

## CONTENTS

### Introduction

#### 1 Waiting in the wings: female characters in Italian Renaissance comedy

Setting the scene  
Plotting the trick  
Addressing the audience

#### 2 Gender deceptions: cross-dressing in Italian Renaissance comedy

Performance and spectatorship  
Fetishism and commodification

#### 3 Artful women: morality and materialism in Goldoni

Angel in the house  
Artful women

#### 4 Masterful men: difference and fantasy in D'Annunzio

Difference as dominance  
Fantastic femininity

#### 5 Patriarchs and prodigals: the generation gap in Pirandello

Patriarchs and prodigals  
Three-generational plays  
Women and age

#### 6 Centre stage: Franca Rame's female parts

Female subjects  
Performance politics

GENDER AND THE ITALIAN STAGE

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to offer a new, up-to-date perspective on Italian theatre by examining the representation of gender in a range of plays from the comedies of the Renaissance to the one-woman satires of Franca Rame in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. An interdisciplinary approach informs textual analyses to produce a set of feminist readings in which gender is seen to interact with other social categories, particularly those of class, age and the family. This approach is in line with feminist research which crosses the boundaries separating disciplines and social categories in order to elucidate their actual interaction in the overriding context of a dominant patriarchal ideology. One of the earliest such cross-overs was that of materialist feminism, which recognized the importance of the economic sphere in determining not only the position of women in society according to their class, age, race, colour, working and familial status, but also the reinforcement of this position by cultural texts. More recently, feminist discussion of western civil society has drawn attention to the effects on women of social relations as governed by market relations in a capitalist economy subtended by the ideology of patriarchy.<sup>1</sup>

The interdisciplinary approach followed in this book draws on areas as varied as semiotics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and dramatic theory. One main line which runs through all these areas to provide continuity and coherence is that of materialism. This will be noted in the constant consideration of the socioeconomic context in its effects on the dramatic representation of gender as perceived through an interdisciplinary range of areas. Within this socioeconomic context, attention is focussed on the interface between ideology and culture; in other words, between patriarchal strategies and the formal properties of the dramatic genre as exemplified by structures of plot, comedy, realism, and conventions specific to drama as performance. Particularly evident in all the plays is patriarchy's adherence to gender difference as informed by traditional western epistemology, most notably in

the form of the binary structure, with its oppositional, rather than relational, implications.<sup>2</sup>

Given the broad historical span covered by the book, the socioeconomic context for the production of Italian theatre ranges from the early development of a capitalist market economy during the Renaissance, through to the post-boom years of industrial capitalism within which Franca Rame's plays are situated. One important issue which arises throughout is the effect of a changing socioeconomic climate on dramatic gender representation. At the same time, patriarchal ideology can be observed to remain relatively constant, changing its face only superficially to accommodate varying socioeconomic patterns. What changes and what similarities can be detected across the centuries? The first two chapters show how the Renaissance comedies, written during a period of expanding market capitalism but strongly influenced by the pre-capitalist plays of Plautus and Terence, retain the fundamental patriarchal definitions of femininity, while constructing different variants of them in accordance with the development of early capitalism. Other questions to be addressed are, how, if at all, does subversion find its way on to the stage at different periods, given the changing perceptions of sexuality over time? What are the possibilities of counter-reading or deconstructing dramatic texts, given the now-dismantled ideal of the text as monolithic and univocal, but, rather, as a site of conflicting ideologies and contestation of meanings? And in the light of the recent shift of emphasis back on to the addressee of the text not as passive recipient, but as active participant in meaning-construction, how can we be sure to historicize correctly our reconstruction of spectator readings of the performance text?<sup>3</sup>

The questions raised by the diachronic nature of this book are made more complex by elements of regionalism, a factor peculiar to the history of a country which did not unify until 1870, and which, even after unification, has resolutely favoured regional rather than centralized, national identity. As a result, a certain degree of regional variation occurs in both socioeconomic and cultural spheres, adding a further dimension to the historical variation taking place over the five

centuries spanned by this study. For example, gender portrayal in the comedies of Goldoni (1707 - 1793), the subject of chapter three, is informed by overly materialist and moralist concerns in a specifically eighteenth-century Venetian context. This chapter examines Goldoni's inflection of the generic notions of morality - good and bad, virtue and vice - terms which acquire a special patriarchal resonance in the context of eighteenth-century Europe in general, and Venice in particular. The specifically Venetian issues of permissiveness and gambling can be seen to particularly affect gender portrayal in these realist urban comedies.

By contrast, the decadent plays of D'Annunzio (1863 - 1938) dramatize both pre-capitalist and capitalist, urban and non-urban preconditions for their particularly extreme problematization of femininity. The focus in this chapter is on difference as dominance, given the overt workings of power in D'Annunzio's plays. A hierarchical dynamic informs gender relations in a way which is much more covert in other eras, and in other dramatists not so influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy of will to power. Of central significance is the crucial role of a decadent variant of patriarchal femininity in helping to define the D'Annunzian superman as it interacts with masculine fears and superstitions. A comparison with the realist plays of Verga (1849 - 1922) helps to highlight the particular features of gender portrayal to be found in decadent theatre.

Both rural and urban Sicily of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century supply the context within which Pirandello (1867 - 1936) wrote the plays examined in chapter five. The workings of patriarchy are again in evidence despite, or perhaps as a reaction to, the growing women's movement in Italy. This writer was well aware of feminism's demands for wider working horizons for women, and registered his disapproval in an article entitled 'Femminismo' in 1909 (Pirandello 1965). The movement did little, however, to modify the continued socioeconomic and cultural hegemony of market relations and their patriarchal underpinning in a slowly industrializing Italy, while Sicily itself remained locked in the primary sector of agricultural and mining production. While the tertiary, public sector developed

significantly in Italy in the 1920s and 30s, and many more women joined the labour force as office workers, Pirandello's plays resolutely exclude this particular contemporary reality. His work illustrates how patriarchy continues to police its own male hierarchy, in both material and sexual arenas, in such a way as to marginalize femininity, and specifically maternity. This chapter concentrates on the age hierarchy in Pirandello's plays, both as it is represented by interactions between male characters, and in its very different implications for femininity. Age as a social category is frequently mentioned as an important factor in gender criticism. However, all too often there is no further development of this issue, a situation which this chapter attempts to remedy.

The socioeconomic line followed throughout this study ends with fully-industrialized, post-boom Italy of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, with its well-entrenched market capitalism subtended as ever by patriarchal ideology. It is within her satires of these aspects of modern Italy that Franca Rame (b. 1929), both in collaboration with and independently of Dario Fo, situates her critique of patriarchy. A central aspect of gender portrayal in Rame's work is its highly politicized context, from which it is inseparable on many levels, including those of production, performance, funding and use of profits. Gender portrayal is integrated with representations of contemporary issues; profits from these performances, which have often taken place not in conventional theatres, but in factories and public spaces, have been donated to political causes, as well as being used to finance future productions. Rame herself, moreover, is involved in all these stages, rather than solely those of writing and acting (in itself already quite a unique combination of roles). In all senses, hers is a living, working theatre, which aims not to reaffirm dominant values in elitist settings, but to question the system on all its levels (gender, politics, economics, religion) and in the forum of popular culture. Her particular performance politics ensure that female parts dominate the stage, unlike their sixteenth-century predecessors waiting in the wings during the early period of developing market capitalism.

The selection of Rame, a female playwright/actress/producer, for the final chapter concluding a study of otherwise male dramatists, raises the issue of the choice of plays and playwrights for this volume. This was determined by one major consideration, namely that they are revealing in matters of gender in an interesting variety of ways. Rame was chosen as a deliberate contrast, not simply on account of her gender and the popular theatrical tradition which she continues, but in order to explore how dramatic representation of femininity might function differently in theatre that is contemporary, and that actually aims to unmask and subvert traditional values. The fusion in her work of past dramatic method with present-day concerns makes her an ideal culminating point for this study. Rame is, moreover, a key figure not only in contemporary Italian theatre, but on the world stage. It was felt important to concentrate as much as possible on what may be regarded as landmarks in Italian theatre, and, in some cases, theatre history generally. While the main object of study is the representation of gender, this is necessarily also informed by developments in theatre history, particularly in view of the timespan covered.

Any study of theatre must also be prefaced by clarification regarding the type of text on which it is to focus. I am referring to the distinction between the dramatic text (the play in its written form) and the performance text (the play in performance).<sup>4</sup> The dramatic text exists in a single form as matrix for innumerable performance texts, each distinguishable from the other in the light of a complex set of performance factors: producer and stage manager, actresses and actors, vocal and gestural inflections, audience reception, venue, etc. The study of the text in performance, and so in its ultimate, authentically theatrical format, although desirable, is, in effect, largely impracticable. While this work therefore deals with the play in its written form, attention is nonetheless paid to the actualities of stage presentation, especially in terms of audience dynamics.

This is particularly the case as far as the early chapters on the Renaissance are concerned. Here recourse is taken to recent theories of spectatorship, as well as

accounts of stage and auditorium practices of the time, in order to piece together the overall performance context for which the plays would have been intended. The gender of the performer was a vital aspect of the performance and is crucial to an understanding of gender dynamics on stage and in the auditorium. Chapter two explores the implications, for both female and male spectators in the sixteenth century, of young male actors playing female roles, a scenario which becomes even more complex when female characters, in reality already male, cross-dress as male characters. The performance context itself can of course be seen to change with time. With the passing of the centuries, the play no longer forms merely one part of an entertainment that went on for eleven or twelve hours, as it did during the Renaissance. As a consequence, the immediate context within which gender relations are enacted becomes progressively more variable, making issues of spectatorship even more difficult to unravel.

The overriding aim of this study is to develop a methodological framework for the analysis of gender portrayal on the Italian stage, a methodology informed by the historically-specific patriarchal and socioeconomic context within which Italian theatre has evolved. In so doing, it is intended not only to bring discussion of Italian theatre into the contemporary debate on gender, but also to facilitate the analysis of gender in dramatic works in any language.



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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Hartsock, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>Critiques of western epistemology can be found in Alcoff and Potter, 1993; Hekman, 1990; Jay, 1981; and Nicholson, 1990.

<sup>3</sup>This is one of the many issues concerning the reader and meaning-construction addressed in Mills, 1994.

<sup>4</sup>This distinction is explained in Elam, 1980, p. 3.

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## CHAPTER 6

### *Centre stage: Franca Rame's female parts*

In contrast to the marginalized position of female characters waiting in the wings in Renaissance comedy, female parts in the plays of Franca Rame are placed firmly centre stage. Nowhere is the feminine point of view more clearly expressed than in the one-woman satires, both those written by Rame herself and those written in collaboration with Dario Fo. Foregrounding the feminine perspective in these plays is achieved partly, on the formal level, by the fact that the female character is not, as is usually the case, competing for audience attention with other characters, who, in mainstream theatre, are predominantly male. Of course, sole occupation of the stage by a female character would not, in itself, be enough to privilege a genuinely feminine viewpoint. The norm, as the previous chapters have shown, is for the female character to be constructed in such a way as to merely reiterate and reproduce Other subjectivities. To place her alone on stage could quite possibly even augment the recuperative effectiveness of her reiteration. As it happens, female monologues and soliloquies, along with active female protagonism, have tended to be outweighed by those of male characters, as has also been observed.

