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## Metatheatre and Identity: An Examination of Luigi Pirandello's Plays

Zafiris Nikitas<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The article at hand examines two major aesthetic and thematic aspects that dominate the plays of the groundbreaking Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello: metatheatre and identity. More specifically, the study selects a series of well-known and obscure dramas written by Pirandello from 1917 to 1936 in order to illuminate the historiographical, autobiographical and ideological connotations that inform the plays and extend the pre-existing hermeneutics by using suitable tools such as the lens of trans-theatre. As I argue in the article, the vibrant and experimental theatre-within-theatre trilogy of Pirandello that celebrates the power of theatre while bearing a pessimistic approach towards life receives a rather subversive endnote through his last, unfinished, play. At the same time, the crisis of identity and the dominance of madness rise both in his established and less performed plays and often intersects with his interest for the metatheatrical mechanisms. As a result, metatheatre and identity, interpreted in revised ways, are crucially intertwined. The article also includes an extended overview of Luigi Pirandello's international bibliography.

**Keywords:** Pirandello, Metatheatre, Identity, Relativity, Futurism, Verismo.

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### 1. Introduction

My first encounter with Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) was through the narration of a book, not the embodiment of the stage. Reading the fascinating *Henry IV* at a young age – a play which caught my eye at first because of its Shakespearean connotations – led me soon to the unending “mazes of Pirandellism” (Bentley, 1986, p. 7) that fascinated international and Italian scholars from Eric Bentley and Martin Esslin to Richard Sogliuzzo and Anthoni Caputy. My interest in Pirandello was reignited after I became a member of the welcoming community of the Pirandello Society of America (PSA) and I would like to thank Professor of Comparative Literature and Italian Mr. Michael Subialka for his kind introduction to scope of the activities of the Society that sheds new light on the Pirandellian corpus through a systematic scholarship that incorporates new epistemological perspectives. My most recent exploration of Pirandello's vast bibliography led to my scientific desire to revisit two of the major aesthetic and thematic aspects of his work: the implementation of metatheatre and the exploration of

<sup>1</sup>Student at The Pennington School, New Jersey. E-mail: [minghao.li@pennington.org](mailto:minghao.li@pennington.org)

identity. The hermeneutic approach of my research focused in two central challenges. Firstly, the (re-)framing of Pirandello's theatre-within-theatre trilogy through the lens of trans-theatre, which is a subcategory of metatheatre that has not been employed at length for his plays. Secondly, the investigation of the identity theme in selected dramas (both well-known and lesser known) with a prism that combines the historiographical, autobiographical and aesthetic connotations that blend in Pirandello's creations. The decision to examine the two pillars of the playwrights plays in one study was deliberate. Separating them – as it often happens – drains the form from the content it encompasses. Before moving on it is essential to go through an overview of the existing bibliography on Pirandello in order to present afterwards my methodology and contribution.

Pirandello's bibliography, as I mentioned above, is an ever-growing study field. A series of monographs maintain a wide scope on his literary corpus in order to examine the totality of his art and life (Di Pietro, 1941; MacClintock, 1951; Guasco, 1954; Puglisi, 1958; Starkie, 1965; Büdel, 1966; Cambon, 1967; Matthaei, 1973; Macchia, 1981; Barilli, 1986; DiGaetani, 1991; Artioli, 2001; Borsellino, 2004). However, as it is expected, the majority of monographs focus on his dramatic corpus (Pasini, 1927; Fergusson, 1949; Tilgher, 1967; Franca, 1976; Oliver, 1979; Ragusa, 1980; Alonge, 1997; Mazzaro, 2001; Mariani, 2008; De Iorio, 2013). His plays have been examined dually, through the lens of tragedy (Williams, 1966) as well as “dark” comedy (Styan, 1968). They have been illuminated e.g. through the psychoanalytic perspective (Kligerman, 1962, p. 731-744; Kroha, 1992, p. 1-23) and in the context of Italian theatre of his times (Farell & Puppa, 2011). Another aspect that has been investigated in a series of studies is Pirandello's work as a director and the staging of his plays (Squarzina & Gino, 1966, p. 76-65; Bassnett, 1993, p. 11-67; Bisicchia, 2007; Bassnett, 2009, p. 349-352). For example, the work of directors such as Giorgio Strehler or troupes such as Living Theatre has been examined in detail (Strehler, 1967, p. 263-269; Sogliuzzo, 1985, p. 9-12; Malina, 1992, 341-349; Kowsar, 2003, p. 59-75).

