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Whenever the name Franca Rame comes up, it is immediately preceded or followed by that of her husband, Dario Fo. Indeed in Italy, for the last four decades, Dario Fo and Franca Rame have been very significant theater personalities. They have performed not only on the traditional stages of the most reputable theaters in Italy and abroad, but also in the improvised, popular performing spaces of *Camere del Lavoro*, factories, public parks, city squares, and village fairgrounds. Their innovative experimental performances have thrilled as well as shocked Italian and foreign audiences of all ages and social classes.

The theater of Fo and Rame has been identified as militant and popular—and even popular-national in Gramscian terms—because of its provocative and at the same time realistic discourse and subject-matter. Its intention has been to show the hidden face of power as realistically as possible, as Fo himself stated in 1973 in an interview for the magazine *Panorama*: “Quel che ho sempre cercato di fare in questi anni è stato di far vedere alla gente la dimensione vera del potere, di scoprirne la facciata. . . .”¹ In order to convey this message, Fo and Rame’s theater avails itself of a very vast repertoire of performing techniques that combine the improvisation and use of masks and dialect typical of the *commedia dell’arte* with the rigorous facial contortions of mimes, the physical tricks of acrobats, the comic farces of clowns, and so forth.²

Another goal of their theater is to establish and maintain close relations between spectators and actors in the course of the performance. This allows the actors to be constantly in touch with their audience and thus immediately sense the minimal variations in their reactions in time to propose new, often extemporaneous performing solutions aimed at reactivating the audience’s potential for reception. For this reason, this company’s scripts have a wide margin of openness that allows for improvisation, even on open stage, as dictated by the audience’s reactions and by the actors’ perceptions of those reactions.

The method of script-writing utilized by Fo and Rame is very captivating. As Rame explains, this consists of all the members of the company musing collectively over an idea proposed by one of them and developed through additions and changes until it is ‘rehearsed’ several times as a play. When the play is ready, it comes up for the fi-

ITALICA Volume 72 Number 3 (1995)

nal 'rehearsal' in front of an audience that is asked to comment and take an active part in discussing the performance.³

Compared to traditional theater, Dario Fo and Franca Rame's is and has been viewed as very unusual, thus unique. The *spettacoli* that they produce address the audience with a transgressive and defiant discourse aimed through comedy and laughter at denouncing social injustice, political corruption, religious hypocrisy, and private and institutional intolerance. Fo himself has stated several times that farce and comedy are the ideal tools for this activity. In fact, the intentions of their theater is to provoke as well as to amuse its audiences.

Because of its militancy and provocative disruptiveness, this theater has been the target of unusual measures directed by government authorities against both Fo and Rame and their company. These have included denying them regular public subsidies or performance spaces, incarcerating Dario Fo under the charge of *oltraggio alle forze pubbliche*, and even prohibiting minors (who make up a large part of this theater's audience) from viewing their works because they are deemed immoral. Because theirs is a popular theater that operates on the fringes of the bourgeois establishment and denounces the power system and articulates the views and needs of the lower classes, factory workers, peasants, poor, neglected, and exploited, Fo and Rame have also been fiercely opposed by middle class opponents and even physically attacked (Franca Rame, for example, was kidnapped, beaten, and subjected to physical violence by a gang of right-wing youths).

Openly critical of the political and social system in power, both Dario Fo and Franca Rame have become the objects of a socially repressive political campaign intended to control and even silence their transgressive and disruptive discourse. They, however, have resisted such attempts, and have not been silenced. On the contrary, both as playwrights and actors, they have constructed their theater as a space and a discourse of resistance of such control. This is evident from their choice of such unconventional performing spaces as factories, market places, parks, and so on that are clearly untraditional in modern theater. In this way, Fo and Rame have launched their attack on the mainstream system from outside rather than inside the system.

Because of this resistance to authoritarian control, Fo and Rame's theatrical discourse is closely related to feminist discourse, which is equally intent at resisting the control of patriarchal authorities from a marginalized perspective and thereby "examining the processes whereby woman is given or refused access to discourse" (Wright 150). Although, as I have suggested before, it seems difficult to separate these two great theater personalities who have worked so long together for a very special and unique form of contemporary theater, I

feel that, in the last decades, Franca Rame achieved a stature as a scriptwriter and performer that deserves to be considered on its own and be appreciated for its unique characteristics. For this reason, I intend to review and appraise her work as an actress and co-writer of the plays which she has largely contributed to creating and in which she has been performing beginning at least in the late 1960s within the context of resistance against authoritarian control over discourse.