What differentiates the female characterizations of Franca Rame is their *overt* critique of femininity as defined and circumscribed within patriarchy. This is in marked contrast to the predominantly *covert* means used by patriarchal ideology to contain femininity in plays such as those examined in the previous chapters. The aim of Rame's plays is to unmask traditional assumptions concerning gender relations in a fundamental set of mostly everyday social spheres (sexuality, work and the family), spheres whose interaction is inflected by historical, political and socioeconomic issues. Rame's critique is frequently made pleasurable, and so more penetrating, by the comic genre which expresses it; and it is on her comic, rather than her 'obscenely tragic', female parts, that this chapter concentrates.<sup>1</sup>

The key question to be asked is, how effective a critique is achieved in Rame's plays, and how much of patriarchy still remains inscribed within the dramatic fabric? In addressing this question, a number of issues need to be explored, such as who, or what, exactly is now centre stage, given the current debate not just about female subjectivity, but also postmodernism's fragmentation, and even denial, of the 'subject' itself. In what ways do Rame's plays reflect the contemporary context within which gender relations work today? How are gender relations portrayed differently from the preceding eras and dramatists examined, in terms of both thematic and formal dramatic areas? Can a progression be traced which situates Rame's plays as the culmination of an evolution of female characterization from stage absence, marginalization, problematization, antagonism and reactivism, to a position of dramatic centrality as protagonist with a proactive role corresponding to that of central male characters? Or would it in fact be unrealistic to expect a complete revolutionizing of earlier dramatic representations of femininity, given that patriarchy still holds sway, albeit in a more complex, technological world (such as that portrayed in *Una giornata qualunque* and *La donna grassa*)? In any case, how could one expect this different portrayal of femininity, which would also have to be a portrayal of a different femininity, to function on stage?

The first step towards the creation of genuine dramatic female protagonism might be to deconstruct traditional female characterization in order to re-construct a more authentic feminine version (a process rather akin to that of *autocoscienza*, the equivalent in the Italian women's movement of American 'consciousness raising', but with the additional element of 'self re-construction'). The stereotypical female character would then be displaced by an alternative, more proactive version that would function differently in both formal and thematic aspects to its patriarchally constructed, and constricted, counterpart. The dramatic criteria set up in the first chapter on Renaissance comedy can be enlisted here as a yardstick for female characterization. It will be remembered that the first requirement for dramatic

female protagonism is freedom of stage movement, without being hampered, marginalized or even completely excluded, because of the socio-dramatic constraints of time and place based on age, class and marital status (of female, but not male, characters).

Secondly, in the realm of dramatic action, direct involvement and agency in plot development are crucial, while the plot should be of relevance to the lives of women themselves, rather than women exclusively in relation to male interests. Most importantly, the unfolding of the plot and the development of its issues should be seen from an authentic feminine viewpoint, rather than from that of the idealized or demonized female character of patriarchal fantasy. Of course, 'authentic' feminine subjectivity, as will shortly be seen, is not so easy to delineate as might at first sight appear. Nonetheless, making female protagonists representative of women of all ages, for example, in place of patriarchy's dramatic focus on the reproductive phase of the female life cycle, would certainly be a step in the direction of broadening the spectrum of femininity portrayed. In conjunction with this notion of a female voice, the third dramatic component, that of speech, should allow female characters to speak for themselves, rather than have their thoughts ventriloquized by male characters (let alone be replaced and caricatured by vestiges and fetishes of femininity in the form of male cross-dressing). As regards speech vehicles, the female protagonist should be allocated across the full range of the dramatic speech hierarchy (prologue, monologue, soliloquy, aside, dialogue, polylogue), irrespective, once again, of her age, class and marital status.<sup>2</sup>

Franca Rame's female parts appear in many ways to work in diametric opposition to traditional female characters. Her female parts have freedom of stage movement, are involved in plots based on issues relevant to women's lives, and speak for themselves. Indeed, her at times complex performance technique means that her female characters on occasion even 'speak for' male characters (as well as other female characters). It remains to be seen whether her female parts nevertheless still function along patriarchal guidelines, particularly in the type of

women's lives they represent. Bearing in mind the three basic dramatic criteria, this chapter attempts to pinpoint areas of adherence to patriarchal dramatization of femininity, and areas in which the stereotype is subverted.

The term 'female parts' is used to indicate not merely the female characters created by Rame, or co-written with Fo (and as they appear in the dramatic text), but refers also to the fact that these parts have often been played by Rame herself (in the ever-changing recreation of the role in performance). This exceptional combination results in the integration of writer/actress/character to produce a complex blend of the diegetic and extra-diegetic, especially in view of Rame's star-status. In other words, Rame's own personality and life experiences enter the equation in her approach to the issues she dramatizes, as well as influencing the way the audience perceives her characters. Rame's writing/acting/directing activities are most strongly in evidence in the dramatic form of the monologue, such as the one-woman satires grouped together as *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, which brought her various dramatic talents into a wider public arena in 1977. Later plays, such as *La donna grassa* of 1991, also include polylogues, containing several speaking parts, both female and male.

While plays such as *Lo stupro*, *La donna grassa* and *L'eroina* were written by Rame, and in the latter two cases, produced by Fo, it is not always so easy to distinguish the dramatic contributions of Rame and Fo. The form of their collaboration, particularly pre-1977, the year when Rame began to work independently of Fo, is complex and varying in combination.<sup>3</sup> Fo's introduction to *Venticinque monologhi per una donna di Dario Fo e Franca Rame* is devoted almost exclusively to an elaboration of the initial statement that almost all the twenty-five monologues were written, as he puts it, by two pairs of hands ('a quattro mani da me e Franca'). He breaks down the collaborative writing stage as follows:

It often happened that Franca would suggest an idea to me, I would set out its 'treatment', we'd discuss it either more or less vivaciously and then I got

the job of dramatizing it in its entirety. On other occasions it was Franca who would hand me a plot outline to read, I'd give her my opinion, and she'd conclude the writing out (Fo 1989, intro.).

Rame-Fo theatre, however, does not mean the simple transference of the written text from page to stage, as in the case of the dramatists examined in the previous chapters. The plays of Rame and Fo, even as regards the actual words spoken by the characters, take shape on stage, in that performance considerations, and particularly audience response, determine the final performance product (final, that is, for the duration of that performance). In this sense, their plays cannot be considered to be in the tradition of those dealt with in the rest of this work, in that they trace their lineage back along a different route, to the medieval *giullari*, or jesters, and to the Renaissance *commedia dell'arte*. Unlike the scripted erudite Renaissance comedies explored in the first two chapters, *commedia dell'arte* plays began with a *canovaccio*, or plot outline, which was then elaborated on stage, a tradition which Goldoni worked against by providing his actors with a complete written script, and which Rame/Fo theatre takes up again.<sup>4</sup>

The important implication here is that Rame the actress, rather than just Rame the writer and producer, has an input into her collaboration with Fo which is significant for the purpose of this chapter. Her playing of female parts involves re-creating the role during performance, a re-creation that feeds into the next version of the written text, and consequently into the version on which this study is based. In other words, the female *characters* in the Rame and Rame-Fo plays examined in this chapter as they appear in the written text, are very often the descendants of a line of female *parts* (based on characters) that have been shaped and re-shaped by Rame.<sup>5</sup> Fo explains the process of this shaping in the following terms:

Most of the working out of the text took place directly on stage. Night after night Franca, using the input of the audience, which is always our greatest collaborator, would vary the rhythm and structure of sentences, speed up passages, put in or leave out remarks, etc. In that way, after

a couple of months, the text seemed to us to be completely transformed, almost unrecognizable compared to the original text (Fo 1989, intro.).

It is to Franca Rame's female parts, then, rather than simply to her female characters, that this chapter devotes its attention.

## Female subjects

### *Subjectivity*

The dramatic status of the female character in Renaissance comedy was assessed in the opening chapter on the basis of visibility and audibility, twin aspects of stage performance which are central in determining audience perception of femininity. With female parts centre stage in the plays of Rame, the mere matter of being both seen and heard now gives way to considerations such as protagonist action or antagonist reaction as features of her characterization of femininity. Rame herself actually denied the role of protagonist to the central female characters in *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* of 1977, despite the fact that this collection of plays is all about women: 'The out and out protagonist of this show about women is the man. Or rather, his sex! He isn't present 'in flesh and blood', but he's always here among us, big, enormous, getting in our way . . . and he squashes us!' (Fo 1989, p. 5).<sup>6</sup> To this male protagonist (*protagonista maschile*) she then counterposes female characters (*personaggi femminili*) (Fo 1989, p. 7). One could accept Rame's assessment of her characters (and that of some of her feminist critics) at face value, and go on to explore whether a female protagonist, or subject, does evolve over the following fifteen years (with, for instance, *L'eroina* and *La donna grassa* of 1991), or whether her female characters continue to be typified by antagonist reaction, and relegation to the object position.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, and this is the approach taken by this study, one can focus on the plays themselves in order to trace the precise nature of the female parts which they foreground so emphatically.

The centrality and complexity of Rame's portrayal of femininity allow for, and indeed necessitate, a more sophisticated discussion than earlier representations.



The spotlight on her female parts straightaway reveals a set of issues around the female subject, notably those of subjectivity and femininity, particularly in the face of patriarchy's presumption of the male, but denial of the female, subject. There is then the further question of defining feminine subjectivity not only in itself, but for the purposes of its study in a dramatic context. Leading on from the arguments surrounding subjectivity and femininity, are the debates in feminist identity politics and, especially given the politicized nature of Rame's gender critique, the various discussions on the workings, and particularly the effects, of power. A brief overview of the relevant issues in these areas can lead the way to a working definition of dramatic feminine subjectivity.

In the first place, the question arises of how, if at all, the subject is to be pinned down; and, even if its existence can be established and delineated, is it possible for the writing/acting 'I' ever to be a 'she', or is it always inevitably a 'he' in the patriarchal symbolic order? Or is the notion of the subject, in all its determinist fixity, to be replaced by that of subjectivity as a process and a practice? As for femininity, is it to be thought of in terms of femininities, as in the case of feminism (radical feminism, essentialist feminism, materialist feminism)? Linking the vexed definitions of subjectivity and femininity is the fact that the notion of a single feminine viewpoint, or identity, so long assumed necessary for political cohesion and effectiveness, has been thrown into question by the postmodernist fracturing of the essentialist 'I', whatever its gender.

Writing on subjectivity and femininity, Vintges considers the contemporary European penchant for decentring and deconstruction of the subject, with a view to theorizing a feminism not tied to an essentialist feminine subject. The mid-seventies, the era of Rame's *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, saw a particular assault on the coherent, unified subject, the seamless, pre-discursive Cartesian 'I' that indisputably pre-existed thought, being and action. Instead, ideological and psychoanalytical theories decentring the subject reduced its social role from causal agent to interpellated effect (Althusserians) and undercut its sentient dominance in

the symbolic by reinstating the unconscious and partially relocating the subject within the imaginary (Lacanian) (Vintges 1991, p. 230). Even more radically, deconstruction of the subject denied its existence altogether, replacing it with variegated subject forms and subject positions (Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari) (Vintges 1991, p. 230). Vintges concludes the following implications for femininity:

If we assume that a unified subject does not exist, then we can no longer speak in terms of a feminine subject. There are only feminine positions, roles and places in practices and discourses, which offer and structure being a woman . . . Instead of assuming that there are women who are subsequently confronted by all manner of practices and approaches, the relationship is reversed: which woman-positions do we find in our society? (Vintges 1991, p. 231)

However, as noted by Foucault, two major problems arise in relation to subject positions, illustrating the cardinal workings of power not simply as that exerted by state institutions (juridico-political, educational, scientific, medical, religious), but as manifested in its effects. The first problem is that these subject positions are in themselves liable to become fixed and normalized, rather than remaining flexible and, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, true to the actual multiplicities of existence:

Standardized subject forms are imposed on us in all kinds of ways, and . . . herein lies the greatest power effect in our culture: countless technologies, techniques and practices - interwoven with the humanities - produce subject positions which we have to assume on pain of exclusion and/or sanctions . . . what are in fact multiplicities become caught in subject forms, and thus subjected to the existing order (Vintges 1991, p. 232).

The second problem is that the mere fact of occupying subject positions can give the illusion of existing as a subject: 'The fact that we live in these subject positions and experience ourselves as subjects, forms the mechanism of *the* dominant power type

in our society, characterized by Foucault as normalization and disciplinary power'. This illusory subject, however, is not an agent, but, rather, an 'effect of disciplinary power' (Vintges 1991, p. 232). It is only when a subject position, and the contingent, temporary identity it confers, is recognized *in the moment of its taking up*, in other words, as a process and a practice of signification, rather than a pre-established place to be filled, that control over it as an effect, and thence agency, can be achieved.