Pirandello and his dramatic mechanisms have been connected to seminal aesthetic tendencies from the late 19th to the 20th century from Modernism (Arnold, 2018), the Avant Garde (Squarzina, 1987; De Micheli, 1988; Lauretta, 1999) and Expressionism (Bini, 1999, p. 173-182) to the Theatre of Revolt (Brustein, 1964), the well-known Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin, 1969; Esslin, 1970) and the Brechtian Epic Theatre (Chiarini, 1967, p. 317-341; Gieri, 1999, p. 269-285). The correlation of his work with cinema has also been explored (DaVinci-Nichols, 1995). His prose (with many common themes with his dramaturgy) has been presented in various anthologies (Pirandello, 1984) and has been explored in multiple monographs (Radcliff-Unstead, 1978). Scholars have also investigated aspects of his biography (Giudice, 1975; Frassica, 2010) and made light of the historical context that frames Pirandello's work in connection with “Aesthetic Fascism” in Italy (Frese-Witt, 2001) and “Mussolini's Theatre” (Gaborik, 2021). His contradictory at times ideology and personal philosophy has produced a series of relevant studies. The innovative playwright has been interpreted both as a burdened existentialist (Rauhut, 1964; Cincotta-Strong, 1989) and a humorous - within his pessimism - writer (Attardo, 2014). His connection with Nietzscheism has also been noted (Facchi 2016, p. 31-55). In a wider perspective, the reception of Pirandello's work has been explored in the cases e.g. of Germany (Penicca, 1984), America (Mignone, 1988) and Greece (Iordanidou, 2003; Georgiou, 2014).

In terms of the Italian bibliography from the last quarter of the 20th century, one should underline the seminal contribution of Enzo Lauretta, a devoted scholar of Pirandello and director of the Centro Nazionale di Studi Pirandelliani in Agrigento. Major collections of articles from relevant Conferences edited by Lauretta were published, for example, in 1977, 1986, 1997, 1999 and 2002 (see, for example: Lauretta, 1977; Lauretta, 1999; Lauretta 2002). The first one focused on Pirandello's famous “theatre-within-theatre” trilogy and excavated seminal hermeneutics (Scheel, 1977, p. 323-338; Barberi-Squarotti, 1977, p. 7-36), the second expanded on his work (Tinterri, 1986, p. 133-146), the third revisited the trilogy (Calendoni, 1997, p. 207-222), the fourth investigated Pirandello's connection with the Avant-Garde (Barilli, 1999, p. 55-70; Verdone, 1999, p. 45-54) and the fifth revisited the trilogy (Alonge, 2002, p. 13-26; Tomasino, 2002, p. 51-68; Sica, 2002, p. 195-215). This constant (re-)framing of the Pirandellian corpus through four decades promoted the enrichment of epistemological perspectives.

## 2. Methodology

Taking into consideration the wealth of the existing bibliography, the contribution of my article focuses on the illumination of trans-theatre and identity in Pirandello's plays. In the sections that follow I look into the emergence of the term "metatheatre" in the early 1960s and, subsequently the poetics of trans-theatre employed by Pirandello in his "theatre-within-theatre trilogy" and the last play from the "myth trilogy", moving through the span of fifteen years, from 1921 to 1936. Afterwards, I illuminate the crisis of modern identity that rose in the beginning of the 20th century along with the trepidations of personal tragedy that governed the playwright's life before examining four plays where the themes of madness, mask and illusion become evident epicenters. The article concludes with a final note on Pirandello's dramatic (and life) philosophy. The study makes extensive use of primary and secondary sources in order to establish the hermeneutic findings. In terms of primary sources, I focus mostly on eight plays [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Each in His Own Way*, *Tonight We Improvise*, *The Mountain Giants*, *Right You Are (If You Think So)*, *Henry IV*, *To Clothe the Naked*, *To Find Oneself*] as well as selected complimentary documents such as the writer's prose, theoretical works and his correspondence or elements from performance history. The choice of the plays was based on their relevance to the major aspects that I explore (metatheatre and identity) while the additional sources illuminate the playwright's complex philosophical and fictional outlook that extends well beyond his popular (and widely performed) plays. In terms of secondary sources, I included a category of studies that clarify the meaning of metatheatre (and its various versions) and another category that brings into perspective the crisis of identity that appears in the plays in connection with the historical context and the predominant autobiographical elements that must be taken into consideration. Additionally, I employed a series of monographs and articles on the plays under examination that offer vital insights and belong to the established "thesaurus" of the bibliography on Pirandello that emerged from the 1940s until very recently, in the 2010s. This constant dialectics with the preexistent bibliography serves a double purpose: it underlines the explored variables concerning the Italian's work and acts as a basis for the build-up of my arguments. The combination of the primary and secondary sources with hermeneutic tools structures an informed exploration of Pirandello's poetics and thematic outlook. Lastly, I would like to thank Biblioteca Museo Teatrale for the access to visual sources in their Archives.

