Grazia Deledda (1871-1936), Nobel laureate of 1926, continues to intrigue readers and critics alike because of the psychological complexity of her characters, her portrayal of Sardinian mores and depiction of compelling moral dilemmas. In order to decipher Deledda’s message, critics have focused on a variety of perspectives – the author’s regionalism, her moral and spiritual proclivities, gender interpretations, and semiotic readings of protagonists. This paper proposes a new paradigm for understanding Deledda’s narrative by analyzing an emblem which signifies her unique blend of Christian and popular spirituality, the Virgin Mary. Poised at the juncture of popular and divine, the Virgin Mary exercises extraordinary powers that affect male and female characters alike in many narratives. For Deledda, the Madonna is a complex figure whose representation vacillates between fairy godmother and mother of God, accomplice and protectress. At once a figure of profound reverence and intense familiarity, the Virgin Mary symbolizes the coexistence of pagan customs (adherence to superstitions, and belief in the supernatural and magical transformations) and Christian beliefs (as defined by church doctrine) that characterizes Deledda’s work. Despite the Madonna’s manifold textual representations and her centrality to many of Deledda’s narratives, this icon has received no critical attention. The figure of the Madonna offers insight into the author’s own spirituality while providing an interpretative key to Deledda’s work.

Modern as well as ancient representations of the Virgin Mary are a product of the popular imagination, for the Gospels provide little ecclesiastical evidence of her life. Thus, for the medieval faithful, the Blessed Virgin appears to reflect more elements of folklore than doctrinal devotion. Tales of her miracles were for the most part orally transmitted or pictorially depicted for the illiterate, devout masses. In many of Deledda’s narratives, the Madonna appears either as a pictorial representation, or as the alter ego of a female character. As such, she acts as a counselor to wayward men and women, or as an intercessor who grants protection from evil. Deledda’s characters seek
an immediate connection with the divine by appealing to the Virgin Mary. In this way, the Madonna serves as an intermediary with the awe-inspiring, yet intimidating, God, just as she had done for the faithful in the middle ages. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux pointed out, Christ's majesty awes the sinner, and he seeks an intercessor with Him. The Son admires Mary's purity and by appealing to Mary, the sinner will be heard by the Son, who in turn will be heard by the Father.4 St. Bernard states "this ladder for the sinner is my whole hope." Dante’s prayer to the Virgin, which concludes his commedia,5 exemplifies the Marion cult of his last guide. Dante’s encomium to the Virgin emphasizes her importance as the receptacle of divine wisdom, the guiding light of Christian faith. The Virgin, throughout a long tradition, represents the deepest, most essential side of Christian religion, with her insistence on faith, the power of love and infinite mercy. Although she stands outside the Holy Trinity, the Virgin inhabits a particularly powerful realm as intercessor.

Perhaps the most intriguing interpretation of the Virgin as the nexus of cultural artifact and religious devotion appears in a fable recounted by Deledda. The author championed the fable as a literary genre, emphasizing its power to cut across all social and economic levels, as well as to connect the past, present, and future.6 The short story “Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio,”7 portrays Mary as the fairy godmother of the classic tales in this story about a beautiful, good and pious young girl, Mariedda, who seeks to escape the evil machinations of her ugly, mean, and atheist uncle Juanne Perrez. The title suggests that the true protagonist is Mary, “Our Lady of Good Advice,” yet the reader’s attention is drawn to her devothée, Mariedda, the diminutive of Mary. When Mariedda refuses to marry her uncle’s choice for husband, the ugliest man in the village, Juanne Perrez gives her a choice: she may either marry the unfortunate Predu Concapreda or the uncle himself. Horrified by this idea, Mariedda begins to cry and pray fervishly to Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio. Her prayers result in an apparition, the first of three in this fable, all of which vividly describe a colorful, regal Mary:

“le apparve una donna bellissima, tutta circondata di luce, vestita di raso e di velo bianco, con un mantello azzurro e un diadema d’oro simile a quello della regina di Spagna.” (170)

The Virgin advises Mariedda to request a week’s reprieve, and to remain good. In the next apparition, on the eve of her decision, the Virgin gives her a magical rosary and tells Mariedda to continue to pray to her:
"ricomparve quella Celeste Signora, con un vestito di broccato d’oro e un diadema di perle come quello della Regina di Francia. (171)

When Mariedda awakens from her slumber, she finds herself transported to Oristano, a foreign land where everyone is mourning the imminent death of the young prince. Mariedda remembers that her rosary contains healing powers and heads to the castle to cure the prince. Armed with the magical rosary, Mariedda heals the prince’s grave illness and then marries him. Soon afterwards she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a beautiful, rosy-completed boy.

