

**“Come uno che non è nemmeno un maschio.” Inadequate
Masculinities in Michela Murgia’s *Accabadora***

This paper suggests that Michela Murgia’s novel *Accabadora* (2009) is constructed upon the concept of masculine inadequacy, symbolized by insufficient corporal features that contrast with the expectations that men set for themselves. In the context of a novel that evidently revolves around female characters (exemplified by the social role of the *accabadora* and the decisional power that often lies in the hands of women), I intend to analyze the way that the emergence of women, following a process of dichotomy or antithesis, mirrors the consistent failure of men and especially of their bodies, which are being portrayed as absent, insufficient or mutilated. Claudio Vedovati has observed that the male body “può essere sempre rimosso, messo da parte, sacrificato (nel lavoro in guerra, in politica); portatore di «bassi» istinti, di mere pulsioni biologiche” (140). This emerges, in *Accabadora*, as a means of symbolizing a peculiar interpretation of gender balances, not only in connection with the specificity of the Sardinian town of Soreni, but also in reference to historical events that encompass the Italian Unification and the aftermath of both World Wars.¹ My approach will focus specifically on three examples of masculine inadequacy in the novel, in the order the text introduces them: Sisinnio Listru, whose death is the original cause of his family’s financial straits and makes it possible for Bonaria to adopt young Maria with the practice of *fill’e anima*; Raffaele Zincu, Bonaria’s betrothed and whose disappearance in WWI’s trenches is the main premise for the intrusion of global, historical events in a setting that would otherwise appear to be a microcosm following an independent trajectory; Nicola Bastiu, whose disability is caused by his attempt to subscribe to a set of non-written rules establishing aggressive behavior as one of the ways through which men not only gain respect, but also publicly display their status as notable members of the community. The disappearance, death, and mutilation of men’s bodies all contribute to a social setting where men eventually pay for their aggressive, irrational and instinctive behavior, while women are portrayed as wiser, more practical, and less inclined to be influenced by the same rhetoric of a “manifest destiny” that affects the male characters.²

This reflection on corporal features becomes even more meaningful if one considers the temporal setting of *Accabadora*: the

1950s, following the fall of the Fascist regime that, in addition to exalting the aggressive traits of masculinity, imposed an ideological cult of Mussolini upon the public, using his body to inspire images of health, energy, and a sexual power that women could not resist. This is thoroughly studied, with specific reference to the concept of virility in terms of full vigor and one's sexual prime, in Barbara Spackman's *Fascist Virilities*. Spackman insists particularly that the supposedly exceptional qualities of Mussolini's body served propagandistic purposes in a semiotic system that cleverly balanced overt and covert signifiers, alternating messages to silences:

No news of the Duce's illnesses or birthdays, nor the fact that he had become a grandfather, was to be published. Mussolini himself shaved his head so that no grey hair might mar the appearance of a man in his prime. He was simply not to grow old. The lights left burning late into the night in his Piazza Venezia office similarly signaled not only devotion to his "duties" but vigor and stamina. He was not to be shown participating in "nonvirile" activities (and here the term *non virili* is used) like dancing but was instead to be shown participating in vigorous sports such as riding, flying, motorcycling, and so on. (3)

Aldo Palazzeschi provided an alternative interpretation of the mythical body of the Duce as an entity that, far from being concrete, had been idealized to such an extent that it could be considered a creation of the Italian populace. Following the fall of the regime, Palazzeschi criticized the attempt to deny collective responsibilities regarding Mussolini's role, a tendency that he countered precisely by referring to the myth of his body as stemming from the flesh and blood of Italians:

Non esiste né mai è esistito il *Duce*, ma esiste questa immagine che è uno specchio fedele nel quale dovete guardarvi. Siamo noi che giorno per giorno gli abbiamo dato quelle mani e quella voce, quegli occhi e quelle mandibole; il *Duce* è una creazione nostra, è carne della nostra carne, è sangue del nostro sangue, e lo abbiamo creato in un'ora di vanità, di assenza e di esaltazione; guardatevi bene in questa immagine come dentro ad uno specchio, altrimenti non costruirete la nuova civiltà ma una

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nuova immagine vana e folle, la mistificazione di una civiltà. (246)

On his side, Mussolini attempted an anthropological transformation of Italians, whose bodies had to become more fit in order to serve nationalist dreams of colonial expansion and military prestige, a concept expressed through claims reported by *Il Popolo d'Italia*, such as: “How we eat, dress, work, sleep and all of our everyday habits need to be reformed.”

Fascism initially struggled to infiltrate Sardinia, mostly because the island presented different socio-economic conditions than those that had allowed the rise of the National Fascist Party in continental Italy, and because the regional *Partito sardo d'azione* had successfully voiced the needs of many WWI veterans. Following the mandate of Asclepia Gandolfo, “munito di poteri impensabili in qualunque precedente funzionario dello Stato liberale” (Sechi 380), the Sardinian political balance shifted toward the normalization of the island’s urban centers under Fascist leadership, even though the selection of the leading class resulted often in a compromise with the pre-existing localist tendencies. *Accabadora* rather portrays the Sardinian rural setting that proved more resistant to the mentality Fascism imposed on urban areas (Brigaglia 327), as it approaches (displaying similar resistance) the years of the “economic miracle.” Yet, several traits in the way masculinity was intended in rural Sardinia—and particularly the concept of *balentia*—resemble the aggressive behavior Fascism justified as a means through which to reach its goals. If the pictures of Mussolini’s corpse hanging in Piazzale Loreto next to Claretta Petacci (one of the recipients of his idealized womanizing power) signify the end and the reversal of the aforementioned rhetoric, the tragic fates that bodies in *Accabadora* meet indicate a similar failure to deliver what the cult of masculinity promised if average Italians applied the same canons and expectations.³

The novel is set mostly during the 1950s in Soreni, a small Sardinian village. It centers around the character of Maria Listru who, at age 6, is adopted by Bonaria Urrai, through the peculiar practice of *fill'e anima*. Maria is not technically an orphan. Her mother, Anna Listru, gives her away in order to relieve the family of the fourth child, perceived as a burden after her father dies. In this way, Bonaria, an aging seamstress who has lost her love interest during WWI, welcomes a child who is expected to gladden the final

part of her life. Bonaria soon turns out to be quite a mysterious character: she is the local *accabadora*, the person who facilitates assisted suicide for those who are suffering in the very final stages of their lives. As Maria struggles to accept the role that the community confers to Bonaria, she is also coming of age. Then she rebels against her adoptive mother and emigrates to Turin. When Maria, now a young woman, returns to Soreni, she finds Bonaria on her deathbed and faces the dilemma of whether to deliver the same form of assistance she had deprecated. The centrality of all these female characters emerges from the portrayal of men as being unable to fulfill the expectations that they project on themselves. The analysis of Sisinnio, Raffaele, and Nicola will allow for the study of inadequate masculinities in *Accabadora*.