## 3. Metatheatre, *Theatrum Mundi*, Metadrama

The term "metatheatre" was introduced by Lionel Abel in 1963 in his book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. Metatheatre is the theatre that "centers around theatre and therefore 'speaks' about itself, 'represents' itself" (Pavis, 1998, p. 210). Abel's approach expands the theory of the "play within a play" into the concept of "theatre into theatre". The difference is that the latter does not necessarily include an autonomous play that is presented within the play, but focuses on the theme of theatre itself and represents a theatrical reality which blurs the limits between constructed play and real life. The first emergence of metatheatre, according to Abel, can be traced back in early modernity and more specifically the baroque topos of "*theatrum mundi*" (Abel, 1963, p. 100-113; Davis & Postlwait, 2003, p. 110; Frese-Witt, 2013, p. 27-89; Thacker, 2002). The concept of *theatrum mundi* reflected on the idea that "all the world's a stage" and explored both positive and negative aspects of the connection between theatre and life. The roots of this notion can be traced even before the Renaissance, when it became quite commonplace. As Lynda G. Christian mentions in *Theatrum Mundi: The History of an Idea*: "Man as an actor on the stage of life is a cosmic conception" (Christian, 1987, p. 4). The exploration of *theatrum mundi* in dramatic form, through the convention of the "play within a play" was seminal in the work of Shakespeare and Calderon and especially *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* and *Life is a Dream*, three plays that are pillars of early seventeenth century metatheatre. According to Forestier's definition of the play within a play in *Le Théâtre dans le théâtre* this convention is characterized by the presence of "spectateurs intérieurs" for whom the play is performed and the performance that takes place creates "un spectacle détaché", a separate theatrical event with differentiated theatricality for the off-stage audience that watches the play (Forestier, 1996, p. 11). The concept of *theatrum mundi* was also explored theatrically in French drama e.g. by Corneille in *L'illusion Comique* and metatheatrical aspects of role playing were popular in the work of Scaron, Rotrou and Molière, e.g. his work *La Malade Imaginaire* (Elmarsafy. 2001). Metadrama was also implemented by Molière in *Le Tartuffe* to comment

on the political and social order of the world (Cashman, 2005, p. 56). During the 20th century playwrights such as Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and Tennessee Williams explored the possibilities of metatheatre in their plays.

It has been noted that metatheatre appears, historically, in times of crisis. In such instances metatheatrical endeavors become a device for social exploration. From the times of the Spanish Golden Age to the turbulent tensions of the war-ridden 20th century, metatheatre was used in order to reflect on human challenges. As Hornby points out metatheatre

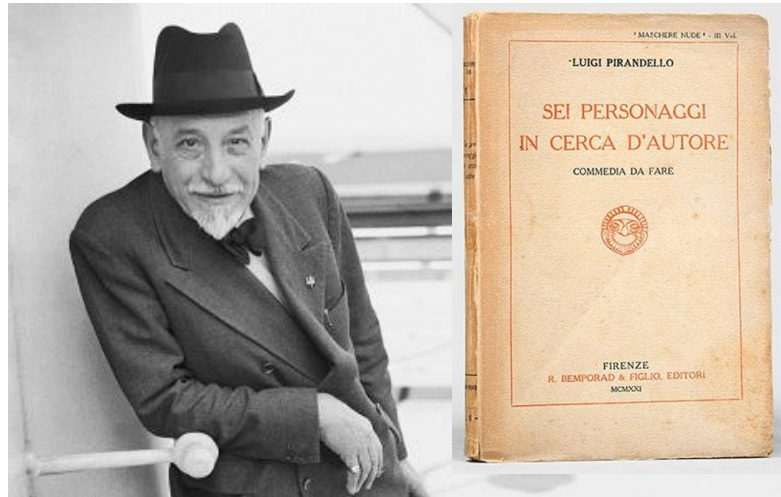


Figure 1. The “Master of Naked Masks”: Luigi Pirandello (1932) (Source: Biblioteca Museo Teatrale Siae, Digital Archive)

occurs when “man distrusts reality around him” (Hornby, 1986, p. 45). In these cases, “the play within the play is used, it is both reflective and expressive of its society’s deep cynicism about life” (Hornby, 1986, p. 45). The interest of scholars for metatheatre (as well as metadrama and metafiction in drama) was expanded through a series of studies after Abel’s endeavor many of which focused on Shakespeare, French Classical Theatre or Modern Drama such as James L. Calderwood’s *Shakespearean Metadrama*, Robert Egan’s *Drama within Drama*, Sidney Homan’s *When the Theatre Turns to Itself*, Robert J. Nelson’s *Play within a Play*, June Schlueter’s *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*, the collection of essays *The Play Within the Play*. The performance of Meta-theatre and Self-Reflection and Richard Hornby’s *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, Kimberly Cashman’s *Staging Subversion: The Performance-Within-a-Play in French Classical Theater* and Mary Ann Frese-Witt’s *Metatheatrical and Modernity: Baroque and Neobaroque*. I should also clarify that the term “metadrama” (connected but not the same with the broader term “metatheatre”) can be defined as drama about drama and can take five major forms (which can also appear, of course, within the extended frame of metatheatrical endeavors). These are: 1) The play within the play 2) The ceremony within the play 3) Role playing within the role 4) Literary and real-life reference 5) Self-reference (Hornby, 1986, p. 49; Fischer & Greiner, 2007, p. 191). In conclusion, the term of metatheatre, rooted in the baroque idea of *theatrum mundi* and essential in the work of playwrights such as Pirandello, includes a variety of dramatic structures and critical functions that reflect on the relation between theatre and life.