This line of thinking has moved feminist identity politics on from the essentialist, unitary Woman-position to a multiple identity politics, where identity is understood as a process featuring diversification and change. Noting the roots of identity politics in the resistance to dominant culture and politics, Wright defines identity as a matter of one's 'sense of history, understanding of social relations and personal possibilities, modes of reasoning, values and expressive styles' (Wright 1993, p. 1). The sense of agency implicit in this definition underlies theories of identity politics that 'build on the development and/or reconstruction of a strong, resilient 'self', able to survive with dignity in societies which deny or degrade it' (Wright 1993, p. 1), a tenet encapsulated by Italian feminism's *autocoscienza* and its emphasis on self re-construction. The 'self' in this case is not to be understood as a reversion to the pre-discursive subject with a fixed identity; there is no such thing, Wright argues, as 'a single and exclusive identity affiliation' (Wright 1993, p. 3). On the contrary, the multiple identity model means the interaction of identities that are permeable as well as flexible.

In this context Wright emphasizes the importance of recognizing that the multiple identity model of being is made up of identities that are not only 'oppressed', but also 'privileged', in relation to the dominant ideology. This complex model of identities, or subject positions, that not only intertwine and interact, but also contradict each other, may appear paradoxical when measured against the simplistic, unitary pre-discursive subject of dominant ideology. As a more nuanced and variegated model, however, its contrapuntal processes are more

reflective of the multiplicities of everyday existence, as well as offering genuine, rather than merely illusory, possibilities for agency.

Franca Rame's one-act monologues allow for a variety of subject positions to be observed in the process of being taken up. Alone on stage, the actress enacts significant life choices and subsequent changes in her character over a period of time (as in *Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia*). As another variant, the actress may also play, by implying their presence onstage, other characters in addition to, and alternating with, her central female role (*Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia* and *Michele lu Lanzone*). Alternatively, she may dialogue with implied offstage characters, whose parts she also speaks, by repeating what she has 'heard' them say (*Una donna sola*). At issue here is the foregrounding, at the formal level, of the taking up of subject positions *as a process*, with the important implication of intervention and agency. This is at its most pointed when the central, onstage female character changes and develops in response to the viewpoints of other, implied female characters. These 'characters' thereby take on the guise of 'personified', alternative subject positions available to her. The performative nature of these subject positions is made particularly overt by the fact that one actress plays them all *by implication*, rather than as separate female characters in individual stage appearances (as in the case, for example, of Silvia and Gioconda, personifying asexual domesticity and sexual artistic creativity respectively, in D'Annunzio's *La Gioconda*).

Neither decadent nor realist theatre allows for the same degree of complexity in playing with subject positions, their characters remaining relatively fixed throughout the play. One partial exception is the device of cross-dressing, such as that found in Renaissance comedy, both at the first, formal level (boy actors in female parts) and at the second, plot level (character - character) (see chapter two). In the context of the process of taking up subject positions, a character cross-dressing to take on the identity of another character of a different gender (such as Lidio pretending to be Santilla in *La Calandria*), can be seen as playing with gender

identity as contingent and as a process. However, this type of cross-dressing could also be considered as the mere exchange of one traditional, unified subject for another. Alternatively, a character can cross-dress as a newly-created character (as Lelia does when she calls herself Fabio in *Gli ingannati*), in which case Lelia (in reality a boy actor), fashions Fabio according to 'her' own style. In the case of Franca Rame's one-act monologues for women, on the other hand, the fact of an actress (rather than a boy-actor) playing, or rather implying, one or more characters, and enacting a series of life stages and changing feminine subject positions, ensures that the focus remains exclusively on the practice of a self-reconstructing femininity, in line with the practice of *autocoscienza*.

Self-styling (Wright's 'expressive styles') is one particular development of the key promise of agency in theories positing multiple identity, subject positions and effects of power as processes. Building on Foucault's later work on Greek and Roman discourses of sexual behaviour, which he characterizes as arts of existence that lie outside state-institutionalized discourses, Vintges argues for a feminism that takes up 'the possibility of constructions of self-identity which escape subject being as a result of normalization' (Vintges 1991, p. 236).<sup>8</sup> Two crucial Foucauldian points are taken up by Vintges here. The first is the de-naturalizing or deconstruction of the seamless slippage in dominant ideology from *normativity* ('the construction and application of norms and values, and of giving meaning in general') to *normalization* and discipline ('the power of the Norm, which determines what is normal, what is deviant') (Vintges 1991, pp. 232, 233). The splitting of normativity, with its particularity and free-wheeling difference, away from normalization, generality, and discipline, is made possible by Foucault's separation of self-styling, or personal ethics, from hegemonic forces:

For centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life and the great political and social and economic structures there were analytical relations . . . I think we have to get rid of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or

economic or political structures (Foucault 1983, p. 230, quoted in Vintges 1991, p. 236).

It could of course be argued that this argument comes full circle back to an essentialist viewpoint that denies the relevance of historical, social, economic and political context in the formation of identities and subject positions, resulting in a dangerous de-politicizing of the issues of identity and reinstating the seamlessness with which dominant ideology covers its processes. However, while there is no doubt that social, economic and political change is vital for the freeing up of subject positions, the drive towards such change has come from somewhere, namely from outside the dominant ideology, and in reaction to it. It is in the interstices of hegemonic structures, or, more specifically, in Foucault's terms, at the effects-end of the workings of power in everyday life, that a space resides for agency in the form of self-styling.

Self-styling offers feminism a mode of agency that is freed from the constraints of patriarchal truth and morality about femininity, and so from the essentialist, unitary female subject. Femininity, or rather, femininities, can now be construed in terms of the *process of taking up* multiple 'styles of living' (the effects, subject positions and identities that are self-created through specific practices and discourses), rather than in terms of pre-discursive subjects *allocated*, under the guise of individual choice, to a limited, and limiting, set of pre-existing, patriarchally-defined feminine roles. The female subject as fixity can now be replaced by female subjectivity as process, 'perpetually construed and constructable' (Vintges 1991, p. 237). In the context of identity as a process, Butler argues that: 'Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed' (Butler 1990, p. 147). It is in the production or generation of identity as a process, that Butler locates the functions of the repetitive, the performative, and the public, functions which are all recognizably theatrical.

Taking signification as the first locus of agency and identity, Butler notes that, just as 'signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects', so too 'the rules that govern intelligible identity . . . operate through *repetition*' (Butler 1990, p. 145). It is in repetition as a practice, in other words, as ongoing, that possibilities reside for intervention and subversion. Repetition as constitutive of identity is linked by Butler to the performativity of gender, with the term 'performative' echoing its use in speech act theory, where it denotes the 'executive' force of all utterances (Elam 1980, p. 158):

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results . . . In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. . .

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler 1990, pp. 25, 140).

Gender performativity as repetitive self-styling transports the whole issue of identity as a practice into the theatrical arena: 'Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning' (Butler 1990, p. 139). It is in the inherently fabricated nature of self-styling that the essence of performativity, and so of theatre, lies, as a set of acts and gestures characterized by 'made-upness' and contingency, and as a preoccupation with 'surface' (with the focus on 'surface' reiterating the issues of fetishism explored in chapter 2):

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface of the body*. . . Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that

the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler 1990, p. 136).

This performative theory of gender, in which gender is not a pre-existing identity, but is constituted by specific actions, is particularly reminiscent of Renaissance perceptions of sexuality not as a once-and-for-all defining factor of identity, but simply as an act that might or might not be repeated (see chapter 2).

Another feature of the enactment of self-styling as identity, is the necessity for this process to be collective, rather than isolated and private: 'Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this 'action' is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential' (Butler 1990, p. 140). Theatre is once again invoked here, in its definition as a public event: without an audience, there can be no theatre. The repetitive, the performative, and the public elements that constitute the process and practice of taking up subject positions and identities may account for the irresistible appeal of theatre and other visual performance arts that are also defined by these elements. In watching and listening to actresses and actors enact the taking up of particular subject positions, 'repeating' their parts, often performance after performance (one form of repetition particularly foregrounded by the Characters in Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*), the audience are able to rehearse and re-evaluate their own subject positionings.

In that her monologues particularly emphasize the practice of taking up multiple subject positions, and underline identity as a performative process, Franca Rame's work can be described as quintessentially theatrical. Her focus on the process and contingency of identity formation treats identity, in Foucauldian terms, as an effect that is on-going, rather than pre-discursively ordained. In this sense, her plays deal with power in the area of its effects, namely power brought into effect by virtue of being repeatedly brought to surface, or enacted, in everyday life,



and therefore open to subversion at this point through self-styling. However, her plays also deal with those purportedly exclusive sites of power, namely state institutions (the law, police, religion) and their underpinning by patriarchal ideology. These regulatory systems conceal the fact that they are in fact practices and discourses, and in order to perpetuate this concealment, require and produce fixed, unitary, *pre-discursive subjects* with an illusion of agency in their adherence to the norm. At the same time, these systems also work to exclude the mobility and plurality of *discursive subjectivity* and difference, in disciplinary repression and denial of the effects-end of the dynamics of power. Rame's plays, through the viewpoint of their female parts, often explore the interaction between these two cardinal sites of power, albeit rarely with a positive outcome.

What definitions of the dramatic feminine subject or dramatic feminine subjectivity are now available, in the light of the preceding discussion, for an exploration of the female parts that Franca Rame places centre stage? It seems that identity can no longer be perceived as monolithic, or pre-ordained, and that the unified subject has been replaced by multiple subject positions and identities. It may, then, be impossible to talk of, or from, one fixed subject position, let alone a fixed female subject position. As a consequence, there may well *be* no female subject to be dramatically reproduced and represented. Any attempt, whether in political or cultural representation, to produce and reproduce a single stable female subject position or identity, must, in that case, be regarded as ideology breeding false consciousness. Vintges' answer to this question in her essay *The vanished woman and styles of feminine subjectivity*, is that 'the subject woman does not exist, long live feminine subjectivity!', a solution that can be appropriated for the purposes of this chapter in the form of dramatic feminine subjectivity (Vintges 1991, p. 236).

The modernist dramatic feminine subject of the previous chapters can now be defined as the representation of a fixed, unitary identity, more often than not idealized or demonized according to the patriarchal fantasy of a femininity

circumscribed by compulsory reproductive heterosexuality. Postmodernist dramatic feminine subjectivity, on the other hand, can portray the taking up of multiple subject positions and identities through enacted discourses, and dramatize the possibility of holding a variety of even contradictory ideological and political standpoints (Wright's combination of oppressed and privileged identities), depending on repeated patterns of self-styling (Vintges' Foucauldian lifestyle ethics). Dramatic feminine subjectivity, as a portrayal of a process and a practice, can illustrate the occupation, simultaneously or at different times, of varying feminine standpoints (for example, those defined within essentialist feminism, radical feminism, or materialist feminism). Importantly, dramatic feminine subjectivity can also represent the possibility of participating in practices other than those related to reproduction and sexuality, such as, for instance, those associated with work or leisure.

In Rame's plays, dramatic feminine subjectivity appears in line with feminine subjectivity as a process, by the way in which her female parts play out the search for subject positions in various areas of their lives. This search is often informed by three salient characteristics in Italian feminism, namely the practice of *autocoscienza*, the prioritizing of relations between women, and an active awareness of the political and economic context.<sup>9</sup> The drive towards *autocoscienza*, the process of an emergent awareness of the self and the consequent move towards its reconstruction, provides the impetus guiding plot development in many of Rame's plays, such as *Una donna sola*, *La mamma fricchettone*, and *La Medea*, as well as the more recent *Una giornata qualunque*. As *Una donna sola* progresses, for example, Maria develops an awareness of the exploitative nature of her domestic situation, which sees her locked indoors by her husband, and the object of sexual harassment on the part of her live-in brother-in-law, a neighbour with binoculars, an obscene phone caller and an ex-lover. The play takes the form of a self-revealing, confessional-style monologue that provides the therapeutic vehicle enabling Maria to simultaneously externalize and recognize her anger at her situation, thereby giving

her a new sense of self (the first stage of *autocoscienza*). Until now she has been used to speaking and doing everything internally, rather than speaking out and risking a beating by her husband (Fo 1989, pp. 16, 17). She is helped in this process of externalization by a female neighbour to whom she addresses her thoughts, and whose encouraging comments and questions, which are either 'repeated' or implied in Maria's monologue, perform the function of a therapist's prompts. Interestingly, this 'therapy' is not conducted with Maria lying down, or even sitting, but takes place while she is carrying out a host of domestic duties that are executed with comic frenzy. The implication here is that of the insidiously disciplinary motto 'busy hands are happy hands'; her lifestyle allows her little space for herself, let alone for the important process of reflection on her condition (a negative feature of the female experience of traditional family life that the Donna in *La mamma fricchettata* particularly resents (Fo 1989, p.46)).