Franca Rame is not only an exceptional actress, she is a theatrical personality of unmatched talent endowed with extraordinary intellectual and professional resources. Her comic talent is particularly unusual, especially if we think along with Schopenhauer, Bergson, or Freud that the comic is a quality often denied to women. As a superb comic performer, Rame has overcome the institutional taboo that places the comic muse beyond women's grasp, and has established herself as an internationally recognized comic interpreter and writer.

Rame has devoted her professional life to creating an essential comic space for a satire that is directed first at social conventions and then focuses more sharply on the unfairness of the economic and political conditions of contemporary society. She has staged episodes taken from real life where the victims, mostly working class and women, are inevitably typified as weak and powerless, without political or economic connections. Especially in regard to women's issues, Franca Rame's role in the Fo-Rame theater has become of major importance, as she has grown increasingly influential as both scriptwriting and stage performer.

As an actress, Franca Rame became very well known in the '50s in *svampita* roles in which she played a combination of the dumb-blond type of Hollywood movies and the chattering housewife of popular Italian theater. In the late '60s, she became involved with roles which were increasingly politically committed. Since 1977, beginning with *Parliamo di donne*, she has interpreted several important transgressive female characters. In a 1977 interview, that appeared at the time of *Parliamo di donne (Female Parts)*, a series of four plays planned for television staging that was later published as *Tutto casa, letto e chiesa*, Franca Rame openly revealed her and Fo's concern for the condition of women in Italy: "Il gran tormentone mio e di Dario è sempre stato quello della condizione femminile . . . (e) per un teatro come il nostro . . . mancare il collegamento con la questione delle donne, sarebbe gravissimo. Il problema femminile oggi è troppo importante" (Valentini 173–74). From then on, Franca Rame has given voice to one of the most challenging feminist discourses in the contemporary Italian theater.⁴

Even before 1977, Rame had already given considerable attention to certain important, even if not yet fully developed female characters,

who, in their seemingly unknowing transgressiveness foreshadow the more self-conscious characters of the later plays. One of the first of these was the woman protagonist of *La casellante*, a short play performed on television in 1962 and published later in *Coppia aperta quasi spalancata*. The play is a very biting satire of the awful conditions of life experienced by women and their families when the women are compelled to accept health-threatening jobs in order to survive. By alternating short descriptions of the disastrous effects of such a job on a woman worker's family life with comments voicing the authority's point of view, the woman's discourse ironically reveals the unfairness of her situation. The thick, black smoke of the train-engines roaring by day and night slowly poisons children and animals, while the unnerving noise of those same trains makes nervous wrecks not only of humans but also of the animals, as the cock "si ammala di strissite per via dei continui spaventi (e) invece di chicchiricchi fa bee . . ." or the hens "fanno le uova senza rosso, come alle donne per via dello spavento va via il latte, a loro ci va via il rosso . . . povere figlie!" (79). Rame's parody is apparent when the worker tries to minimize the responsibilities of the authorities. In listing the so-called advantages of her government job, she specifies that workers do not have to pay for

la luce elettrica, il gas e il riscaldamento . . . e non lo paghiamo perchè non c'è. . . Le ferrovie sono oneste . . . mica ci fanno pagare quello che non danno . . . infatti l'illuminazione ad acetilene che ci abbiamo ce la fanno pagare . . . ed è giusto. (76)

Admitting that neither she nor her husband have "diritto a nessuna pensione" she hastens to specify that they both are employed "senza contratto fisso . . . siamo, come dire, avventizi . . . avventizi da quindici anni" and then goes on minimizing the responsibilities of the railroad system "cosa vuoi prendertela colle povere FS con tutto quello che le Ferrovie dello Stato hanno passato e continuano a passare . . . Poverine! Povere FFSS!" In the end, however, this trend to minimize the political system's responsibilities is dramatically reversed by the worker's lucid exposé in what are indisputably transgressive terms:

D'accordo, ho il marito in galera, i figli stremati coi tic nervosi, manca la luce, le galline fanno tutu, il gallo fa beh, il bambino piccolo bau bau, mi passano uno stipendio da fame nera . . . però mi devo contentare . . . anche perchè, se no, mi sbattono via su due piedi. (80)

This discourse highly critical of government exploitation was promulgated publicly by the RAI, the official government television network, and raised an enormous controversy. Although this was the first time that Rame's transgressive voice shook the Italian political

system, it was not the last one. In later years, particularly from the stage, Rame has spoken more and more boldly, her powerfully comic as well as tragic voice interpreting past and present, as well as her personal experience of life as a woman.

