

Queer(ing) Gender in Contemporary Italian Women's
Writing. Maraini, Sapienza, Morante

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I propose a queer reading of the works of three contemporary Italian women writers, Dacia Maraini (1936—), Goliarda Sapienza (1924-1996) and Elsa Morante (1912-1985), published between the 1970s and 1980s. This timeframe coincides with the height of the Italian *pensiero della differenza sessuale*, emphasising the socially constructed nature of 'woman' and advocating a new symbolic order, with a focus on the redefinition of female identity. Yet, the texts that I examine for my study are not, or not just, feminist manifestoes. Despite sharing many feminist concerns, they also go beyond the dominant theoretical paradigms of the day and venture a step further into the exploration of alternative discourses that challenge taken-for-granted relations between biological sex, gender and sexual desire as fixed patterns for identity formation, thereby problematising the notion of 'identity' itself. As such, they appear in tune with more recent formulations arising from a new field of critical theory first elaborated in the North-American context in the early 1990s and now referred to as 'queer theory'. Used as a framework for my analysis, queer theory will help us understand the critical attitude that Maraini, Sapienza and Morante upheld towards the cultural and philosophical positions of their time, while also suggesting new ways of (re)reading their works nowadays. My thesis will demonstrate that, despite not always sharing the same ideological agendas, these authors manifest a marked unease towards the binary logic implicit to the categories of 'man' and 'woman', positing these as cultural performances and espousing a queer distrust towards identitarian anchorings.

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Chapter 1 Queer Instances in 1970s-1980s Italian Women's Writing

La leggenda non racconta di tre tipi di ermafroditi originali? L'uomo-uomo la donna-donna e l'uomo-donna. Queste creature offesero Zeus che divise le loro doppie persone destinandole a cercarsi per tutta la vita. Ciascuno cerca la sua controparte originaria: l'uomo-uomo amerà solo gli uomini la donna-donna solo le donne e l'uomo-donna o la donna-uomo ameranno il diverso da sé. [...] Eppure ci deve essere un modo più ricco e fluido di essere sessuati senza cacciarsi dentro un destino da etichetta. (— *Lettere a Marina*, Dacia Maraini)

In this thesis I offer a queer reading of the works of three contemporary Italian women writers, Dacia Maraini (1936—), Goliarda Sapienza (1924-1996) and Elsa Morante (1912-1985), written between the 1970s and 1980s. I will show how, at the peak of the Italian *pensiero della differenza sessuale*, while sharing with their fellow feminists a marked concern with issues around questions of identity, sexuality and corporeality, these authors also went beyond the theoretical paradigms available at the time and moved on to challenge and problematise the notion of 'identity' itself. They did so in a way that lends itself to be framed through the lens of more recent queer formulations gathered under the umbrella term of 'queer theory'.

In denouncing the limits of the notion of sexual difference, philosopher Teresa de Lauretis has called for 'a subject [...] not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted' (1987: 2). The authors that I analyse in my study, even when speaking from within the feminist movement (particularly in the case of Maraini), appear in line with de Lauretis's position in the creation, in their texts, of hybrid and rhizomatic selves that shatter the idea of a fixed identity, positing this as a mere fictional ideal. Produced at the end of the social and feminist activism that marked the 1970s in Italy, when an increased presence of women writers were addressing 'previously neglected or hidden areas of female experience, such as the relationship between mothers and daughters and the expression of

female sexuality' (Panizza and Wood 2000: 9), the voices of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante stand out from the dominant literary trend because, while partaking with their contemporaries in the effort to rescue the body from biology and to present it as a site of social construction, they also go as far as to push the limits of representability of sexuality and desire. The act of staging, in their texts, non-normative subjectivities that defiantly challenge the hetero/homo binary as any other identitarian anchoring, is a radical and political choice. What brings the works presented in this study together is that they all have, despite their differences in form and scope, a clear political agenda in mind. My study aims at investigating the gender politics of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante, whose writings, read today, appear in line with Anglo-American queer theories concerned with presenting subjectivity as non-linear, multiple and irreversibly fragmented. An approach of this kind stands as an original contribution to the philosophical paradigm of the Italian *pensiero della differenza* understood as the advocacy for an autonomous female subjectivity (*il soggetto donna*) that frames the cultural context to which these authors belong. Italian sexual difference places at its centre 'il corpo, sito di ancoraggio alla storia e alla singolarità di ciascuna esistenza, carne dotata di intelligenza e memoria' (Ronchetti 2009: 119), while promoting the irrefutable difference between man and woman (*l'essere sessuati nella differenza*). Albeit also relying heavily on the corporeal sphere, the texts by Maraini, Sapienza and Morante that I consider in this thesis do so less as a validation of the specificity of the individual (female) experience, than to expose the mechanisms of power played upon it and to investigate 'the possibility of reworking normative gender categories' (Butler 1997b: 3).

In the 1970s and 1980s the Italian literary panorama saw a steady increase in the presence of women writers as a consequence of the rise in literacy levels and as an effect of feminist battles. On the feminist literary criticism of those years, Sharon Wood writes that '[s]e lo scopo politico era di effettuare una svolta nella posizione sociologica, legale e giuridica della donna, la letteratura veniva intesa come arma potente in questa lotta' (1990: 48). While emphasising the novelty and the political potential of an approach of this kind, however, Wood can also see the risks inherent in 'un modo di concepire la letteratura che rischiava di divenire didattico' (1990: 48). Amongst the preferred themes tackled in women's writing at the time were: the dynamics between mothers and daughters told in

autobiographical undertones (Sanvitale, *Madre e figlia* 1980; Ramondino *Althénopis* 1981); the relationship between the sexes and the challenging of the traditional family (Ginzburg, *Famiglia* 1977); the thorny question of women's choice to terminate pregnancy (Fallaci, *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* 1975); women's emancipation from male domination (Lagorio, *La spiaggia del lupo* 1977) and the denunciation of the invisibility of women's subjectivity and their individual experience (Guiducci, *Due donne da buttare* 1976; *La donna non è gente* 1977). This is not to say, however, that there were no instances of literary subversion of sexual categories, as occurs for instance in Leila Baiardo's *L'inseguimento* (1976), depicting a sexually liberated and pleasure-driven female protagonist, nor that sexuality and the pushing of moral taboos were the exclusive province of female writers. Alberto Moravia and Pier Paolo Pasolini are two illustrative examples in this respect. Interestingly, and arguably not coincidentally, they both belonged to the same social circle of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante—namely, the Roman intellectual milieu that formed in the 1950s and 1960s, made of left-wing men of letters and artists of the like of Luchino Visconti, Citto Maselli and Attilio Bertolucci. Lamenting the 'natura spesso "moralistica" della nostra letteratura', literary critic Marco Antonio Bazzocchi recognises Moravia's 'primi nudi' and Pasolini's 'scandali di natura sessuale' as groundbreaking in, respectively, Italian literature and Italian cinema as for their tackling issues of corporeality and—in the case of Pasolini—illicit sexualities (2005: 3). Yet, and this is what justifies my choice of authors, Maraini, Sapienza and Morante all venture a step further into the breaking down of sexual boundaries and into the exploration of the multiple possibilities open to sex, gender and desire in a way that is unprecedented in the context of Italian women's writing. They do so whilst departing from the notion of literature as 'didactic' and 'prescriptive' that Wood recognises as the dominant mode of enquiry in 1970s feminist literary criticism (1990: 48). In fact, they come closer to more recent queer formulations that, whilst sharing a number of feminist concerns, introduce also new discourses on gender and sexuality. I will thus adopt queer theories, with a particular, but by no means exclusive, focus on Judith Butler's 'gender performativity', to argue that a striking aspect of their works lies in their thinking about identity in a way that resonates with on-going formulations on the subject. All of these authors stage queer characters that display a discernible unease with the gender roles bestowed upon them by the socio-cultural context they inhabit—roles that they subvert, going against the normative

grain.

The present introduction starts with an exploration of the socio-cultural milieu in which Maraini's, Sapienza's and Morante's works were produced, with a focus on the formulations and practices at the heart of the Italian *pensiero della differenza sessuale*. Having contextualised the authors within the preeminent cultural and philosophical debates of their time, I will then proceed to establish their originality by expanding on a set of queer formulations elaborated within the North-American context in the early 1990s; formulations which can already be found in Maraini's, Sapienza's and Morante's texts. A terminological clarification of 'queer' and of the reasons behind my choice of using it as a tool for critical enquiry will then be advanced. Finally, the adoption of a trans-national approach (originally, a North-American phenomenon) to read texts produced in Italy some decades prior to its theoretical formalisation, makes necessary an investigation of its reception within the context to which it is applied. I will thus conclude this chapter with an overview of the Italian response to queer theory, both at a grassroots and academic level, considering also the ideological reasons behind its problematic national circulation. The resistance to queer theories in Italy makes an approach such as the one proposed in this thesis all the more timely. Against the backdrop of its difficult national reception, I suggest the adoption of a trans-national and much debated concept to (re)read texts pertaining to the Italian literary tradition and illuminate their on-going relevance.

1.1.1 Italian Feminism and the *pensiero della differenza sessuale*

Emerging in the 1970s in the wake of the theories of Belgian-born French feminist Luce Irigaray, whose earlier works were promptly translated into Italian by the members of the *Libreria delle donne di Milano*, the *pensiero della differenza sessuale* placed the relationship between women at the centre of its reflection and political practice, which marked a point of departure from the feminism of the previous decade.¹ From the end of the War until the 1960s, the Italian women's movement was characterised by its ties with politics, so much so that feminists were simultaneously involved in the movement and in organised political

¹ The *Libreria delle donne* was funded in Milan in 1975 by a group of activists who were associated with different feminist movements. It acted as both an actual bookshop and a political point of reference, advancing its own theoretical contributions. For Irigaray's approach to sexual difference, see Irigaray 1993.

parties—a practice known as *doppia militanza* (double militancy).² The 1970s, however, saw the rise, in all major Italian cities, of new women’s collectives operating separately from politics, such as the Milanese *DEMAU* (1966) and *Anabasi* (1970) or the Roman *Rivolta Femminile* (1970) (Lussana 2012: 151-62). As documented by scholar Andreina Clementi, these groups were characterised by ‘a rejection of Marxism [that] led to the vindication of feminine otherness and extremist separatism’ (2002: 335-36); a rejection which was due in large part to the rampant sexism of the New Left and its reluctance to include women in political matters. Legal rights notwithstanding, women soon came to the realisation ‘of being emancipated *but still* being oppressed [...] on a subjective and ‘symbolic’ level’ (Bono and Kemp 1991: 5; Bono and Kemp’s emphasis).³ Italian feminism thus went from being a feminism of *equality* to being a feminism of *difference*: ‘contro l’uguaglianza formale tra donne e uomini come obiettivo di lotta, e per l’affermazione della disuguaglianza e differenza esistenziali’ (Cavarero and Restaino 2002: 70).⁴ Sexual difference meant first and foremost ‘to be engendered in a different sex (*l’essere sessuate nella differenza*) [which] is something not negotiable’ inasmuch as, for each woman, ‘the difference is rooted in her being [...] as that which she necessarily is: female’ (Cavarero qtd. in Bono and Kemp 1991: 16). Reflecting on the shift from the historical feminism of the 1960s to so-called ‘neofeminism’, Fiamma Lussana frames the new feminist consciousness in these words: ‘Donne e uomini non sono uguali per natura. Dentro e fuori la fabbrica, il vero egualitarismo dovrà riconoscere questa diversità, non negarla facendo finta che non esista’ (2012: 46). What was being addressed was a recuperation of a female genealogy as well as a fundamental attention to the corporeal dimension—the common denominator being the notion of ‘the body as a site of interaction of material and symbolic forces’ understood as ‘the threshold of subjectivity’ (Braidotti 1991: 282).