#### 4. Pirandello’s Poetics: From Metatheatre to Trans-Theatre

The use of metatheatre prevails in Pirandello’s theatre within the theatre trilogy that consists of three plays written from 1921 to 1929: *Six Characters in Search of an Author* [*Sei Personaggi in Cerca d’autore*, 1921], *Each in His Own Way* [*Ciascuno a Suo Modo*, 1923] and *Tonight We Improvise* [*Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, 1929]. The plays were published collectively by Pirandello in 1933, who made clear that he considered them a collective endeavor with unifying themes. The playwright’s metatheatre has been described as a “radical and paradoxical metatheatre” that “does not expose the theatrical fiction of the theatre; rather, it shows the theatrical fiction that exists in life” (Biasin & Gieri, 1999, p. 57). The metatheatrical simulation achieved by Pirandello does not only suspend the dramatic illusion but also elevates fiction as a “threshold between theatre and life” (Biasin & Gieri, 1999, p. 57). The playwright incorporates complex dramatic techniques that result in a variety of metatheatrical aspects such as performance within a play and play within a performance. According to Maurizio Grande, the circular and reflective game of mirrors that is instigated in Pirandello’s trilogy leads to another level of metatheatre: trans-theatre. This “trans-theatrical” aspect is produced through “the continuous transit between theatre and metatheatre” that leads to the overturning of dramatic art: instead of theatre acting as a “mirror of life”, life acts as a “mirror of theatre” (Grande, 1999, p. 59). Another important aspect of the playwright’s metatheatre, pointed out by Ann Ceasar is “the sense that any aspect of the



performance may, at any moment, fall apart; the audience might rebel, or the actors, or the plot [may] prove to be unperformable, or the fictitious characters might try to take over” (Hallamore-Ceasar, 1998, p. 93). Pirandello was interested in implementing in his play aspects of the practices used by Marinetti and the Futurists, such as the theatrical happenings, that created a sense of possible riot or confusion. But at the same time, as Claudio Vicentini points out, he “neutralized” the eminent (and fascinating) risk that he embedded through metatheatre in the plays (Vicentini, 1983, p. 18-32). In terms of formal innovation, critics often maintained that the most important elements were introduced in the first play of the trilogy, while the two that followed, as Eric Bentley put it, “seem less an artistic outgrowth of the first than a discursive, at times garrulous, elaboration of it” (Bentley, 1986, p. 82). Other studies however (and my study as well), contest that all the plays offer seminal aspects (Grande, 1999, p. 53-63).

The play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* establishes Pirandello’s metatheatrical devices and explores the trans-theatrical transition from the illusion of theatre to the hallucination of life (Giudice, 1989, p. 69-88; Vicentini, 2002, p. 69-83; Tessari, 2002, p. 27-50; Lorch, 2005, p. 7-11). The framing action of the play is the preparation of a performance by a director and his theatre troupe that is interrupted by the “invasion” of a family on stage (Klem, 1977, p. 39-52; Corsinovi, 1992, p. 63-70; Donati, 1993, p. 73-98; Fried, 2002, p. 167-172). Consisting of six members, this peculiar family is a collective of fictive characters that search for an author (or a director) that will bring them into life. The relations of the family, full of passion, betrayal and suicide, bring onstage the request for a second play (performed, in part, by the troupe) that resembles a melodrama. A decisive scene of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* takes place when the Leading Actors recreate onstage the first encounter of the Father and the Stepdaughter in Madama Pace’s dress shop. The theatrical rehearsal that is realized by the theatre troupe under the supervision of the director fails, according to the six characters, to portray the “truth” of their experience. It brings onstage mere “stage stereotypes” as Martin Esslin pointed out, which undermine “the truth of the imagination” and offer nothing more than cliché renderings of the events (Esslin, 1970, p. 63). As a result, the fictive characters appear to be closer to the “real” than the actors, that stoop to mere falsification and distortion. The trans-theatrical aesthetics of Pirandello elevates the fictive characters into representatives (and seekers) of a reality that is more than the illusion of theatre. The mechanism of metatheatre is used in order to underline the reflection of theatre in life, not (just) life in theatre. This revolutionary notion that is promoted by the playwright deconstructs the idea that theatre raises a mirror that portrays reality and implies that reality is encompassed by an everchanging distortion between theatrics and truth, relativity and certainty. Life emerges as an unresolved melodrama, just like the one experienced by the family, where factuality becomes an unattainable prospect. The only attainable reality is the quicksand of illusion. Art, according to the writer, created a distinct world of suspended refuge (Pirandello, 1960c, p. 113-119).

The play *Each in His Own Way* expands the Pirandellian use of metatheatre by introducing the risky randomness of the performance (simulated, of course, rather than real) that evokes the happenings of Futurists. The playwright constructs a play that consists of two or three acts (as he proclaims) and the third act is eventually cancelled abruptly when the actors run off stage and leave the director and the treasurer of the theatre hanging in front of a bewildered number of spectators. Again, as in the first play of the trilogy, the framing action is a theatrical performance of a play and the framed action is an ambiguous passionate story that revolves between two illicit lovers, Delia Morello and Michelle Rocca. Throughout the play, a series of different versions of the truth about their relationship is presented to an audience seated on stage in a setting that represents the bourgeois drama of wealthy living-rooms while a *raisonneur* blurs even more the truth rather than clarifying it. Morello moves from angel to femme fatal and Rocca from victim to savior while the facts become parts of an ambiguous puzzle. Using as a starting point the device of a “play within the play” rather than just



