that to be able to communicate with the village people, she must appropriate those clothes, like the scarf and the shawl, which would make her recognizable to the people. By learning their semantics, she can take possession of the way they are making meaning out of their lives. She uses what Lévi-Strauss refers to as the technique of *bricolage* to assemble signs whose meaning is somewhat changed, “like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit to their freedom of maneuver” (1962, 13). To be able to enter a business relationship with the village people, Piemontesa needs to use the “pre-constrained” units of a non-verbal language, like clothing.

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<sup>9</sup> “Se non che, le sue manine esperte [...] Donna Mimma se le rimira pietosamente, attraverso le lacrime. Saprebbero più muoversi ora, queste manine, come prima? Sono come legate da tutte quelle nozioni scientifiche. Tremano le sue manine e non vedono più” (Pirandello 1957, 25).

<sup>10</sup> “non porta più il cappello, ora, ma lo scialle e il fazzoletto [...] Che dice? Ah, che i bambini si comperano a Palermo? Con la lettiga? Ah, traditora! Ah, infame! Ma dunque, per levare il pane a lei? [...] Per entrare in grazia della gente ignorante del paese?” (Pirandello 1957, 28).

Piemontesa's mobility and maneuvering are limited by the village people's ability to recognize her service by the clothes she wears.

However, unlike Mimma, Piemontesa's mimicry is consciously used to be better recognized in the village for her midwifery. Thus, her appropriation of the Sicilian village's culture is premised on profit. As a colonizer, she needs to learn how to trade with the natives, by acquiring their systems of signification like fashion. Piemontesa's hybrid personality is starkly different from Mimma's inasmuch as she consciously inhabits two cultures at once and to her own economic advantage. Moreover, she took the decision to leave her own village and region where she had the choice to go back if she so desired. On the contrary, Mimma is forced to live the mimicry condition that displaces her in her own home village, marking her subalternity.

Going back to Rössner's idea of the "cultural translation" process that both women undergo, I would add that also the village people are part of that process. Specifically, as Piemontesa learns their semantics, they, too, learn to speak her language, Italian, "The moms are happy because they are called 'madam.' By dealing with Piemontesa, the village people feel they learned to speak the language and acquired the continent's finesse and civility ... and the satisfaction to have everything explained in scientific terms just like by a physician" (Pirandello, 1957, 26)<sup>11</sup>. The happiness of moms is twofold. They are happy for having acquired the Italian language and the Italian title "madam" (instead of *donna*). Second, they are "satisfied" because they have acquired the language of science, the "ultimate signifier" of hegemonic culture.

Writing about the colonized people's desire to acquire the colonizer's language and culture, Fanon stresses that success for every colonized people will depend on their adaptation to the mother country's cultural standards, including the language (2008, 17). The cultural phenomenon Fanon writes about is present among the village women who have already associated the learning of Italian with the acquisition of "the continent's finesse and civility" (Pirandello 1957, 26). The continent is deemed civilized, of course, because it is recognized as the site of the discourse of science and thus, modernization, and progress. Here it is important to notice that the word "madam" is French as the House of Savoy was culturally intertwined with France and its culture, due to their geographical vicinity. French was the language spoken in court, and Cavour was in constant contact with the enlightened French intellectuals of that period (Romero, 2012, 38-85). Thus, the House of Savoy, and Italy, were culturally subaltern to France and its cultural empire, almost mirroring Sicily's subaltern position to the North and its cultural empire.

In Gramsci's terminology, one may say that the village women "consented" to the dominant order represented by Piemontesa and that it is through consent that hegemony works (Hall and Jefferson 1975, 39). Expanding on Gramsci, Hall states hegemony works by

<sup>11</sup> "Le signore mamme si sentono chiamar madame [...] e sono tutte contente [...] contente che ormai, a trattare con lei, è proprio come se sapessero parlare in lingua anche loro e le avessero familiari tutte le finzze e le "civiltà" del Continente" (Pirandello 1957, 26).

inserting the subordinate class into the key institutions and structures of the political and social power of the dominant order (Hall and Jefferson 1975, 39). The village people were “inserted” into the cultural structure of the northern and hegemonic power without even realizing it. Through their consent, the new law became the “norm” in only two years. The normalization of an imposed and, thus, aberrant social practice works on two different yet connected levels. On the one hand, it gives validity and authority to the ordinances that come from the nation’s capital; on the other hand, it builds consent among the people for whom the ordinances were enacted. It is important to notice that the ordinances were enacted through a process of enunciation that came from Turin, the site of authority, creating cultural differences that produce “fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity” (Bhabha 1999, 155).

Ultimately, Mimma is betrayed by her own people who, through the implementation of alien laws, learn to consent to the system supporting the hegemonic group’s ideology, “Mimma cries. She would like to find some comfort in talking to the children. In vain she takes off her black hat, hoping they will come closer to her. They no longer recognize her [...] nor want to go near her. They remain hostile and resistant to her presence [...]” (Pirandello 1957, 30).<sup>12</sup> In her transformation, Mimma becomes estranged from her own people, and even the children avoid her. She tries to regain their trust by taking off her black hat, her most visible sign of “modernization,” yet to no avail, and they “remain hostile and resistant to her presence.”