By focussing on the growing self-awareness of one female character in response to the interventions of another, implied female character who is clearly more aware, *Una donna sola* highlights the emphasis in Italian feminism on individual feminine subjectivity very much in the context of a collective feminine identity. In a manner akin to Sibilla Aleramo's 'I'-narrated novel *Una donna*, Rame's dramatic monologue *Una donna sola* is the story of one individual woman, and at the same time that of many women (also a particular feature of *Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia*, which literally means 'We all have the same story'). Apart from the fact that Aleramo's novel is autobiographical, while *Una donna sola* is not, there is another notable difference between the two works. Written at different moments in the history of the Italian women's movement (1906 and 1977 respectively), the former speaks from the viewpoint of an isolated female 'I' that is separate from other women in its struggle for autonomy (most notably from the mother, whom the narrator only truly comprehends in later life on discovering her mother's own writings left behind after her suicide). Rame's play, on the other hand, shows the beginnings of a sense of female community, a feature of Italian

feminism that is also present in *Una giornata qualunque* of 1986, and that was to develop into the bond of *affidamento*, or entrustment, between women. The interplay between individual and collective femininity is particularly dramatized on the formal level in *Una donna sola* by the use of the monologue form which at the same time implies a dialogue.

Friendships between women, and recourse to women, rather than to men, as the primary reference point, are an important part of Italian feminist political practice which finds expression in some of Rame's female parts. Rame herself, however, has said that 'after the great battles, campaigning for divorce, abortion, or the law against sexual violence, women in everyday life are the worst enemy of women' (Rame, *L'Unità*, 14 December 1991, in Rame 1992, p. 114). This is certainly true of the many 'other', and usually also younger, women, in her plays, who act against the interests of wives in their liaisons with husbands (but who are, curiously, never really held to account). Competition between women for men, the result of internalization of patriarchal misogyny, can be countered within feminism by strengthening the bonds between women. Making choices in 'everyday life', such as steering clear of other women's husbands, as well as restructuring female identity around something other than sexuality, are particularly contemporary possibilities of self-styling and *autocoscienza* that do not appear available to Rame's female parts.

Nonetheless, affirming relationships between women play an important role in many of her plays. These appear, interestingly, to be restricted predominantly to non-related women (*Una donna sola*, *Una giornata qualunque*, *Ho fatto la plastica*), while in some plays, non-related female voices dialogue with each other on feminine issues in a professional capacity (*Monologo di una puttana in manicomio*, *Voce amica*, *La donna grassa*). Mother-daughter dyads, on the other hand, do not always function amicably (*La donna grassa*, *L'eroina*, *Una donna sola*). In *Una donna sola*, Maria finds she can confide, not in her daughter, from whom appears estranged, but in her new female neighbour, who, during the course

of the play, is upgraded from 'una signora' to 'una cara amica'. *Una giornata qualunque* shows Giulia turning her attention away from her ex-husband, for whom she can be seen making a video-recorded suicide note at the beginning of the play, to Clara, whom she gets to know only as a voice on the telephone. Clara's methods of dealing with her problems closely mirror those of Giulia, even down to the specific details of the eating habits/disorders that they have in common. As a result, Giulia is forced into the realization that her problems are not particular to her, but are also shared by other women. This has the positive effect of deflecting her from her original plan to commit suicide and re-directing her anger outwards, rather than turning it on herself. As she explains through the intercom to the policeman standing ominously outside her front door:

No, I've already saved myself . . . when this dear friend of mine, Carla, telephoned me, it acted like a mirror for me . . . enormous . . . grotesquely deforming . . . and I understood! She spoke with my very own words . . . An absurd photocopy! See, like a flash of lightning! I appeared so funny to myself . . . unreal. Those are the words for it: funny and unreal. I realized my madness, do you understand? As if at last projected in perspective. I said to myself: OK, Giulia, you're a bit down, but do you really want to kill yourself? You must react! (*Una giornata qualunque* 1991, p. 70)

As a result of her interaction with Clara, Giulia's attention switches from unhealthy introspection as an isolated individual marooned indoors, to a place in the collective: 'Enough navel-gazing (. . .) You must leave this house that's driving you mad (. . .) . . . I want to go out . . . talk to people . . . tell about my experiences' (*Una giornata qualunque* 1991, p. 71).

However, Giulia's new self-awareness and her subsequent resolve to take up a different, active subject position in relation to the patriarchal order (in other words, the process of *autocoscienza*, or self-styling, which she has set in motion as a direct result of her growing awareness of other women), are cancelled out by the

direct intervention of state systems of power. On the one hand, this intervention illustrates the politicized nature of Italian feminism, with its perception of the state as patriarchal and inimical to women (the third characteristic of Italian feminism, it will be recalled). On the other hand, it is a critique that looms large over the end of the play to deny any positive *dénouement* for the female part, in that it problematizes Giulia's blossoming *autocoscienza* by misappropriating it for patriarchal medical discourse: at the very moment of Giulia's dramatic self-realization, the forces of law, order and medical science, in the form of a policeman and a doctor, force their way into her home to take her away to a mental asylum. There is also the implication that Giulia's new-found voice cannot, and must not, be heard, as her entry into the symbolic is firstly interrupted by the criminal patriarchal underworld (in the form of two male burglars who break into her home), and then silenced by the law enforcers, who are more concerned with what she is *saying*, than with what the burglars have *done*.

Carla's reaching out to Giulia is also ineffectual. Giulia is unable to dissuade her from suicide (unlike the neighbour in *Una donna sola*, who successfully prevents Maria from shooting herself). Moreover, Carla's attempt to get the police to stop the burglary taking place in her new friend's home, ironically puts into motion the disciplinary and punitive forces that culminate in Giulia's enclosure (in an ending that is reminiscent of Pirandello's *Il berretto a sonagli*, which sees Beatrice taken away to an asylum after she has tried to 'interfere' with male codes of honour). *Una donna sola* ends similarly. Maria's response to her oppression takes the form of an extreme final solution: on the advice of her female neighbour, she decides not to kill herself, but to eliminate her oppressors instead (she pushes her wheelchairbound brother-in-law out of the fourth floor window of her flat, shoots the voyeur with the binoculars, and awaits her husband's return, gun in hand). Chillingly comic, these actions crown her growing self-awareness in such a way as to problematize it. Her *autocoscienza* may not become medicalized, but

her actions will doubtless summon the forces of law and order, and so ensure a punitive postfact to the play.

Both *Una donna sola* and *Una giornata qualunque* end with failure on the part of the female character to implement effectively what has been gained in terms of *autocoscienza* and female community during the course of the action. These two positive developments are in line with Italian feminism, but that appear negated by the third, political, element in a closure marked by pessimistic determinism. In the following section, an exploration of issues related to femininity in Rame's plays will attempt to distinguish the ways in which her female parts remain inscribed by patriarchal definitions of femininity policed by internalized strategies of self-victimization and powerlessness, leading to continued entrapment in circumscribed roles; and the ways in which dramatic treatment of these issues attempts to empower their female parts.

#### *Subject matter*

Ostensibly as a result of the type of subject matter commonly associated with writings by women, an entire area labelled 'women's writing' has been separated off and accorded either low status by patriarchal ideology, or high status by essentialist feminism. These assessments derive directly from conflicting views of the 'female subject' behind the writing. Essentialist feminism both extols the female subject as Woman, and argues for 'writing-the-body' from a pre-Oedipal, pre-discursive position lying outside the patriarchal symbolic order. For patriarchy, the 'female subject' is a contradiction in terms, and by extension the 'female writing subject' an impossibility, in that the universal subject of the symbolic order is presumed to be an 'I that is only ever a 'he'.<sup>10</sup>

Replacing the notion of the subject with that of subjectivity, however, means that both feminine and masculine subjectivity are seen as constituted through discourse, in ways that not only free up the regulatory female-feminine and male-masculine pairings, but also allow for new and changing gender identities. One

implication for the subject matter usually linked with women's lives and with their writing is that, far from being 'naturally' and predeterminedistically 'feminine', and so low-status, issues regarding the personal and the private (the emotional and instinctual, the domestic, the familial), are in fact neither gender-specific nor inconsequential. The corollary is that so-called masculine issues of the political and the public (the rational and intellectual, work, war), also concern women, rather than being the exclusive province of high-status masculinity.<sup>11</sup>

Gender mobility across these two sets of issues, encapsulated in the concept 'the personal is political', is a feature that sets 'subjectivity' apart from the 'subject'. In what sense, then, is it still a valid project to speak in terms of 'feminine' subjectivity, and in terms of the performative practice of dramatic feminine subjectivity and identities? Butler points towards an answer in her comment: 'If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is' (Butler 1990, p. 3). While not automatically jettisoning all stereotypically feminine issues in favour of those that are categorized as masculine (and thereby acceding by default to patriarchal divisions), dramatic feminine subjectivity should play out the taking up of *non-patriarchal* subject positions across a range of different discourses. At stake, then, are the subversive feminine subject positions in, and radical comprehensivity of, the discourses engaged with by Rame's female parts, or their conservative perpetuation of a patriarchally-circumscribed set of roles.

There is no doubt that Rame's female parts are constructed through a wide range of discourses traditionally associated with both femininity and masculinity. In keeping with contemporary socioeconomic developments, they are not always exclusively associated with the personal, private, domestic sphere (as in *Una donna sola*), but are also wives and mothers who additionally participate in the labour force at various levels, although never in top-ranking professional positions. They are to be found as workers (*Il risveglio*, *La casellante*), as office and other salaried staff (*Rientro a casa*, *La mamma fricchettata*), and in middle-class careers (*Coppia aperta*, *quasi spalancata*, *Una giornata qualunque*, *La nonna incinta*).



Occasionally, they are, or have been, workers whose marital status is unspecified (*La maestra di ballo, Il pupazzo giapponese, Monologo di una puttana in manicomio*). They are not only politically aware (*Il risveglio*), but also politically active (*La mamma fricchettata*).

However, the particular subject positions that they take up in some of these different discourses appear to fluctuate in the degree of their subversiveness, with the result that traditional images of femininity are at times reinforced. This is particularly clear in the way many of the plays end. A final denial of multiple possibilities for feminine identity and subjectivity clouds many of Rame's plays, despite the fact that the motor force of *autocoscienza* actually drives them. At the last moment, fate and determinism seem to cut short what the female parts have been working to achieve, as any agency is ultimately ruled out by state forces. Now allocated exclusive possession of power in terms of both its source and its effects, the state effectively dominates the final scenario in a reinforcement of the 'analytical or necessary link' between personal ethics of existence and 'other social or economic or political structures', an illusory link, according to Foucault, and, by implication, existing only as part of dominant ideology (Foucault 1983, p. 230).