² Exemplary is the case of UDI (*Unione delle donne italiane*), whose members had a strong political tie with the Communist Party but were also, at the same time, involved in forms of social activism.

³ For a comprehensive list of the main feminist gains of those years, see Lucia Birnbaum 1986. The divorce law was passed in 1970, followed by the repeal of the ban against advertising contraceptives, in 1971, and the family law reform, in 1975, proclaiming juridical equality between husband and wife.

⁴ Italian feminism of difference made its debut on the international scene in 1990 with the publication into English of *Non credere di avere dei diritti*, the volume assembling documents and testimonies collected between 1966 and 1986 by the Verona-based *Diotima* group and the Milanese *Libreria delle donne*, translated into English by Teresa de Lauretis with the title *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Socio-Symbolic Practice*.

In her seminal *Sputiamo su Hegel* (1974), art historian Carla Lonzi, one of the historical voices of Italian feminism, made it clear that being equal to men (in society, in the family and so forth) would not grant women freedom: ‘L’uguaglianza è un principio giuridico [...]. La differenza è un principio esistenziale che riguarda i modi dell’essere umano [...]. Quello tra donna e uomo è la differenza di base dell’umanità’ (Lonzi qtd. in Lussana 2012: 156). A change in focus was deemed necessary within the movement, from the search for equality onto the valorisation of woman’s existential difference from man. The specificity of the female experience is the main concern of ‘Per una teoria della differenza sessuale’, by Adriana Cavarero, the document that is considered the true manifesto of Italian difference feminism.⁵ Cavarero’s essay evidenced that a clear linguistic shift had occurred from the activism of the previous decade onto the denunciation of a linguistic system excluding women:

La donna non è il soggetto del suo linguaggio. Il suo linguaggio non è *suo*. Essa perciò si dice e si rappresenta in un linguaggio non suo, ossia attraverso le categorie del linguaggio dell’altro. Si pensa in quanto pensata dall’altro. Infatti il soggetto di questo linguaggio è sin dall’inizio definito come identico al linguaggio stesso: ‘l’uomo è un animale razionale’ ci tramanda una tradizione che erroneamente [...] traduce il Greco “l’uomo è un vivente che ha il linguaggio”. (Cavarero 1987: 49; Cavarero’s emphasis)

What was advocated was a (self-) definition of woman ‘as female being, or female-gendered speaking subject’ (De Lauretis 1990a: 2). One way of achieving this was to focus on ‘i dilemmi che minano la condizione femminile, e che fanno dell’identità e dei rapporti con le donne una questione centrale nella discussione collettiva’ (Ergas 1987: 14). This inward turn of Italian feminism, with a focus on the development of a new female consciousness and on the awareness of one’s exploitation within patriarchy, translated, at a political level, into an anti-institutional and separatist stance, one of the distinctive features of Italian feminism of difference. At the centre of the analysis was ‘il partire da sé’, that is, the need to give voice to the specificity of women’s individual experiences. It is acknowledged that a peculiarity of Italian feminism is the meeting of theory and practice. In the words of Ida Dominijanni:

⁵ Cavarero’s essay is included in *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, the collective volume published in 1987 by the philosophical community of Verona, *Diotima*.

‘poiché la teoria, nasce, nel femminismo, a stretto ridosso dalla pratica politica, la storia dei concetti del femminismo è sempre, anche, storia delle sue pratiche politiche’ (1989: 119). Thus, in order to establish the theoretical debates of Italian feminism, it is important to first look at the practices in, and through, which they originated.

The second half of the 1970s was marked by a general distrust of traditional politics and by new forms of feminist associationism focussing on the analysis of women’s subjectivity and creating new forms of female relationship. The practices of *autocoscienza* first, and *affidamento* later (although the transition from the former to the latter was not so clear-cut, so much so that the two ended up overlapping) are symptomatic of a tendency to a ‘conflictual but nevertheless sustained relationship between theoretical separatist speculation, the effort to analyze and create an autonomous subject-woman, and practical political activities’ (Bono and Kemp 1991: 20). Following the example of their Anglo-American sisters, Italian feminists elaborated their own way of doing politics and organised themselves into small groups that made of *autocoscienza* their preferred political tool.⁶ The practice was born in the United States at the end of the 1960s, where it was known as ‘consciousness-raising’, and was adopted by Italian feminists a decade later, translating its name into *autocoscienza*—a term coined by Carla Lonzi that further emphasised ‘the self-determined and self-directed quality of the process of achieving a new consciousness/awareness’ (Bono and Kemp 1991: 9). It consisted in women gathering together to share their personal experiences, in a fashion that has been seen as not too dissimilar from that of psychoanalytical sessions, except that it replaced the mediation with the analyst with that of ‘the mirror that was [one’s] fellow woman’ (De Lauretis and Cicogna 1990: 45). In the economy of the movement, this practice was aimed at making women aware that they shared their marginalisation from men, besides gaining a better understanding of their bodies. The meetings of the ‘piccolo gruppo’, as its members referred it to, thus became the privileged medium through which women chose to analyse and reconsider their role, within the family and within society. The *autocoscienza* groups played a pivotal part in fostering discussions on women’s sexuality, issues that the advent of feminism brought to the fore for the first time (Caldwell 1991: 105). When, during my

⁶ For more on the genesis and implications of this practice, see de Lauretis 1990a, esp. the chapter ‘*Autocoscienza*, the first invention of feminist politics’ (40-46).

interview with Maraini, I asked her to discuss her experience with the practice, she conceded:

I think that the significance of *autocoscienza* has been paramount [...]. What were the practical gains? As a result of taking part in these groups, women learnt to feel comfortable around each other and were motivated to promote solidarity. Ultimately, they would come to the appreciation that their plight in our societies is very much alike. An example drawn from my personal experience might better explain this last point. I myself have done *autocoscienza* extensively, and I can recall one thing that did strike me a lot, back then: violence against young women (girls, rather) was indeed very common in those years. We were just about to cross the threshold into womanhood, and nearly all of us had a record of experiences of violence during our childhood, although no one would dare mention it. But there, within the group, we would open up, tell everyone our own story, no matter how painful. Specifically in the case of childhood sexual abuse for women, I believe that the evaluation of its incidence and its political and social implications cannot be overlooked. (Morelli 2016b, forthcoming)

Although the impact of *autocoscienza* in the development of women's self-awareness goes unquestioned, as evidenced in Maraini's words recalled above, the strength of this practice, that is, the common identification of being 'woman' soon turned into its biggest weakness:

Le donne che si separano dagli uomini creano infatti uno spazio in cui ciò che viene in primo piano è innanzitutto il loro *comune* essere donne. Dal comune essere donne al significante generale Donna che tutte accomuna, il passo è breve. L'appartenenza al genere femminile decide così nel nome Donna la sostanza simbolica dello spazio separato da quello dell'altro sesso. Con il risultato che la differenza dagli uomini, proprio perché sottolinea il comune essere donne, produce inevitabilmente anche la loro interna indifferenziazione e perciò la loro uguaglianza. (Cavarero and Restaino 2002: 96; Cavarero and Restaino's emphasis)

While Maraini's assertion clearly validates the fundamental significance of *autocoscienza*, when I asked her to comment a passage in *Lettere a Marina* (1981) where the protagonist, after her initial enthusiasm about the practice, dismisses it as a dangerous (con)fusion into the (m)/other, the author admitted departing from it herself, once new forms of symbolic female mediation became necessary.⁷ The passage in question is the one where Bianca dismisses the group's sessions as 'Mesi e mesi a parlare della madre appunto senza vedere che ciascuna poi cercava delle maternità non soddisfatte nell'altra una ricerca insaziabile ma

⁷ Personal conversation with Dacia Maraini, Birmingham, 27th February 2012.

sempre rimandata' (*Lettere a Marina* 147), which suggests a recognition of the close woman-to-woman relationship that the group entailed as a double-edged sword. Because the 'piccolo gruppo' presupposed an impossible sameness among its members, it led to inevitable tensions among women that have been seen as replicating 'comportamenti come l'aggressività, il silenzio, l'ostilità, la recriminazione che continuano a segnare la vita delle donne rivelando l'incoerenza fra enunciati ed esperienze reali, fra parola e vissuto' (Lussana 2012: 164), which seems to be also the message contained in the excerpt from *Lettere a Marina* above.⁸

Albeit not being against feminism *per se*, Sapienza was highly critical of the separatist strategies adopted by her contemporary feminists. In a letter to writer and literary critic Enzo Siciliano dated 19th October 1979, she expounded her views on what she saw as a tactic bound to failure:

È stato duro per me – in questi ultimi dieci anni – assistere all'insano neofitismo che come un veleno (sicuramente istillato dal potere: dividere l'uomo dalla donna per sconfiggerli entrambi, tecnica antica usata anche per le razze, i lavoratori ecc.), mi costringeva a contrastarle [le femministe] dentro e fuori di me. / Sempre lotterò per l'amicizia fra l'uomo e la donna, pianeti così diversi e così simili, bisognosi l'uno della diversità dell'altro. L'armonia dei contrari diceva Giordano Bruno, e così deve essere, ripeteva mia madre, a dispetto del potere che vorrebbe vederci tutti uguali ben insaccati nella prigione di una divisa o di una tuta da operaio. (Sapienza-Pellegrino Archive, unpublished 167-68)

Separating men from women was for Sapienza counterproductive because it could lead to their mutual annihilation or, to use her own terms, 'defeat'. What she advocated, instead, was an inclusive strategy inspired by the meeting of opposites ('l'armonia dei contrari') of the philosophical tradition of Giordano Bruno, which was also that of her mother, the socialist feminist Maria Giudice. This last point finds resonance in the author's writings of those years, particularly in the autobiographical account of her own brief prison experience that informs the narrative material of *L'università di Rebibbia* (1983). Here Sapienza transforms the homosocial space of the prison into an amniotic-like environment that seems to replicate the coeval feminist practice of the small groups. What is interesting to notice, however, is

⁸ It has been suggested that *autocoscienza* reproduced the fraught mother-daughter relationship among the group's members. For more on this, see Frabotta 1976a, who describes the intricate dynamics within the group in Kleidian terms as 'intricata vicenda di amore-odio, desiderio-aggressività' (59).

that she does so in a way that calls for the necessity of self-boundaries, confronting us with negative examples of what could happen when these are not maintained.