Another of Rame's important early stage characters was Enea, the gravedigger of *Settimo: ruba un po' meno* (1964). As the butt of her colleagues' jokes, Enea ends up the only one who maintains fundamental human values, in spite of bribes and pressures for petty compromise. Because of her mixture of gullibility and naiveté on one side, and her strong commitment to honesty and fairness on the other, Enea became a favorite of the audiences of the time. She is also important because, while acting out such roles imposed on women by traditional representation as, the unquestioning acceptance of men's rules and discourse in a context of low self-esteem and emotional frailty, Enea's discourse ends up by exposing "the ideology of authority and power" (Little 19–20) represented by the male characters. While all the play's male characters, even if critical of the system at first, eventually accept or bow to the corruption and unfairness of the political establishment, Enea, in all her simple-mindedness and naiveté, defies the *status quo*: "A me non ce la farete a mettermi l'elica in testa, né gli occhiali verdi per farmi mangiar la paglia e farmi credere che sia erba . . . [io] me ne vado . . ." (Fo, "Settimo" 207).

Both *la casellante* and Enea have much in common with the working-class women who, through parody, carry forward the satire against the capitalistic system in Fo and Rame's works between 1968 and 1971. All their plays of this time strongly support the working class's struggle against capital and government of those years. With the exception of *Grande Pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli e medi* (1968) and *Vorrei morire anche stasera se dovessi pensare che non è servito a niente* (1970), these works reveal in their titles themselves the conflict between establishment and workers (examples include *L'operaio conosce 300 parole, il padrone 1000, per questo è il padrone* [1969], *Il funerale del padrone* [1969], and *Tutti uniti, tutti insieme! Ma scusa quello non è il padrone?* [1971]).

In these works the role that women play is increasingly more significant. The feminist discourse that they voice (feminist in the sense of a discourse "which aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women's roles and/or to effect social change" [Goodman 36–37]) effectively parodies the contemporary ideology of power. The best example is that provided by the Ricciolona, the factory worker of *Grande Pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli e medi*, who presents a powerful indictment of capitalist methods of labor exploitation. This play was devised as a grandiose allegory of Italian history from Liberation

to the late 1960s. The last part of the play concentrates on the capitalist exploitation of factory workers, especially women.

A dancing test "la catena 'tuttadanza,'"⁵ for the screening of candidates for assembly line jobs provides a representation of women workers in traditional terms when seen through a patriarchal-capitalist discourse, women are viewed as the "uniche a sapersi adattare con profitto a quel sistema di montaggio: primo: per l'istinto armonico ritmico corporale di cui sono dotate naturalmente . . . secondo perchè sono più docili . . . non reagiscono . . . costano meno." Female candidates for a factory job are asked to perform a whole series of rhythmic movements in order to pass the so-called "tuttodanza" assembly-line cycle—a test that is described as "semplice . . . non faticoso . . . perfino elegante e divertente" (56). The examiner's language—the dance teacher is played by Franca Rame—projects a childish, emptyheaded, frivolous image of femaleness (seen by her use of such expressions as "tesorini miei" and "carine mie" and of diminutives applied to body parts such as "nasino, manine, dentini, pancino"), juxtaposed with an all too real representation of factory workers reduced to Chaplin-like machines by the debasing, robot-like 24 movements of the "tuttodanza" assembly-line cycle (in which the workers are asked to "avvitare le viti . . . con le manine," "infilare le spolette . . . con i dentini," "infilare i gommini . . . con i nasini," "bloc-care i pistoncini con i fianchi," "sbattere . . . i glutei . . . sulla sbarra timone," and so on).

This opposition between female gullibility and dehumanizing labor that has created this parody of the relationship between an exploiting employer and working girls all too eager for a job, resurfaces in Ricciolona's description of her own assembly-line experience. Her discourse functions on two different registers: on one, she expresses the traditional image of femaleness as passive, resigned, empty-headed, and obedient as expected to the establishment's directives. On another level, by speaking the language of the exploiting employer, Ricciolona's discourse succeeds in "carnivalizing" that language, ridiculing its ideology by promoting to the absurd the role that ideology had imposed on women (Little 20).

Per riuscire a stare nella media, che è un po' altina, qualcuna si droga . . . e allora si tira bene, ma poi a forza di tirare . . . ogni tanto c'è qualcuna che si sbatte là come secca . . . al capo ci rincresce la gente che ci viene i malori . . . ma la responsabilità non è della direzione . . . mica è colpa del signor padrone . . . lui è buono . . . la colpa è della legge del profitto. . . . (60–61)

This dialogic tension of Ricciolona's discourse reaches its peak in the song that she and the women workers sing about their sexual sta-

tus as virgins, a condition imposed on them by the “macchina . . . bastarda.” Here the women workers expose the hypocrisy of both the industrial and religious establishments, two institutions that speak the same language of power through the intimidating presence of the machine, the new embodiment of God’s word:

La macchina . . .
 ci tiene lontane dal peccato:
 è la nostra salvezion per tutte le tentazion.
 In questo mondo di vizio carnale
 sola una voce a salvarci che sale,
 la voce paterna dell’industriale,
 che tornando alla regola del monacale
 “prega e lavora” e non scioperare
 ti dice “sta’ buona lì
 prega e lavora e fai cuccia lì.” (65)

This traditional message embedded in the modern world of technology thus proposes once again the Christian ideology of the “monacale/prega e lavora” though in extending its control to the factory space it has added the injunction “non scioperare!” The sexual politics apparent in this passage has, according to Michelene Waldorf introduced “another kind of radical critique to its [theatre] vocabulary by raising questions about a division of labor based on gender, and about distorted and debasing representations of sexuality” (xix). The language used to construct the image of the “good girl” at the end of the song, “fai cuccia lì” degrades the working woman to the condition of an animal, of a dog, and consequently of a bitch in need of control. This debasing representation of femaleness will become a dominant topic of Rame’s theater, particularly in the series of plays *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (1977) and *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata* (1983–86).

In these plays Franca Rame has physically appropriated the stage as a woman in that in most of them she is the only character on stage and her voice is the only one that the audience hears. This is particularly threatening for theater audiences accustomed to the traditional patriarchal standards that dominate mainstream theater and unwilling to be intellectually or emotionally challenged by a polemically transgressive play. Such audiences usually feel at ease with plays that project familiar characters and situations and produce recognizable and unthreatening forms of discourse. An alternative theater, like Fo and Rame’s, is based on a different conception of the dramatic apparatus. Rather than reassuring the audience, it aims at provoking it by questioning and undermining “the habitual performance codes of the majority [male] culture” (Goodman 20). The function of the exclusively female voice in such a theater is to involve the audience in a

provocative relationship that questions the exclusively male outlook in order to create a context wherein “to think about issues differently” (Goodman 16).

The best examples of Rame’s monologist technique can be seen in the earlier one-act plays such as *Il risveglio* (*Waking up*) and *Medea*. In the first, the protagonist is a factory worker who is also a wife, mother, and housewife and whose discourse expresses in dialogic tension the disturbing effects of sexual politics both at work and in the family. In a 1977 interview Rame has described her personal involvement with this piece: “di mio forse c’è più di quanto non m’aspettassi si potesse utilizzare.” She has performed the work repeatedly from that time on. Overworked, close to a nervous breakdown, this woman without a name, besides holding a full time factory job like her husband, is wholly responsible for all domestic activities in her household, motherhood included. Her monologue betrays an intention to muse about “woman’s peripheral yet invested position within a male-dominated culture” (Little 19). In this way she articulates what Gilbert calls rebellious “hysteria” that “mocks both itself and the phrases borrowed from a language of power.”⁶

The young woman of the “monologo del ‘risveglio’” in Franca Rame’s own summary of the play: “si sveglia rimbambita, stordita dalla fatica e dal sonno mai smaltito, per andare a lavorare in fabbrica. . . . E, come al solito in ritardo, deve ancora andare a portare il bambino all’asilo nido . . . e quando finalmente è pronta per uscire, non trova la chiave per riaprire la porta . . .” (Puppa, *Il teatro politico* 143–44). Even in her sleep, the unnerving experience of factory life haunts her through nightmarish projections: “Tre pezzi, una saldatura, un colpo di trapano, due bulloni . . . una saldatura, un colpo di trancia, un colpo di trapano . . .”⁷ that eventually wake her up “di soprassalto.” Her reaction to the world around her is verbalized through a language that combines stereotyped comic tonalities with realistic representation of an everyday life subject to restrictions which authorities outside her control have imposed on her and her family. Examples are those imposed by the nuns of the “asilo nido” who “se arriviamo dopo le sette non ti accettano . . .” and the inadequacies of subsidized buildings where 300 families live together and all run the water at the same time, so “non c’è mai l’acqua. . . .” This comic tension informs the woman’s language all through the monologue, especially from the point when she cannot find her key and she has to reconstruct move by move and eventually word by word, all that had gone on the night before.

The protagonist of Rame’s monologue keeps on projecting the image of a rather disorganized, scatterbrained mother and housewife, who forgets her baby in a closet: “Metto la vaschetta qui, cerco il

bambino . . . non c'è più il bambino. Dove ho messo il bambino? Nel frigorifero, nella lavatrice, nell'armadio. . . . Avevo messo il bambino nell'armadio . . ." (12); bathes him in sugar and water so that he becomes a target for bees and flies: "ecco perchè la suora all'asilo mi ha detto: 'Devo tenere il suo bambino sempre al chiuso . . . come lo metto fuori, api, calabroni e mosche gli volano addosso . . .'" (13); or puts the detergent box in the refrigerator instead of the milk bottle. In this way this character is an example of what Sheppard would call conventional "male role-consistent humour" (44), a formula that represents women as dimwitted and bungling housewives and mothers. Rame, however, alters this formula by having her character muse over her "domestic" shortcomings in brief asides to the audience. Her discourse thus undermines the language of the establishment that has always insisted that domesticity is women's major social function in life.