A crucial factor here is the Italian historical and political context for a perception of the state marked by suspicion of centralized state powers. Still the subject of debate, the 'distrusted state' is seen variously as the result of strong regional roots, the failure of the *Risorgimento* as a class revolution, the unresolved north-south divide centring on the misalliance between northern capital and southern land ownership, and the overall failure of the state to function in the interests of civil society. The unrest that peaked in 1968 in Italy, as elsewhere, was to continue over the decade that saw both Rame's own political activism and the flowering of her theatrical career (while other countries returned to stability relatively quickly) (Lumley 1990, pp. 11 - 18). This context, in conjunction with continuing patriarchal hegemony, informs the way in which Rame's female parts explore a range of discursive spheres. They proceed with this exploration from the initial

viewpoint of the particular juncture of class, age, familial and marital status that, were they to be regarded in terms of representing fixed, unitary subjects, defines and pre-conditions their actions. In terms of representing subjectivity, on the other hand, this juncture signals an essentially arbitrary point of entry into a set of interactive discourses, and thus into a performative scenario where multiple identity (including both 'oppressed' and 'privileged' identities) can be enacted and re-enacted.

In the personal sphere of sexuality and body-imaging, the female parts enact a complex blend of subversion (rebellion on the part of the oppressed identity) and reiteration of the status quo (failure of the oppressed identity to rebel, or complicity on the part of the privileged identity). The plays deal with both recreative and procreative feminine sexuality. In terms of recreative, as opposed to procreative, female sexuality, Rame's plays take up the forbidden position not only of female sexual desire, but of desire unrelated to reproduction, a position relegated by patriarchy to the negatively-valued side of the madonna-whore division. In marked contrast to the fantastic demonization of female desire in the decadent plays of D'Annunzio examined in chapter four, Rame's female parts give matter-of-fact expression to their sexual expectations when their erotic needs are ignored. Maria in *Una donna sola* (1977) and Caterina in *Rientro a casa* (1983) both resent the selfishness with which their husbands treat them sexually. Maria's husband uses her rather like one of the household appliances ('Yes, used, like an electric shaver, a hair-dryer'), and always expects her to be instantly available ('always instantly ready! Like Nescafé!' Fo 1989, pp. 18, 17). For Caterina, sex with her husband ('My 21-second dear'), makes her feel like a video-game being played at speed. Like Maria, Alice in *Alice nel paese senza meraviglie* (1977) experiences sexual exploitation from all directions, this time from fairy-tale creatures and even trees. In a dream-like fantasy setting, this play satirizes the sexual liberation of the late 60s and 70s which, in the guise of 'allowing' female sexual desire, merely ratified the continuing use of female bodies for male pleasure. The plays abound in

expositions on female desire. Images recur of the female body likened to a butcher's chart or map of Italy, with differently coloured areas sometimes denoting regions of varying erogenous intensity (*Una donna sola*, *Monologo della puttana in manicomio* (1977), *Ho fatto la plastica* (1988)).

Rame's female parts do more than merely lament their lot. The Donna in *Contrasto per una sola voce* (1977), for instance, actively pursues sexual satisfaction. In this Boccaccesque play, set in the fourteenth century, the female character uses her parents' absence to dictate when her lover may visit her and, by convincing him that they are still in the house, regulates both his speaking part and his sexual behaviour. With the *orgasmo adulto* in *Una donna sola*, female recreational sexuality has come of age (Fo 1989, p. 16). The fact that Maria is both sexual *and* a mother is particularly effective in countering the patriarchal madonna-whore divide. In Rame's plays, mothers, and grandmothers (*Ho fatto la plastica*), are portrayed as possessing sexual desire as a matter of course, rather than being villified for it in terms of patriarchal morality that de-sexualizes motherhood and ageing female bodies (as in the plays of D'Annunzio and Pirandello).

Yet, alongside the affirmation and assertion of female desire, its fulfilment is nonetheless still represented as illicit and of carnivalesque temporariness, taking the form of adultery (*Una donna sola* (1977), *Rientro a casa* (1983), *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata* (1983)) and parental deception (*Contrasto per una sola voce* (1977)). In a more recent play, the satisfaction of female desire through solitary fantasizing is portrayed as alienating and pathetic (*La donna grassa* (1992)), while in *Voce amica* (1988), the caricatural Donna Disperata is confused by her sexual relations with countless men, whom she can only identify by numbers corresponding to their ages. There is no *autocoscienza* at work in this play, with the Donna Disperata sleep-walking into a variety of beds, a metaphor for lack of self-awareness in a character far more naive and ignorant than Maria, a decade previously, in *Una donna sola*.

This later female part is used to poke fun at female desire not only as excessive, but also as automatically leading to pregnancy. While the 'voce amica', the friendly voice of a female psychologist at the end of a telephone, listens sympathetically to the Donna Disperata's worries about the paternity of her baby, the only outcome is her frantic decision to transform her lovers into numbers to be played in the lottery. This resolution, while comic, masks a darker complicity with patriarchal misappropriation of female sexuality, which removes it from female control, seen here to be faltering. Moreover, unlike Maria and her implied female neighbour in the earlier monologue, the Voce Amica and the Donna Disperata are written as speaking parts to be played, more conventionally, by two different actresses (with the former as an offstage voice). In terms of performance politics too, mobile feminine subjectivity has been implicitly sacrificed here in favour of fixed feminine subjects.

One striking common denominator between many early female parts, such as those in five out of six of the monologues in the play-cycle *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* of 1977, and the more recent Carla in *L'eroina* and Mattea in *La donna grassa* of 1992, is that they are all mothers. As in the case of recreative female sexuality, exploration of the procreative dimension is double-edged, in that it both posits a critique, and harbours reinforcement, of the patriarchal status quo. Alignment with traditional values is particularly evident in the assumption, pre-shaping many of the female parts and re-affirming the specifically Catholic patriarchal tenet of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality, that all women are, or will at some point become, mothers; moreover, they will do so within marriage. Only rarely, as in the interactive prologue to *Una madre* (1980), is there a nod in the direction of women who are not mothers, the result here of an audience reaction that surprised Rame and indicates the assumption of motherhood to be unrealistic. Rame asks seemingly unconvinced female members of the audience to imagine that they are the mother of a terrorist shown on the television news: 'It's your son! I'm

talking to you . . . 'your' son . . . It's absurd? It's not possible? Why? Don't you have children? A brother then . . . a sister . . . Just pretend' (Fo 1989, p. 260).

Motherhood is omnipresent in the plays, in contrast to the marked absence of mothers in the Renaissance comedies, and their marginalization in the plays of Pirandello. In Rame's plays, it is more a case of absent fathers, and husbands, unless they are to be considered as 'not present in flesh and blood', but nonetheless 'oppressively here among us' (Fo 1989, p. 5). In *Il risveglio*, for instance, the father/husband is 'present' but asleep. The stage directions indicate that he can be replaced with a mannequin, since he has no lines (as in the case of Maria's brother-in-law in *Una donna sola*). Although deprived of a voice, his pseudo-presence is, however, loaded with significance. He is enjoying sleep, while the mother/wife frantically prepares their child for school and herself for work. The unequal sharing of domestic responsibilities in a household where both parents work allows him a lie-in (while the last straw for this working mother is the realization that she does not have to go to work after all as it is Sunday). Motherhood is comically omnipresent in *L'uomo incinto* (1977), with all three family members (mother, daughter and father) realizing they are pregnant. Informing the comedy in this play, as in many others, is a critique of procreative female sexuality as problematic. The unexpected pregnancy of the father, who has inadvertently taken his wife's contraceptive pills, shifts the problem into the male court to expose double standards in patriarchal values idealizing motherhood. While self-sacrifice and suffering is the lot of the ideal woman-as-mother, it will not do for men. Other plays point out the valorization of femininity exclusively in terms of reproduction ('as if we were thoroughbred cows meant for reproduction', *Lisistrata* says to other mothers in *Lisistrata romana* (Fo 1989, p. 151)), while for *Medea*, children are the means whereby men subjugate women (Fo 1989, p. 74).

In other female parts, critique of motherhood comes close to reinforcing the ideal patriarchal stereotype of the *mater dolorosa*, the particularly Catholic image of motherhood-as-suffering that pervades Pirandello's plays. The prologue to *Passione*

*arcaica dei Lombardi: Maria alla croce* defines the play as 'the anti-passion, the drama of non-acceptance of sacrifice' on the part of Maria, mother of Christ. However, despite her imprecations at her role as suffering mother *par excellence*, the only solution offered by the closure of the play is an expression of her desire to die, followed by some comically irreligious berating of the Angel Gabriel. Other similar maternal female parts suffer in the fate of their children: the mother of an imprisoned terrorist and drug addict in *Una madre*, the mother of a peasant-hero murdered by landowners in *Michele lu Lanzone*, mothers of murdered children in *La strage degli innocenti*, and the mother of a young man murdered by Fascists in *Mamma Togni*. In *Mamma Togni*, the son's death deprives his mother of motherhood itself, a role that she is bereft without, and that subsumes her entire identity: 'Boys, my son is dead, now I've no-one to call me mummy anymore . . . and I . . . need . . .'. This identity is returned to her as the other injured young partisans, after a long silence, cry out 'Mamma, mamma', after which 'I was always Mamma Togni to everyone' (Fo 1989, p. 215, first performed 1971).

Unhappy relationships between mothers and older children appear to haunt motherhood (*Una donna sola*, *La mamma fricchettona*, *La donna grassa*), including domestic violence inflicted by a drug-addicted son in *L'eroina*. Any positive images of motherhood in the plays mostly revolve around younger children. For Maria in *Una donna sola*, her baby is the only member of the family whom she cares about, while in *Il risveglio* and *Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia*, young children become the addressees of monologues spoken by the female parts. While some plays toy with the possibility of abortion (*Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia*, *L'uomo incinto*), one play stands out in its exploration of a female subject position that takes exception to motherhood as the norm. *La Medea*, a monologue re-working a Euripidean theme, is introduced in the prologue as being the most politically feminist play in *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*. Medea's response to Jason's infidelity and marriage with a younger woman is to kill both their children (as well as her rival and the latter's father). By killing her children, she intends to break out of the

cage of motherhood in which patriarchy ('the society of men') has imprisoned her, and to recreate her identity anew ('to be re-born a new woman' (Fo 1989, pp. 74, 75)). A different female subject position echoes the traditional womanhood-as-motherhood tenet: 'You should think like a worthy mother, not like a haughty woman', advise other female voices from outside Medea's house (Fo 1989, p. 71) (a position that reiterates the Father's view of the Mother: 'She's not a woman, she's a mother', in Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, Act I).

Although infanticide in *La Medea*, 'the most politically feminist piece in the whole show' (Fo 1989, p. 67), is intended as a purely allegorical act of self-awareness or *presa di coscienza* (p. 69), its association with feminism is unfortunate. Not only does it lend credence to extremist anti-feminist discourses, among them that of feminists as bad mothers, and second-rate women generally, but it fails to locate the true source of Medea's problems by simply reiterating, rather than deconstructing, the patriarchal ideology underpinning the original play. The site of Medea's problems is, importantly, her internalizing of motherhood defined in patriarchal terms as the bearing children *for a man* - the children are, after all, hers as well as Jason's. Her problems of course also relate to the entire complex of femininity as understood within patriarchy. It is not in fact until Jason leaves her for a younger woman that Medea finds fault with motherhood. While recognizing the internalization by other women of patriarchal values regarding the female body and double standards regarding ageing, she paradoxically fails to recognize her own acquiescence with patriarchal motherhood. As a result, she falls into the erroneous belief that the complete destruction of motherhood, rather than its re-interpretation and re-appropriation into her control, will lead to the demise of 'male law' and allow her to redefine herself anew. However, she not only fails to reclaim motherhood by rejecting her role as 'envelope enclosing the stakes of social circulation . . . the place, the sign, of relations between men' (Irigaray 1977, p. 181). By acting the archetypally 'bad mother', she also plays into the hands of a patriarchal society which can simply classify her as 'mad'. Ultimately, her action is

one of unproductive false consciousness, rather than a *presa di coscienza* leading to successful self-reconstruction (*autocoscienza*).