Whereas Maraini and Sapienza took a direct stance towards the women's movement—whether by involvement or by opposition—Morante's engagement with the feminist debates of the day is more difficult to assess, not least because of her legendary reluctance to show herself in public and to release interviews, but also because of what is arguably her only commentary on 'le femministe', her well-known lapidary statement: '[loro] non mi piacciono molto' (Schifano 1984: 125). The fact remains, however, that all of Morante's writings are invariably informed by discussions around the socially constructed nature of identity—a preoccupation that, in a way, she can be said to partake with difference feminism. But they also express the need to debunk coherent and self-evident categories, which is particularly true in the case of her last work *Aracoeli* (1982), a novel that, as we shall see, is obsessed with the deconstruction of any form of identitarian anchoring.

At around the turn of the 1980s, women began to consider the small group as outdated and forged new paradigms of female subjectivity that took the shape of 'dynamic' separatism, as opposed to the 'static' separatism of the previous years (de Lauretis 1990a: 7).⁹ What was being advocated was no longer estrangement from, but rather involvement in, society, and *affidamento* was seen as the means to achieve this. It consisted in a form of symbolic entrustment whereby a woman—usually, the weaker and younger one—would rely upon an older and more experienced one acting as her mentor, thus creating a bond of symbolic sisterhood transcending the biological sphere (de Lauretis 1990a: 8-9). Forging new forms of female relationality whose focus was not so much on the relationship with men, but rather among women, and using the mother-daughter bond as a model, this practice stood as a powerful political tool of Italian feminism and one of its most original contributions (Wood 1995: 196-99). Women 'mirrored' themselves in one another, a process that led to the surfacing of personal differences and, in turn, a mutual increase in self-

⁹ Feminist groups such as *Analisi* and *Pratica dell'inconscio* borrowed the 'practice of the unconscious' from their French fellow feminists of *Politique et Psychanalyse (Psych et Po)*. The practice, which aimed at replicating within the group the dynamics between patient and analyst, was elaborated in the document 'Pratica dell'inconscio e movimento delle donne', considered the manifesto of the homonymous group (Lussana 2012: 163)

knowledge.¹⁰ This symbolic mother-daughter relationship, which posed itself as alternative to a male dominated system, represented ‘a defiant move forward to the recognition of both the mother as primary female figure and the role she plays in shaping a woman’s life’ (Picchietti 2002: 76). In the words of Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino, what was being created was thus a new ‘*ordine simbolico della donna*’, an alternative to the ‘*ordine simbolico dell’uomo*’ (2002: 72; Cavarero and Restaino’s emphasis), the latter understood in a Lacanian sense as a male dominated system whereby woman is in a position of inferiority to man. Women were no longer looking at one another to see their own image reflected back at them, as had been the case with *autocoscienza* groups, but rather to find in their fellow women those peculiarities and differences that helped them gain realisation of their constitutive uniqueness (Picchietti 2002: 109).¹¹

1.1.2 Between Feminist Bodily Matters and Postmodern Subjectivities

It is acknowledged that, for Italian feminists, ‘[p]ersonal and political elements [...] tend to be regarded as inextricably interwoven’ (Rutter 1996: 19).¹² This is no more true than in the case of feminism in the 1970s, when the privileging of personal experiences was indeed inseparable from collective political action. Many of the feminist struggles against sexual violence at a theoretical level originated within the groups themselves, fostered by those very same discussions that were at the centre of the practices of ‘il partire da sé’, and were only later pursued in the public sphere. A case in point is the campaign for the legalisation of abortion, whose genesis is said to be central to an understanding of the Italian women’s movement and its vicissitudes (Caldwell 1991: 96).¹³ After a long gestation and a period marked by hard-fought feminist and anti-clerical struggle, in 1978, Law 194 was finally introduced in replacement of the Penal Code of 1931, which still considered abortion a crime and, as such, punishable by law. As noted by historian Fiamma Lussana in a recent

¹⁰ For more on *affidamento*, see also Paolucci 1991 (56-66); Bono and Kemp 1991 (109-138); 1993 (8-9); de Lauretis 1990a (1-21).

¹¹ These ideas around the creation of a female symbolic order were to be theoretically elaborated in the following decade by Luisa Muraro in *L’Ordine simbolico della madre* (1991).

¹² Significant in this respect is a well-known slogan of Italian feminism, ‘il corpo è mio e lo gestico io’, which highlights the centrality of issues of the body in the practices of the movement.

¹³ This was achieved by means of public activities or—as was the case with the campaign against sexual violence—the legislative process. On this occasion the rape bill was drafted directly by women. For a discussion of the vicissitudes of the legislation against sexual violence and the fractures it originated within the feminist movement, see de Lauretis 1990a (71-75).

publication tracing the history of Italian feminism, '[I]a legge sull'aborto è [...] un traguardo che ha alle spalle lunghi anni di mobilitazione delle donne. Durante la sua gestazione il paese è cresciuto. Una nuova consapevolezza dei problemi connessi alla sessualità, alla famiglia, alla coppia è diventata senso comune' (2012: 108).¹⁴ Its contradictions and its partial application notwithstanding, the passing of such legislation stressed how the woman's body had become, in the 1970s, an ideological battleground for Italian feminism.¹⁵ This concern with bodily matters represents one of the distinctive traits of Italian advocates of sexual difference, and the main point of departure from the North-American context in which 'queer' as a line of thought was born—partly, but not exclusively—from a reappropriation of French deconstructionism. The points raised by Cavarero and Restaino in this respect are useful to illuminate the peculiarity of the 'Mediterranean', and, by inclusion, of the Italian situation:

Il femminismo teorico di lingua inglese, soprattutto sul suolo statunitense ma con larga diffusione nel nord Europa, parla, per esempio, la lingua della decostruzione, del poststrutturalismo e del postmodernismo che, provenendo dalla Francia, ha conquistato le aree più radicali della comunità intellettuale americana. Altrettanto non si può dire per la teoria femminista italiana e mediterranea in genere che, pur rivolgendo una certa attenzione alla Francia, risente dell'influenza di Luce Irigaray piuttosto che di quella di Foucault e Derrida e, pur condividendo con il femminismo americano un'attenzione per le categorie della psicoanalisi, la condivide invece assai meno per quelle del postmodernismo. (2002: 92-93)

The scholars are here referring to key figures of post-structuralism such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—the other names generally associated with the movement being those of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva—to illustrate their influence on the Anglo-American thought and to mark a clear distinction between the latter and Italian feminism. Although the definition of problematic concepts invoked in their analysis, such as 'post-structuralism' (or the even more loose term 'post-modernism') goes beyond the scope of my study, let it suffice to say here that, although diverging from one another, what the above-mentioned thinkers share is the call to dismantle, across different disciplines

¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that Italian feminists were divided on the issue of abortion. For more on this, see Lussana 2012 (esp. 56-66).

¹⁵ Because of the inclusion of a conscience clause allowing the refusal of performing abortion on moral or religious grounds, and because of the influence of the Church, the free application of the Law was hindered from the start.

(philosophy, psychoanalysis, literary writing and so forth) taken-for-granted axioms such as: ‘the body’, ‘the self’, ‘masculine/feminine’. These theorists are important points of reference for philosophical theories centred upon the fragmentation of the subject and the multiplicity and instability of identities, which are at the centre of those theoretical assumptions that proliferated at the beginning of the 1990s and that have now been gathered under the name ‘queer theory’, born out of feminism and, partially, as a reaction to it (in Butler’s terms, “‘women”, the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought’; 1999: 5).¹⁶

Having outlined the ideology and practices of Italian feminism of difference in order to establish the socio-cultural landscape in which the texts by Maraini, Sapienza and Morante were produced, in what follows I will situate the authors contextually so as to explore their attitude towards the feminist movement, before moving on to illustrate the theoretical framework that I will use to read their texts. What interests me here is that, while sharing many of the concerns of feminism, these writers also departed from the dominant theoretical paradigms of the day focussing on the specificity of women’s bodies and on the privileging of the subjective experience on the premise that ‘difference’ (from men) is women’s most powerful means to contrast patriarchal domination.¹⁷ What the works of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante considered in this study have in common is their exploration of alternative discourses that contest the very same notion of ‘identity’ as a static category. Issues of corporeality permeate their texts. And yet, without leaving the materiality of the body behind, these authors respond to the dominant philosophical and ideological positions of the 1970s and 1980s—specifically, those emphasising *differenza sessuale* as a dualistic biological category—in a most original way.

¹⁶ In the preface to the second edition of a landmark volume for queer theory, *Gender Trouble*, Butler admits that she wrote it ‘in an embattled and oppositional relation to feminism’ (1999: vii). The intersection between feminism and queer theory is still a contentious subject. Some, such as Gayle Rubin, claim that there is a clear demarcation between the two (1993). Other critics, however, prefer to see possible alliances between feminism and queer (Schor and Weed 1997; Berger 2014).

¹⁷ Etymologically, the word ‘patriarchy’ derives from the Greek *patriarkhēs* (‘father’ or ‘patriarch’), which literally means ‘rule of the father’. A clarification of the term as it was first used in feminist-related contexts can be found in the definition provided by late American feminist and poet Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*: ‘patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which [...] the female is everywhere subsumed under the male’ (1976: 57).