Figure 2. A Metatheatrical Milestone: *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). (Source: Biblioteca Museo Teatrale Siae, Digital Archive)

“theatre within theatre” Pirandello moves one step further, as the play within the play becomes an entity that occupies the whole duration. Beginning in media res, *Each in His Own Way* insinuates that life (whether fictive or real) cannot be chopped up into tidy theatrical acts with a clear start and ending. Theatre can only reflect segments of life and life appears as a subjective windmill of diverse opinions. Another important aspect introduced by Pirandello is the duality of the reception towards the performed spectacle. Instead of focusing only on the subjectivity of the perception of the “real” scandal that took place between married Delia and her lover Michelle (leading to the suicide of her husband Giorgio), the playwright also introduces, as I mentioned above, an audience seated on stage. In this way the play within the play is received simultaneously by two audiences, one by actors and one by non-actors. This triangular structure stresses, once again, the never-ending diversion of the truth and the fractured nature of life and (or as) theatre. As it becomes apparent, in this experimental play the trans-theatrical poetics of Pirandello are enriched by a series of dramaturgical mechanics that multiply the fluidity of truth.



Figure 3. *A Lover of the Stage: Pirandello in Rehearsal* (1931). (Source: PirandelloWeb, Online Archive)

The play *Tonight We Improvise* concludes the trilogy with an exploration of the powerful position of the director in theatre. Modeling his “director”, the controlling and arrogant yet profound Hinkfuss possibly after Max Reinhardt (who has successfully staged *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in 1924), Pirandello criticized in his play the overpowering presence of the director in the theatre. At the same time, one should not overlook that this dramatic ode to the praxis of theatre echoes the playwright’s restrained admiration for the creative process which leads to the formation of the performance text through the mighty presence of the all-encompassing director. More than a decade before, in his essay *Theatre and Literature* (1918), the playwright had commented on the kind of theatre that undermined the written text turning it into nothing more than a sketch, a *commedia dell’arte* scenario, and the theatre where written text was respected (Pirandello, 1960b, p. 106-112). The role of the director had captured his imagination in all the plays of the trilogy, yet in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* the “director” (as the character is often translated in English) was in fact a mere theatre manager, a “*direttore-capocomico*” and again, in *Each his Own Way*, he was just a “*capocomico*”. These theatre managers were closer to the secondary professionals that arranged theatre performances before the rise of the visionary director from the end of the 19th century. Having collaborated with Reinhardt and Pitoëff (both of which he admired) in the 1920s, Pirandello was now ready to comment with satire on their role in theatre in *Tonight We Improvise*. However, I should underline that *Tonight We Improvise* is more than a statement against the role of the director in Pirandello’s contemporary theatre. It is also a comment on the inability of man to direct the exact course of life, not just the obsession of the director to control theatre. The playwright is deconstructing the notion that life (and theatre) can be determined through human will. The “director” of fluid life and the director of transient theatre are bound to failure. Another paradox - which is to be expected in the Pirandellian universe of oxymorons - is that a play that explores improvisation is structured in a detailed way that abides to the preciseness of the playwright, not the creativity of the director. After the indirect exploration of the “happening” in *Each in His Own Way*, the last part of the trilogy makes clear that Pirandello loved the taste of the unexpected, not the complete demolition of form. Employing the usual metatheatrical mechanics that dominate his trilogy, the playwright presents an inner play which is a melodramatic Sicilian tragedy about a poor family that strives to make ends meet.

The metatheatrical explorations of Pirandello are not exhausted in his theatre-within-theatre trilogy. Julian Beck of *Living Theatre*, for example, claimed that the unfinished *Mountain Giants* were

the “climax” of Pirandello’s metatheatre (Bassnett, 1983, p. 142). The playwright was working on the play since 1929 but the drama remained unfinished until his death in 1936. The plot focuses on a travelling theatre company led by a Countess names Ilse, who wants to stage Pirandello’s play *The Fable of the Challenging*. The troupe visits a mysterious villa, inhabited by the magician Cotrone and his companions. Cotrone wants to create secluded theatre and stage the play in his villa, disconnected from society. Ilse wants create an extroverted theatre that connects with the local community. Both of them are supporters of art, although they have a different view on its function. On the other hand, the nearby town does not care for the enchanting mystery of theatre that fascinated Pirandello. The powerful “giants” of the town do not even bother to show up for Ilse’s company, while the lower-class workers do not understand her play and destroy the actors’ endeavor, also killing Ilse. Framing, once again, his play as a metatheatrical comment, Pirandello chooses a very different viewpoint from the one that prevailed in his theatre-within-theatre trilogy. Now his pessimism has transferred from the melodramatic inner plays that portrayed family disasters to the deconstruction of theatre itself because of the ignorance and indifference of society. As a result, whereas his trilogy celebrated the vibrancy of theatre (as life and art), the *Mountain Giants* becomes a dystopian comment that predicts the demise of the power of theatre in society. The playwright seems to conclude his exploration of metatheatrical dynamics shifting his focus to the dark future of arts in Europe at a time when his relations with the fascist regime were deteriorating. His worry for authoritative “giants” were overshadowing his faith in theatre.