Meanwhile, the evil uncle Juanne Perrez, unable to find his fugitive niece, happens to journey to Oristano for the celebration of the young prince’s wedding, where to his surprise he recognizes the bride as Mariedda! Seeking revenge for his niece’s betrayal, Perrez sells all his worldly belongings and impersonates a doctor so that he might gain access to Mariedda. At the birth of Mariedda’s son, Perrez, incognito, examines the boy and, in a wink of an eye, substitutes an ugly puppy (un cagnolino nero, brutto e rognoso) for the baby, whom he starves to death. Meanwhile the prince is fighting a battle far from home. When he finally hears that the princess has given birth to a dog, he reacts in a fury of rage. His enemies in battle deride him unmercifully over his bestial offspring, causing him to order his Maggiordomo to expel his wife and dog son from the castle immediately. Now Mariedda laments her failure to heed the Virgin’s admonishment of prayer, yet, at this critical moment, the Madonna appears again, dressed exactly the same as in the first apparition:

“apparve la Madonna col vestito bianco e il manto azzurro e il diadema simile a quello della Regina di Spagna.” (175)

The Madonna advises Mariedda to walk until she finds a house, which will be her new home. She does as the Virgin suggested and one day the prince, with his entourage, passes through the woods, where he discovers Mariedda. The two embrace and reconcile, with their son, who has been transformed by the powers of the Virgin from a dog back into a child. Whereas justice is paramount in the fairy tale (represented in this tale by the conquest of the evil uncle and the liberation of Mariedda), the appearance of the Virgin Mary adds a new dimension — unconditional maternal love and understanding. This reflects Mary’s reputation for unselfish beneficence, as she helps those in need even when they forget her. She reminds Mariedda of her status as mater dolorosa:
“tu ti sei dimenticata di me, e per ciò sventura. Ma io non abbandono gli afflitti, e sono la madre dei dolorosi.” (175)

Mariedda’s prayer to the Virgin is modeled on Lucia’s prayer in I promessi sposi, where Lucia invoke the Virgin’s aid in liberating her from the mysterious and evil Innominato. In both texts, marriage is the frame of reference. In both texts a miracle occurs: Lucia is saved from the violence of the Gothic figure and here Mariedda is saved from her demonic, Spanish uncle’s sexual schemes. But if in Manzoni there is no visionary experience (he is too rational, too Jansenist for that), Deledda highlights the visionary or epiphanic dimension of Mary’s intervention. In many ways “La Signora del Buon Consiglio,” with its folkloristic elements — traditional opening and closing (“C’era una volta...” and “vissero lungamente felici”), the number three, fairy godmother figure, magical transformations, evil and violence—encapsulates the Deleddian coexistence of magical and divine, playing upon the miraculous moments of Christian theology and the folklore’s insistence on magic and justice. The substitution of the Virgin for the fairy godmother suggests the counselling role of this beneficent figure whose understanding and empathy with filial sacrifice is emblematic. In this fable, the characters alternate between the pagan and divine in a world circumscribed by an accepted tension between magic and religion. These characters, as much as Deledda herself, understand the tension between the terms, which is reflected in the framing of the narrative with apparitions of a religious figure, the Madonna.

In this fable, the Virgin Mary is the focal point for Deledda’s idiosyncratic and unapologetic fusion of high and low culture, Christian and fabulistic traditions. Deledda’s Virgin Mary is as an amalgam of Christ’s interlocutor and pagan fairy godmother as she counsels a young woman confronted with her own human limitations. This figure recalls the peculiarly Mediterranean hybrid of the Virgin, who is part mother of Christ and part vestigial Great Mother or Earth Mother of primitive traditions. Birnbaum examines the evolutionary nature of Great Mother worship from the goddess of fertility to the Virgin Mary in the Christian era. Pagan earth goddesses such as Ceres, Demeter, Diana, Isis, Cybele, Artemis, or Rhea were usually depicted as black, the color characteristic of goddesses of the earth’s fecundity. Critics hypothesize that black Madonnas are Christian borrowings of both form and meaning of these Christian deities. This syncretism of Christian and pagan devotion informs Deledda’s portrayal of the Virgin and offers insight into the
author’s spirituality as well as an elaboration of her culture, in which the Madonna appears as a pivotal figure in the lives of its inhabitants.