The authors presented in this study all share a set of personal and ideological connections with one another. Each was part, although not always at the same time, of the same social circle and had personal and professional relationships with artists of the like of Pasolini and Visconti. Maraini was introduced to the Roman cultural milieu in the 1960s after meeting Moravia, her future partner of fifteen years, at a time he was married to Morante—who had then become reluctant to appear in public, and was mostly living as a recluse. Because of her sentimental and professional liaison with Maselli, Sapienza was also part of the same circle before distancing herself from it, in the early 1960s, on account of ideological discrepancies and a severe depression. Morante is openly acknowledged by Maraini as one of her ‘*madri letterarie*’,¹⁸ while Sapienza knew and admired Morante’s literary talent, although she was said to disapprove of her ideology and political non-commitment.¹⁹ In the preface to Sapienza’s *Lettera aperta*, Maraini remembers with admiration Sapienza the woman as well as Sapienza the writer (Maraini 1997: 9-11). Biographical reasons aside, it is their shared concern toward the disruption of normative gender roles and the staging of queer subjectivities that brings them together in this study. In what follows I will thus investigate their stance with regard to contemporary critical debates and, particularly, to the feminist movement, before setting the theoretical tools that I will use to frame their works.

1.1.3 Dacia Maraini. ‘Dalla parte delle donne’: Fighting for the Woman’s Cause

Featuring a fifty-year-long career as a novelist and a playwright, Dacia Maraini (1936—) is currently one of the leading and most celebrated figures of the Italian contemporary literary panorama, where she has established a reputation as a committed activist for women’s rights. Given the author’s on-going role as a social commentator of the woman’s cause, the relationship between her literary oeuvre and her position within the feminist discourses of the time of her writing needs be established. Inextricably intertwined with her political and feminist activism, her works invariably emphasise the ways in which gender becomes socially constructed and then re-enacted. As noted by Itala C. Rutter:

¹⁸ The other ones being Lalla Romano, Grazia Deledda, Natalia Ginzburg, and Anna Maria Ortese. Personal conversation with Dacia Maraini, Birmingham 27th February 2012.

¹⁹ Personal conversation with Angelo Pellegrino, Rome 18th May 2016.

Dacia Maraini represents, in the context of Italian literature, [the] perception of women's everyday experience, above all in their bodies, as still central to the discovery of *women*. [...] [H]er focus is on the relationship of women with their historical circumstances, their environment, other women, their perceptions of the boundaries of sex and class, or, we might say, with the "construction of gender". (1990: 569; Rutter's emphasis)

By stressing the plural form 'women' Rutter is, I suggest, differentiating it from, and marking its contrast to Woman, understood as the definition of femaleness that has permeated Western philosophic tradition in order to justify the subjugation of one sex (male) over the other (female). As de Beauvoir sees it, 'Woman' is the signifier that sanctions 'the material representation of alterity' (1972: 211), that which is defined against a male universal. The relationship between man and woman thus comes to be modelled around the master and slave dialectics, whereby men assume the role of Subject, thus relegating women to that of 'Inessential Other'.²⁰ In resorting to distorted biological assumptions that read one's destiny as dictated by anatomy, and confining women to their bodily sphere, not only is this differential criterion hinged with essentialism, it also patently neglects the intrinsic specificities and differences existing among women themselves, a theme to which I will return when I come to discuss the treatment of female relationality in Maraini's literary production.

On the occasion of the presentation of her *L'amore rubato* (2012), a collection of eight short stories that have the physical and psychological violence against women at their centre, Maraini once more confirmed her role as an *engagé* writer: 'Lo scrittore è quel testimone che lavora con dettagli fisici, con la realtà che si può toccare, cioè con la materia umana. Per questo deve raccontare la verità ed essere così di sprone alla società' (*Tempostretto* 2013). Such a conceptualisation of the mission of the writer as one who propels change through observation and criticism has, almost without exception, been a cornerstone of Maraini's literary and theatrical production since its very inception. The author's work is the perfect illustration of politics and theory complementing, and indeed merging into, one another. Maraini's commitment to the woman's cause goes unquestioned. For Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, the late 1960s marked the onset of Maraini's activism

²⁰ The 'Essential One/Inessential Other' is one among the many interpretative categories that de Beauvoir employs in her lucid analysis of woman's subordination to man. For more on this, see Sage 1998.

(2000: 4). From the campaigns and surveys carried out in support of the legalisation of abortion during the 1970s, to the creation of the women-only fringe theatre *La Maddalena*, or from the staging of her first feminist play *Manifesto dal carcere* (1969) to the enquiries on women's prisons for the daily *Paese Sera*, from which her novel *Memorie di una ladra* (1973) is drawn, numerous are the testimonies to Maraini's relentless activism in those years. Concurring with critic Grazia Sumeli Weinberg, for whom a markedly feminine viewpoint subtends Maraini's artistic production as a whole (1993: 23), the author herself acknowledges her role as a writer to be that of unveiling the intricate dynamics of power and unbridgeable differences between the sexes, starting from the assumption that 'la discriminazione viene da lontano, ha radici profonde' (Maraini 1987: xxix-xxx) and, as such, needs to be brought to the surface in order to uncover the mechanisms of gender oppression and abuse that have become ingrained in the social tissue through centuries of enduring patriarchy.²¹ But Maraini does not limit herself to exposing the shortcomings of patriarchal laws, specifically in the regulation of female sexuality, she also engages in a process of denaturalisation and reconfiguration of the same. The arduousness, and revolutionary potential, of such a task has been aptly captured by Sharon Wood:

[Maraini] challenged what she perceived as a narrowly bourgeois, *bien-pensant* categorization and regulation of sexuality as serving the interests of rhythms of production and reproduction in a capitalist society, and her unrepentant declaration that bisexuality, as opposed to heterosexuality, was the norm was deeply shocking to a profoundly conservative political establishment which was already being shaken to the core. (1995: 219)

In the texts *Donna in guerra* (1975), *Storia di Piera* (1980) and *Lettere a Marina* (1981) that I consider in this thesis, this operation of reconfiguration of socially prescribed gender behaviours translates into highly subversive narratives that call for queer forms of female subjectivity and relationality and, as such, allow us to read them as a most original response to the shortcomings of coeval woman-to-woman feminist practices, such as those of *autocoscienza* and *affidamento*. Despite her commitment to the woman's cause, Maraini has

²¹ Although the collection of essays *La bionda, la bruna e l'asino* (from which the excerpt above is taken) was written in the 1980s, Maraini's view on the position of women in society as reflected in these writings seems just as applicable today, as evident in her more recent 'Reflections on the Logical and Illogical Bodies of my Sexual Compatriots' (2000).

always been reluctant to label herself a ‘feminist’, to which she prefers the expression ‘dalla parte delle donne’ (Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 2000: 3). Recently, when interviewed by Joseph Farrell on the commonplace that sees her as ‘una scrittrice «femminista»’, she has provided a lucid response to the relevance of the women’s movement in the twenty-first century:

Il femminismo era un’ideologia, come il marxismo, come il socialismo. Le ideologie sono tutte morte, così anche il femminismo. [...] Certamente si tratta della più grande rivoluzione dal punto di vista del costume. Una rivoluzione pacifica, che ha avuto il potere di cambiare le leggi, la famiglia e il concetto dei ruoli. Ma, come dicevo, il femminismo ideologico è morto. Ora si può parlare di una prassi, ma le grandi ideologie, come le grandi utopie, come la pratica dell’autocoscienza e le manifestazioni di piazza, sono finite ed è giusto parlarne come di un fenomeno storico concluso. (Farrell 2015: 125-26)

In the same interview, with regard to what is considered her most explicitly feminist text, *Donna in guerra*, Maraini observed:

Donna in guerra l’ho scritto in un periodo per cui per l’appunto il femminismo era ancora un sistema di idee, vivo e importante per il mondo femminile. Si scrive dentro una epoca, dentro un clima, anche quando si crede di esserne fuori. Poi le cose cambiano e anche la scrittura cambia, i temi si modificano, è normale che sia così. (Farrell 2015: 133)

In the light of Maraini’s remarks, I propose a way of reading the texts that most reflect her involvement with the feminist movement, a phase inaugurated in 1975 with *Donna in guerra*, as not just mere products of their time, but as gesturing towards contemporary quandaries over taken-for-granted notions of gender and sexuality that are at the heart of the debates between present and past feminist theory and more recent queer approaches.²²

One of the main points of criticism against difference feminism comes from philosopher Judith Butler and consists in what she defines as the ‘implicit and compulsory presumption of heterosexuality’ (Schor and Weed 1997: 2), a binarism that the *pensiero della differenza*, for stressing woman’s difference from man, would be complicit in

²² In the 1970s Maraini wrote also *Memorie di una ladra* (1972), as the result of her surveys on the condition of female inmates in the Roman prison of Rebibbia. As noted by Sumeli Weinberg, the anthropological intent behind the book attests to the link between Maraini’s writing and her social commitment (1993: 58-62). As such, *Memorie* can be taken as a proto-feminist text, paving the way for the author’s most overtly feminist production inaugurated with *Donna in guerra* and comprising of the works included in this study.

perpetuating. Normative—or to say it *à la* Rich, ‘compulsory’—heterosexuality, which consists in the imposition of predetermined gender roles, is identified as one of the variables at play in the societal coercion of the individual to adopt pre-established gender positions alongside the feminine/masculine divide, positions that come to be (mis)taken as constitutive of one’s identity.²³ Yet, for Butler, agency is not necessarily denied by the individual’s impingement, so that the condition of being acted upon does not exclude the possibility of being able to act back, in the sense of overcoming the powers that mould us. This last point is particularly important when coming to discuss the texts written by Maraini, an author who is well aware of the disparity between the sexes, and of the necessity, for women, of political agency. As my analysis of a number of her works will demonstrate, her prose provides an invaluable example of the bridging of this seemingly unworkable paradox. While reaffirming the bodily specificity of women, Maraini also resists the temptation of indulging in essentialist reflections on an alleged female ‘nature’. Rather, and far from falling prey to biological determinism, the author moves along queer, Butlerian lines to expose the factuality of one’s gender performance, or else to give voice to dissident sexualities that disrupt codified sexual norms and, in doing so, she aligns herself with more recent queer approaches focussing on the representations of split and fractured identities.

1.1.4 Goliarda Sapienza. ‘Quell’odio, malattia infantile [del femminismo]’

To trace back the roots of Sapienza’s stance on the woman’s cause, one should look at the influential ‘Woman under socialism’, originally published in 1879 by German socialist politician August Bebel.²⁴ The first comprehensive account on the plight of women in capitalist society made by a Marxist, Bebel’s work is a denunciation of the exploitation of women as a means of production (of men’s progeny) and, at once, a source of unpaid labour. The victory of socialism is thus seen as the only way for women to attain, through economic independence and free education, the auspicated self-sufficiency. Such is, according to

²³ The invention of the term ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ is attributed to Adrienne Rich, who used it for the first time in 1980 in her influential essay ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’.