## 5. Crisis of modern identity

The relativity of identity and the fluidity of the self prevail throughout Pirandello’s plays. This seminal aspect reflects the historical context of his era. At the beginning of the 20th century artists were facing a multifaceted ideological crisis due to the demolition of certainties and the deconstruction of myths (Sarti & Subialka, 2017, p. 65). Religion, philosophy and (most of all) science were seen in a different light. Psychology and Physics were making leaps. Nietzsche had already proclaimed the death of God in *Gay Science* (1882), Freud was actively exploring the unconscious since the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Jung was investigating the self in *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1912), Einstein was establishing the foundation of modern physics in his *Annus Mirabilis Papers* (1905) and publishing his groundbreaking theory of general relativity in 1915, Heisenberg was publishing his seminal paper on quantum mechanics in 1925 and establishing his “uncertainty principle” in 1927. Pirandello was following closely these radical evolutions that changed forever the landscape of human thought. He was deeply influenced by Einstein and met him personally, he exemplified Freud’s theories in his short story “*The Reality of Dream*” [“*La realtà del sogno*”, 1914] and he theorized on humor (adopting the opinion that it is a way to deal with the imperfections of an uncertain world) in his essay *On Humor* [“*L’umorismo*”, 1908], in the footsteps of similar thematic contributions by Bergson and Freud (Pirandello, 1960a, p. 1-10; Barnes, 2009, p. 14-20). In an age when the physical world and the unconscious of man were viewed as permutable entities Pirandello was exploring in his work the “crisis of the modern consciousness” and the interchangeable “masks” of the self (Caputi, 1988, p. 1-11).



Figure 4. The “Einstein of Drama”: Pirandello and Einstein (1935). (Source: *Théâtre en Europe* 10, 1986, p. 52).

The playwright’s philosophy of personality is comparable to Einstein’s theory of relativity, as Martin Esslin pointed out (Esslin, 1987, p. 9-18). However, Pirandello’s viewpoint was not only theoretical. It was also autobiographical. His wife, Antonietta Portulano, had chronic mental problems until she was diagnosed as schizophrenic (DiGaetani, 2008, p. 26) She has suffered a mental breakdown



in 1899, which led to outbursts of jealousy. Although Pirandello focused on her well-being, she gradually started accusing her husband, with which she shared three children, claiming that he maintained extramarital relationships and that he was planning to abandon or even murder her. She portrayed him a monstrous villain and often locked herself in the house. Although the doctors suggested that it would be better if she was transferred to a sanatorium, Pirandello was reluctant to let her go. From 1908 the playwright seemed to realize that his wife's disturbed imagination had invented another Pirandello, very different from the one in reality. The "mask" he wore was the one created (and persistently projected) by the mind of Antonella, not by himself. By 1913 her condition had worsened irreversibly and in 1919, facing at last her incurable insanity, Pirandello committed her in an asylum. By that time, Antonella was convinced for his incest with their daughter Lietta and his responsibility for her suicide attempt. All the melodramatic personal relationships echoed in the inner plays of his theatre-within-theatre trilogy, as well as the theme of madness that appeared in his work seemed to have roots in his marital experiences. The declining mental health of his wife for two long decades and the fact that she viewed Pirandello as an alternative self influenced greatly his viewpoint on the instability of personality.



Figure 5. A Family Man: Pirandello, his wife Antonella and their children, Lietta and Fausto (1917).

(Source: PirandelloWeb, Online Archive)

## 6. Pirandellian identities: Madness, mask, illusion

The play *Right You Are (If You Think So)* [*Così è (se vi pare)*, 1917] examines thoroughly themes such as the persistent relativity of truth, the elusive nature of the self and the dominance of illusion. Maintaining familiar conventions of the realistic bourgeois drama, the play takes place in a middle-class house and focuses on a love triangle. However, breaking away from the targets of "verismo", the Italian version of naturalism that documented precisely the details of daily life, the playwright's endeavor underlined the futility of trying to capture one version of the truth, thus deconstructing the positivist viewpoint (Bassanese, 1997, p. 46). Taking place in some provincial town in Italy, the drama presents a rather strange family that arrives in the community and raises the curiosity of the locals. The family consists of three members, a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ponza, and their mother-in-law, Mrs. Frola. Instead of connecting with their neighbors (as they should, in terms of social convention), the three members remain secluded and maintain curious accommodation habits. For example, Mrs. Ponza lives in the outskirts while Mrs. Frola lives in the town, although it would be more logical if they stayed together. Bewildered by the family's choices, the locals invade their privacy in order to learn the "truth" about their relationships. However, Pirandello offers an unsolvable puzzle, not a clear answer. Mr. Ponza claims that his first wife died but his mother-in-law could not bear the loss of her daughter and now lives in a state of denial, thinking that Mrs. Ponza (the second wife) is her child. On the other hand, Mrs. Frola says that Mr. Ponza thinks that his wife died (because he was traumatized by her hospitalization) and that he remarried. Instead of offering an answer, Mrs. Ponza appears in the end of the play in order to state to the curious locals that her identity is just a reflection of their perception: she is the one they think she is. The play touches on themes such as the cruelty of society that exposes private secrets for the satisfaction of curiosity and the tragic fate that has been cast on a dysfunctional family. However, the epicenter of the drama is what came to constitute "Pirandellismo", that is an inquiry on the relativity of truth and the dominance of illusion. The dramatic mechanisms employed by the playwright (the laugh that is heard when the word "verità" comes up and the presence of a *raisonneur*) make sure that his message is clear: truth is a phantom, reality is a chimera. The members of the family have no concrete identity, there are infected by trauma and madness. The social pressure



they experience exposes their lack of ontological stability. They wear masks in an ever-lasting (tragic and comic) game of confusion.