Importantly for Deledda, the Madonna is also a model of ideal womanhood: strength, virtue and honor in the face of immense human suffering. As such, the Madonna inspires Deledda’s women who find themselves in compromised situations or facing difficult decisions. In Annalena Bilsini (1927), a novel from Deledda’s more mature years, the Virgin Mary acts as a moral compass, a source for spiritual guidance to the female protagonist of the title. This novel, essentially a “Ritratto di contadina” as the author herself suggests by the title of excerpted sections of the novel published on the terza pagina of the Corriere della Sera on 26 January 1926, describes the travails of economic and moral survival of the widowed mother. Early in the novel, Annalena, the matriarch of the family, enters into a complicitous pact with the Madonnina who graces the niche in her new home. After paying homage by lighting the spent lamp, Annalena crosses herself and addresses the Virgin. Her familiar tone suggests a dialogue rather than a prayer, emphasizing the Madonna’s accessibility to women such as Annalena:

Le parve che la Madonnina, distolta dalla sua fredda solitudine, le sorridesse. Allora si fece il segno della croce e strizzando l’occhio sinistro come verso un’antica conoscenza, disse ad alta voce: “Sono qui, Madonnina; e tu proteggi l’anima mia e fa prosperare la mia famiglia.” (522-523)

Here the Madonnina symbolizes prosperity of home and hearth, and protection from evil, recalling the ancient Romans’ lares or Vesta, goddess of the hearth. She reappears later in the text, during an encounter with the married padrone, Urbano Giannini, when Annalena considers seducing him in order to enhance her family’s precarious financial situation. Yet when Annalena spies the Madonnina above Urbano’s head, she rejects this option:

Eppure, quando l’uomo le fu davanti, alto sopra di lei e grande anche accanto al tronco del platano che proteggeva la nicchia della Madonnina, lo ricevette quasi arcigna: poiché al primo calcolo era subentrato un tortido senso di scrupolo e di rimorso: e sfuggendo lo sguardo fisso di lui, ella domandò subito: “Come sta tua moglie?”(595)

After the friendship between the Annalena and Urbano blossoms into the illicit affair that both parties fear and desire, Annalena identifies with Mary Magdalene instead of Mary:
E adesso, ecco, non più la donna forte della Bibbia, ma la femminuccia desiderosa d'amore, riviveva in lei. Ma aveva promesso alla Madonnina del portone, di non rimettere più piede fuori del recinto della casa e dei campi, e di non rivedere l'uomo se non in presenza dei parenti. (611)

The tormented Annalena reassesses her lapse of chastity, recalling an earlier promise to remain within the sacred precinct of Mary's protective sphere. A model of female virtue, the Madonnina provides an example of faith and enduring suffering to women such as Annalena who gaze upon her and believe in her special powers of intercession. Although Annalena has sinned by disregarding her promise to the Virgin, she continues to believe in her protective powers.

The vacillation between the Madonna and Mary Magdalene suggested in the novel *Annalena Bilzini* is the subtext for Deledda's short story "Sole d'estate." The protagonist of the story, an unnamed wealthy landowner, hopes that the Virgin's painted image will scare away the mice who have ravaged his fields of grain. This newly purchased portrait of the Madonna takes on human terms: the narrator refers to her as "la nuova ospite sacra" to distinguish her from the original Madonnina, painted in the characteristic hues of pink and blue on the walls of the farmhouse, under which a candle burns. The narrator describes the hierarchical reversal of placement, with the new Madonna, poised high on the wall appearing to look down upon the original Madonnina. She seems to enjoy physical superiority but moral inferiority:

> lo stesso padrone volle attaccare il più alto possibile, quasi rasente alla volta, in modo che la Madonnina numero due pareva volesse nascondersi e sfuggire allo sdegno della prima protettrice del luogo. (106)

As the novella draws to a close, the dangling threads of the narrative – the reasons for the unhappiness of the landowner's wife, an explanation for the secretive hanging of the new portrait of the Madonna – come together as the household servant tells the painter, in a "complicità di malizia," of the origins of the discontent: the model for this Madonna is none other than the daughter of the owner's lover, now dead. The owner's daughter, the painter's servant, is "tutta la madre." Once again Deledda confounds the classical interpretation of the virtuous Madonna by revealing the icon's model as the owner's lover, an adulteress. Deledda seems to continue a tradition, embraced by Caravaggio, of using prostitutes as models for the Virgin Mary. Here, the Madonna escapes facile symbolism as her two
“faces” are juxtaposed just as Mary and Mary Magdalene were on either side of the cross.