²⁴ Where not specified otherwise, the information on Sapienza’s stance on feminism provided in this section and in Chapter Three comes from personal conversation with Angelo Maria Pellegrino, her widower and literary heir. I met with Pellegrino at the author’s private archive of Via Denza, in Rome, over three days (16th-18th May 2016), when he patiently sat down with me to answer my questions about Sapienza’s work, provided insightful information and anecdotes, and kindly allowed me to access unpublished materials including private correspondence and notes, some of which I reproduce in this chapter.

Angelo Pellegrino, the ideological legacy that Sapienza inherited from Maria Giudice. With a socio-political background of this kind, Sapienza's hostility to certain manifestations (she would call them 'infantilisms', in the sense of involution and degeneration) of feminism comes as no surprise. The author regarded 1970s Italian feminism as anachronistic since, for her, the women's movement as she had known it had died with her mother, failing to reach its greater end. It was the feminism for which Giudice herself had fought her whole life, and whose vestiges could be found in the practical and legal gains attained by women during the previous decade—gains, that, however, had only partially resolved the contradictions of women in a patriarchal society. Sapienza was firm in her criticism against the tendency of Italian feminists towards separatism, a tendency that consolidated during the 1980s after the publication, in 1983, of the famous issue *Sottosopra verde*, by the Milanese collective *Libreria delle donne*, sanctioning the need for separatism as a political strategy (Bono and Kemp 1991: 118-22). Also, for Sapienza, the emancipation of woman could not possibly be attained through the aping of men on the part of 'lady di ferro, donne poliziotte, soldate e culturiste' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 3), a category of 'masculine' women emulating men's occupational choices that, as we read in the incipit of *Io, Jean Gabin*, the author saw as encapsulated in the figure of English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.²⁵

Disseminated in Sapienza's private correspondence we find insightful clues on the reasons behind her aversion towards feminism and, particularly, its separatist strand. In the letter to Siciliano mentioned above, the author expressed her delight and surprise for the favourable reception of her colossal *L'arte della gioia* (1998, posthumous) by feminist Adele Cambria, a key figure in post-'68 Italy who had read Sapienza's book in manuscript form:

Enzo caro, / ti mando l'articolo della Cambria, che, lo confesso, mi ha reso felice. Temevo molto che le "nostre" fraintendessero l'amore che la mia Modesta ha per gli uomini, ma se Adele ha capito che è odio razzista quello che oggi impronta un certo movimento femminista, anche le altre lo capiranno. [...] Tu dirai perché tanta gioia? Perché proprio per lottare per questo odio-malattia infantile del femminismo (nato tardi, purtroppo, e da quello americano invece che dalla matrice vera e ricca delle femminilissime voci della Kollontaj, della Woolf e di mia madre stessa) presi a scrivere delle avventure di Modesta dieci anni fa a costo di mettermi contro di loro. (Sapienza-Pellegrino Archive, unpublished 167)

²⁵ It would seem that Sapienza had originally thought of P.C.I. member Leonilde (Nilde) Iotti as an iconic 'iron lady', before opting for Margaret Thatcher in order to avoid repercussions with the Communist Party.

Standing against not feminism *per se*, and indeed defending the ideology of which her mother was a spokesperson, Sapienza's found fault with what she regarded as a form of 'odio razzista', a resentment that Pellegrino, in the afterward to *Io, Jean Gabin*, defines as 'la sua amarezza e il dissenso verso un certo tipo di femminismo che portava dritto all'omologazione dei sessi' (2010: 121). For Sapienza, men-hating feminists were responsible for replicating the dynamics of patriarchy, trading age-old patterns of exclusion for new ones, thus ultimately running counter to the ideals of emancipation, those that she found encapsulated in the advocacy for radical social change of Marxist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai or in the support of women's personal experience contained in the feminist literary criticism of novelist Virginia Woolf. It is against a feminism epitomised in the woman 'che per avere il coraggio di parlare si traveste di panni maschili' that Sapienza addressed her contempt: 'Lo capii leggendo "Il secondo sesso" della De Beauvoir e se c'è fra voi qualche ragazza che porta la cravatta o gli sta spuntando la barba le consiglio [...] di leggersi quel libro prezioso' (*Lettera aperta*, unpublished manuscript 46). In her letter to Siciliano, the author continued her crusade against what she regarded as a degenerate version of historical feminism, going as far as to call it 'veleno', culpable in her eyes of separating men from women. In another, undated, missive to an unidentified addressee named Gianfranco, quite possibly a friend of the author's, Sapienza once more broached the subject of her 'amiche-nemiche [femministe]', provocatively claiming: 'il mio lato maschile ha una paura tale [di loro] da farmi nel sonno portare le mani a proteggere i miei genitali mentali' (1979, Sapienza-Pellegrino Archive, unpublished). Sapienza is here, not without a certain irony, taking a stance against the pretence of her hatred 'phallic' women to usurp distinctive aspects of men's traditional masculinity. Her stand against women's imitation of virility notwithstanding, the philosophy Sapienza is promoting is neither a fixedness of gender positions nor a return to the essentialist nature/culture divide. In fact, her understanding of gender categories is far more nuanced than her ideological battle against 1970s feminism might at first suggest. Emblematic in this respect is the message contained in an untitled piece of poetry collected in *Ancestrale*:

Con la gioia / dell'occhio voglio / amarti straniero / nemico / uomo amante / nemico
 / Tu non sei padre / di donne come vuoi / sembrare / e se lo sguardo / addolcisci la /

bugia del tuo / sesso s'affila / in una lama / Io non temo il / coltello / contenere posso
/ il suo assalto senza/ sforzo e rubarti / lo sperma donna / e ladra la / natura m'ha /
fatta per godere / e rubare/ e sottrarti la / vita che tu temi / di dare uomo avaro / che
sperperi / nei dubbi dell'essere / o del non essere / il tuo pene. (2013b: 154-55)

Confronting herself with the other sex, the author demystifies the man/woman symbolic relation of power that is here emblematised by 'coltello', a signifier for the phallus, which is, in turn, a signifier itself—namely, for male sexuality and its privileged status within a binary sexual economy.²⁶ To this, the author counterposes women's *jouissance* ('la natura m'ha fatta per godere'), marking a point of resistance to the place of subordination and passivity women have traditionally been allotted within a male-centred system. Although the diacope 'nemico', used to refer to 'man', would seem to contradict, precisely, Sapienza's professed scorn towards a separatist stance that would see men as women's sworn enemies, and although the stanza's underlying motif of women's generative potential risks reiterating the man/woman dichotomy, I believe that, ultimately, these verses are less a reaffirmation of a phallic economy than a restoration of women's position *within* it—as will become clearer later on in Sapienza's work through the character of Modesta, the heroine of her masterpiece *L'arte della gioia*.

Elsewhere in her opus, Sapienza displays an acute awareness of the historical construction and societal imposition of specific gendered behaviours, particularly on women. This is made clear in the first draft of her debut autobiographical novel, *Lettera aperta* (1967), where she confronts a hypothetical 'lettrice' coming from a 'famiglia cattolica' to instruct her on the pressure to fulfil societal expectations:

Sei stanca anche tu di questo futuro destino-compito che a forza, mentre dormivi, ti hanno, di nascosto, infilato sotto il cuscino? Come si affannano proprio mentre tu correndo, giocando con la terra incominci ad imparare la vita, a prendere coscienza del segreto dei gesti, incominci a prendere gusto anche di questo segreto appunto perché lo intuisci aperto a tutto quello che può divenire: affascinante proprio perché cela in sé tutte le possibilità del divenire. [...] e avendo loro già deciso per non turbare questa parvenza d'ordine che si ostinano a ritenere sacra (per loro tranquillità e per tranquillità della società) (ordine costituito) ti inchiodano a pochi modelli inumani (sterilizzanti e sterilent) che soffocano le tue membra ed i tuoi pensieri [...]. (*Lettera aperta*, unpublished manuscript 78)

²⁶ For more on the Lacanian phallus, see Lacan 2006a (575-84).

The locution ‘destino-compito’, used here to signify a set of impositions/expectations among which is compulsory heterosexuality, can be linked, via Butler, to the performative quality of gender formation. There emerges a contrast, in this passage, between a ‘would-be’, that is, an open net of possibilities (‘le possibilità del divenire’) on the one hand and the intervention of society, with its imposition of models to which one must conform, on the other. This comes very close to the Butlerian critique of constructed identity categories as we find it in an early essay, ‘Performative Acts’, where the philosopher expounds her view that gender is a ‘sustained social performanc[e]’ that is ‘shaped and compelled by compulsory heterosexuality’ (1988: 528). Alongside similar lines, Sapienza sees the scripted behaviours learnt by individuals over time, among which are gendered behaviours, as ‘modelli inumani’, which debunks the belief that these are expressions of a core, pre-given essence and, in a queer light, presents them instead as cultural obligations.

My study on Sapienza focuses on the works she wrote between 1970s-1980s, thus: *L’arte della gioia* (1998, posthumous); *Io, Jean Gabin* (2010, posthumous); *L’Università di Rebibbia* (1983); *Le certezze del dubbio* (1987) and accounts for the way in which they all disturb normative gender conventions. I suggest the recourse to a spatial metaphor to read the ‘eccentricity’ of these texts with respect to the norm, that is, in de Lauretis’s words, the “‘space-off” (de Lauretis 1987: 26) staged therein, a metaphorical space that challenges institutionalised social arrangements while suggesting new forms of being and relating to others.

1.1.5 Elsa Morante. ‘Non amo molto le femministe’: Anti-Feminist or Misogynist?

Elsa Morante (1912-1985) is recognised internationally as one of the most original and influential authors of twenty-century Italian literature, one whose legacy still resonates with younger generations of writers (D’Angeli 2006: 189).²⁷ Refractory to the leftist slogans of her time and their call for politically *engagé* writers as she was to the feminist movement’s demands for the literary representation of women and their struggles, she was known for her anti-conformism.

²⁷ For an exploration of Morante’s literary legacy see Concetta D’Angeli’s ‘A Difficult Legacy: Morante’s Presence in Contemporary Italian Literature’ (2006: 188-220). D’Angeli identifies a small group of contemporary novelists and poets (Enrico Palandri, Patrizia Cavalli, Gianfranco Bettin, Mariateresa Di Lascia, Fabrizia Ramondino and Elena Ferrante) as exemplary case studies of the author’s literary heritage.