The story, though, does not stop at the simple denunciation of Mimma’s utter estrangement within her own village. It also displays the workings of a centralized and bureaucratic state that functions through a center-to-periphery system. More precisely, as Dandeker states, bureaucracy works through a system of contacts between the center and the periphery (1962, 194). In Italy, municipalities became the “contacts” of the Italian bureaucratic apparatus, marking, even more, the difference between them and the rural villages which lacked institutions of education and public health (Patriarca 1996, 227). As he did at the beginning of the story, Pirandello once again dramatizes the contrast between the modern and progress leaning city, Palermo, and Mimma’s traditional and rural village by placing her in a university classroom where her Palermitan classmates treat her with Piemontesa’s same impudence and haughtiness, “At school, forty-nine devilish girls, with boyish, haughty attitudes just like that troublemaker from the Continent who landed in her own little village, surround her [...] Here comes grandma! The fairytale grandma coming from the moon. She is too prudish to dare to show her hands” (Pirandello 1957, 21).<sup>13</sup> First, it

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<sup>12</sup> “Mimma piange. Vorrebbe consolarsi un poco almeno coi bambini e per farli accostare, si toglie dal capo lo spauracchio di quel cappellaccio nero; ma inutilmente. Non la riconoscono più i bambini [...] non vogliono accostarsi; restano scontroso, ostili alla sua presenza [...]” (Pirandello 1957, 30).

<sup>13</sup> “At school, forty-nine devilish girls, with boyish, haughty attitudes just like that troublemaker from the Continent who landed in her own little village, surround her [...] Here comes grandma! The fairytale grandma coming from the moon. She is too prudish to dare to show her hands” (Pirandello 1957, 21).

is important to note that higher education became more common for women after the unification, allowing women to become more independent (Guidi 2003, 282).

Nevertheless, the contrast between Mimma and her devilish classmates underlines the presence of a highly centralized government that created a power structure that favored the center to the detriments of the periphery. The same center-periphery structure was adopted both at the national and regional level, aggravating the already existing resentment of the peripheries against the center, which had forever undermined the Bourbon regime in the South (Riall 1998, 121). Consequently, in Palermo, women acquired modern ways and attitudes earlier than in Mimma's little countryside village. Above all, in Palermo Mimma understands that her long experience no longer has any value and that she must learn "the new words" (Sorrentino 2013, 101), which is the language of science.

After her graduation, once she is back in her village Mimma is called once to substitute Piemontesa, and she tries very hard to demonstrate that her method is as scientific as Piemontesa's. However, her attempt fails:

*Piemontesa?* She really does not want to be a substitute. But in the end, she gives in to the supplications. She puts her hat on and goes. She thinks she can show them that she studied for two years at the university just like the other one. She knows as much, if not more. She knows all the rules of hygiene. She wants to show all the rules of science, one by one [...] so many rules applied, so many times demonstrated [...] that, at a certain point, one must go to look for the other one, Piemontesa, if child and mother are to be saved, otherwise they could die, suffocated by all the rules and precepts (Pirandello 1957, 31)<sup>14</sup>.

In the end, Mimma demonstrates that she is not really like Piemontesa, since she cannot remember all the rules well enough to successfully deliver a baby.

To avoid sure disaster, she is forced to send someone to fetch Piemontesa to save the mother and child. With that comes her agonizing realization and acceptance of Piemontesa's dominance, which shifts from being *de jure* to *de facto*. Davis Spurr argues that "colonization is a form of self-inscription onto the lives of a people who are conceived of as an extension of the landscape. For the colonizer [...] it becomes a question of establishing authority through the demarcation of identity and difference" (1993, 7). In other words, colonization requires colonized people to acquire the colonizers' identity and *modus vivendi*. At the same time, though, the colonized must be constantly reminded of the difference and, thus, the distance that separates them from the colonizers. Accordingly, Bhabha asserts: "mimicry ... becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a "partial" presence"

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<sup>14</sup> "Eh? Che? Donna Mimma? E che è donna Mimma? Uno straccio per turare i buchi? Lei non vuol fare da "sostituta" a quell'altra! Ma alla fine si arrende alle preghiere, si pianta prima piano piano il cappello in capo, e va. [...] Le vuole mostrare tutte a una a una queste regole della scienza; tutti a uno a uno li vuole applicare questi precetti dell'igiene; tanto mostrare tanto applicare, che a un certo punto bisogna mandare a precipizio per l'altra per la *Piemontesa*, e anche per il medico ora, se si vuol salvare questa povera mamma e la creaturina, che rischiano di morire impedita, soffocata, strozzata da tutte quelle regola e da tutti quei precetti" (Pirandello 1957, 31).

(1999, 86). As the story tells us, being a partial presence (to be like but not quite) undoubtedly becomes Mimma's doom: "There are those who say that she took up drinking ... coming back home, she cries and cries inconsolably, which, of course, is the effect that wine has on people" (Pirandello 1956, 32)<sup>15</sup>. Her partial presence and existence drive her to utter alienation, loneliness, and, ultimately, alcoholism, a condition that is associated with human degradation.