The moral rectitude embodied by the Virgin Mary affects men as well as women. In the short story “Un uomo e una donna,” Deledda focuses on the power that the vision of the Virgin exerts over a young man, Ghisparru Loddo. Seeking to leave behind the prospect of a mundane future in his father’s profession as cantoniere, Ghisparru steals his mother’s money and sets out to investigate the claims that nearby an older woman, Onofria Dau, gives young men money and perhaps sexual favors as well. As he walks, Ghisparru imagines Onofria as a dark, robust, buxom Mary Magdalene, like one of the “donna che amano ancora divertirsi sebbene non lo dimostrino, e che, in fondo, non dispiacciono troppo agli uomini” (915-916). When Ghisparru reaches the door of Onofria’s house marked with her name, its “targa di ferro come quelle sopra di Cristo” (914) suggests this woman’s penitential or sacrificial nature. What a surprise awaits the young man when the door opens to reveal an illuminating figure of light and goodness where he had expected darkness and corruption:

una donna alta e bella con un viso bianco e lucido di Madonna circondato dall’aureola nera della benda, con gli occhi azzurri a mandorla che riflettevano la fiammella del lume ch’ella teneva in mano, egli sentì sfuggirli d’intorno, con l’ombra il terrore del male: sentì subito che non avrebbe ucciso, che non si sarebbe venduto. (917)

Onofria’s virginal appearance instills in the young man the fear of evil; her appearance cancels the suggestion of sin. Deledda’s prose masterfully paints Onofria as the vision of Mary, the sight of which is singularly capable of recalibrating Ghisparru’s moral compass.

In this figure Deledda may be recalling the medieval legends that recount how the devil, who hated Mary’s goodness, referred to her as “illa mulier.” According to medieval legend, the devils knew that any appeal to Mary would be decided not on merits of justice, but rather according to her special feminine influence on God. In Deledda’s novel, Onofria, the much-maligned woman, has now become the figure of hope and salvation, the antidote to violence and evil. When Ghisparru attempts to elicit recognition by Onofria of her questionable reputation, she rejects any such conversation, concentrating instead on the sale of a blanket which Ghisparru said is desperately needed by his mother. Onofria sells the blanket for a pittance, believing that she is helping a truly needy person. The young man who set out on a mission to escape the permanency of his father’s career, where he
would be stationed to assist travellers as they journey, rejects this future, but
now, after his encounter with Onofria, sees no alternative but to return to
his home and his destiny. In this story, which is part cautionary tale, part
failed Bildungsroman, Ghisparru’s realization of the injustice of calumny (a
case of mistaken identity of virgin for prostitute) is inextricably tied to his
realization of the limits of self-determination. Onofria does not offer him tit-
illating succor (though she will sacrifice economic gain for the benefit of a
sick person), nor does the world present him with marvelous opportuni-
ties. Both infantile quests, based on unrealistic expectations, will end with
Ghisparri’s recognition of the virginal goodness exemplified by Onofria
Dau.

Marianna Sirca, the protagonist of the eponymous novel published in
1915, is a lonely young heiress of her priest-uncle’s fortune who falls in love
with a local bandit, much to everyone’s dismay. She intends to marry the
radiant Apollonian figure, Simone Sole, on the condition that he surrender
himself to the authorities and suffer his punishment for past crimes. Simone
agrees, but then reneges under pressure from his friends, thereby infuriating
his fiancée. Upon learning of his change of mind, Marianna vilifies him with
insults, and breaks off their engagement. Following the dispute, Simone
leaves Marianna’s house and encounters her cousin, who fatally wounds
him. After hours of agony, Simone dies in his lover’s arms.13