As Stefania Lucamante and Sharon Wood have acutely pointed out, Morante's works reveal a 'need to write outside of a specific ideology' (2006: 5). In fact, the author refused to adhere to any ideological movement, and manifested a marked aversion for all 'isms'—among which feminism—that dominated the Italian cultural scene in post-war Italy (Wood 1995: 153). A literary rebel, Morante was among the first few in Italian post-war tradition to tackle taboo topics of a sexual nature, and she did so whilst emphasising the condition of marginality suffered by the individual failing to abide by the logics of normative sexuality, a theme that is emblematically encapsulated by her male protagonist in *Aracoeli* (1982), as I shall explore.²⁸ Through her husband Moravia, Morante met writer, poet, and director Pier Paolo Pasolini. Significantly, while their friendship grew stronger, the latter was being subject to discrimination due to his open homosexuality—which cost him the expulsion from the Communist Party, the loss of his teaching position and a prison sentence (Rossi Barilli 1999: 23). In the light of the homophobic stance of the Italian society and establishment, the fact that Morante, well known for steering clear from the public eye, had developed strong links with such a controversial figure is, I believe, illustrative of her anti-conformism and openness in the matter of moral taboos.²⁹ On 2 November 1975, Pasolini was assassinated in Ostia. One year later, Morante began the writing of *Aracoeli*, with her male protagonist setting out on his journey-quest on All Souls' Day 1975—precisely, the very same date of Pasolini's shocking murder—on whose account the character has been read as a portrait of Morante's late friend, and his story as a way for the author to console herself for her loss. More than the mere biographical data that is said to have inspired the writing of *Aracoeli*, however, what interests us here is that Morante's last novel reflects Pasolini's fate of discrimination and with him, arguably, that of innumerable gay men and women in those years.

During her lifetime, and beyond, Morante was the object of criticism by feminist and non-feminist authors alike who reproached her for portraying mythologised female

²⁸ Another recurrent feature in Morante's novelistic production is the topic of the incestuous love between a mother and her son.

²⁹ Although their relationship is said to have deteriorated in the years prior to Pasolini's death due to ideological and personal disagreements, some critics do nevertheless read *Aracoeli* as Morante's homage to her late friend. Manuele's 'avventure a pagamento', reminiscent of Pasolini's *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) and the protagonist's untimely discovery of his love for his father would also further strengthen this alleged correspondence. For more on this, see Siti 2006 (286).

characters more identifiable with the natural world than with the combative ideals of womanhood promoted by the women's movement. The position of Anna Nozzoli is emblematic in this respect. In her *Tabù e coscienza* (1974), she accused Morante of being hostile to her own sex; an anti-feminist.³⁰ In the eyes of Nozzoli, and of other feminist critics with her, Morante was culpable of failing to produce politically *engagé* female characters (Lucamante and Wood 2006: 7-8). It is likely that this animosity was fostered by the author's refusal to refer to herself as a 'scrittrice', preferring instead the masculine 'scrittore', which, however, reflected less her unwillingness to be assimilated to her own sex than her attempt to combat sexist resistance towards literature produced by women (Bernabò 1991: 11). Moreover, Morante was accused of essentialism because of the representation of female characters that allegedly perpetuated the culture versus nature stereotype for being mostly lower class and subjugated to dominant husbands, or else destined to sexual repression and self-effacing motherhood (Jeuland-Meynaud 1989). Cesare Garboli took up such accusations when claiming that 'nessuno dei messaggi della Morante ha per destinatarie le donne, né può essere indiziato di solidarietà con la loro lotta, la loro ideologia, le loro battaglie in favore dell'emancipazione femminile' (1995: 223). Taking his allegations to greater length, he went as far as to assert the author's purported masculine (and masculinist) identification:

Se a una madre si chiede di fare da educatrice, da guida, da aiuto nella difesa dei diritti della donna, se a una madre si chiede un atteggiamento solidale nei confronti del maschio, la Morante può essere considerata sì e no una pessima matrigna. Esibire le viscere materne, abbandonarsi al proprio demonio non basta. Sono donne le streghe? Ma anche questa è una pista sbagliata. La Morante non s'identifica con le donne, s'identifica con i ragazzi. [...] La Morante non ama le donne. Le disprezza; e le disprezza quanto più esse vantino civiltà, educazione, cultura. (1995: 223-24)

Lucamante and Wood rightly detected in Garboli's words the misogynist assumption that a female author should necessarily have other women as addressees and, besides, her writings should invariably be informed by a feminist message (2006: 9). Whether it is undeniably true that Garboli's allegations can be read as misogynist, it is also true that they seem to find roots in some controversial statements advanced by Morante herself.

³⁰ Nozzoli is particularly drastic with regard to Morante's *La Storia*, concluding that the novel's ideology can be classified 'sotto il segno di un visibile e accertato antifemminismo' (1978: 146).

The fact that the author was recalcitrant towards the positions of feminism is well known. Feminists, on the other hand, did not forgive Morante her refusal to contribute to *Donne in poesia*, a literary anthology edited by feminist poet Bianca Maria Frabotta and exclusively devoted to poetry written by female authors (Bernabò 1991: 11). Morante's position towards the feminist movement is reflected in her writings. In the midst of the campaigns for the legalisation of abortion, she responded with the character of Ida, the female protagonist of her colossal *La Storia* (1974), who not only accepts a son born out of sexual assault, but will also make it her only purpose in life. What is more, Morante openly admitted her preference for 'le vere madri'; in her own words: 'Ho un grande amore per la donna semplice. Non amo molto le femministe perché ritengo che la donna sia una creatura necessaria all'umanità, agli uomini. Amo molto le donne come Nunziatella dell'*Isola di Arturo*, come Aracoeli. Mica tanto le signore borghesi o le intellettuali' (Schifano 1984: 125). This assertion could seem disturbingly conservative, other than anachronistic, since it conflates the idea of motherhood and womanhood at a time when women were channelling their struggles against a discrimination based on their biological difference from men, in a bid to free themselves from the patriarchal model of femininity as the dual ideal of 'donna madre'. However, I would contend, with Laura Lazzari, that Morante's alleged anti-feminism was less an indictment against feminist ideology *per se* than it was against certain feminist tendencies of the day—namely, the devaluation of maternity on the part of those who saw it as the culprit of women's subjugation to the domestic fate and, as such, as an obstacle to their auspicated self-sufficiency.³¹

Scholars have sometimes come to diametrically opposed stances when dealing with Morante's treatment of womanhood in general, and of motherhood in particular. Whereas Jeuland-Meynaud (1989) accused the author of upholding an essentialist view of women, reducing them to biological instincts and needs of procreation, in the same year—and, incidentally, in the same publication—Robin Pickering-Iazzi (1989) argued that the

³¹ Lazzari maintains that Morante's treatment of motherhood is intended to 'valorizzare l'importanza della maternità, spesso svalutata sia dalla società patriarcale che dalle femministe' (2006: 257-58). With regard to the feminists' rejection of motherhood in the 1970s, it should be noted that the initial resistance will eventually give way, some decades later, to a recuperation of the maternal through a symbolic form of motherhood transcending biological ties (Muraro 1991). For more on the re-elaboration of the maternal within the feminist movement in Italy, see Scattigno 1997.

depiction of self-effacing motherhood as we find it in Morante would be the product of social conditioning on women, rather than the depiction of some sort of feminine essence.³² The polarisation of critics on the subject of Morante's (anti)feminism notwithstanding, the fact remains that, although Morante had no qualms in denying her sympathy to the feminist movement or in professing her preference for peasant women, she was far from embracing a conservative idea of gender roles. Even in the case of self-effacing maternal figures such as Nunziatella in *L'Isola di Arturo* or the first characterisation of Aracoeli in the eponymous novel, to approach them with clear-cut definitions is an impossible task. Despite being the embodiment of the virginal mother who has ended up sacrificing herself to an unloving marriage out of filial obedience and economic necessity, Nunziatella is also depicted as a site of sexual ambiguity for her step-son Arturo, object of worship and source of forbidden desires at once (Della Coletta 2006: 141)—a theme, that of the quasi-incestuous love between the boy and his step-mother, that will be widely explored as the narration develops. As for the peasant figure of the Andalusian Aracoeli, her initial simplicity, closeness to nature, and complete dedication to her marital and maternal roles would make her the seemingly perfect incarnation of Morante's ideal of womanhood. Yet, and as we shall see when coming to discuss the novel, despite the apparent conservatism implicit in her initial characterisation, the virginal mother is also the one who, during the course of the narration, will metamorphose into the most transgressive figure of the Morantean female repertoire.

All of Morante's novels are infused with controversial taboo topics and borderline behaviours oftentimes verging on pathologies, including unresolved Oedipal dramas and sexual obsessions, which can be linked to queerness because of their defiance of normative gender assumptions: 'from *Menzogna e Sortilegio* to *Aracoeli*, Morante explores the deepest recesses of eroticism, sexuality, identity and trauma' (Lucamante and Wood 2006: 3). Never before, however, had she tackled so explicitly all of these issues at once as she did in *Aracoeli*, thereby stretching the boundaries of representability of gender and sexuality to an unprecedented level. Focussing on the author's last novel, my study seeks to establish Morante's status as a groundbreaking thinker and, reading her non-involvement with the feminist movement against itself, positing her as deeply engaged with the theoretical debates

³² The volume in question is the special number of *Annali d'Italianistica* titled *Women's Voices in Italian Literature* (West and Cervigni 1989).

of her day over issues of identity and corporeality. Begun in 1976 and published in 1982, *Aracoeli* reflects the awareness of the need for a new sexual consciousness at the time it was written and, as such, it can be read as defeating the accusations of anachronism made against its author. Staging queer characters that transcend, rather than emphasising, a straightforward man/woman dichotomy whilst addressing the violence of a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, in the context of 1970s Italy *Aracoeli* is remarkable for the themes it tackles, both ideologically and historically.

1.2 Why Queer Theory? A Theoretical Overview

Before moving on to analyse what is at stake in queer theory, its debt to feminist theory needs to be pointed out, and a dialogue between the two should be attempted, with all the due care so as not to oversimplify an intersection that ‘is not as straightforward as many academics and bookstores might think’ (Schor and Weed 1997: viii). Generally speaking, queer theorists find fault with what they see as the heterosexist presumption sustaining the binary paradigm that feminism, for stressing the intrinsic difference (i.e., *sexual* difference) between man and woman, would be complicit in perpetuating (Butler 1997b: 2). Feminists, on the other hand, are sceptical about the dissolution of women into “‘post-something’” undifferentiated sexual categories (Butler and Braidotti 1997: 55). To complicate things even further, both feminist and queer approaches escape easy and unifying interpretations and refer to a plurality of formulations that are not void of internal contradictions.