Through humour and transgressivity, then, the woman on stage constantly provokes her spectators to laugh or be surprised. When she sees the lemon-scented detergent in the refrigerator, she comments: "nel frigorifero non ci ho messo il latte . . . però c'è il detersivo al limone per la lavatrice . . . e perchè è giusto: il limone si mette sempre nel frigorifero" (12); or when, trying to put talcum powder on the baby, she covers him instead with parmesan cheese: "ora ti sciugo, una bella spolveratina di formaggio grattugiato . . . ma cosa c'entra il formaggio?! Chi mi ha spostato il borotalco? Con quello che costa il formaggio! Aspetta che lo tiro su, tanto il sedere del mio bambino è pulito . . ." (10). In this parody of herself as a woman who realizes she cannot accomplish all that is expected of her, this character also questions those expectations, and consequently succeeds in neutralizing her domestic inefficiency by what Zita Dresner calls the "ability to recognize and laugh at the incongruities between the ideal 'norm' and the realities of the average woman's life" (99).

So far, this woman's first-person voice has focused exclusively on her own personal situation as mother and housewife. The introduction of Luigino, her husband, in her reconstruction of the preceding night leads to a description of her condition as wife. What she says at first is without gender discrimination, as she recognizes their common inferior class situation as underpaid and overworked factory workers reduced to the status of animals, "Lavoriamo come due cani . . ." (15). Together man and wife voice their frustration against the "padrone" or better the "multinazionale" since nowadays "non si dice più padrone . . . oggi il padrone ce l'hanno solo i cani" (14).

Sexual politics, however, soon surface as this character comments on her inferior position in relation to her own husband within the family structure: "a me, che oltre che lavorare . . . ti faccio anche la

serva gratis" (14). At this point, she is clearly questioning "woman's peripheral yet invested position" within the male-dominated world of the factory by polemically reiterating the establishment point of view on the role that family and wives play in working men's life: "La famiglia, 'sta sacra famiglia l'hanno inventata apposta perchè tutti quelli sballati dalla nevrosi dei ritmi di lavoro bestiali come te ritrovinno in noi mogli tuttofare, il materassone!! Noi vi rigeneriamo . . . gratis, per essere pronti l'indomani a tornare belli scaricati a produrre ancora meglio per lui, il multinazionale!" (14). Conveyed by a woman's voice, this point of view is thus openly exposed and parodied as the woman denounces the system both in its public (the factory) and private (family) dimension. This still comic outburst, however, is soon followed by a more trenchant realization of how she is exploited as a wife in a crescendo of personal frustration and unfulfilled needs:

Ti viene mai in mente che anch'io possa avere dei problemi? Mi chiedi mai 'sei stanca? vuoi una mano?' Chi fa il mangiare? Io. Chi lava i piatti? Io. Chi fa la spesa? Io. Chi fa i salti mortali per arrivare a fine mese? Eppure lavoro anch'io! Io, io, io . . . Le calze che sporchi, chi le lava? Io. Quante volte hai lavato le mie calze? Io voglio poter parlare con te. . . . Voglio che i miei problemi siano i tuoi, e non soltanto i tuoi i miei! Io voglio che si viva insieme, non che si stia insieme! Voglio parlare, parlare con te. . . (15)

In this tirade, the female voice constructs a traditional representation of a woman's domestic functions. "Fare il mangiare, lavare i piatti, fare la spesa, lavare le calze sporche" all belong to the realm of the low domestic and as such constitute "the realities of an average woman's life." In the woman's view, however, "domesticity" is far from an "ideal" female space; rather, it makes her aware of her longings for a different relationship with her husband. In the last part of her tirade, the comic undertone is dropped as the woman emphasizes her need for communication—"Io voglio poter parlare con te"—and for fairness in their relationship: "Voglio che i miei problemi siano i tuoi, non soltanto i tuoi i miei. Io voglio che si viva insieme, non che si stia insieme." With these words, the woman clearly projects a female personality radically unlike the stereotyped bungling and dimwitted housewife, typical in male-dominated humor. She is now revealed to be a clear-minded, direct, and perceptive woman, aware of her problems and able to verbalize them and in so doing to influence her partner.