Capace di far bene solo una cosa

In order to reinforce the centrality of his inadequacy, the character Sisinnio Listru is introduced with connotations of not only his physical and emotional absence, but also the narrative construction of an unreliable man, one who is depicted with traits opposing those that should epitomize his virility. Rather than glorify the sexual power and fertility that have generated four daughters, his widow summarizes her disappointment with Sisinnio's betrayal of his masculine role by describing him as a man who "si era dimostrato capace di far bene solo una cosa" (5). That is to say that procreating, in this sense, is intended as an isolated and even undesired expression of virility. The "accessorial" role of men in the processes of procreation and childbearing has been interpreted as one of the causes behind the establishment of male dominance in gender roles, a sort of backlash intended to supplement the lack of reproductive qualities in men. In this regard, Stefano Ciccone's words help contextualize the role men have constructed for themselves in order to fill this gap:

Mi riferisco innanzitutto a un'asimmetria tra i due sessi che è *percepita* come uno *scacco* del corpo maschile: una sua accessorieta nel processo riproduttivo a cui la storia degli uomini ha risposto con costruzioni simboliche e reti di poteri che ne hanno occultato il fondamento e, facendolo, lo hanno esasperato. Di fronte a due corpi *dispari* nel generare, la risposta maschile non ha cercato nel proprio corpo le potenziali risorse per dare senso al proprio stare al mondo,

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ma ha costruito ruoli, poteri, simboli che quasi *surrogassero* questa disparità e affermassero una centralità maschile. Penso alla necessità di costruire un controllo sul corpo della donna, alla paternità fondata sulla potestà di fornire cittadinanza alla prole, penso alla svalutazione della corporeità (percepita come terreno del primato femminile) come luogo della relazione e dell'identità, ridotta a strumento di una soggettività disincarnata che si affranca da essa. . . . Questa percezione ancestrale di uno scacco del corpo maschile, di una sua accessorietà del processo generativo avrebbe dunque prodotto una strategia maschile di uso del potere, di costruzione di istituzioni sociali che reintegrassero il maschio nella riproduzione della vita. (182-83)

Sisinnio aggravates men's accessorial role in the process of procreation by struggling with the social, public characteristics that should balance out his disadvantage. Men have imposed a system of power relations and symbolic values meant to express their own decisional authority over the family, and Sisinnio's limits prevent him from meeting those expectations. His body causes his family's misery; deemed *riformato* (5), unfit for military service, he is then found unreliable at work when he dies and subsequently loses decisional power over the adoption of his youngest child. Sisinnio's biological fertility can be described in binary terms, if one contrasts it with the simultaneous sterility of his role as husband and father. He fails to participate in the military effort that his generation was asked to honor and, more so than cowardice, his unfit and faulty body is presented as the reason for his missing part in the public display of virility. He cannot conform to that model of masculinity that "with the spread of nationalism, had increasingly become associated with 'warrior-like' characteristics. Since a strong, powerful nation had to be made up of virile men, masculinity was associated with the ability to fight for the homeland; it became symbolic of virtue, health, vigor, and national regeneration" (Benadusi 14). Declared officially ineligible to serve in WWII, Sisinnio bypasses the formative experience of warfare⁴ that, albeit tragically, had represented what Sandro Bellassai calls a "spartiacque nella vita di moltissimi uomini" (*L'invenzione della virilità* 68), which is absent from his personal character. This circumstance initiates a chain reaction that magnifies his failure to

project an image that conforms to the masculine canon of the time. Such failure is evident, even though his biological fertility means that Sisinnio, at first glance, complies with such standards. Sisinnio then dies at his workplace, further demonstrating a lack of those pragmatic qualities that should allow him to provide for his family while also suggesting his inability to conform to the image of the Italian man, supported by Mussolini, who should demonstrate familiarity with the productivity of the agricultural and rural environment. To add insult to injury, his premature death takes place in a civilian, and not a military, setting. This has serious implications on the bare necessities of the family he leaves behind, which would have been much easier to satisfy had Sisinnio died at war and left a pension to Anna.⁵

Sisinnio only complies with one of the three ideals of manliness in regard to the way masculinity is interpreted in Mediterranean areas, which David Gilmore lists as “three moral imperatives: first, impregnating one’s wife; second, provisioning dependents; third, protecting the family” (48). Sisinnio also changes the community’s perception of his male body because his death remains an individual one, rather than a loss to the collective body that men would form in the armed forces. He remains outside of the circumstances through which multiple individual bodies begin to act as one, because his is not considered fit enough to be a part of this communal process. Unable to contribute to the military effort because of his physical limitations, Sisinnio cannot participate in the rhetorical attempt to connect masculinity with aggressivity, a discourse that, starting with WWI and *interventismo*, had been a leitmotif of the public construction of masculinity in Futurism and on through Fascism, until WWII and the Allied bombings uncovered the fallacies behind it. If, as Manuela Spinelli notes, “essere guerrieri significa provare sul campo la propria mascolinità” (21), Sisinnio’s faulty body places him in an inferior position when compared to those men who can share comradeship in a setting that excludes women, so it stands to reason that he should at least provide for his family through his practical skills. He fails when he dies clumsily, run over by Boreddu Arresi’s tractor, in a passage that visually renders Sisinnio’s submission to his employer and magnifies his inadequacy.

