

Gender, Class and Suffering in the Argentinean Telenovela *Milagros*: An Italian Perspective

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Abstract

In the 1990s the Argentinean telenovela *Milagros* was broadcast on network television in Italy. The show was enormously popular with the residents of Sasso, a hilltop community in central Italy where I conducted my fieldwork. The women with whom I watched the program identified with the protagonist's circumstances and shared a special kinship with her. A modern day Madonna figure, she was deeply admired for her courage and elicited an almost religious devotion from her fans. In the face of rapid social change, this pious vision of femininity valorizes suffering and provides a metaphor for understanding broader gender inequalities.

In the mid-1990s an Argentinean telenovela (Spanish for soap opera) named *Milagros* (Miracles) was broadcast on network television in Italy. The show attracted a wide audience, and was particularly popular with the residents of Sasso,^[i] a prosperous small town in the central Italian province of the Abruzzo. While a cross-section of Sasso's population was familiar with *Milagros*, its most ardent followers were older, working class women from the ages of fifty to eighty who spent their time tending to older relatives and grandchildren and preparing meals for their extended families. Mostly married or widowed, these homemakers work hard to maintain filial ties and diligently use their skills, resources and knowledge to help with household expenditures. They are unremunerated members of the hidden economy—those whose invisible work, efforts and competence often goes unrecognized by society (Smith, 1987). A report on the local reception of a transnational media product, this article explores the relationship between gender, class and religion in Sassani women's viewing of *Milagros*. Based on interviews with the women and fourteen months of participant observation fieldwork in Sasso, I hope to show how the use of traditional Catholic imagery allowed a televisual narrative from Latin America to resonate with conservative viewers from a forgotten segment of contemporary Italian society and help them make sense of their lives.^[ii] This research is part of a larger study which examines how contemporary Italians use both traditional practices such as the *passeggiata* (ritual promenade) and a variety of newer expressive forms (postcards, community games and local responses to national media events) to think about and respond to the forces of modernity. Unlike accounts that focus exclusively on large-scale social forces or universal theories of historical change, my larger project centers on the experiences of ordinary people and the culturally specific ways that modernity manifests itself in a particular place.

To understand how gender, class and religion play themselves out in the television viewers of older Sassani women, one must know more about the town and its social life. The hilltop village of Sasso is located half an hour away from the Adriatic Sea and has a population of approximately three thousand people. Most Sassani work in factories in the town's industrial zone. This area has seen strong growth in the last twenty years because of tax incentives, cheap labor and the government connections of local officials. Also present in the village is a small group of artisans and self-employed entrepreneurs. About 50 percent of the full-time wage earners own small plots of land in the surrounding countryside, and farming is a weekend or holiday activity that contributes to the family larder. In the local imagination, Sasso has often been viewed as a modern, cosmopolitan village with close affinities to the nearby coastal centers. The townsfolk affectionately call it *la piccola Parigi dell' Abruzzo* (the "little Paris" of the Abruzzo) and point to its attractive thoroughfare and well known *passeggiata* as a sign of the town's civility and enlightened modern spirit.

In the first part of the twentieth century, however, Italy was far from a modern nation and Sasso was not the thriving small town it is today. Much of Italy, both rural and urban, was decimated by the Second World War, and electricity and indoor plumbing only became widely available in rural areas in late 1960s. After the war, the country's economic devastation drove millions of Italians to emigrate abroad in search of better lives. In the late 1940s and early 1950s fully half the population of Sasso left the town, many resettling in Canada, Belgium, Argentina, Australia and the United States. The Italian construction boom of the 1960s, however, bolstered the national economy and brought about a period of affluence, and this general prosperity helped pave the way for the emergence of large scale consumer capitalism in the Italy of the 1970s.

The central region of the Abruzzo profited greatly from this economic upsurge, and, in many ways, post-war Sasso is a case study in the modernization of rural Italy. In this period, corporate investment and economic development dramatically changed this once agricultural community into a local center of light industry. The former Sassani contadini (peasants) were transformed into the impiegati (wage earners) of the modern labor force. The town's former mayor held a number of posts in the national government, and his political connections have been partially responsible for Sasso's recent growth. Cheap labor and subsidies from la Cassa del Mezzogiorno (a national agency that provided funds for economically underdeveloped areas) not only paved the way for the development of the town's industrial base, but supplied steady employment for the residents of Sasso and the surrounding towns

It is within this broader context of intense economic development and rapid social change that we must understand the meanings that Sassani women bring to their interpretations of the Argentinean telenovela *Milagros*. With varying degrees of acceptance and resistance, almost all of the older women of Sasso have been informed by traditional Catholic notions of womanhood. Born before World War II, they are too old to have taken advantage of the broadened gender roles and career opportunities that younger Sassani women enjoy. Whether they view the women of the postwar era with scorn or longing, those of the previous generation cannot fully share in the new found freedoms. Further, older working class women have reaped the least economic benefit from Sasso's industrialization. While they have known the pleasures of child rearing and domestic life, they look out at today's society and see images of gender and class progress that they know they will never directly experience. The term "modernization" is commonly used to refer to a group of closely related social changes--the development of an industrial economy and consumer capitalism, the growth of mass mediated popular entertainments and the emergence of new gender roles. Although this term is not without its problems, "modernization" succinctly describes the kinds of sweeping transformations that struck Italy in the post-war period, and we may say that Sasso's working class women have found themselves to be doubly marginalized by modernity. Seeing their role as mothers and matriarchs devalued, but unable to enjoy professional careers or substantial upward mobility, these women are precariously perched between the present and the past.