Luigino, for his part, recognizes the justness of her plea and acknowledges his flaws, speaking in emotional self-incriminating language, unusual in typical male discourse: "ha cominciato . . . a dire che sì, che ci avevo ragione, che era tutto sbagliato, che doveva cam-

biare, e si è fatto, insomma, la cosiddetta 'autocritica.'" At this point, the woman too verbalizes her own feelings: "E mi stringeva, mi stringeva . . . e più mi stringeva e più io piangevo, . . . com'era bello piangere ieri sera! Come mi è piaciuto!" (16). By now the woman has fallen back into her role of wife and her language shows the transition. Striking the same comic note as that made earlier, she realizes that it's actually Sunday and not a working day and ends up parodying herself, her own "hysteria" and the situation she herself has created:

il tesserino del tram . . . sei buchi? Sei buchi di andata e sei buchi di ritorno! Sei buchi di andata sei buchi di ritorno? Domenica! E' domenica! . . . Ma roba da pazzi, volevo andare a lavorare anche di domenica! Sono pazza! è domenica. Di domenica non si lavora e fino a tarda ora si sta a dormir! Che bella la domenica! A letto bambino! . . . Si ritorna a letto, e giuraddio se mi sogno un'altra volta di lavorare, mi strozzo da sola. . . . (16)

In this monologue the female voice which has exclusively dominated the stage has humorously involved the audience in a provocative questioning of domestic and sexual politics and confronted issues of gender discrimination. In particular, the issues that face "the couple" are here, (for the first time in the theater of Fo and Rame) considered exclusively from the woman's viewpoint and actually resolved in a, at least temporarily, positive way. The use of a male voice but employing an atypical male language contributes to the solution since it shows that through communication and mutual understanding a man can accept change and respond to his partner's needs, in this way creating a context in which "to think about issues differently."⁸

Similar issues are also confronted in *Medea*, the only tragic piece in Fo and Rame's theater. Although modeled after Euripides's tragedy, as Franca herself admits: "La nostra Medea si rifà ai maggi umbrotoscani, è una Medea popolare, che ricalca la tragedia scritta da Euripide . . . un pezzo di teatro straordinario, recitato in un linguaggio arcaico . . . un dialetto dell'Italia centrale."⁹ The main conflict of this play seems to center on desire. Desire has been viewed in several studies on narrative as the motive force of narrative action. Plots of any type, whether literary, cinematic, or dramatic narrative, are usually constructed around the male's desire for a female object and develop out of male actions to convince, change, or seduce the female into accepting his desire. When she does so, the plot normally reaches narrative closure.¹⁰ If this is the expected narrative progression of these works, most of Fo and Rame's plays dealing with the condition of women show a drastically different dramatic development. While

normal discourse in literature, cinema, and theater aims at narrative closure where the male subject's desire controls the female object, Rame's stage discourse is quite different from what audiences or readers are accustomed to. Her female characters, dominating the stage as they do with their presence and addressing the spectators in a very strongly subversive voice, strike the audience as at least unusual, often transgressive and therefore unacceptable and/or incomprehensible. The discourse of these characters constructs the female as a point of resistance to male control able to break down a centuries-old silence with a subversive voice calling attention to the unfairness of the woman's condition, especially in her role as mother. This is particularly true of *Medea*.

If we consider this one act monologue in relation to its Euripidean subtext, a play already quite transgressive in its own way, we notice that in both plays the main female character is a wife who opposes her husband's desire for another woman, who is younger and more politically influential than she is. Although this female character's voice strikes the audience as subversive in her opposition to the male's desire, opposition is embedded within her role as a jealous wife in a patriarchal society where only the will and desire of men count and women are dependent exclusively on their husbands' or fathers' wills. Thus even if both these plays present an important female character, critical of the male hero, these characters are not necessarily provided with a transgressive discourse. This holds true of Euripides's play, while Rame's *Medea* goes beyond the Euripidean character in her opposition to the male's control and in the construction of a female subject charged with a new political awareness of her own rights and needs.

In Euripides's play, in which *Medea* succeeds in destroying Jason's new object of desire as well as his children (the representatives of his paternal pride), the plot is still a traditional one in which a woman moves inside patriarchal parameters that frame her only as wife and mother, that is, exclusively as the object of the needs of her immediate family. Consequently, *Medea* can only view Jason and the children, exclusively from this perspective. Jason is husband and father, the children sons. Furthermore, her voice always expresses her exclusive concern as betrayed wife, and as such she is hardly different from the other women around her. Her revenge is thus aimed at punishing Jason as husband, by killing his new wife, and by killing his sons.

For never living shall he see henceforth
 The sons I bore him, nor shall he beget
 A son from his new bride, that wretch foredoomed
 In agony to die by drugs of mine. (801–06)

When the Chorus asks her as “of wives [sic] most wretched” whether she will “have the heart to slay [her] sons”, she replies “yes: so mine husband’s heart shall most be wrung” (816–18).