From a strictly narrative and structural perspective, the limitations of Sisinnio’s masculinity are expressed through this character’s inability to speak for himself and form his own

personality. His widow, Anna, fulfills this goal on his behalf by projecting her own unenthusiastic opinions on him: a process that is typical of the rural setting, in which the *vox populi* imposes its perspective on other characters. Even before he fails to provide for his wife, Anna's relatives warned her that she "aveva sbagliato matrimonio" (5). It's a harsh judgment, but one that proves legitimate when Sisinnio's lack of practical skills leads him to fail his family and leave it in miserable conditions, while the female character has to take over the responsibility of providing for all of his daughters. While Anna is not described in sympathetic terms, she displays admirable organizational qualities that fill the gap that Sisinnio has left.⁶ Anna's late husband becomes representative of a specific literary figure: the inept man who cannot fulfill expectations, as popularized in the works of Svevo and Pirandello, among others. The consequences of his physical limitations exemplify the perception of the body as a political subject, "a battlefield on which a series of contradictions could express themselves publicly: young/old; black/white; healthy/sick; strong/weak; normal/abnormal; male/female" (Benadusi 27). "Finito stupidamente come era vissuto" (5), Sisinnio's inadequacy is the first factor that, by initiating the events leading to Maria's adoption, contributes to the centrality of women in the novel; his ineptitude contrasts with Anna's decisional firmness, and prefigures a similar opposition between Bonaria and the other absent man in the novel, Raffaele Zincu. For similar reasons, Sisinnio also contributes to the allegory the novel poses in response to the contemporary debate on parenthood (Sulis 77). Maria's adoptive mother, Bonaria, is not only more loving and caring than Anna, but also much more capable than her legitimate father: a reflection that indicates how responsible behavior overcomes biological considerations regarding parenthood.

Nessuno muore per una terra che non è la sua, se non è stupido

The other main absent figure in the novel, Raffaele Zincu, was promised to Bonaria before he left for WWI, but never returned. This aspect adds another important connotation to the military interpretation of the male role. Raffaele is not technically declared dead, but missing in action, which inspires a different reaction among the previously mentioned *vox populi*. His ineptitude becomes a form of cowardliness, based on the assumption that Raffaele has used the war as a pretext to abandon his commitment to Bonaria and

start a new life with a different woman. In this sense, Bonaria becomes the fictional representation of those *vedove bianche* (“white widows”) who lost their promised husbands at war before they could marry and elected to display the same mourning behaviors one would expect from a traditional widow.⁷ Raffaele’s character also emphasizes the dichotomy of men’s immaturity (in the form of dishonoring one’s commitments) versus women’s responsible behavior, and what appears to be the most relevant connection between the isolated setting of Soreni and larger, historically relevant events such as WWI. It should be noted that, in the tradition of Sardinian literature, military service has also been portrayed in positive terms, such as when it is connected to the possibility of escaping isolation and a narrow-minded social environment. Gavino Ledda’s *Padre padrone* (1975) established a particular link between two main aspects of masculinity: the hierarchy imposed by patriarchal societies and another structured setting like the military service, which is interpreted as a way to escape the violence of paternal figures and, by extension, the social restrictions of Sardinia. The narrative implications of Raffaele’s reputation are similarly connected with the idea that, away from Soreni, he found a renewed form of freedom, even though the community relegates his memory to the realm of rumor and speculation, and cannot definitively rule out his death during the Battle of the Piave River.

Raffaele’s disappearance causes a substantial number of effects on the fictional representation of women, particularly in regard to Maria’s story. In several ways, the adopted child succeeds where Raffaele fails, further perpetuating the portrayal of masculine inadequacy as opposed to female efficiency. Above all, she is not afraid to tell Andria to his face that she does not foresee a future together: something that, at least according to the shared memory of Soreni, Raffaele was not brave enough to discuss with Bonaria. This is one of the main events of the novel that portray the reversal of roles, an almost parodic passage in which Andria mourns the death of his brother while proposing to Maria, right after vomiting. As Maria firmly rejects the offer, Andria’s masculinity is called to question by the comparison she makes between him and her sisters, which leads Andria to feel “come uno che non è nemmeno un maschio” (102), or hurt by Maria’s display of common sense, suggesting that certain conversations should be held in a completely different context. This passage reiterates that male characters

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embody instinctive personalities that cannot plan events or find the right words to express themselves, being frequently put in crisis by women who are rational, practical, and who act according to these qualities. Bonaria points out the opposition between Maria and Raffaele when she openly tells her adopted child “tu dalle guerre devi tornare” (26). This statement prefigures a future that must be brighter than Raffaele’s, and that should be built on more solid ground that will eventually allow her to survive instead of perishing or vanishing. This dialogue also encompasses one of the key narrative elements of Maria’s overall character: accessing education and learning standard Italian in addition to specific dialect, an aspect that features prominently in the “Neapolitan novels” of Elena Ferrante.⁸

Raffaele’s death at war (which, despite the *vox populi*, Bonaria never questions) becomes symbolic of men’s instinctive aggressivity without reasoning and strategical planning. He is sent to the trenches unequipped and without combat boots, while Maria is invited to take advantage of all the opportunities that will eventually teach her to face life with a sense of dignity. Raffaele’s disappearance is the product of a specific historical period that saw the rise of masculinity as a response to the first feminist conquests. *Fin de siècle* Italy experienced a backlash from the 1880s through WWI that Bellassai (*L’invenzione della virilità*) identifies as the impetus for images of virility and masculinity whose artistic representations have surpassed the limits of literature, and eventually influenced the representation of men in such quintessentially Italian artistic forms as the *opera lirica* (Cecconi). On the other hand, the faith that Bonaria displays over the national cause is significantly connected to the priority she gives to Maria’s education, and it embraces a refusal to consider Sardinia only in its stereotypical isolation. The widespread acceptance of such a stereotype has led Marcello Fois to identify its origin in the accolades that the works of Grazia Deledda have received. Fois laments the construction of an image of the island that serves the purposes of a sort of “commodification” meant to fascinate those foreigners who look for an idealized geographical area. If not entirely false, this perception is misleading and limited compared to the sum of possible representations:

Il successo del pubblico, le traduzioni, il Nobel producono nel mondo l’esplosione, la moltiplicazione, di un’idea di

Sardegna. Ma dove l'impatto è terribile è all'interno stesso dell'isola. In quel momento preciso si ha la coscienza che il modello di «riappropriazione» della Deledda è diventato un progetto manzoniano di riferimento. Ai sardi diventa subito chiaro che la Sardegna letteraria è diventata più piccola della Sardegna geografica. C'è la Sardegna-Sardegna, il resto è abitato da turisti, sardi senza pedigree. (11)

The *accabadora* rejects the idea of regional isolation, when she says: “Arrafiei mi è morto in guerra nelle trincee del Piave. E quella guerra la faceva l'Italia, mica la Sardegna. Quando si muore per una terra, quella terra diventa per forza la tua. Nessuno muore per una terra che non è la sua, se non è stupido.” (25). Thus, Bonaria's words become part of a peculiar rhetorical strategy that combines the collective priorities of patriotism with a strictly private interest in believing Raffaele died for a legitimate cause, and not as someone who ran away from his promises and responsibilities. Her attitude is typical of that part of the population that, as Silvia Zangrandi has remarked in regard to Matilde Serao's articles collected in *Parla una donna*, experienced the Great War indirectly, and was therefore more inclined to accept a mainstream discourse simultaneously affected by the state monopoly of information and a form of voluntary censorship from soldiers who did not want to write alarming letters to their already concerned families. Because Raffaele was employed seasonally in the Urrai family's fields, picking melons and olives, Bonaria's memory of his death is also representative of that rural working class whose heroism at war was supposed to redeem its poor social status: another process that followed hyperbolic rhetorical techniques and suggested an antithesis among Italian men in opposition to the enemy, a mechanism that “ci mostra come veniva considerato il nemico, che è sempre descritto in posizione di inferiorità rispetto al soldato italiano: è pavido, è in fuga, è disorganizzato” (Zangrandi 202).

The idea that Raffaele either perished at war or used the conflict as an excuse to vanish is the main factor establishing a connection with historical events in terms of masculinity. The public narration of WWI, which saw an enormous propagandistic effort of mass persuasion (consider the well-known debate between *interventisti* and *neutralisti*, and such appeals as Giovanni Papini's “amiamo la guerra finché dura”), initially failed to recognize the new and unpredictable dynamics of modern warfare. The male body

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was expected to become a means through which a sort of “rito collettivo ed erotico di uccidere o essere uccisi” (Bellassai and Malatesta 210) would be celebrated. As such, the portrayal of Raffaele’s supposed attempt to escape his responsibilities neglects the collective meaning of a sacrifice, downgrading it to the less heroic sphere of personal convenience. As Bellassai remarks, precisely because the modernization of the *belle époque* customs calls their privilege into question, European men embark with enthusiasm “verso i fronti avventurosi, lontano dalle città e dalle donne” (*L’invenzione della virilità* 62), trusting in the supposedly regenerative power the war would instill in them. Especially in the context of certain bourgeois European youth, war came to be perceived as an opportunity to display one’s value as part of the affirmation of the “new man” who was moved by nationalistic ideals. They welcomed war “first, to obtain their eagerly awaited personal independence; second, for a personal growth and a chance to develop their personalities; third, to leave their ordinary and oppressive lives behind” (Ponzio 21). On the other hand, Bonaria supplements her patriotic words with a much more realistic understanding of the difference between rhetoric and pragmatism, in the passage that arguably best summarizes the “intrusion” of the state in Sardinia—in the form of the soldiers it demands—and of historical, transnational events into the microcosm of Soreni:

La guerra che poi sarebbe stata battezzata come Grande aveva già meritato l’aggettivo, chiamando da Soreni ben tre leve di maschi alla trincea del Piave, e non bastavano ancora. Dal fronte, insieme ai feriti gravi congedati, arrivavano notizie dell’eroismo della Brigata Sassari, e Bonaria ventenne aveva già visto abbastanza mondo da sapere che la parola «eroe» era il maschile singolare della parola «vedove». Ciononostante era proprio sposa che le piaceva immaginarsi, quando, sdraiata sul prato sotto gli alberi di pino, stringeva al seno la testa ricciuta di Raffaele Zincu, ispirando a pieni polmoni i profumi della terra resinosa. (83)

The difference between an idealized, corrupted representation of war and its realistic consequences provides one more reason to establish a connection with the works of Verga (see note # 5), particularly in regard to the interference of the state with

local and familial dynamics that would otherwise continue undisturbed,⁹ and the illusion of Raffaele's heroic social elevation. Similar to Sisinnio's sad condition, Raffaele's can only be expressed through selective memories, serving either the desires of the *vox populi* (projecting the image of an unfaithful coward) or of Bonaria (who remembers him as a soldier who died for the greater good), while his absent body symbolizes the liminality in which this character falls.

As opposed to Raffaele's lack of representation, however, Bonaria's present character is respected not only as a sort of channel between the living and the dead, but also because of her daily interactions with male characters and their bodies. She imposes her decisional power over the survival of Jusepi Vargiu, and displays a mesmerizing influence over his relatives following her hint to leave the room and let her assess the conditions of the old man when "nessuno degli uomini pensò di non obbedirle" (52), which indicates an authority that does not require thorough verbal arguments or motivations. In fact, men need to argue their requests to Bonaria and convince her to comply because they do not carry the same unquestioned authority that she does. This all eventually leads to Bonaria's deliberation over the main question and climax in the novel. Before she agrees to liberate Nicola from his suffering and his nagging thoughts, the young man resorts multiple times to rhetorical techniques of identification to convince the *accabadora*, particularly establishing a connection between the mutilated condition of his body and Raffaele's explanation of how coming back from the war in a similar state would have proved unbearable. Even in a minor situation, during which Bonaria receives Boriccu Silai as a customer for her seaming business but decides not to accept his request for a tailored suit, triggering Boriccu's disappointment, she once again displays pragmatism and a realistic attitude in response to a man's unreasonable request. Aware of the fear she instills in men, Bonaria is able to convert this feeling into a communicational code consisting of mere gestures (or even silences) that others respect religiously.