Another feature of this play is that the female part continues to situate motherhood within marriage and the patriarchal family unit, with the *pater familias* at its head. This traditional definition of the family unit prevails in Rame's plays, reinforcing heterosexual parenting as the norm and heterosexual, reproductive femininity as compulsory. At the same time, the patriarchal family appears as the prime locus of oppression for many of the female parts, with its many inherent double standards the object of critique: in terms of the work/unpaid housework debate (*Il risveglio*, *La mamma fricchettata*, *I piatti*), and exploitation that is both sexual (*Una donna sola*, *Rientro a casa*) and emotional. In *Una giornata qualunque*, Giulia thinks back on thirty-five years of family life with a husband as the exclusive centre of attention:

waking up every morning and thinking about you . . . not you as you . . . but you as husband . . . you were the centre of the family . . . I'm not being ironic . . . what with thinking about food . . . the ironing, the washing . . . about your work . . . your career . . . About your problems . . . that were always also my problems . . . then about my problems too, that somehow always remained just my problems' (Fo/Rame 1991, pp. 40 - 1).

An even darker side of family life is exposed in the domestic violence which female parts have experienced at the hands of husbands (*Una donna sola*, *Coppia aperta*, *quasi spalancata*) or sons (*L'eroina*), leading, in turn, to a desperately violent reaction on the part of the abused wife (*Una donna sola*).<sup>12</sup>

Some female parts openly reject family life. Caterina in *Rientro a casa* regularly leaves her husband and two children because of his sexual behaviour, an oppressive family situation that she realizes is commonplace. On returning in a drunken haze to the wrong home one foggy evening, she spends the night in a block of flats, and in a family set-up, identical to her own, including the statutory mother-in-law with her crochet, who, barely turning round, comments: 'Is that you, are



you back already?' (Fo 1989, p. 119). The Donna in *La mamma fricchettata* has left her husband and adult son, and an existence that never allowed her 'a moment for myself', and opted for a part-time job and a life 'among people, among women', only to be denounced to the authorities by her husband and son for abandoning the conjugal home and forcibly taken back by the police at the end of the play. Despite the critique of traditional family life in these plays, no viable alternative is posited. There are no representations, even in more recent plays, of, for instance, single working women living alone quite happily. With the notable exception of *La mamma fricchettata*, women on their own are mostly portrayed as not coping, and as desperate for another marital set up (*Una giornata qualunque*, *Coppia aperta*, *quasi spalancata*, *La donna grassa*).

In the personal sphere of the female body and self-imaging, Rame's female parts similarly occupy multiple positions of critique and reinforcement in relation to dominant discourses on ideal femininity. These particularly concern body-size and shape, as well as the associated area of ageing explored in the previous chapter. Orbach noted in 1978 that concern with body-size as a focal point for the definition of feminine self-image became part of the consciousness-raising process of the 1970s. In particular, she situated thinness as a recent and specifically western ideal in countries where food is plentiful, and its production monopolized by multinational corporations that target women catering for families as primary purchasers (Orbach 1988, preface to 1978 edition, p. 17). A decade later, she records ever-increasing problems of compulsive eating, and the related conditions of bulimia and anorexia, as a direct result of internalization of body-size as definitive of individual worth (Orbach 1988, preface to 1988 edition, p. 19). By the time of the written versions of Rame's *Coppia aperta*, *quasi spalancata* (1983), *Rientro a casa* (1983), *Una giornata qualunque* (1988), *Ho fatto la plastica* (1988) and *La donna grassa*, or *The fat woman* (1991), all plays featuring body-size and shape as a concern for their female parts, it was still the case that 'obsession and preoccupation with the body had increased, rather than abated' (Orbach 1988, p. 20).

Mattea, the 'fat woman' of the play's title, is obsessed with her weight, and experiences an ambivalent attitude towards food that appears to bear out the fact that, as a result of the 'thin aesthetic which has dominated over the last twenty years . . . women absorb a powerfully contradictory message vis-à-vis food and eating. It is good for others, but bad for the woman herself; healthy for others, harmful to the woman herself; full of love and nurturance for others, full of self-indulgence to herself' (Orbach 1988, pp. 20 - 1). She appears also to be caught in another double bind, on the one hand subscribing to the magazine *Grasso è bello (Fat is beautiful)*, and on the other hand, desperate to lose weight. Orbach expresses a similar paradox. Despite her understanding of the perception of body-size as conditioned by cultural and historical context, she still assumes thinness as the ideal, and her work is geared to the goal of losing weight. While Mattea's deliberations about fatness and food are comical, she remains trapped in the position of victim to poor self-image. This is emphasized by the closure of the play, which sees her deflated at the news that her ex-husband has fathered a child and is about to remarry. The play ends with her returning to her electronic lover (a tape-recorded male voice) for comfort. She is ultimately problematized in her body not only in terms of size, and its assumed negative implications for sexual attractiveness, but also in her reproductive power, in which she has also been supplanted by another woman.

Other, earlier plays also engage with dominant discourses of the female body by similarly restricting their female parts to positions that, however comically, manage to illustrate and perpetuate, as well as critique, the status quo. In *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata*, a satire on open relationships ending unexpectedly with the husband's, rather than the wife's, suicide, Antonia's own son orchestrates her transformation in terms of body-image, so that she can successfully find another man to replace her unfaithful husband. Satisfied with her new wardrobe and hairstyle, he turns his attentions to her weight: 'Well done, Mum, it's going well . . . you've changed your wardrobe, your hairstyle . . . but you're fat, Mum, you'll have to slim, Mum' (Fo/Rame 1991, p. 12). His next comment, 'you've got to

make yourself appetizing', recalls the metaphors of consumption frequently associated with the female body in Renaissance comedy. Despite her witty retort ('What am I, a guinea fowl?'), she follows the exercise-routine and diet he sets for her, and loses weight, re-shaped by male hands, a man-made woman made ready for other men, in a process she refers to uncritically as adaptation ('I adapted to look for another man' Fo/Rame 1991, p. 29).

In *Rientro a casa*, the feeling of well-being after an unexpected afternoon in bed with Oreste, a colleague at work, is automatically translated into weight-loss by the unhappily-married Caterina ('I've certainly lost at least three kilos' Fo 1989, p. 118), in a direct equation of positive self-imagining and thinness, and bearing out the view that fatness and thinness 'are not so much descriptions of body size as they are emotional categories: emotional categories that carry the weight of cultural dictates we have all internalized' (Orbach 1988, p. 22). Stage props like the exercise bicycle in *La donna grassa*, and Giulia's diet book in *Una giornata qualunque*, signal the body-styling industry that has grown up alongside the food industry to encourage and capitalize on current concern with body size, shape and fitness. They also serve to illustrate the 'technologies, techniques and practices' that 'produce subject positions which we have to assume on pain of exclusion and/or sanctions' (Vintges 1991, p. 232).

Mattea's response to the possibility of a television appearance in *La donna grassa* is a feeling of inadequacy leading to a comically grotesque fantasy of drastic body-reduction (and revealing a passing awareness of body-styling as a western luxury): 'I'll have seven liftings done . . . I'll have five kilos taken off each breast . . . twelve from my stomach . . . eighteen from my behind . . . and what's left over I'll donate to the Third World' (Rame 1992, p. 79). Body-styling is taken a step further in the form of ludicrously extensive cosmetic surgery and 'lifting' in the satirical *Ho fatto la plastica*, with stitches unravelling at crucial social moments and resulting in total paralysis at the moment of the grandmother's first sexual triumph in her new, Frankensteinian body. The final comment by the female part

that she might as well be a motionless mannequin in a shop window, forces home the point that, far from signalling the beginning of a new lease of life, eight hours-worth of cosmetic surgery have only created a facsimile of woman.

In this play, as in *La Medea* and many others, deterioration of body shape is associated exclusively with the ageing of the female body (while concern with body-styling is of course expected in women of all ages). There appears to be no escape in any of the plays from the patriarchal double bind that valorizes femininity in terms of youth and ideal body size, and at the same time problematizes women who attempt to counter the effects of ageing. On the positive side, many of Rame's female parts represent later, rather than earlier, stages in the female life course, in itself a broadening of the spectrum of dramatized femininity. They are placed centre stage to grapple comically with the patriarchal double bind, with the audience exposed to a feminine viewpoint (unlike Pirandello's older female characters, who rarely step beyond their pejorative descriptions in the stage directions). However, it is a feminine viewpoint still entrapped and confined by patriarchal definitions and parameters, with a preponderance of negative dramatic closures sealing the inability of the female parts to find fulfilment in what they *do*, rather than how they *appear*, and particularly, how they appear in the eyes of men.

It appears that the body, sexual relationships, marriage, and the family, remain the spheres within which they continue to construct their identity, with a notable recurrence of the age-old commonplace of the *malmaritata*, or unhappily married woman, dating back to beyond the Renaissance. While working female parts are by no means absent, the working-class workplace is more often than not considered in its burdensome interaction with housework and childcare (*Il risveglio*), or in the light of the dangers it presents to women's health (*La maestra di ballo: catena di montaggio*). Antonio in *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata*, is a rare, and relatively recent example of a middle-class female part who places importance on the new job she has found since leaving her husband, and on her voluntary evening work at a local centre for drug-dependency: 'It's very important

to work . . . you're among people, you don't brood . . . you're independent' (Fo/Rame 1991, p. 18). In most plays, however, work is defined in terms of a breadwinning activity rather than a fulfilling career that might afford a sense of identity beyond being a woman. There is, moreover, a complete absence of any leisure activities that, particularly in contemporary society, provide another means of self-development. The question to be asked of Rame's female parts is, if they are women, and taking up positions in discourses of femininity, ideal or otherwise, is that all that they are?

### Performance politics

Complementing the previous discussion on *what* Rame's female parts portray, attention to *how* they function on stage reveals that they often differ formally from traditional female characters, such as those examined in the previous chapters, in ways that draw on popular medieval performance practice. Specific performance strategies are particularly crucial in facilitating and enhancing the dramatization of the *performativity* of a feminine subjectivity aware of itself as a process and a practice.

This is achieved in the context of an often intimate and humorous stage-audience dynamic established in the prologue and/or during the course of the play, and geared to provoke critical reflection rather than the complacent catharsis of a fourth-wall response. Her use of comedy is particularly important in that it counteracts one of the dominant stereotypes of feminism as unattractively bitter and humourless. More significantly, the fact that her critique takes place within the context of heterosexuality and marriage also disavows one popular misconception of feminism as a position definable as radical lesbian separatism, rather than a plurality of positions, as is in fact the case. Dominant ideological forces propagate this misrepresentation in order to mask the existence of other feminist positions, notably the particularly threatening ones working within, rather than outside,

heterosexuality and marriage. In her use of the comic genre as a vehicle for critique, Rame follows a long tradition. Explaining her use of comedy, she says:

When you go to the theatre and see a tragedy, you identify, get involved, cry your heart out, and then go home and say: 'What a good cry I've had tonight!, and you sleep relaxed. The political content has passed you by, like water off a duck's back. In order to laugh, on the other hand - and this is still Molière talking - you need intelligence, sharpness of mind. It's not only your mouth, but also your mind, that opens wide with laughing, and into your mind go the nails of reason (Fo 1989, p. 9).

A grotesque vein often provides an edge in realist comedies that epitomize the everyday (*Una donna sola*, *Rientro a casa*, *Coppia aperta*, *quasi spalancata*, *La donna grassa*, and most of her other plays), and in comic surrealist fantasy (*Alice nel paese senza meraviglie*), comic mythical allegory (*La Medea*, *Lisistrata romana*), and farce (*La maestra di ballo*, *Il pupazzo giapponese*).

The stage-audience relationship set up by Rame also works to reinforce the strengthening of bonds between women, visible in several of her plays, and recognized by Italian feminism as crucial to *autocoscienza* (and thence to the freeing-up of multiple feminine subject positions). Direct address and interaction with female members of the audience are features of her performances which find their way, in turn, into subsequent versions of the dramatic text. In evaluating the perception by female and male spectators of Rame's female parts in terms of the dramatic criteria of stage setting (time and place), action and speech vehicles, and comparing the subsequent stage-audience dynamics with those explored in earlier chapters, a scenario comes into focus, the complexity of which mirrors that of Rame's female subjects discussed in the previous section.