Critics have ignored the magnificent final scene between the now-recon-
ciled lovers. In a literary tour de force, Deledda merges the sacraments of
confession, extreme unction, and marriage at Simone’s deathbed. The ban-
dit confesses his sins, including one that surprises the young priest who
attends him in his final hour: Simone has stolen a ring from the Madonna.
The priest remarks on the extraordinarily sacrilegious nature of the crime,
for “i banditi non rubano mai nelle chiese” (942). When questioned as to
what precipitated such a bold act, Simone replies that he had wanted to give
the ring to Marianna as a pegno, or guarantee of love and faith. Now the
dying man asks that he be allowed to give this wedding ring (whose name
in Italian is fede or faith) to his beloved, so that she might be able to return
it to the Madonna. In an emotionally charged but narratively simple moment,
Simone slips the ring on Marianna’s finger, in the presence of the priest who
had been called to celebrate an entirely different sacrament. Prior to this
time, Marianna and Simone had been unable to convince a priest to marry
them secretly because of Simone’s criminal notoriety. Now, with the priest
as God’s witness, the couple affects their own marriage, as Marianna
instructs Simone:
“Simone,” disse tendendogli la mano, “mettimi tu l’anello nel dito.”
Allora la mano di lui, ch’era diventata scarna e pallida, già bruciata e lava-
ta dalla morte, si sollevò verso quella del prete: le dita tremanti ripresero l’anello e lo infilarono nel dito di Marianna.
Queste furono le loro nozze. (941)

In this novel, Deledda subverts the traditional male role with a female, as
the Virgin Mary instead of Christ acts as the divine mediator of marriage. This
representation recalls the medieval Marian legends known as Mary and the
Bridegroom. In these legends, the Virgin regards any man who has sworn
devotion to her as betrothed, and resists with vigor the rivalry of an earthly
bride.14 In Deledda’s story, the passion of Christ’s death is refigured as a pas-
sion of lost love, as Marianna, the bride, comforts Simone, her dying hus-
band. This refiguration of the pietà, of the mother holding her son’s limp,
lifeless body serves as the final reconciliation of the contrasted love affair for
Marianna, whose name weds those of Mary and her own mother Ann.15 The
reader understands implicitly the connection between love and death; sacri-
fice and suffering intensify the already extraordinary emotion of love. This
mother/lover interchange emphasizes the characteristic Deleddian insistence
on parallels between sinners and saints, where the former bandit assumes
the position of the dying Christ.16 Deledda’s narrative elevates the sinners to
positions usually reserved for the most holy. The figure who adds credence
to the infinite possibilities for redemption is the Virgin, whose intercession
delivers mercy and unconditional love to those characters grappling with the
vicissitudes of life.

Deledda’s exquisitely spare prose omits details of Simone’s death, but the
description resonates with pietà, a virtue which is an attribute of the Virgin.
The narrative leaps forward in time to Marianna’s “real” marriage proposal,
which occurs several months later as she prepares to return the ring to the
Madonna during the feast of Nostra Signora del Miracolo. The bachelor son
in the family with whom she and her father are lodged listens with marvel
to the stories of Marianna’s piety. His decision to marry Marianna coincides
with the celebration in honor of miraculous Mary, compounding Marianna’s
identification with the Virgin.

Thus Deledda presents a figure of empowered womanhood in her multi-
faceted representations of the Madonna. This figure supplants Christ in the
marriage union, protects women and men against their own carnal desires
and urges, delivers good girls from evil men through her transformative
powers, and halts sinful thoughts at a glance. The Virgin Mary, moulded by

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popular faith into a woman of divine intuition, forgives sinners while enjoying a special relationship with God the Almighty. She exercises her prerogative in favor of mercy, giving constant hope to the faithful who struggle with their transgressions. The Virgin, who inhabits a special place between heaven and earth, empowers Deledda’s women and men in their quest for faith, along the path of adversity wrought by human temptation.

Whereas Momigliano located Deledda’s power in her ability to relate the beginnings of history, by emphasizing the oppositional characteristics of maleness (patriarchy) and femaleness (virginity), I would suggest looking beyond this narrowly-construed archetype of virgin daughter enslaved by the will of her father to the quintessential chaste woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary. A product of immaculate conception, she seems at once divine and human, worthy of all respect and admiration, an exemplum of ideal womanhood, as her praise is sung: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed are thou among women.”