The "mysterious" part of her fictional character serves similar purposes, empowering her and granting her intellectual authority on several occasions. The men from the Bastiu family need her to decode the supernatural message coming along with the puppy they find buried in their land, which also indicates a sense of intellectual superiority that allows Bonaria to repeatedly address the

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men with sarcasm. Such connotation is deeply rooted in the simultaneous representation of the Catholic dogma and beliefs that appear closer to the pagan tradition. The prevalence of men in the administration of the Catholic Church is constantly counterbalanced by the acceptance of rituals, fears and beliefs contextualized in a domain that allows for a more concrete role for women as protagonists, and not as mere recipients of conventionally organized faith.¹⁰ The priest, representative of the dogma that prevents women from holding hierarchical positions in the administration, sees his authority diminished exactly because it is perceived that he is not entirely fulfilling the expectations that are reserved to men and their public display of masculinity. In this sense—despite the undeniable privilege that comes with his social position—the priest suffers from direct confrontations with other men who project on him the image of those “weak categories” that are mocked in order to reinforce the dominant perception of masculinity.¹¹ Having lost the opportunity to compete with other townsmen in the display of hyperbolic masculinity, Nicola identifies the priest as an individual who can still be perceived as holding a vulnerable position, at least according to the canons through which he interprets his status as a man. Attacking the priest corresponds with mocking his voluntary choice to be a “mutilated” man, and with abandoning any aspirations of being perceived as virile, which indicates that even the loss of his leg does not make Nicola reconsider the categories of his social interactions:¹²

Voi vorreste parlarmi della mia vita? E cosa ne sapete voi, prete? Forse che vivete monco? – sorriso di scherno, abbassando lo sguardo sul sacerdote. – Certo, in qualche modo monco lo siete anche voi, o così almeno avete promesso di essere. Una cosa è dire «sono storpio per vocazione», ma intanto quello che non si usa è sempre lì, sia mai che uno cambia idea. . . . Non sono vostro figlio, o almeno lo spero, sottana gonfia! Non sono obbligato ad ascoltare le vostre minchiate. (74-76)

Therefore, Bonaria’s role is to consistently question men’s intellectual capabilities and decisional power. As Nicola tries to take credit for uncovering the plot to steal their land, Bonaria makes the witty remark, “Non farti più furbo di quello che sei, Coleddu. Te ne sei accorto solo perché il cane non è morto subito. Se moriva, stai

sicuro che la linea di confine moriva con lui” (33). A similar pattern involves men’s bodies, with Bonaria diminishing physical exuberance and dismissing it as useless. In the case of Bonacatta’s husband, having heard Maria praising how tall he is, her adoptive mother observes, “Ah, allora siamo a posto. Quale altra dote si può desiderare, più di uno che ti stacchi i fichi dalla pianta senza scala?” (40). Another element suggesting the legacy of a patriarchal and, at times even “archaic,” society—such as the practice of letting the instinct of an old man decide the right moment for the harvest—ends up being ridiculed by Bonaria’s condescending observation that, “Chiccinu Bastiu e il mosto hanno confidenza. Con il naso sempre nel bicchiere, vuoi che non gli riconosca l’odore” (29). In this case, Bonaria’s wit unveils the fallacy behind the idea that the male body bears an instinctive characteristic resembling a supernatural quality, and that this is meant to reinforce the role men play in making decisions involving the entire community. Having had her own existence marked forever by the excessive value conferred to the male body and to the decisional power of men—in the form of the loss of her future husband—Bonaria becomes a medium for criticizing hyperbolic masculinity and its acceptance in the community. In this sense, Raffaele’s absence, whether as a result of betrayal or of death, participates in the full development of Bonaria’s centrality as a character.

Quello che una donna si aspetta da un uomo

Nicola’s character more evidently proposes a peculiar interpretation of virility in relation to the male body, stemming from the knowledge that he is observed by an audience that expects a constant display of strength, stamina, and physical performance as typically associated with a man in his prime. One of the turning points of the whole story, the amputation of his leg and his request to have Bonaria end his suffering, provides opportunities to reflect on the role of masculinity and the acceptance of a non-written code defining the expectations men are supposed to fulfill. Nicola exemplifies the concept of *balentia*, a code of aggressive behavior and revenge that Maria Christina Rosander Hagen has studied in connection with other Sardinian authors. Murgia’s *Viaggio in Sardegna* illustrates *balentia* as “l’apoteosi della nobiltà dell’animo unita alla fermezza del carattere” (17), an interpretation that proposes it bears positive connotations in Sardinia, whereas outsiders would typically perceive it as a questionable cultural

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aspect. This hyperbolic representation of virility works, in *Accabadora*, as one of many elements that separate Soreni from centralized institutions; through the use of violence, the administration of justice does not follow institutional procedures (consider the forceful way that the Porresus extend the limits of their land).¹³ Similar to other representations of masculinity in the novel, Nicola appears incomplete even before the connotations associated with his mutilated leg. Introduced as a character that always seems ready to win an argument through violence, Nicola represents that rural culture with parents that still had a strong influence over children who imitated their behavior, an assumption threatened by modernity, especially in larger cities in the 1950s and later on, during the following years of social unrest. Salvatore Bastù is said to have never walked the streets of Soreni without his knife, a perception of life about which “Nicola aveva imparato tutto e in fretta” (32).¹⁴ Nicola consistently supports a philosophy constructed upon virility and aggressive behaviors that inevitably renders a “unico (e totalizzante) modello di mascolinità, che non ammette eccezioni” (Ventura 83), and that associates him with an exclusive group of men who deserve to be considered as such.