At the closing of the story, the two women remain starkly apart, even after all Mimma's attempts to become like her nemesis. From this point of view, the story goes full circle and ends where it started: the two women's deep and un-dialectical differences that cannot come to a synthesis. The outcome of their impossible synthesis results in *Piemontesa's* triumph and Mimma's utter annihilation. Both women are quite anti-Pirandellian characters, though, which makes the story even more interesting. As Mary-Ann Frese-Witt writes: "Pirandello's female characters often play one or more roles assigned to them by the absent but controlling author and by the male characters in their lives. These roles can be defined broadly as those of mother/wife/daughter/woman" (1991, 58). In contrast, Mimma and *Piemontesa* escape this description: They are neither mothers nor wives, though they deal with pregnancy and motherhood.

Ultimately, they seem to be two masks representing the two nations on the stage of Italy's unification: the Bourbon and the Savoy nations. The representation of a nation through the body of a woman is a very common *trope* in colonial literature where women are typically constructed as the symbolic mothers of the nation—the term "nation" derives from *natio*: to be born (McClintock 1996, 63). Mimma's and *Piemontesa's* representational power is, thus, twofold. On the one hand, through their profession, they are directly involved with the *natio*, that is with the "birth" of the nation, through the delivery of its own citizens. On the other hand, their women-ness is symbolically subsumed into the national body politic.

In her symbolic representation of the nation, Mimma goes from having an old, modestly veiled and magic body to acquiring a body of knowledge that will never be useful to her but will discipline her into a citizen of the new state, even at the cost of her disintegration. *Piemontesa's* body, instead, goes from being flashy, and transgressive to acquiring clothes to conquer the hearts of the village people. Ultimately, it is through this operation that the nation's norms are imposed and the old ones are discarded together with the people who lived by those norms. Also, their age difference underlines their representative roles: Mimma's old body represents the old system as much as *Piemontesa's* young body represents the new and modern.

In the end, Mimma's failure represents *Risorgimento's* failure; hence Pirandello's nostalgic desire for an idealist paradigm was rooted in his disappointment with Italy's unification which should have been the synthesis of the Bourbon and Savoy nations, instead of the

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<sup>15</sup> "C'è chi dice che s'è data al vino [...] tornando a casa, donna Mimma piange, piange inconsolabilmente; e questo, come si sa, è un certo effetto che il vino suol fare" (Pirandello 1957, 32).

South's annexation to the North (De Castris 1962, 10). Because of its teleological nature, an idealist paradigm would have been very comforting and satisfying for an intellectual like Pirandello, who had lost faith in history, as well as in any ideology. Pirandello seems painfully aware of the "accidentality" of history and the impossibility to return to a past that he sees (or wants to see) as more integral and genuine in its simplicity, "[...] Mimma knows that she will never be able to throw out science. And this is the real and irreparable evil" (Pirandello 1957, 31)<sup>16</sup>.

Pirandello does not believe that the *moderni perfezionamenti* ("modern improvements") will better the life of the southern rural masses, because they were not intended for those regions. History demonstrated that he was almost right; they arrived, but late, and in a diluted way. Mimma's sorrows are echoed in the personal correspondence of many southern politicians and intellectuals. These letters often reflect the Southerners' material and psychological discomforts due to a deeply changed political situation, and the obliteration of their traditional and multi-secular institutions. As Giuseppe Lazzaro, a *Deputato* of the Historic Left, writes to his colleague Antonio Ranieri: "the country can be considered the land of conquest for the lords of Piedmont.... As you remember, we did not want the annexation. We wanted One and indivisible Italy, and with this condition, we accepted King Victor Emmanuel II as our constitutional king" (Romano 2003, 91 *Translation mine*). Pirandello dramatizes the bitter resentment, inscribed in Lazzaro's letter, toward a quasi-colonial regime imposed on the South and its people. Pirandello is fully committed to portraying the "naked reality of the disinherited popular masses marked not only by exploitation, cruelty, and misery but also a potential for revolution" (Dombroski 1999, 130). I must admit that Dombroski's idea of "a potential for a revolution" is very seductive, yet I concur with Gian Franco Venè in asserting that Pirandello lacked the political conviction of the possibility of a mass revolution. Ultimately his lack of conviction took his art to a more existential dimension (1971, 8).

## Conclusion

The significance of the short story "Madame Mimma" lies in Pirandello's denunciation of *Risorgimento's* failings. Pirandello witnessed the unification's repercussions in Sicily, registering it, while never being particularly vocal, especially vis-à-vis Sicily and its second-class status within the new nation. I concur with Michael Rössner that his reticence was due to the authors' financial necessity to write for northern readers and editors (2013, 312). His reticence allowed me, though, to read him "against the grain"; that is, through the postcolonial lens, denouncing the creation of Italy's nation-state through Sicily's *piemontizzazione*.

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<sup>16</sup> "[...] la scienza, no, non potrà più buttarla via domma Mimma; e questo è il vero male, il male irreparabile" (Pirandello 1957, 31).

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