As one would expect in plays dealing with contemporary everyday life, many of Rame's female parts have freedom of movement. They appear unproblematically in the street (*Il problema dei vecchi*) or indoors (*Coppia aperta*, *quasi spalancata*), or move between both outdoor street and indoor domestic

scenes, irrespective of the time of day (*Rientro a casa*). They are shown outside the home in the public sphere of work (*Il pupazzo giapponese*, *La maestra di ballo: catena di montaggio*, *La casellante*, *La nonna incinta*), or at the wheel of a car in a transcontinental rally (*Parigi-Dakar*). Of course many are older, married female parts, who would also have been allowed to appear unchaperoned in street scenes in the comedies of the Renaissance and Goldoni. There they would have functioned, however, mostly as minor characters, with plot interest usually revolving around younger, nubile female bodies. A shift of interest towards older married and unmarried female characters, albeit mostly pejorative, is discernible in the plays of both D'Annunzio and Pirandello. Rame's older female parts, on the other hand, take centre stage to take issue with patriarchal stereotypes.

While they occupy a variety of stage settings, for a number of female parts, however, both outdoor and indoor scenarios have negative connotations. An outdoor job as street-vendor in an unsalubrious area, exposed to all weathers and to the violent criminal underworld, has become the lot of Carla, an ex-teacher of Latin and mother of heroin-addicted children who is accidentally shot dead at the end of the play (*L'eroina*). Other working female parts are also in danger. As factory workers in *Il pupazzo giapponese*, they are drugged to increase efficiency, and have also lost limbs because of poor safety standards. In *La maestra di ballo: catena di montaggio*, their ability to have children has been severely damaged through repetitive strain injury on the production line. Adverse conditions of work and housing for the female level-crossing keeper in *La casellante* mean constant ill-health for her family. On the indoor front, Maria in *Una donna sola* is permanently locked indoors by her husband. Mattea in *La donna grassa*, Antonia in *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata* and Giulia in *Una giornata qualunque*, all experience isolation and alienation in their homes. For some female parts, 'inside' means being locked up in a mental asylum (*Monologo di una puttana in manicomio*, *Il pupazzo giapponese*, *Una giornata qualunque*, *Michele lu Lanzone*), while references to madness by the female parts themselves are not uncommon.

In assessing Rame's stage settings in terms of positive development for the dramatic representation of femininity, these negative stage settings demand closer attention. The place in which the female parts are seen to carry out their self-exploration is particularly significant in terms of the visual aspect of the stage-audience dynamic; the stage setting can therefore never be considered as mere background, but always carries meaning (as discussed in chapter one). Moreover, in the case of stage settings that are mimed, audience attention is specifically directed by the actress to her surroundings (*Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia*). In the complex coexistence of critique with reinforcement of patriarchy in Rame's plays, it is not always easy to unravel the status of the stage settings. Sometimes the stage setting is openly criticized as part of the particular aspect of contemporary society under scrutiny. This is the case of many of the ubiquitous indoor, domestic settings in Rame's plays, and ties in with her focus on unmasking traditional home and family as idealized patriarchal institutions harbouring female oppression. At other times, however, the setting remains unmarked, receiving no comment.

The domestic habitat confining and defining patriarchal femininity is made the overt object of critique, in different degrees, by both Antonia in *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata*, and Giulia in *Una giornata qualunque*, so that the audience is forced into an awareness of the formal dramatic element of place, and of its implications for feminine subjectivity. For Giulia, the urge to 'get out of this house that's driving you mad . . . to go out . . . talk to people' (Fo/Rame 1991, p. 71) is an important step as she proceeds towards *autocoscienza* during the course of the play. In the case of Antonia, her move towards self-development in finding work and taking part in activities outside the house and among people in *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata* has already taken place, and is recounted as antefact. The play is set in the new home she has established after leaving her husband, but with the emphasis remaining on her relationships with men (ex-husband, son, lover), the critique of place remains passing and momentary, rather than forming part of the *dénouement*, as in *Una giornata qualunque*.



On the other hand, no critique of the traditional alignment of femininity with the domestic scenario takes place in *L'uomo incinto* (first performed in 1977). During the course of this play, the action moves from a scene with the Mother (*Madre*) and the Daughter (*Figlia*), set in the Mother's home, to a scene with the *Industriale* (the father and husband) and the *Professore*, in the latter's medical study, with the naming of the characters further reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. (There is also a female nurse (*Infermiera*) whose menial role is established when she is summoned to take an order for refreshments). While the play offers a critique of patriarchal double standards regarding reproductive roles, the audience is never distanced from, and therefore made aware of, the value-laden scenarios which the stage settings represent.

In *Una donna sola*, critique of place is closed down by a no-exit ending, as in *Una giornata qualunque*. The fact that the apparently ordinary household setting in which Maria appears, is actually one in which she is physically imprisoned, is revealed during the course of the play in such a way as to surprise and shock her female neighbour, who points out that her husband is breaking the law in locking her indoors. Yet, hand-in-hand with this critique of female enclosure, is the implication that Maria is in effect powerless to prevent it. This is made evident by her reason for not reporting either her husband or the male voyeur to the authorities, namely that the law is patriarchal and would undoubtedly favour the two men. Her own illegal, and impotent, solution of violence at the end of the play reaffirms the hopelessness of her situation. While on the one hand, multiple feminine positions beckon as the play progresses, on the other, possibilities are shut down by the play's closure. Her enclosure in a private prison remains intact, with her imprisonment in a state prison an almost inevitable next step.

Prevalent in Renaissance Italy, and integrated into the stage practice of the classical comedies, the enclosure indoors of women continues to find stage space centuries later in the plays of Pirandello, together with forced confinement of women in mental asylums for patriarchal convenience (*Il berretto a sonagli*).<sup>13</sup>

While Rame's *Una donna sola* at least offers a critique of female enclosure in the home, plays like *Monologo della puttana in manicomio*, *Il pupazzo giapponese*, and *Una giornata qualunque* appear not to explore enclosure in mental asylums as a form of medicalized discipline that has always been imposed on women in particular.<sup>14</sup> Even though *Michele lu Lanzone* contains criticism of the illegal but continuing practice of wrapping unruly inmates tightly in wet sheets until they faint (*la strozzina*), the fact that the Mother is there at all receives no attention.

Stage settings tend to portray stifling domestic surroundings and hazardous lower-class workplaces, in line with the aspects of contemporary industrialized patriarchy that Rame singles out for critique. Yet, even in plays figuring middle-class female parts with occupations that are not problematic, the locus of action still remains exclusively in the domain of the domestic and the sexual. Any shift in focus away from patriarchal definitions of femininity, with its domestic, familial implications, to a femininity with other elements, such as a career or leisure pursuit, also contributing to its identity, remains but a glimmer. Even *La nonna incinta*, set not in a factory, but in an artist's studio, and opening with Franca seen creatively at work restoring a statue, is concerned with her pregnancy. One could, of course, choose to read the nature of her pregnancy (her bearing of a child on her daughter's behalf, engineered by the son-in-law to safeguard his wife's lucrative career), as a violation of her own career. However, the play never explicitly acknowledges any pleasure or fulfilment that she might be experiencing in her work.

In conjunction with the type of action depicted in the plays, exploration of the precise form that this takes on stage raises the issue of how the female parts use their bodies in performance. In particular, do the dancing female bodies in *Una donna sola* and *La maestra di ballo: catena di montaggio* function exhibitionistically as spectacle, providing opportunities for audience voyeurism and interrupting narrative progression (like, for example, Basiliola's erotic dance in D'Annunzio's *La nave*, or the Stepdaughter's dance in Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*)?<sup>15</sup> Do enlarged female screen images (*Una giornata qualunque*)

and outsized female silhouettes (*La donna grassa*) act as the monstrous feminine, an excessive, alarming, sharp-toothed femininity that threatens to disempower masculinity and that must be cut down to size (like Pirandello's Tuda, who appears on stage initially in the form of a giant silhouette, only to become anorexic during the course of *Diana e la Tuda*)?

Maria enters the stage in *Una donna sola* dancing frenetically to rock music, clad in a transparent, low-cut negligée which led to objections from feminists. While gratuitous, sensationalist exhibition of the female body reinforces patriarchal definition and objectification of femininity as body (in opposition to masculinity as subject and intellect), to deny the female body runs the danger of obliterating female eroticism altogether. *Una donna sola* can be read as an attempt to re-appropriate female eroticism for a non-patriarchal femininity currently besieged by various forms of exploitation and harassment. In this context, Maria's revealing costume is not gratuitous, but, functioning as semi-nudity rather than semi-nakedness, forms an integral part of the satire on a femininity grotesquely abused from all angles.

In addition to her selfish and violent husband, her brother-in-law's gropings, a voyeur and a lover, all seeking gratification at her expense, she is also subjected to obscene phone calls. While swelling an already absurdly long list, the inclusion of a phone caller (who presumably does not know what she is wearing) also indicates that her sexual harassment is not 'caused' by her transparent attire, thereby undercutting the patriarchal assumption that women are to be held responsible for men's sexual reactions to them. At the same time, the sheer extent of male sexual response to this particular female part serves to ridicule the patriarchal fantasy/nightmare of an excessive female sexuality that cannot be contained, with Maria's 'sexual powers' emanating well beyond her domestic prison. Importantly, however, Maria is no *femme fatale* (a factor that helps to differentiate her from D'Annunzio's Basiliola, for instance). As the prologue makes clear, Maria is 'simple' and 'naïve', modelling herself on television images of femininity (Fo 1989,

p. 7). Yet, unlike Flaubert's Emma Bovary, who remains attached to her romantic, literary blueprints, and interested only in male characters, Maria makes significant progress towards *autocoscienza* through her new female friendship.

Together with her revealing stage costume, Maria's dance is also to be read in a satirical context. It is neither erotic, nor, coming as it does at the beginning of the play, interruptive of narrative progression, to which, on the contrary, it functions as a trigger. The frenetic speed at which the dance takes place, to the accompaniment of loud rock music, together with the basket of ironing that Maria holds, serve to deny interpretation as sultry, erotic spectacle catering for voyeurism. Dancing female bodies are particularly central to *La maestra di ballo: catena di montaggio* (*The dancing mistress: assembly-line style*). In this play, dance movements are foregrounded in a critique of exploitation of the female workforce in the context of contemporary industrialized Italy. Three aspiring female factory workers are trained by a dance mistress in the twenty-four different movements they will need to perform repeatedly at the machines. These numerous, repetitive movements are disguised as an enjoyable form of art, or a means of keeping fit, in order fill the workers with enthusiasm and so maximize production on the assembly line. Coupled with this disguise is encouragement of the alienation of women from each other in the form of cross-class competitiveness: 'Have you seen how simple it is? Then there's the further advantage of firming-up the pectoral muscles and getting rid of cellulite. Who knows how many ladies would pay to be in your place!' (Fo 1989, pp. 80 - 1).

The dance mistress is the only speaking part, while the factory girls merely dance, with the occasional quizzical look at their teacher. Once they have mastered the movements, they dance 'with a by now obsessive rhythm' (Fo 1989, p. 81). However, any notion of gratuitous spectacle is immediately undercut by the intervention of an offstage voice from a loud-hailer which accompanies the dance, intoning the injurious effects on women's gynaecological health of the repetitive strain of performing forty-thousand five hundred awkward movements each day (Fo

1989, pp. 81 - 2). As in the case of *Una donna sola*, the female bodies in *La maestra di ballo: catena di montaggio* do not function to provide sensationalist sexual exhibitionism. In both plays, the female body is incorporated into a critique of patriarchal exploitation in contemporary society, while the use of distancing effects (fast music, props, voiceover) maintains audience awareness of the formal properties of performance.