Jason’s reaction to the murder of his sons shows that Medea understood the importance placed on fatherly pride by patriarchal society. When the Chorus informs him that: “Thy sons are dead, slain by the mother,” his reply clearly reveals the depth of the wound inflicted. As a father, Jason is now dead: “Ah me! . . . then hast thou killed me!” (1309–10). In the end, Medea’s voice is overwhelmed by Jason’s in his unrelenting projection of the male judgment on the murder when he evokes the “justice that looketh on murder” (1390) and that will punish the “abhorred child-murderess” (1407). As a man, and a member of divine and human societies of men, Jason reprimands Medea as a “woman hatefulest” to the “Gods, . . . me, . . . all the race of men,” for “me hast made a childless ruin” (1323–26).

The main conflict of Euripides’s play is thus reduced to a conflict between a mother and a father over the sons having been used as the instruments for the mother/wife’s vengeance against the husband for his crime of having desired another woman. What had started as a potentially transgressive female voice expressing resistance against male desire, has turned into a traditional maternal narrative, in which the masculine discourse in the name of the father condemns the mother’s actions against father and sons. Euripides’s *Medea* therefore confirms Elizabeth Wright’s statement that “mothers don’t write,” but rather “are written and always from the viewpoint of those who lay claim to them” (145).

Rame’s *Medea*, by contrast, seems a response to the urging of feminist criticism, that women “write rebelliously . . . thereby bringing a woman subject into existence and history” (Wright 149). In Rame’s play, Medea challenges the patriarchal representation of woman as wife and mother and her own exclusively sacrificial role as articulated by the women of the chorus in their expression of apparent solidarity with her:

Non a te ma a’ figlioli toi hai da penzare! . . . Per l’amore che teni a ‘sti figlioli, Medea, te de’ sacrificare! Che de madre degna, non de donna orgogliosa hai da penzare. . . . Che anco a noialtre li nostri ommeni ne hanno fatto torto e noi te se pole capire. . . . E cussì da sempre è la legge de lu monno. . . . (65–66)

This law, however, easily accepted by the women of the chorus, is fiercely questioned by Medea:

La legge de lu monno? De quale legge me annate parlando? . . . De una legge che voialtre amiche avite penzato, e detto, e scritto? E poi ban-

dito? E battuto tamburo voi nella piazza per dare avvisata che 'sta legge è sacrata? L'ommini, l'ommini. . . . L'ommini contro de noialtre femmene l'hanno penzata e segnata e sacrata 'sta legge. E sacra fatta per scrittura dello re. . . .

Medea's discourse polemically mimics the working of the patriarchal mind and its controlling through the law of the father of the role of women in the world:

ora m'avvedo bene donne mee che la migliore penzata che l'omo ha fatto a vantaggio sojo è d'averve ben allevate alla soa dottrina . . . a scola v'ha mannate . . . e voialtre ne ripetete la lezione e ve fate contentente, chinate state, nun ve rebellate. . . . (67)

By juxtaposing the working of the patriarchal mind with her own awareness of its impact on women's lot, Medea takes her stand against the law of the father.

A similar juxtaposition occurs in Medea's encounter with Jason. Here again she mimics his patriarchal view of woman's role within the family and ironically opposes it, verbalizing her own awareness of this constrictive and oppressive view. During these scenes, Jason is on stage, but silent all the time. As a result, the patriarchal standards by which the male voice controls the female are clearly subverted as Rame carries her polemic to the audience through this unexpected representational strategy.

Faithfully interpreting the male point of view, Rame's Medea first constructs herself negatively as a resisting woman, prey to a "rabbia storta e giallusia de donna corta" and filled with anger and complaints because "debole è la femmena . . . pe' soa natura . . . fazzile a rancore, envidia e 'llamento" (70). But then, using the same linguistic strategy, she reverses the linguistic process and constructs herself positively as the "good wife" her husband demands, a woman who shows understanding for his needs as a man and a politician: "Tu savio se' stato che te procura giovinezza nova dentro novo letto . . . e de gente maggiore t'acquista nova parentela." Medea is happy at his success "e ne fo gran contento," and wants to help his new wife please him more "vegnerò . . . apparecchiarte lo letto, con fresche lenzuola de genziana odorose, e darne consiglio alla giovine sposa come portarse con te all'ammore." She also constructs herself as a "good mother" and exalts the rewards to be found in motherhood: "E donna abbisogna che se contenta d'essere madre che è già gran premio" (70). At this point, her audience, both on and off stage, is at ease with the familiar representation of woman that Medea has delivered in a reassuring and traditional authoritarian discourse.