Momigliano employs the adjective vergine, in place of ingena, to describe Deledda’s predilection for imbuing her native Sardegna with elevated moral tone. This provocative use of the term calls for an examination of Deledda’s own assessment of the female condition. As reported by Momigliano himself, Deledda’s epistle extols the literary and spiritual virtues of womanhood in the following hypothetical contrast. She writes:

Se fossi nata uomo sarei stato un solitario; sarei vissuto in un eremo fra le braccia immense della grande Natura, donde sarei sceso solo di tanto in tanto fra gli uomini per studiarti e compassionarti. Donna, devo adattarmi a piegarmi, a vivere fra coloro che amandomi e proteggendomi completano la mia esistenza. Ed io sono felice così, forse più che non lo sarei stata se fossi nata uomo. Ho un marito buono e bello e due bambini graziosi che adoro. Ho una grande pietà, una infinita misericordia per tutti gli errori e le debolezze umane. (in Ultimi studi, 89)

In this last remark, Deledda appears to make an implicit comparison between herself and the Virgin Mary, in that she shares the attributes of pietà and misericordia for all human weakness. Just like the Virgin, the author reflects the hope of the faithful who struggle unsuccessfully against their sinful tendencies. Deledda’s haunting narrative conclusions (the bandit Simone as Christ, Mary Magdalene as model for the Madonna) suggest that sinners and saints share some ineffable characteristics. Deledda recognized these same characteristics in herself, which allowed her to portray human errors with true compassion and understanding. With her emphasis on piety and
suffering, the author championed the idea of a feminine spirituality, embodied in the Madonna. This new theological insight into Deledda's work is reflected in comments she made on her own spirituality. Deledda saw herself as a servant of God, as evidenced in the following excerpt from a letter to her friend Stanis Manca on February 1, 1894:

La felicità sta solo nel lavoro e nella coscienza di poter dire ogni sera: io non ho perso la mia giornata spirituale che piace a Dio, mentre nell'ozio forzato è la noia, sono le passioni stolte, le idee che fanno così soffrire e deviare dalla buona via. (Versi, 271)

Throughout her long and distinguished writing career, Deledda remained cognizant of her critical distance from the literary world as a woman writer from Sardinia. Deledda recognized the difficulties faced by women who dared enter the preponderantly male literary world in her thinly-veiled autobiographical novel Cosima, which was published posthumously in 1936. This work, written after Deledda learned of the breast cancer which would eventually kill her, traces the poetic origins of the protagonist Cosima, who shares Deledda's own middle name. Cosima's struggles to abrogate the dictates of society, which excluded women from writing, reveal the embarrassment and guilt the author herself experienced as she transgressed the bonds of patriarchal society. Deledda's letters and essays also speak to her sense of alienation in the Italian male world of letters. Even after she received the Nobel Prize in 1926, Croce disparaged her for never having suffered the poet's drama. Other Italian critics, driven by philological concerns, focused on Deledda's distance from the canon. Unable to locate her within the patriarchal system, they dismissed her work as naïve. Just as critics failed to understand Deledda by applying critical standards that did not pertain to her experience as a Sardinian woman, so have they failed to grasp the importance of the Madonna, arguably one of the most popular literary heroines, in explicating her texts. The Virgin Mary functions as the interpretative key to a particularly feminine theology while remaining a model for female comportment and compassion. In this way the Madonna serves as a role model for both the woman and the writer, Grazia Deledda.

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NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was given at Fordham University at a conference on the Virgin Mary in Italian Literature on April 11, 1997. I wish to thank Judith Barringer, James Carolan, Giuseppe Mazzotta, Peter Patrikis and Deanna Shemek for their helpful remarks and careful editing of this work.

2 Soru asserts that Deledda, more than any other author in the second half of the nineteenth century including Verga, has succeeded in addressing the spiritual problems of the forces of good and evil (101). Bocelli concentrates on the Deleddian synthesis of verismo and symbolism which results in the portrayal of Sardinia as a mythical island, a land outside of time and space, characterized by folklore and superstitions. This magical backdrop allows for a transformation of human suffering and sin reach a certain form of acceptance (93). Momigliano recognized Deledda’s moral imperative, while minimizing the role of folklore in her works (79-80). DiZenzo denies any form of proselytizing in Deledda’s work, saying that religion is found in the souls of her characters (189). Briziarelli proposes a gender-based reading of Deledda’s later works, especially Cosima and La chiesa della solitudine.