The female body also takes to the stage in Rame's plays in the form of images projected on to a screen or backcloth. The role of the media in producing and reproducing images of femininity in *Una donna sola* raises issues of femininity as image. The inherent notion of surface and the consequent implications of fetishism for femininity, have been explored in chapter two, while the screen imaging of femininity that exploded with the advent of cinema has been a major focus of feminist film studies.<sup>16</sup> Rame's middle-class female parts have access to the technology allowing them to produce their own images of themselves. Franca in *Ho fatto la plastica* makes a video of her new, surgically 'lifted' and rebuilt self for a female friend in a play that opens with a denunciation, by a *male* television presenter, of the 'pervasiveness of stupid moralisms' that make women undergo cosmetic surgery 'as if it were a sin, a horrendously shameful act, to be confided only to a close female friend' (Fo/Rame 1991, p. 167). During the course of making this video, an image construction of yet another re-constructed surface (the female body), the female part comes to finally reject the complete subsumption into surface and image to which media's mediation of femininity has reduced her.

Enlarged screen images of femininity figure in *Una giornata qualunque*, a play that makes extensive, and particularly farcical, use of television and video, along with other, more mechanical devices. Like *Ho fatto la plastica*, this play opens with the making of a video as a modern technological means of communication that can replace the written letter. An enormous screen placed at the back of the stage is filled with an image of Giulia, an image that she plays with, adjusting both her clothes and, by means of signals to unseen stage hands, the

lighting and camera angles. In a passing comment, she reveals that she is familiar with camerawork ('I'm so nervous . . . I'm used to being behind the camera, not in front of it' Fo/Rame 1991, p. 38), while a complex system of warning gadgets that spring into action when she tries to drink and smoke, illustrates that she is at home with modern technology.

As she creates her image on the screen, she plays with the enlarging effect of placing her hands close to the camera, while the slow music she has added as a sound-track suddenly erupts into blaring rock music, and the telephone keeps ringing. By showing the feminine image in the process of construction by the female part herself, and by breaking playfully into the process, the audience is distanced from the enormous image before it. Constantly reminded of the constructability of the image, and so of the performativity of a feminine subjectivity in control of its own constitution, the audience is not allowed to identify with the image, or to occupy a voyeuristic position in relation to it. Images from television replace Giulia's images as she postpones her suicide for a chicken dinner and one last episode of her favourite soap. Screen images and real life intermingle comically when she believes herself to be addressed by a policeman in a crime thriller on the screen (but presaging the real policeman who helps the doctor take her away at the end of the play). Comically immersed in images generated by the media and modern technology, it is in fact a combination of this technology, in the form of the telephone, with the written medium (a magazine) that brings her, however accidentally, into contact with Clara. This is not only an indication that technology can bring people together, rather than alienating them from each other, but also points to a future where the inside/outside dichotomy, as utilized by patriarchy, may no longer have meaning.

The enormous female image at the beginning of *Una giornata qualunque* recurs in *La donna grassa*, this time in the form of the outsize silhouette of Mattea. In this play devoted to the female body and the contemporary western patriarchal template for ideal female body-size, Mattea's actual body is not always visible on

stage, disappearing at regular intervals to leave behind only a voice. In the opening scene, a female and a male voice are heard emanating from a bed, but neither are seen in the flesh. Mattea then gets up, to vanish shortly afterwards into the bathroom, at which point the audience sees 'Mattea's rather abundant 'silhouette'' (Rame 1992, p. 62). However, this is no erotic silhouette (like that of Tuda which opens Pirandello's play *Diana e la Tuda*), but one that is sitting on the toilet having a pee ('fa pipì'). Mattea disappears from view again later in the play, on the arrival of a stranger. Mattea puts up a dividing screen and proceeds to converse with him from behind it. On her re-appearance, and after a brief interchange, he exits, and the audience once again sees her silhouette, this time as she washes herself. She is joined in the bathroom by her daughter, Anna, who undresses and mimes having a shower. This time, both women are watched by a Young Man, Mattea's colleague, in an act of voyeurism discovered and cut short by Mattea, who sends him into the kitchen. Anna reappears, wrapped in a towel, finally going back into the bathroom, where she gets dressed.

While the play on Mattea's silhouette comically deflates any possibility for audience voyeurism, it is difficult to see why Anna should spend so much of her time undressed, particularly in the presence of someone she has never met before. A further area for debate in this play is the frequent use of Mattea's disembodied voice. While the voice of the Man in bed is of course even more disembodied, being in the form of a tape recording, the frequent disappearance of the female body raises the issues of invisibility and a voice for femininity explored earlier in relation to the Renaissance comedies. On the one hand, the omnipresence of Mattea's voice can be read as positive in terms of feminine subjectivity, and notably so when detached from the body, which is, after all, the defining factor of patriarchal femininity. There is also a reversal of the traditional dynamic of masculine voyeurism - feminine exhibitionism/spectacle (as exemplified by the Young Man watching the women's naked silhouettes), in the episode when Mattea can see the stranger who visits her, while he can only hear her. On the other hand, this

reversal is only temporary, ending with the stranger's exit when, having at last presented herself to him, Mattea threatens to strip. Moreover, the reason for the reversal in the first place is a negative one, namely Mattea's poor self-image. As far as her voice is concerned, while it is always to be heard, a denial of the female body, as discussed earlier, is not to be advocated, given the relative invisibility of feminine subjectivity within patriarchy.

The notion of a feminine voice is central to the third and last dramatic criterion, that of speech vehicles. In the Renaissance comedies, the dramatic feminine voice was relegated to the wings not just on the basic level of the transvestism of boy actors as female characters, but also in terms of the female characters themselves. Enmeshed with the frequent ventriloquizing of their views by male characters went the standard dramatic practice, informed by the sociocultural context, of severely limiting their stage presence and curtailing their access to the full range of speech vehicles, according to their age, class and marital status. In diametric opposition, Rame's female parts (most notably in the monologues and plays written for several parts but performed as monologues), speak for themselves and take over the speech of other parts, both male and female, in ways that have already been mentioned.

In the monologue *La mamma fricchettone*, for example, the priest's contributions to the dialogue with the Donna, and her arrest and handcuffing by policemen, are all inferred by the audience from the female part alone on stage, a dramatic practice recalling the medieval jester's performance 'in which the storyteller, in this case myself, a woman, acts all the parts through allusion' (Fo 1989, p. 159). While in this play the priest and policeman are not represented in any physical form, in *Il risveglio*, for instance, a mannequin is used to play the part of slumbering husband, whose viewpoint in arguments belonging to the play's antefact is ventriloquized by the Donna in her monologue. The female part in the medieval *Contrasto per una sola voce* denies her male lover, who has a walk-on part only, any form of speech apart from the odd sneeze, using the pretext that her



parents are sleeping nearby. Even in *La donna grassa*, a play including two speaking male parts, the main female part has constructed a third male voice according to her own desires. Moreover, Mattea in this play, like Carla in *L'eroina*, maintains a position of centrality in a polylogue context, by virtue of the fact that she is always the main addressee of all the other parts.

Organization of the speech vehicles around the female part is an important contribution to audience perception of a dramatic femininity that is centre stage. This is complemented by another performance strategy, namely that of direct address. Direct address to the auditorium constructs the audience *as* audience, formalizing the relationship between stage and auditorium by breaking down the fourth wall, and counteracting the dynamic of non-critical, escapist identification and voyeurism. In particular, direct address to female spectators means a strengthening of bonds between women (a necessary part of *autocoscienza* in a patriarchal context) across the stage-auditorium divide. Women are addressed in the prologue (*La Medea, Una madre*), as well as during the course the play itself. Stage directions in *Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia*, for instance, state that the Ragazza 'directly addresses the women present at the front of the auditorium' (Fo 1989, p. 53), while in the prologue to *La Medea*, Rame dedicates each performance of this favourite play to 'all the young, and not so young, present in the theatre' (Fo 1989, p. 71).

Direct address is a prominent feature of *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata*, a polylogue with three speaking parts. Significantly, Antonia addresses the audience much more frequently than her ex-husband (named generically as 'Man' in the stage directions). The thirty-nine stage directions instructing her to directly address the audience, or to turn towards them, in comparison with the Man's seven, ensure Antonia's greater rapport with the audience in a context where attention is divided between two characters on stage. Also included is a direct address by Antonia to the women in the audience, with whom she strikes up a special relationship through mock didacticism: 'The first rule . . . you women at the front, take notes from now

on . . . you never know . . . my experiences might be useful . . . the first rule, as I was saying, is to leave home' (Fo/Rame 1991, p. 11).

The use of direct address and, in the monologues, the playing of multiple parts by one actress, are central to Rame's performance politics. Her adherence to a type of stage practice derived from pre-Renaissance times functions particularly well in ensuring the dominance of a dramatic feminine voice. Moreover, many of the plays dramatize the taking up of a variety of feminine subject positions, rather than adhering to the limited feminine stereotypes fantasized by mainstream dramatists. In a fertile blend of past dramatic methods with contemporary concerns relevant to women's lives, her female parts break the mould by offering a critique of patriarchal definitions of femininity. At times this critique appears to sit alongside the actual reinforcement of traditional values. It is tempting to see the problem of authorship re-surfacing here, and to designate the patriarchal viewpoint as Fo's contribution. Alternatively, one could attribute the two contrasting standpoints to Rame's own multiple feminine identity, and read the combination as indicative of the specific historical and socioeconomic context of her personal, political and theatrical development. Beyond all doubt, however, is the fact that Rame has made an important contribution. This is to be found in the particular kind of link she forges between the dramatic and ideological spheres, in that her plays work to activate not simply feminine subjectivity itself, but feminine subjectivity as a performative process that is ongoing and so open to change.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This phrase is used by Rame to describe the grim monologue *Io, Ulrike, grido . . .* (Fo 1989, p. 243).

<sup>2</sup>For a definition of 'polylogue' and other dramatic terms, see Pfister 1991.

<sup>3</sup>One indication of the ambiguous nature of this area is the appearance of the volume entitled *Venticinque monologhi per una donna di Dario Fo e Franca Rame* as part of the collection *Le commedie di Dario Fo* (rather than perhaps independently). Yet some of the same plays are listed under *Il teatro di Franca Rame* at the end of Rame's *Parliamo di donne* (containing *L'eroina* and *La donna grassa*) of 1992 (a volume with only Rame's name on the cover, but describing *Parliamo di donne* on the flyleaf as 'two one-act plays by Franca Rame and Dario Fo'). On the intricacies of the Rame-Fo collaboration, see Rame 1992, pp. 116 - 17; Hood 1993, xiv; Mitchell 1986, pp. 79 - 80.

<sup>4</sup>See Goldoni's *Il teatro comico* (1750).

<sup>5</sup>The play collections referred to in this chapter are as follows: Dario Fo, *Venticinque monologhi per una donna di Dario Fo e Franca Rame*, 1989; Dario Fo and Franca Rame, *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata, e altre quattordici commedie*, 1991; Franca Rame, *Parliamo di donne*, 1992. While many of the plays in the 1991 collection were originally written for television, they have been included in this study because they are considered by their authors as suitable for the stage, and have indeed been performed in a theatrical context (Fo/Rame 1991, p. vi).

<sup>6</sup>The Italian for sex ( *Sesso* ) also denotes the penis, leading to ambiguous word-play in the following sentence, in which the pronoun 'he' can also be understood as 'it'.

<sup>7</sup>On the feminist reception of Rame's plays, see Hirst 1989 and Rame 1992.

<sup>8</sup>Foucault 1985, 1985a, 1987.

<sup>9</sup>See the introduction in Kemp and Bono 1993.

<sup>10</sup>For further discussion of the status of 'women's writing', in particular women's autobiography, see Günsberg 1993.

<sup>11</sup>See Hartsock 1983.

<sup>12</sup>While sexual violence against women in a family context does not appear in any of the plays, its perpetration against women in the workplace (*Il pupazzo giapponese, Monologo della puttana in manicomio*) and in the streets (*Lo stupro, Previsioni meteorologiche movimenti di stupro in Italia*) is brought out into the open and placed on the dramatic agenda.

<sup>13</sup>On female enclosure in Renaissance Tuscany, see Brown 1986.

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of patriarchal methods of dealing with female 'madness', see Showalter 1987.

<sup>15</sup>On female spectacle and narrative interruption, see Mulvey 1989.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Bruno and Nadotti 1988, Kuhn 1982 and Penley 1988, to name but a few.

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