I argue that, in his vendetta against the Porresus, Nicola does not exactly comply with the image he tries to project. The previous reference to the *arresoja*—a traditional Sardinian knife—implies the necessity for close combat, in which the offender cannot hide his identity and is willing to take physical risks for the sake of his honor. Nicola follows the example of his father and always keeps his *arresoja* ready, and yet, he resorts to an indirect attack to avenge the injustice from the Porresus. He sets their land on fire, hoping that the lack of evidence will send the right message to his enemies and shelter him from legal consequences. In this sense, Nicola puts a distance (physically and figuratively) between his actions and the open display of virility that distinguished the strictly codified practice of a duel, in which honor and respectability were seen as more valuable than one’s life and that had been, in previous decades, above all “un’occasione di manifestazione del proprio senso di virilità” (*L’invenzione della virilità* 55).¹⁵ The nagging thought that leads Nicola to seek revenge four years after the first offense is also fixed in the context of a particular interpretation of lost opportunities and the possibility to climb the social ladder, a chance that Nicola considers was unjustly granted to the Porresus following their theft, when he says “Se lo sognano i figli di Porresu

di farsi dottori con i soldi miei” (58). Honor, respect, social opportunities, and money, along with the display of one’s masculinity, all come together to provide a legitimate motive for Nicola’s choice, considering that, in the peculiar interpretation of masculinity he embodies, “il balente non è mai violento senza necessità” (*Viaggio in Sardegna* 17), which refers to a view that seeks to validate and logically explain violent deeds.¹⁶ If analyzed from this perspective, the character also embodies that sense of proud isolation intended as a form of resistance against external interference from a centralized authority. This translates into an attempt to administer justice with alternative and private methods that need to be displayed publicly, and that Antonio Sorge has recollected in the following way:

Giovanni, I am told, is *un vero uomo*, a real man. Fifteen years earlier, he had been released from prison, having served a lengthy sentence for murder. His deed, in this context and in the circumscribed world of Sardinian shepherds, was an especially courageous one for which he had earned a reputation as *unu omine balente*, a serious, honourable man. His was not an act of random violence or a consequence of a hot temper, but rather premeditated murder in the first degree. His victim was a man forty-five years of age who in the previous decade had killed Giovanni’s older brother, apparently as a result of a long-running dispute over rights of access to certain pasturelands. (71)

This interpretation of how to be a “real” man holds a central position in many studies on masculinity. Two elements in particular recur more often than others in male identification, with a norm that can backfire when an individual is no longer able to live up to these expectations. This norm can be summarized as the combination of two factors: the belief in a “natural” masculinity, mostly connected to bodily features, and the necessity to display one’s masculinity to other men, even more so than to women.¹⁷ Robert William Connell’s seminal *Masculinities* reflects on the notion of the male body as grantor of a “genuine” masculine identity, challenging the idea that, “True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body” (45). A strong supporter of both

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interpretations claiming that masculinity emerges from the body and should inevitably be displayed to other men, Nicola finds himself unable to meet the same standards he supports. He becomes the carrier of a certain series of metonymies, according to which his leg represents his whole body, while the body is indicative of his social projection as a *real* man.

Following the other metaphor Connell mentions, that of the body as a machine, Nicola rejects the idea of being able to function while missing one leg. His conversations with the priest and Bonaria are particularly indicative of the dialogue through which men often construct their own public image as being part of a social group, and the attempt to prove themselves to be manlier than others. While addressing two individuals who do not belong to the category of men, as Nicola defines it (the priest being perceived as unmanly and the *accabadora* being a woman), he figuratively continues the conversation with other men, feeling that his disgrace excludes him from the daily confirmation of masculinity that his social role implies. In other words, Nicola continues to support the idea of “men talking to men about other men” (Gutman 385) even in conversations wherein, according to his own standards, none of the interlocutors qualifies as being a “real” man. For this reason, he repeatedly laments the impossibility of being understood by a priest and a woman, individuals who must remain excluded from his homosocial interpretation of exclusive bonding among men. If, as Matthew Gutman suggests, initiations can be seen as ways to be born again as real men (402), Nicola misses such rite of passage when his vendetta on the Porresus fails miserably. As a result, he starts to consider himself dead to public life because he can no longer be considered a fully realized man. With his initiation, Nicola would enter the domain of independence, setting himself free from the paternal authority he now perceives as weak, because Salvatore prefers not to retaliate against the Porresus. Thus, while Nicola fails to actually retaliate, he also proves unworthy of independence from his father’s wisdom; he questions Salvatore’s weakness, but cannot replace it with a valuable alternative.

A monolithic conception of masculinity emerges along with all the shortcomings of a social construction that has little in common with inherent features in men.¹⁸ This rather simplistic interpretation of gender roles puts Nicola at the center stage in the town of Soreni, where the virile qualities of a man in his prime need to be acknowledged publicly. The metaphorical play Nicola acts in

also portrays women as the means through which a message to other men is delivered.¹⁹ With the desperate claim of “non posso fare niente di quello che una donna si aspetta da un uomo” (81), Nicola establishes female expectations, even as women openly reject his metonymical equation between his leg and his body, and between his body and his identity as a “real” man. Following Pramod Nayar’s interpretation of impaired bodies as objectified (and no longer acting as subject), Nicola’s “becomes a screen onto which all anxieties and fears of the community are projected” (104). It has to be removed in order to spare the community a daily reminder of how fragile its foundations are. The desire to end his life also appears to be motivated by the desperation he feels at not being superior to women and, by extension, not being able to compete with other men. The same standards that Nicola has wholeheartedly supported now prevent him from reaching the peak of his public perception as a man, forcing him to go directly from adolescence to a stage that features some of the physical limitations of an elderly man. A question arises as to what happens when the male body, if interpreted as a machine, can no longer function properly, and the analogy between masculinity and bodily performance makes gender “vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained” (Connell 54). In the face of physical limitations derived from an injury, Connell has isolated three frequent reactions: to redouble efforts to meet the hegemonic standards (overcoming physical difficulty), to readjust the notion of masculinity to what is realistic for the newly acquired condition, or to challenge the commonly accepted idea of masculinity (55). By choosing yet another option, that of assisted suicide, Nicola remains intellectually faithful to his original interpretation of masculinity as he stubbornly acknowledges his mutilated body, and thereby exits the play in which he can no longer act as a protagonist.