Restricting for the purposes of this study the field of enquiry to difference feminism, it comes to the fore how, their different objectives notwithstanding, the latter shares with queer a similar deconstructive strategy. Embracing a Foucauldian approach that looks at the socio-cultural construction of sexuality, and integrating it with an analysis of gender, pioneers of queer theory such as Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis amongst others, consider the categories of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as products of normative apparatuses. Similarly, feminist theories from the 1970s onwards also appear in line with an approach of this kind as for the contestation and denunciation of the social mechanisms for which women appear as ‘naturally’ subordinate to men. This was already clear as early as 1949 with Simone de Beauvoir’s famous claim that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’, which is intended to dismantle the prejudice that ‘woman’ is naturally programmed to be subordinate to ‘man’, proving instead that she becomes such as the consequence of the societal

limitations that are imposed on her within a patriarchal culture because of her biological sex. The intersection between queer and feminist theory is pointed out in the introduction to the first queer anthology published in Italy, with the authors recognising the debt of queer towards feminism:

La teoria queer è quindi debitrice nei confronti del femminismo di tutte quelle riflessioni che, a partire da prospettive diverse, puntano a una denaturalizzazione dell'identità di genere, ovvero a una concezione di genere in cui la differenza tra uomini e donne è il risultato storico e culturale di un sistema di oppressione sociale, e non espressione di un'innata e immutabile differenza/disuguaglianza. (Arfini and Lo Iacono 2012: 16-17)³³

Once the similarities have been pointed out, the constituent differences between the two currents of thought should also be investigated. At the heart of the ontological project of the *pensiero della differenza sessuale* is 'il dato biologico, il corpo sessuato della donna, come determinazione del soggetto umano che non è, secondo la visione (filosofica) classica, *uno e neutro* [...] ma *due* e bisessuato, uomo e donna (Dominijanni 1989: 123). Sexual difference, then, is instituted through a process of recognition of the constitutional fact of being woman, '[il] passaggio dalla fattualità biologica alla dimensione simbolica' (Dominijanni 1989: 123) that disenfranchises the feminine subject from assimilation to the neutral, masculine one. Being a project of self-determination and self-definition, it is also, necessarily, a deconstructive one (Dominijanni 1989: 121) that seeks to dismantle existing beliefs on female nature. Although also deconstructive in nature, Butler's queer approach moves along different lines. As aptly put by Adriana Cavarero in the preface to the Italian translation of *Bodies that Matter* (*Corpi che contano*, 1996):

Rispetto alla tradizionale denuncia femminista del patriarcato fallogocentrico, il quadro teorico è dunque più complesso. Per gran parte del femminismo vale infatti la critica basilare all'indebita egemonia del sesso maschile su quello femminile, nelle sue varie forme e nei suoi diversi contesti. Ciò che Judith Butler contesta a questa critica è appunto il suo agire all'interno di un'economia eterosessuale

³³ It should be specified here that Arfini and Lo Iacono are referring to certain sectors of feminism which they identify with 'culture politiche delle donne lesbiche e nere', denying instead the link between queer and the 'pensiero della differenza sessuale di stampo italofrancese' (2010:16). However, in the light of a shared interest in dismantling patriarchal categories, as I have pointed out above, I believe it is safe to assume that the two have more at stake than what is normally acknowledged.

dominante, la quale rimane sostanzialmente ignorata come causa prima degli effetti criticati. Detto in breve, l'egemonia maschilista non è che la conseguenza di un'egemonia eterosessuale che dispone e rende stabili le posizioni sessuate, ossia definisce il maschile e il femminile rispetto a una norma. (Cavarero 1996: ix)

As noted by Cavarero, what is at stake in Butler's work is no longer the fundamental difference between man and woman, but rather the way in which this has been interpreted and reappropriated by the patriarchal norm and used to justify the institution of 'compulsory heterosexuality'—that is, the belief of heterosexuality as a default sexual orientation. In Butler's performative theory of gender, the body is subjected to normalising practices that require the incorporation of femininity and masculinity as a style—a process whereby, almost paradoxically, the nexus between biological sex, gendered identification and heterosexuality comes to *appear* as natural. Queer is precisely what allows for the disruption of this alleged correlation between anatomy and gender, a process whereby culturally accepted gender binaries are undermined and undone.

The problematic intrinsic to the term 'queer', a term that is pluralistic in nature, demands some clarification with regard to the way in which it is employed in my analysis of Maraini's, Sapienza's and Morante's texts. I thus wish to expand on the theoretical underpinnings of my use of the word by turning to its genesis and to the most significant critical contributions that have been advanced in academic-related contexts, focussing in particular on those that have influenced my study. In what follows, I will explore foundational propositions by queer precursors and contemporary thinkers alike, such as Michel Foucault (1926-1984); Judith Butler (1956—); Teresa de Lauretis (1938—); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950-2009); Judith Halberstam (1961—); Lee Edelman (1953—) and Sara Ahmed (1969—). Finally, through their formulations, I will establish my own understanding of 'queer' as a methodological paradigm for investigating how gender(ed) and sexual identities are culturally produced and then re-enacted by individuals.³⁴

As Michael Warner reminds us, the tendency today is to forget that queer originated from grassroots practices before it became theoretically formalised as an academic discipline (2012). Warner is referring to the positive resignification undergone by the term, formerly a

³⁴ I use the expression 'gender(ed)' with the suffix '-ed' contained parenthetically to highlight the process of construction of identity, in line with the queer belief that individuals are not gendered from the start, but become so as the effect of the imposition of predetermined socio-cultural norms.

sexual slur of homophobic use—meaning ‘odd’, ‘deviant’, or ‘transgressive’—within the context of radical activism surrounding the AIDS epidemic in the United States, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Around the same years, ‘queer’ and ‘theory’ merged together to designate a specific field of study within the American academia’s approach, springing from the re-elaboration of deconstructionist theories born in France from feminist, post-Lacanian philosophers and practitioners which were soon exported to the other side of the Atlantic (Berger 2014: 20). The coinage of the phrase ‘queer theory’ and its advance to a discipline of its own right is attributed to Professor Teresa de Lauretis, one of the organisers of the eponymous conference at the UC-Santa Cruz University in 1990, an event premised upon the necessity to differentiate the emergence of this new discipline from traditional ‘Gay’ and ‘Lesbian’ Studies.³⁵ De Lauretis, and other queer theorists with her, have since attempted to tear apart what they see as the mutual implications existing between gender, sex and desire—a position that resonates with Michel Foucault’s work on sex, but which also elaborates it and integrates it with an analysis of gender.

Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (originally published in French in 1976 and translated into English in 1978), suggests that the body is to be interpreted as the locus of a series of discursive power relations. Because of its assumption that, for being historically contingent, sexual identities are fictions rather than biological essences, Foucault’s work is considered instrumental to the queer critique of clear-cut identity labels. For Foucault, sex is the effect of regimes of power: ‘We must not make the mistake of thinking that sex is an autonomous agency [...]. On the contrary, sex is the most speculative, most ideal and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures’ (Foucault 1990: 155). In a radical constructivist turn, this means that the body of the individual acquires social signification only after it has been invested with socio-political norms dictating what makes for a socially acceptable subject. This concept has been taken up and re-elaborated through the lens of gender by American philosopher Judith Butler.

³⁵ ‘Queer’ as opposed to ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ was then used to connote *any* expression of non-normative sexuality. It should also be noted that, in recent times, and due to the terminological overuse (and abuse) of ‘queer’, de Lauretis, albeit being its creator, has distanced herself from it.

Butler is Maxine Elliott Professor in Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and she is unanimously considered one of the founders of queer theory, as well as one of the most influential queer theorists to date. The hybridity of her thought is well encapsulated in the words of Sara Salih, arguably one of the most convincing interpreters of her work: ‘Butler is neither a Freudian nor a Foucauldian, nor is she a Marxist, a feminist or a post-structuralist; instead we might say that she shares affinities with these theories and their political projects, identifying with none of them in a singular sense’ (2002: 6). It is to Butler, and to the originality of her thought, that the theoretical framework of my study is largely indebted. Although her theories, with specific attention to those focussing on gender formation, will be given the attention they deserve in the following section, let it suffice to say here that one of her most significant contributions to the field of queer is the formulation of *gender performativity*. With Butler gender becomes *performative*, that is, produced by our continuous enactment of the conventions that regulate the social world we inhabit, conventions whose repetition makes them appear as natural. Taking the Foucauldian paradigm to the extreme, Butler applies it to the materiality of the body, maintaining that this, too, is not a biological given; the body is not ‘natural’ but only ‘naturalised’ over time, in the sense of being rooted in—hence, the effect of—cultural assumptions, ideologies and codes of behaviour. In other words, bodies, sexualities, and genders alike are for Butler ‘sedimented acts’ (1993: v) that one recites according to the socially available possibilities. The creation of our sense of identity (male or female), which for Butler is but a mere social and cultural artefact, thus comes into being.

Often mentioned in association with Butler as far as the social creation of gender is concerned is Teresa de Lauretis. In her influential essay ‘Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation’ (1988), the philosopher turns to the concept of ‘sexual indifference’ to indicate that the credo of difference feminism—namely, the irreducible sexual difference between man and woman—translates into *indifference* towards the peculiarity of women’s experiences. By arguing that feminists’ definitions of sexual difference are subjected to the same despotism of male-defined categories, for de Lauretis woman’s difference becomes reducible to a mere difference *to* man, thus making man himself the referential criteria against which woman is to be defined: ‘the turn of so-called sexual difference into sexual indifference’ (1988: 156). Always moving along constructivist lines, in *Technologies of*

Gender (1987), De Lauretis starts from the Foucauldian theorisation of sexuality as ‘a “technology of sex” [...] to propose that gender, too, both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies [...] and critical practices, as well as practices of daily lives’ (1987: 2). Identifying such apparatuses (‘technologies’) in the institutions that, in a pervasive yet unnoticed way, regulate our existence, such as the family, the school, or the medical discourse, de Lauretis claims that, in dictating how gender should be—that is, by giving it a ‘social meaning’—they *create* gender itself, so that, in the end, ‘the representation of gender is its construction’ (1987: 5). Thus, the task of queer as de Lauretis envisages it is to go against the norms that regulate gender dictating what is acceptable and what is not, and to broaden the field of representation, which is, also, by extension, the field of the normative.