But provocation starts again when Medea proposes herself once more as a resisting woman. She does this too, however, in a reassur-

ing way, appealing it to the past: first as a betrayed wife, "E pensare che traditore t'avea chiamato. E pensavo che fusse enfame recatto de vostra legge d'ommeni de poterce scambiare" (70); and then as an oppressed mother

E pensavo che 'sta gabbia derentro la quale voi ci avrete imprigionato fusse la peggio enfamità, con alligati, incatenati al collo li figlioli come basto de legno duro alla vacca per meglio tenerce sotto manzue a noi femmene, e per meglio poterce mungere, per meglio poterce montare. . . . Coteste follie pensavo, Giasone. . . . (70)

The repetition of the past tense "pensavo" connected at the end with "follie" clearly aims at reassuring Jason and the audience through the language of male authority as appropriated by Medea in her ingenious imitation of patriarchal discourse.

The brief sentence that follows: "E lo penzo ancora! . . ." abruptly and unequivocally disclaims all preceding reassurances and imposes Medea's definitive and inflexible stand against "the laws of men." This reversal clears the way for the final act of Medea's rebellious challenge as a "donna nova" ready to embrace murder, social destruction, and rebirth: "È 'sta gabbia che te voj spezzare, è 'sto basto che te voj schiantare. Necessità è che sti figlioli a mia abbino a morire, perchè tu, Giasone, e tue leggi infami abbiate a schiattare" (74). Medea's here is the voice of rebellion against the law of men that has invented a cage for enclosing women, a yoke with which to control them, and moral blackmail with which to silence them. No male voice, Jason's or others', interrupts or silences Medea's. It is her voice alone that is heard at the end when she mimics the reactions of the people to her murderous deed and delivers her message of rebirth: "e fora delle porta tutta gente faranno crido: mostro! cagna! scellerata! Matre for de natura! Zozza! e eo me dirò chiagnendo: mori, mori! pe' fa nascere 'na donna nova . . . 'na donna nova!"

The maternal narrative is turned into provocatively open-ended text without narrative closure, thanks to the challenge delivered by Medea in favor of the creation of a new woman: "'na donna nova!" The end of the play thus leads to a new beginning, bringing into existence and into history a new woman subject. Its transgressiveness, together with the exclusive presence on stage of a subversive female voice, makes of it one of the most disruptive texts of Italian feminist theater.

This disruptiveness is apparent too in more contemporary texts written *a due mani* by Fo and Rame. Some of these are included in the series *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata*. Still, *Medea* represents the highest point of Rame's quest for that "collegamento con la questione della donna" described in her 1977 interview. This play highlights woman's

most controversial issues: her relations with her husband, her children, her society, and her inner self, and brings them to shocking, and yet unavoidable, tragic results. *Medea* is, thus, an example of the growing relevance women's issues have acquired in Fo-Rame's theater, beginning with the exclusively comic plays of the early period, through the combination of comic and dramatic discourse, in *Il risveglio*, to this highly ironic drama. What this progression ultimately shows is the significant place that in the last decades this particular discourse, the feminist discourse, has taken in Fo and Rame's theater. Just like their theater, this discourse is meant as resistance to authoritarian control. And there is no doubt that this particular place in their work is due to Franca Rame's invaluable collaboration as a writer and performer.

MARGA COTTINO-JONES

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NOTES

¹Mentioned in Valentini 8.

²See Dario Fo, *Manuale minimo dell'attore*. Especially "Prima giornata" 7–79.

³In "Una testimonianza di Franca Rame," Introduction to *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, vol. 3 (Turin: Einaudi, 1975) v–xv.

⁴Indeed, Franca Rame's role as "performer" fits perfectly in what Lizabeth Goodman discusses in her *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. On the topic of women performers and theater, see also *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue Allen Case and Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*.

⁵"Grande Pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli e medi," *Commedie* 3: 3–79; 53.

⁶Sandra M. Gilbert, Introduction, *The Newly Born Woman* by Hélène Cixous e Catherine Clément xv.

⁷"Il risveglio," *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (Verona: Bertoni, 1978) 7–17; 9.

⁸"The couple" issue surfaces again in one of the later works interpreted by Rame, that is in *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata*, where we find a very brilliant play of reversal of gender roles.

⁹"Medea," *Le commedie di Dario Fo e Franca Rame*, vol. 8 (Turin: Einaudi, 1989) 67–75; 69; 70.

¹⁰Several examples come to mind beginning with Boccaccio's famous story of Nastagio degli Onesti (V 8) where the narrative develops out of Nastagio's desire for the Traversari woman who resists him, but who eventually will be forced into accepting his love out of fear (See Ray Fleming's "Happy Endings?"); to Goldoni's *Locandiera*, where Mirandolina plays the resisting woman up to the point when she too is forced to accept Fabrizio's love in order for the play to reach narrative closure.

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