During my fieldwork in Sasso, I wanted to understand how working class women might deal with their situation, and I searched for a way to get closer to their experiences. Engaging with the everyday life of the community and making my daily rounds of Sassani shops and homes, I quickly learned that the Argentinean television series *Milagros* had a loyal following among this group. Every Wednesday evening, they tuned their televisions to Channel 4 and enjoyed this two-hour telenovela. At first, I believed that watching *Milagros* was a trivial pastime, and I had little enthusiasm for the hours which awaited me if one of my research participants invited me to spend a Wednesday evening at her home. It was only after several months, however, that I realized the importance of this show for these women. *Milagros* was the entrance for which I had been looking.

The story, dubbed in Italian, is set in turn-of-the century South America and revolves around a young woman named *Milagros* who struggles to become reunited with her long lost mestizo lover. Throughout the series, *Milagros* becomes embroiled in a string of ill-fated events that test her honor, virtue and perseverance. Despite her trials, *Milagros* remains steadfast in her female chastity, her Catholic faith and her fidelity to her absent partner. Across the span of the series, she fends off her evil stepbrother's sexual advances and desperately tries to evade the malicious strangers who cross her path. In one episode she is duped into joining a brothel and is saved from a tragic end by a sympathetic prostitute.

The experience of watching *Milagros* in the Italian home is an active one. The actors in the series are well known in Italy, and families all over Sasso discussed the episodes and bantered about the gyrations of the plot in their living rooms and kitchens. The women with whom I watched the program identified with the protagonist's circumstances and shared a special kinship with her. A modern day Madonna figure, she was deeply admired for her courage and elicited an almost religious devotion from her fans. As we will see, this character's troubled life parallels the trials and tribulations of female Catholic martyrs. In the face of rapid social change, this pious vision of femininity valorizes suffering and provides a metaphor for understanding the social inequalities of class and gender. This traditional model of womanhood ultimately helps older, working class Sassani women make sense of the social changes that they have experienced.

One of the reasons that *Milagros* is able to appeal to its fans is its well known cast. As a genre, telenovelas usually employ nationally recognized writers, directors and performers (Leal & Oliven, 1988, p. 85). Grecia Colmenaris, the actress who plays *Milagros*, has acted in a large number of both evening and daytime series. The leading man, Osvaldo Laport, a performer not unlike Fabio in appearance, is an established actor who also starred in a variety of equally successful shows. The director of the lavish show Omar Romay shares co-production credit with Silvio Berlusconi, a wealthy television mogul and Italy's current prime minister. Popular with Italians and a wide range of Latin Americans, *Milagros* draws on longstanding Catholic images and ideas about gender, and distinct from American soap operas, it is part of a larger international, pan-Catholic media culture.

The women with whom I watched *Milagros* greatly admired the actress who played the leading role. Light-complected, with long, straight, auburn hair, a moon-shaped face, and an angelic smile, she bore an uncanny resemblance to Renaissance images of the Virgin Mary. This affinity was not lost on the Sassani women who would reverentially say, "Sembra una Madonna" ("She looks like the Madonna"). The dramatic close-up shots of celestial adoration and despair often reminded me of the stylized portraits of *Maria Addolorata* (*Maria of the Suffering*) which I had seen in Italian churches throughout the country, including Sasso. In these depictions *Maria Addolorata* is almost always seen pleading and her pain is clearly visible. This supplicating pose was frequently affected by the actress who played the lead role in *Milagros*.

In Catholicism, beauty and suffering are often essential to the attributes of female saints and martyrs. The theme of the fair and dutiful daughter who endures great misery is a leitmotif in Catholic folk legends. In keeping with this tradition, *Milagros* undergoes various forms of humiliation before she can achieve salvation. As Kathy Figgen argues in *Miracles and Promises: Popular Religious Cults and Saints in Argentina*, "The physical subjection of the body to the pains and ordeals of ascetic discipline [is] an integral part of sanctity" (Figgen, 1990, p. 68). As the quintessential martyr, *Milagros* is continuously resisting rape and defending her chastity. The perils of sexual contact are omnipresent.