For a biblical exegesis of Mary, see Pelikan pp. 7-36. His inquiry focuses on Mary’s portrayal through the centuries rather than her identity on account of the “tantalizingly brief” account of Mary in the New Testament.

3 For a concise discussion of Mary’s role as intercessor, see Eileen Power’s introduction to Herolt’s Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary, ix-xxxv.

4 Dante praises the Virgin in Paradiso, xxxiii, 1-21: “Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio,/umile e alta più che creatura./termine fisso d’eterno consiglio: tu se’ colei che l’uman natura/ nobilitasi sì, che l’uo so fattore/ non disdegnò di farci sua fattura./ Nel ventre tuo si raccese l’amore/per lo cui caldo nell’eterna pace/ così è germinato questo fiore./ Qui se’ a noi meridiana face’/ di caritate, e gioco, intra i mortal./ se’/ di speranza fontana vivace./ Donna, se’ tanto grande e tanto vali./ che qual vuol volar senz’ali./ La tua benignitù non pur soccorre/ a chi domanda, ma molte fiate/liberamente al dimandar precorre./ In te misericordia, in te pietate,/ in te magnificenza, in te s’aduna/ quantunque in creatura è di bontate.”

5 Deledda’s predilection for representing her native Sardinia in fiction was fueled by her interest in, and study of, that isolated island’s literary heritage. Her anthology of Sardinian legends and fables entitled Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro was published in Rome in 1894 in Rivista delle Tradizioni Popolari Italiane. In the introduction to her compilation of Sardinian legends and fables entitled “Leggende di Sardegna,” originally published in Vita sarda, December 10-14, 1893, Deledda asserts: “La leggenda è aristocratica, è artistica, è volgare e popolare nello stesso tempo; desta lo stesso interessamento nello spirito fine della signora colta, e nella fantasia rozzamente poetica della popolana; nell’animo sognatore dell’artista, e nella percezione spregiudicata del poeta e dello storico, che la sfronda per trovare nel suo fusto le tracce delle generazioni sepolte, l’indole delle generazioni viventi e il germe delle generazioni future.” (as quoted in Fiabe e leggende, 7)

6 This fable, originally published in Giaffa (Palermo: Sandron, 1899-1921), appears in Fiabe e leggende, 169-178.

7 In her seminal work on black Madonnas in Italy, Birnbaum explores the hypothesis that veneration of the native goddesses of Europe merged with African, Middle Eastern and Asian dark goddesses and that this amalgam persisted in vernacular beliefs and rituals associated with these icons. Birnbaum notes the all-encompassing nature of these figures: “Black madonnas, like the primordial woman divinity, are believed to nurture all life, all the different peoples of the earth, and all the seasons
of life: birth, maturity, death and regeneration.(4) Pelikan notes that the pictorial representation of the Madonna as black have expressed more eloquently than words the Virgin's accessibility to the non-white faithful (25-26).

9See Powers, xi.

10This novella is the title article of the 1933 collection "Sole d'estate," 101-108.

11Originally published in 1916 in a collection of novelle entitled Il fanciullo nascosto, this story appears in Romanzi e novelle, 911-920.

12Ghisparru acknowledges his lack of ambition: "sa ceva benissimo che era un poltrone e che suo padre non sperava nulla da lui: ma tentava di giustificarsi davan-
ti a sé stesso" (915).

13Benedetto Croce's failure to appreciate this work is summed up in his assessment of the plot: "È cotesta la linea di un racconto poetico?" (321)

14For a discussion of this legend, see Powers, p. xvi.

15Another refugiation of the mater dolorosa appears near the harrowing conclusion of La madre (1920). As Paulu, the priest, celebrates Mass, he imagines his lover Agnese's denunciation of him. Here the priest who has had an affair of himself with her bearing the cross on Calvary: "pensando che Agnese lo accompagnava al suo calvario come Maria Gesù: che sarebbe fra pochi istanti salita sull'altare, che si sarebbero incontrati ancora una volta, in cima al loro errore, per espiare assieme come avevano peccato insieme." (Romanzi e novelle, 190)

16Kozma, who believes that Deledda's male protagonists suffer from "arrested maturation," has a different interpretation of this scene. She views this as a transferal of mother-son relationship onto an amorous one (335-336). Brizarelli identifies the bond between the female protagonists and the banditi due to their shared contempt for a society they find unjust and their desire for freedom (27).