Conclusions

When read from a gender-focused perspective, *Accabadora* is a novel that addresses the perception of masculinity as stemming from a native or inherent feature of the body, which women oppose with such exemplary statements as Bonaria’s “se basta una gamba a fare l’uomo, allora ogni tavolo è più uomo di te” (68). The characters Sisinnio, Raffaele, and Nicola all display a form of inadequacy that clashes with the dominant interpretation of masculinity in the decades encompassing WWI, Fascism, and the aftermath of WWII

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in Italy, and especially how these specific connotations apply in the Sardinian island. Because men are consistently portrayed as inept, absent or mutilated, they make room for a microcosm where women are not merely the focus of the narrative aspect of the novel, but they become the center of the social relationships governing the narrated events. While “il modello patriarcale ha bisogno della sottomissione delle donne per esistere” (Spinelli 14), Murgia illustrates that faith in hyperbolic masculinity falls apart because of the inconsistency of its premise, with women becoming central to the events in the novel as a result of men’s inability to fulfill expectations that have been imposed to perpetuate their own predominance. Anna, Bonaria, and Maria become efficient counterparts of inept and inadequate men, and, precisely because of the undeniable centrality of female characters to the novel, it is important to study the mechanisms that allow them to also become protagonists of a social environment wherein dynamics are not initially favorable to their emergence. The reflected image that is traditionally meant—in a game of mirrors—to reinforce men’s position compared to that of women follows, in Murgia’s novel, an opposite trajectory, with female characters overcoming difficulties that their husbands and fathers cause with their ineptitude. For this reason, women’s centrality to the events is not necessarily the result of a plan to intentionally overturn the rhetoric of masculinity. It happens as the logical outcome of the inconsistencies of Sisinnio, Raffaele, Nicola, and the other men in Soreni, and in accordance with a dichotomy that magnifies the fallacies in the set of values and priorities these characters represent. Precisely because the novel dismantles the “native” interpretation of masculinity, men’s bodies (dead, vanished or mutilated) are targeted in such a consistent manner.

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NOTES

¹ The metaphorical value of the traditional representation of Sardinia, typically limited to conservative and rural environments, has been suggested by Gigliola Sulis in regard to a connection between *Accabadora* and compelling discussions of societal interest projected to contemporary Italy. Above all, Sulis notices the passage from a pre-modern or even archaic setting and the strictly contemporary debates on end-of-life policies and non-traditional forms of maternity: “Sardinia’s

diversity and archaism work as an allegory, if not utopia, for our times. The traditional island, stereotypically, carries an alternative and fierce civil code, but through this archaic screen are filtered social themes of strict actuality, like the question of civic rights still debated in contemporary Italy: euthanasia and one's right to die, on the one hand, and the forms of non-biological maternity, on the other" (77). My article proposes a similar allegorical value in Murgia's novel, but applies it to the concept of inadequate masculinity in opposition to the affirmation of women's decisional power.

² This idea of a manifest destiny for men encompasses the years from the turn of the twentieth century through the end of WWII. It would emerge with particular relevance from the nationalist movements imbued with antiliberal and antisocialist feelings that welcomed WWI with enthusiasm and that would eventually contribute to the rise of European dictatorships. These movements were often meant to be exclusively for young men, who were supposed to be the carriers of a fresh wave of bold political ideals based on the rejection of corrupt and weak parliamentary democracies. One of the first examples was the German Wandervögel, which was "almost exclusively a male movement for youth between twelve and eighteen years of age, led by leaders barely much older. The social and gender solidarity among them often resulted in homoerotic friendships" (Ponzio 20). Their enthusiasm for war in particular was shared by the trans-European rise of similar phenomena, and it would echo notoriously through the works of the Italian Futurism. At the end of WWI, the youth who had welcomed the war continued to support the same idea of entitlement to secure positions of leadership, conveying the message of a generational renovation that would create a decisive rupture with the past.

³ With the tragicomic register that distinguishes her essays, Murgia has reflected on the Fascist imposition of an image of women as being "other" than men, not only in a historical perspective but also within strictly contemporary concerns. Analyzing the recent rise of authoritarian ambitions in Italian right-wing political parties, she observes sarcastically that, "In natura la femmina cerca protezione e le femmine degli esseri umani non fanno eccezione: esse hanno bisogno degli uomini perché sono deboli e gli uomini sono forti. Preziose per la loro funzione materna e accoglienti per indole, le donne sono delicate e proteggerle è un dovere, specialmente quando nella loro irrazionalità non vogliono essere difese. Non devono esporsi a rischi inutili, frequentando posti non sicuri, o adottare comportamenti disinibiti che le mettano in pericolo facendole credere disponibili" (*Istruzioni per diventare fascisti* 43). My reading of *Accabadora* turns this last stereotype upside down, because men are the characters that consistently put themselves in physical danger when it would not otherwise be necessary.

⁴ The temporal references in the novel, such as Maria turning eight in 1955, legitimately identify Sisinnio as part of the generation that fought in WWII, and his missed military effort becomes, in his widow's accusatory words, a source of regret.

⁵ If read from this perspective, the character Sisinnio can be related to the words of Paul Bailey, who suggests a connection between the construction of the setting in *Accabadora* and Giovanni Verga's narrative production: "Murgia has created an atmosphere reminiscent of the Sicily evoked in the magnificent stories of Giovanni Verga – a place where expectations can never be great and passion is a substitute for common sense." In my reading, the narrative construction of Sisinnio reminds especially of passages from *Rosso Malpelo*, in which the individual value is expressed as being precisely quantifiable, merely depending on the amount of

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money that one is able to bring home, a vision in which affection is entirely replaced by strictly pragmatic priorities. In D.H. Lawrence's translation of Verga's short story, Malpelo, while facing Frog's deathbed, "asked Frog why his mother carried on like that, when for two months he hadn't earned even what he ate."