The play *Henry IV* [*Enrico IV*, 1921] portrays the multiplicity of identity and the fragmentation of personality (Costa, 1981, p. 16-24; Frese-Witt, 1991, 151-172; Mazzaro, 1992, p. 34-57; Barnes, 2011, p. 43-61; Ugwu, 2013, p. 1-7). The reality of madness and the illusions of sanity become the predominant Pirandellian tools in a complex plot that investigates a male character that has been compared to Hamlet (Rofls, 1976, p. 377-397). A wealthy man (who maintains throughout the play only his selected name, Henry IV) falls in love with the enchanting aristocrat Matilda Spina. They meet in a celebrational masquerade, where the man dresses up as the eleventh century Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, and she dresses up as his historical antagonist, Matilda of Tuscany. However, the man has an accident (he falls from his horse) and wakes up thinking he is the grand figure that he portrays. Twelve years later he regains his sanity but decides to keep playing his fantasy role in order to avoid social scrutiny. His nephew decides to bring another psychiatrist in to examine his uncle in the lavish castle he lives. Matilda and her daughter, the fiancé of the nephew, also arrive along with Matilda's lover. The psychiatrist plans to shock Henry through his treatment in order to bring him back to sanity, while he is fascinated by Matilda's daughter and claims her for himself. Henry challenges Matilda's lover with his lunacy and kills him accidentally, taking revenge for the love he lost years ago. As Michael J. Meyer pointed out, the playwright "reinvokes the carnival motif, but he renders it in a macabre light" in order to combine the theme of madness with the theme of acting" (Meyer, 1995, p. 91; O'Keefe-Bazzoni, 1987, p. 414-425) Creating a double identity and trespassing the limits between sanity and insanity Henry becomes a character that mirrors the instability of identity and the distortion of the self. The literal and metaphorical masks that appear in the play underline once again Pirandello's viewpoint on the transient nature of being in an unstable world. Bergson had argued in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903) that the constant flux of the world cannot be grasped by the rigid rules of mathematical physics (Nelson, 2015, p. 121). Pirandello, who had also experienced the rise of insanity in a personal context through his wife, abided to the French philosopher's thesis. Henry IV became the perfect vehicle to demonstrate the never-ending circle between proof and pretense, reality and fantasy. Additionally, despite the historical touch that appeared in the play, the playwright had no interest in a reconstruction of the past. This was made clear in the production of the play by Pirandello's theatre troupe, "Teatro d'Arte", where Henry's face was tampered with clown-like make up and the psychiatrist appeared resembling the figure of "dottore" from *Commedia del'Arte*. The "mask" was both an internal and an external characteristic (Sogliuzo, 1982, p. 105-117).

The play *To Clothe the Naked* (*Vestire gl'ignudi*, 1922) revisits the theme of the fluid personality that emerges in the modern world through a woman's quest to produce a coherent identity. The protagonist, Ersilia Drei, has gained some popularity in the newspapers after the incidents that took place in Smyrna, where the child of a consul (for which she was in charge of) was killed, leading to her layoff from the consul and the simultaneous break up with her fiancé. Now Emilia, who looks into her past in order to form an identity that will cover her harsh "nakedness", takes in a writer hoping that he will compose a novel that will "script" her being into existence and further public notoriety. However, the Pirandellian enigmas that promote the relativity of truth in a world of opposing opinions soon ensue in all their majestic contradiction. Emilia has one version of the "true" events, the writer has a second fictive version and the newspapers have a third one. The subjective rendition or reality clashes with the imagined narration and the narrative that is created in the public sphere, leading to a prism of perspectives. As Benjamin Kilborne pointed out, the play "expresses the desperate struggle to avoid feeling naked and being seen as naked" (Kilborne. 2002, p. 114). However, the need to abide to a stable

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ORE	SI PROVA	Direttore	Saggiatore
10-12	Cavalletti N. Firenze - Una Notte in un Palazzo	Kroll	Montecarlo
14-16	Per la notte di Montecarlo	Pirandello	"
16-18	Nostra Donna	"	"
21-23	L'Opera di Giuseppe Verdi	"	"
ORE	SI RECITA		

AVVERTENZE

Figure 6. Pirandello's Troupe: Daily Agenda of Teatro d'Arte (1925).