17Deledda's short story "Battesimi," first published in Corriere della sera on April 6, 1928, comes instantly to mind because of its emphasis of the oppositional characteristics of maleness (patriarchy) and femaleness (virginity). For a psychoanalytical analysis of this story, see Sanguinetti Katz (1994,1).

18Momigliano concludes his critique of Deledda: "I suoi personaggi sono sempli-
ci, ma di quella semplicità ricca e a suo modo augusta del mondo patriarciale; e la sua maniera di vedere le case e i paesaggi della Sardegna, appunto per quest'in-
definibile elevatezza morale, si direbbe, piuttosto che ingenua, vergine." (82)

19This quotation is an excerpt from a letter to DeLaigue, the consul general of France in Trieste, written on January 17, 1905. It was printed for the first time publicly in Corriere della sera on January 4, 1958.

20Many scholars have addressed the issue of whether or not this text is autobiog-
graphical. See in particular Cavallero and Sanguinetti-Katz (1994,2).

21In a letter, dated May 15, 1892, to Epaminonda Provaglio, Deledda recognized the female exclusion from the literary canon: "Quella Ada Negri! Quella sì che è vera-
mente poetα!... Peccato, però, sia donna e giovine! Sì, proprio peccato! Perché ad una giovine non conviene cantare così: se la Negri fosse stata un uomo tutti l'avrebbero levata al cielo: invece, così, buona parte della critica l'atterra e il senso comune, il senso del pubblico, si rivolta nel leggere la poesia Sfida, e si forma un brutto con-
cetto della fanciulla che ha osato scriverla; mentre se fosse stata scritta da un uomo avrebbe forse avuto il successo delle più ardite e battagliere poesie di Steccetti!" (Versi, 286). Although Deledda never identified herself as a feminist, she did recogni-
ze a woman's right to study and work when she was asked to define the intellec-
tual and social values of feminism in a 1911 inquiry: "Per rispondere adeguatamente alle due domande sul femminismo, occorre che io avessi una profonda conoscen-
za delle principali questioni sociali che agitano l'umanità e una lunga preparazione
sulle grandi questioni civili ed economiche. Io scrivo romanzi e novelle: quest’è la mia specialità. Trovo giusto e bene che la donna pensi, studi e lavori” (“Un’inchiesta,” 123) The antithesis of this measured view can be found in Croce’s response to the question, where he reveals his evident negative assessment of the feminine: “Il femminismo è un movimento che mi sembra condannato dal nome stesso. È un’idea femminile, nel senso cattivo della parola. Anche i maschi hanno i loro problemi particolari, ma non hanno inventato ancora il maschilismo!” (“Un’inchiesta,” 123).

22Croce accused Deledda of never having suffered that which he saw as the poet’s or artist’s drama, which consists “in un certo modo energico e originale di sentire il mondo (per questo si parla del ‘loro mondo’), e nel travagliarsi e dargli forma di bellezza, nella qual cosa di solito non riescono se non dopo alcune prove fallite o approssimazioni insufficienti, e quando alfine vi riescono e hanno detto bene quel che volevano dire, si arrestano, o talora continuano bensì a muoversi ma dando segno di ripetizione e di esaurimento. Ed ecco perché la critica ha avuto poco da fare intorno a lei; e insieme ecco perché l’autrice ha potuto continuare tranquillamente senza stancarsi nel suo lavoro di combinarne e ricombinare i casi, i personaggi e le scene che le sono consuete e tesserne romanzi, che non sarebbe agevole differenziare fra loro nel loro merito artistico, essendo a un dipresso tutti dei patri plausibili, e nessuno così fatto da imprimerli profondamente nel cuore e nella fantasia dei lettori” (320).

23Momigliano identifies Deledda’s lack of anxiety of influence that renders categorization of her writing difficult, saying of the author: “Non è illetterata, ma è, nei suoi libri più schietti, assolutamente estranea alla tradizione letteraria. Cioè, non si riattacca a nessuno e non si contrappone a nessuno” (80).

WORKS CITED