⁶ With her condescending attitude towards Maria's potential educational future, Anna also embodies the legacy of Fascist anti-intellectualism, a belief that practical qualities would always be preferable to theoretical skills and thinking, especially when applied to a woman. Anti-intellectualism was only one part of the more general anti-modern philosophy of life proposed by the Fascists, a view that certainly encompassed the support of "traditional" gender roles. As Bellassai has remarked, a few notorious quotations summarize both perspectives. A 1928 article published in *Popolo d'Italia* declared that "più che dei filosofi si vogliono dei soldati," while Mussolini himself announced that "la guerra sta all'uomo come la maternità sta alla donna" (*L'invenzione della virilità* 76). In both cases, Anna continues to comply with Fascist expectations, even in the 1950s, while her husband, Sisinnio, misses the opportunity to prove his virility during WWII.

⁷ Because of her role as a connection between the world of the living and the dominion of the dead, Bonaria is also given features reminiscent of the fantastic mode and a "gothicized" characterization. For example, her intrusion into the house of the Bastius takes place during the night of the dead, and during which young Andria perceives her as a ghostly figure. In the tradition of fantastic literature, the promised wife who cannot marry her fiancé is a trope that is often represented as living in a liminal territory between life and death. Fabio Camilletti has proposed a genealogy of the figure of the corpse bride, a narrative device that depicts the woman dying prematurely and her return, in the form of a ghost, in search of the happiness she could not enjoy (Camilletti 114).

⁸ Ferrante's *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (2013) especially introduces the topic of intellectual ambitions in the context of gender roles. Above all, the publication of Elena's book is at the center of a quarrel between two men, one criticizing the author while the other defends her. The resulting effect does not even acknowledge the presence of the author, who becomes a mere spectator to the men's conversation centered around a book she has written.

⁹ It is, most notably, the case of *I Malavoglia*, a story that could not even begin without such intrusion: the whole plot stems from young 'Ntoni's commitment to serve in the military service, an obligation that the family considers in tragic terms. To reinforce this idea of the external interference of the state, things become even worse when 'Ntoni's brother, Luca, is killed in action during the battle of Lissa, for a newly born state that remains otherwise absent. The other main connection with Verga is the insistence on a *vox populi* that imposes an arbitrary opinion of characters who are not in any condition to express themselves. Both Sisinnio and Raffaele are victims of this device, which certainly does not exclude women. Maria's adoption causes many people to gossip in Soreni, a phenomenon that ceases only when another young lady becomes pregnant, attracting the attention of rumors instead.

¹⁰ One example is the popular belief that the venomous effects of spider bites should be treated with a ritual that is clearly reminiscent of witchcraft practices, as Andria's words indicate (27).

¹¹ The notion of weak category has been used, in the context of contemporary popular culture, to address the mockery of women and homosexuals as part of the enormous success that the *cinapanettoni* enjoyed in the 2000s. This strategy is

meant to single out and minoritize social groups in order to make them “objects, rather than subjects” (Rigoletto 78) of comical techniques in which they can only take part by becoming victims of ridicule, not by sharing the amusing experience of the film with others from a position of equity.

¹² In the microcosm of Soreni, the role of the priest (the symbol of men’s authority in the Church) is diminished not only when Nicola openly ridicules it as unmanly, but also when Maria, at the time of Bonaria’s passing, ignores his request to perform the last rites to the dying woman.

¹³ A similar avoidance of institutional procedures involves the other two main premises of the novel: the practice of resorting to an *accabadora*, and that of bypassing complex technicalities for the adoption of a child, which is performed with an exchange involving a small amount of vegetables and that will only be officialized in the long period, with Bonaria’s testament eventually recognizing Maria as her heiress.

¹⁴ Constructed on the dichotomy between a rural and an urban setting, the portion of the novel set in the booming city of Turin depicts the Gentilis prohibiting their children from leaving their house, with a bourgeois sense of protection that is motivated by the dangers hiding in the metropolis, and that young Piergiorgio tragically experiences when he is sexually assaulted.

¹⁵ Bellassai insists—from a historical perspective that precedes Nicola’s actions—that the Sardinian legal code reduced penalties for crimes committed in the context of a duel until the 1890 institution of the Zanardelli code (*L’invenzione della virilità* 55).

¹⁶ A similar interpretation was at the center of one of the polemics that supported the rise of the Fascist movement, the violence of which risked scaring away a substantial part of the population and that Mussolini was repeatedly asked to address in his initial years as a leader of the party. In the attempt to motivate and justify violent attacks, Mussolini attempted to portray Fascists as being able to distinguish the situations in which aggressive behavior was not appropriate, thereby implying that episodes of violence had to be perceived as motivated by provocation or by a legitimate necessity of retaliation following an attack. Antonio Scurati’s *Il figlio del secolo* describes Mussolini’s public defense of a phenomenon that actually seriously concerned him, with a rhetorical technique meant to exculpate criminals. Scurati quotes Mussolini’s letters and articles, declaring, “Noi siamo violenti tutte le volte che è necessario,” or “Per i fascisti la violenza non è un capriccio o un deliberato sproposito. Non è l’arte per l’arte. È una necessità chirurgica.”

¹⁷ On this regard, Manuela Spinelli notes, “La mascolinità si struttura in relazione agli altri, prima di tutto in relazione agli altri uomini: il riconoscimento dei pari è dunque determinante per consolidare l’identità maschile” (12).

¹⁸ With regard to unconventional representations of masculinity in Italian cinema, Sergio Rigoletto has noted that, “masculinity makes visible its own status as a construction, one that can be modified, re-assembled and endowed with new meanings” (74).

¹⁹ The parallelism between theater and the public construction of masculinity is a widely established one. Addressing it, Spinelli notes, “l’identità maschile si costruisce con fatica: essere un uomo è un compito che deve essere dimostrato, tutti i giorni in ogni ambito. In particolare, la mascolinità tradizionale ha più a che vedere con ciò che si fa che con ciò che si è: ne risulta una quotidiana messinscena che contribuisce a quella teatralizzazione della vita sociale sottolineata da tanti

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ricercatori e scrittori. In questo edificio apparentemente saldo e coerente, numerose crepe sembrano aprirsi in epoca contemporanea” (15).

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