(Source: Biblioteca Museo Teatrale Siae, Digital Archive)

identity is nothing more than choosing an inconsistent “garment” that clothes the burden of personal nudity. It is a hollow choice that masks the (socially) visible part of Emilia’s personality, not her ontological agony. Love, anger and memory make things even worse. As Emilia’s lover tries to find a way back into her life (after rejecting her), the trauma that he recalls in her psyche elevates her sense of disconnection. She is a stranger to what she used to be and the ones that loved her are now irrelevant. Vividly anthropocentric, this rather overlooked play by Pirandello investigates, as Domenico Vittorini claimed, the “halo of human pathos” that surrounds the “gentle figure” of Ersilia (Vittorini, 1935, p. 147). The title – “To Clothe the Naked” - is precise, both in terms of theme as well as technique. By reducing his emphasis on metatheatre and complex dramatic mechanisms that populate most of his work, the playwright creates a “bare” study on a female character that faces the drama of an identity in absentia.

The play *To Find Oneself* [Trovarsi. 1932] tackled once more the unattainable nature of a stable identity. The playwright focused again on a theme he loved: theatre and more specifically its human epicenter, the actor and the actress. Donata Genzi, the protagonist of the play, is a successful actress who falls in love with an adventurous painter who celebrates the open horizons of life, not the fictive musings of the stage. The actress is trapped in the characters she embodies onstage and maintains no individuality in the real world. All her feelings, gestures and thoughts are “imported” from her performative self, leaving no space for a separate (non-acting) selfhood. Her lover, however, does not share her enthusiasm for the liberation she feels onstage. Her acting life leads to his disapproval because her performances share her presence with an audience, taking her away from his personal embrace. Faced with this dilemma, between real life and true theatre, Donata finally chooses the second and enjoys her existence in the fictive liberation, not the shackles of reality. The play, once again, is penetrated by the same theme that characterized the metatheatrical approach of Pirandello in his theatre-within-theatre trilogy: the continuum between theatre and life. The playwright focuses on a woman in crisis, much like he did in *To Clothe the Naked* ten years before, in order to produce a study

on the nature of identity. But the play offers a vital transposition. Although, in life, the transient self burdens many of Pirandello’s characters (who strive for a consistent identity), in theatre the same lack of self is a safe haven of freedom. The actor, Pirandello seems to insinuate, is the only person who is safe (and sane) in a world of flux. Acting means changing identities and the actor is the only human that becomes, in a way, harmonized with the transitional nature of the world. Like several plays of Pirandello, love becomes the catalyst that reveals the fluidity of identity.



Figure 7. The Muse and the Maestro: Actress Marta Abba and Pirandello. (Source: Biblioteca Museo Teatrale Siae, Digital Archive).

## 7. Conclusion

Pirandello changes theatrical and metatheatrical devices in his plays only to revisit the same theme: the inconsistent nature of identity which is governed by internal crisis, familial tragedy and social convention. Identity in Pirandello emerges as a “plurale tantum” of interchanging personalities and perceptions. Madness, mask and illusion prevail in a world that fuels personal instability and deconstructs concise selfhood. The relativity of truth emerges from a double-edged sword, social and existential. The formation of the Pirandellian viewpoint is informed by the crisis of the self that emerged at the start of the 20th century and World War I. As the playwright stressed: “mine has been a theatre of war. The war revealed theater to me” (Melcer-Padon, 2018, p. 91). The conflicts raised by the bloodshed led to the onstage creation of creatures that “suffer passions [...] as a means of exploration

and purgation” (Bloom, 2003, p. 72). Although, as I should point out, his distressed characters remain mostly in the space of a tortured Purgatory rather than a distinct Hell while they have no imminent vision of Heaven. At the same time, his metatheatrical explorations are fueled by an autobiographical perspective after the years he witnessed his personal theatre of madness and absurdity within his very home. In that spectacle the protagonist was his distressed wife, not a trained actress. Pirandello had famously said: “La vita non si spiega, si vive” (Martinelli, 1992, p. 91). That is: “Life is to be lived, not understood”. However, he was willing to relive multiple transmutations of his experiences through the fictive characters and extravagant plots of his experimental theatre creations.

In 1932, in a letter to the young woman he loved passionately (yet without success) after the demise of his turbulent marriage, actress Marta Abba, Pirandello stressed that she was the only person that could bring his art (and specifically the play *To Find Oneself*) to life. Her combination of “fervor and intelligence” could succeed in not only replicating life on stage but creating life itself. She would be able, through her talent, to breathe life into the dramatic world (Pirandello, 1994, p. 231). She would “live it” on the stage, not just perform it (Pirandello, 1994, p. 231). Pirandello’s thoughts revealed once more his dual interest for life (as theatre) and theatre (as life) which he investigated in his bold metatheatrical approach. Now he loved hopelessly an actress that encapsulated transient identities in a deliberate manner, not a wife that projected on him imagined (and harmful) identities through her irrational way of acting. Metatheatre and identity became the driving forces in the aesthetic and thematic vocabulary of Pirandello who was willing to explore the dark side of human existence through comic and tragic elements. The blurring of the line between acting and madness reflected his stance on the burden of life. From his well-known theatre-within-theatre trilogy to his trilogy of myths, the playwright exposed the unending rehearsals enacted by men and women in the *theatrum mundi* of reality.

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