The Catholic pantheon is replete with the stories of victimized women who are praised for their courage and stamina in the face of adversity. In her book *One Hundred Towers*, anthropologist Lola Romanucci-Ross describes the popularity in central Italy of such a martyr as *Santa Rita* (1991). In the small town of Ascoli-Piceno, legend has it that after *Santa Rita's* abusive husband dies, she has a vision from God and enters a convent where she develops the gift to heal the sick and the infirm. The travails of *Santa Rita* are especially well known to the women of the town, who hold her devotion to family and husband in high esteem.

In Argentina, one of the telenovela centers of the Spanish speaking world, writers have borrowed from the rich tradition of Catholic folk religion by adapting the stories of the saints for radio and television (Figgen, 1990). Like *Milagros*, the popular folk legend *Defunta Correa* deals with a woman's search for her lost companion. Unlike *Milagros* who is blissfully reunited with her partner, *Correa* is found dead with her newborn infant sucking her lifeless breast (Figgen, 1990, p. 172). In both accounts, the heroines are recognized for their ability to "triumph over the demeaning circumstances of the feminine role" (Romanucci-Ross, 1991, p. 123). Their characters are, in fact, defined by their abiding sacrifice and submission. While these legends clearly endorse gender inequities by promoting female compliance,

they also speak of freedom from bondage and servitude and celebrate the power of divine intervention to restore justice in the world.

Such suffering is often viewed through the prism of class in *Milagros*. The animosity between the landed aristocracy and the rural peasants in the show clearly resonated with many Sassani viewers. The women with whom I watched the telenovela identified with the character's humble origin; all of them were from modest, working class backgrounds who themselves remember long hours of agricultural work. Crucial here is that, underneath her tattered clothes, *Milagros* is from a noble family. Unbeknownst to her mother, *Milagros* is switched at birth with her wicked aunt's illegitimate child. While she is raised by a poor but loving family of carnival entertainers, her cousin enjoys the benefits of affluence and respectability.

The ambiguity that we find in *Milagros*' class status is echoed in her native-American love interest. Of Spanish and Indian background, *Catriel* also betrays his fine pedigree. Both noble savage and urban intellectual, he writes popular novels under a pseudonym but is disqualified from enjoying the privileges of class and wealth by his racial background. While his marginal status excludes him from the world of comfort and power, it also frees him from the racist confines of the white man's world. Like *Milagros*, *Catriel* seeks the higher goals of truth and justice.

This theme of dual identity is crucial to the telenovela. The protagonist is not really a downtrodden peasant girl but a member of the upper echelons of society; her boyfriend is not the savage society believes him to be, but the child of a misbegotten love affair between a wealthy white man and a common Indian woman. *Milagros* and *Catriel* have a hidden virtue which their assigned roles obscure and are larger and more complex than the labels that society has placed upon them. Their commitment to honor and justice is the outward sign of the nobility they hold within.

What is it about *Milagros* that resonated so deeply with my informants? Employing powerful imagery from the Catholic tradition, the *Milagros* telenovela allows Sassani women to make sense of the difficulties in their lives. They identified with *Milagros*' experiences of gender, and class-based oppression and her ultimate triumph gives them hope. The protagonist is a genteel aristocrat who appears to be a peasant; identifying with *Milagros*, the women ultimately transform their female and working class status from a marker of social disadvantage into an almost mystical sign of inner nobility. Even the smallest indignity of everyday life becomes a reminder of hidden grace and a promise of eventual redemption.

It is not surprising, then, that these older Sassani women preferred the Latin based telenovelas to the America style soap operas such as *The Bold and the Beautiful* (broadcast in Italy under the English title *Beautiful*). The viewers of *Milagros* found little solace in the machinations of rich people who work in lavish corporate offices and commit adultery. The travails of a humble peasant girl vividly speak to these women's memories of the devastating effects of World War II and the oppressive class barriers of their youth. Identifying with *Milagros*, the women see her story as a confirmation of the values of nurturance, sexual chastity and self-sacrifice--values whose transgression is the main theme of America's soap operas.

In sum, the soaps from the New World celebrate a decadent American modernity, while *Milagros* valorizes the tenets of traditional Catholic culture. If Sasso's older women do indeed look out at today's society and see images of gender and class progress that they know they will never enjoy, they also see pitfalls which they are glad they will never have to face. While they may envy the opportunities that young women have and the wealth of Italy's postwar middle class, they also see consumerism as shallow and the search for individual fulfillment as self-centered. Alienated from the benefits of modernity, they are both attracted to and repelled from this modern world that they constantly see but cannot possess. Ironically, it is *Milagros*--a product of the transnational, pan-Catholic media culture--that offers an alternative. *Milagros* celebrates a traditional Catholic ideology and provides a critique of modern society that both validates the women's experiences and gives meaning to their suffering.

Endnotes

[i]Because of the political nature of related research, the name of the town has been obscured.

[ii]For a more recent look at gender, public display and reflexivity in performance see Del Negro & Berger, 2001 and Berger & Del Negro, 2002.

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