The terminological uncertainty surrounding the term ‘queer’, as well as the difficulty in giving it a straightforward signifier, is further problematised by those who are generally identified as queer theorists themselves. Among them, David Halperin, in his *Saint Foucault* (1995), seems less preoccupied with providing answers than he is with stirring up doubt over the meaning of an already ambivalent term. Significant in this respect is his claim that:

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative [...]. [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. (1995: 62)

Unaligned as it is with any specific identity category, queer contests and problematises the very same notion of a unified, stable subject—a notion which claims heterosexuality as its origin—instead centring on the breaches occurring between the socially accepted possibilities open to gender, sex and desire. Acknowledging the multiple referents implicit to the term and its applicability in fields other than gender and sexuality, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines queer in such terms: ‘That’s one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities [...] when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically’ (1993: 8; Sedgwick’s emphasis). As Sedgwick points out, queer does not strictly refer to the sexual—

despite, however, being always, somehow, implicated in it—but could also refer to other fields. Judith Halberstam identifies two of such realms in the notions of ‘time’ and ‘space’:

“Queer time” is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and the family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. “Queer space” refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understanding of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics. (2005: 1)

To be advanced here is the queering of the beliefs that ground our everyday existence, thus opening up some scope for the analysis of the heterosexual implications embedded within seemingly harmless taken-for-granted categories—an analysis that informs Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) from which the quote above is taken.

Also relying on temporal and spatial metaphors is the understanding of queer by, respectively, Lee Edelman (2004) and Sarah Ahmed (2006). In his provocative *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman postulates the social rebelliousness of queer as a challenge to the ‘reproductive futurism’ of heterosexual society, with ‘reproductive’ here understood literally as the biological capacity to produce progeny (2004: 30). The scholar grounds a queer ethics that stands at odds with the capitalist logic of heteronormativity and its procreative ideal, superimposing to the latter queer’s ‘capacity to figure the undoing of the Symbolic’ through its non-reproductive sexuality (2004: 27). Focussing on ‘space’ and its metaphorical meanings, Ahmed’s study, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, resorts to spatial symbology to look at ‘the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds’ (2006: 2). In Ahmed’s formulation, ‘space’ becomes a conceptual category that encompasses the turns and ‘directions taken’ and their dis/orientation with respect to the straight, in the sense of normative, path.

Because of its broad application, one should be cautious of treating queer as an all-encompassing label that leaves open-ended the questions it raises, and try instead to seek points of connection among its various formulations. Despite their difference in focus, the theorisations of queer presented above all engage with the disruption of established conventions and (hetero)normative patterns of behaviour that regulate different aspects of everyday life (be them the organisation of gender roles, the regulation of one’s sexual

preference or even the categories of time and space); conventions that, because of their pervasiveness, go unnoticed until they become interiorised by the individual and naturalised, so to speak, over time. This is, fundamentally, the basis of the Butlerian performative: the consolidated repetition, over time, of certain acts that, because of their automatic repetition, come to be taken as the norm (Butler 1999), that is, they seem natural to us, although their naturalness is a mere illusion; an effect of their repetition.

Because of its relevance to the understanding of queer, in what follows I will turn to Butler's work on the performativity of gender and, specifically, to the insights that her pioneering *Gender Trouble* provides towards a formulation of queer, before advancing my own understanding of the term and its use for the purposes of the present study. In particular, I will expand on Butler's notion of *performativity*, focussing on its connections with, and differences from, *performance* understood in a theatrical sense—theatricality being a suggestive and productive metaphor among queer studies. Although related and despite sharing a certain degree of theatricality, the concepts of performativity and performance require to be understood as distinct from one another, not least because each implies a different degree of subjective agency. The interrelated notions of performance and performativity, as well as the difference between the two, are crucial to understanding Butler and an approach such as my own that deploys them as theoretical tools for close textual reading. In the section that follows I will thus untangle the terminological knots surrounding the two Butlerian concepts and attempt to solve their complexity for the purposes of this study.

1.2.1 Do Clothes Make Us? Unpicking the Butlerian Performative

Firstly published in 1990, at a time when the 'q' term had not yet caught on, *Gender Trouble* has become a point of reference for queer theorists after Butler. Exposing gender dynamics as performative, that is to say, as a repetition of 'stylized acts' whereby individuals seek to conform to a heterosexual ideal and that, precisely by virtue of this reiteration, give the illusion of a pre-existing, natural essence, allows Butler to posit traditional femininity and masculinity as the expression of, respectively, male and female sexuality: 'Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and

denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself' (1999: 186; Butler's emphasis).³⁶ In a Foucauldian fashion, the philosopher then goes on to posit that there is also no 'natural' sex, because this is no less socially and discursively constructed than gender is. Rather than accepting the body as a mere biological given, yet without ever denying its materiality, Butler sees it as a product of the net of powers exercised upon it. As she sums up: 'the regime of heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the "materiality" of sex, and that "materiality" is formed and sustained through and as a materialization of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony' (1993: 15). Commenting on the importance of her thought, Biddy Martin maintains that 'Judith Butler's performative theory of gender is by now, perhaps, the most well-known example of the use of queer theory to challenge feminists' investment in gender binaries' (1994:110), by which he means the reduction of 'the possibilities of gender to just two, that is, men and women' (1994:104).

Butler draws on linguistics and, particularly, on J.L. Austin's speech act theory, to formulate her theory of the performativity of gender. In his series of lectures *How to do things with words* (1962), Austin identifies three categories of speech acts: 'locutionary' (i.e. the mere act of saying something, in the sense of 'uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference', 109), 'illocutionary' (i.e. utterances that accomplish something in the act of naming it, such as 'informing, ordering, warning, undertaking &c.', 109) and 'perlocutionary' (i.e. utterances that intentionally produce certain effects on other people such as 'convincing, persuading, deterring, and even say, surprising or misleading', 109). He then distinguishes between two types of illocutionary acts, calling 'constative' those that have merely descriptive intents and 'performative' those that perform an action, in the sense that they modify reality by bringing into existence what is being said—as in the classic example of the formula "I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)"—as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony' (Austin 1962: 5). Borrowing from the Austinian performative as for the strength of certain utterances to bring into existence that

³⁶ Halberstam recognises Butler's contestation of the existence of an original behind the performance of heterosexuality as laid out in *Gender Trouble* to be 'one of the most important critical gestures of the 1990s' (2011: 334). Hereafter, all of my references to *Gender Trouble* will refer to the book's second edition (1999), featuring an added Preface that further highlights and expands the notion of the performative nature of identity.

which they name through the repetition of particular conventions, and accommodating it to her work on gender, Butler formulates her notion of the performativity of gender constitution as resting on the repetition of normative acts:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (1999: 173; Butler's emphasis)

Gender identity is thus seen as performative to the extent that it results from certain social rituals that, through their repetition, create the illusion of a pregiven, natural essence—thus, identity itself is brought into existence, or *performed*, ‘through corporeal signs and other discursive means’.

Butler has acknowledged that an even more prominent influence than the Austinian speech act theory on her formulation of performativity is the re-reading of the same by French philosopher Jacques Derrida: ‘I take a further step, through the Derridean rewriting of Austin, and suggest that this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation’ (Butler 1994: 33). In his 1972 essay ‘Signature Event Context’, Derrida takes up Austin’s claim that, in order for illocutionary acts to be successful and enact what they name (hence, for them to have a performative strength), they ought to be uttered in an appropriate context and follow certain conventions (1988). What Austin sees as the prerequisite of performative acts, namely, their alleged reliance on a number of given circumstances, for Derrida would rather be their actual strength. Derrida claims that *any* sign, far from being restricted by the conventions that regulate it, can be transplanted into new contexts and re-appropriated in unforeseen ways. Taking up those acts that Austin calls ‘conventional’—that is, those ‘that have the general character of ritual or ceremonial’ (Derrida 1988: 15)—Derrida shows that their performative force resides in their repetition, or ‘citationality’ (Derrida 1988: 17). Following this logic, a ‘conventional’ act would thus perform what it says precisely by virtue of the conventions sustaining and legitimising its ‘citation’ (i.e., the repetition of the formula which constitutes the act itself), ‘without which there would not even be a “successful” performative’ (Derrida 1988: 17). Butler reappropriates and reinterprets the Derridean ‘citationality’ for the purposes of her work on gender in order to explain how normative gender behaviours become naturalised over time:

Performativity is thus not a singular “act”, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like-status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated and, conversely its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity. (Butler 1993: 12)

Applying the linguistic formulation for which certain speech acts bring into existence what they name in the act of naming it to the context of gender constitution, allows Butler to theorise performativity as ‘the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed’ (Butler 1994: 33). The ‘ontological effects’ in question refer to the *creation* of the categories of masculinity and femininity, understood as ‘a process of *re*-signification and not signification *ab initio*’ (Lloyd qtd. in Sullivan 2003: 90; Lloyd’s emphasis). Gender, then, appears as a linguistically performative act, since ‘identity’ itself is said to be created in and through discursive practices that establish what sets of attributes make for a ‘masculine’ man or a ‘feminine’ woman (Butler 1993).

Gender identities are for Butler products of sustained cultural acts enforced by a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, whose ritualisation, through repetition, makes them appear as natural properties of individuals—that is, seemingly inborn attributes that emanate from a sexed body. Butler’s formulation rests on the assumption that gender (as well as sex) is socially and discursively constructed.³⁷ Hence:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. (Butler 1999: 11; Butler’s emphasis)

³⁷ Butler’s constructionism is influenced by, among others: Michel Foucault (as for ideas on subjectivity and sexuality); Simone de Beauvoir (as for the cultural production of gender roles); Jacques Lacan (as for the imitative nature of gender acquisition and the idea of the ‘comedy’ between the sexes); Esther Newton (as for the self-fashioning of ‘drag’); Erving Goffman (as for the idea of gender as the enactment of social scripts).

Here Butler wants to show that gender categories are illusory insofar as they do not exist outside of culture, relying as they do upon the reiteration of those conventions that regulate them. To better explain the illusion of a pre-given identity produced by what she sees as the culturally enforced performance of heterosexuality, throughout her work Butler often draws on theatrical discourses. Inspired by anthropological accounts of social performance and applying it to gender, in an early essay, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' (1988), she brings a theatrical notion to the social 'rituals' that dominate everyday relations and applies it to the performance of gender:

In what sense, then, is gender an act? As [...] suggest[ed] in studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. (Butler 1988: 526; Butler's emphasis)

By defining gender as an 'act' or a 'social performance' that 'wear[s] certain cultural significations' (1988: 525), Butler establishes an explicit connection between theatrical performance and gender, which she further elaborates in her subsequent work on 'drag', indebted to the ethnographic study of anthropologist Esther Newton on gay subculture in the United States.³⁸ However, it is worth noting—as Butler does—that unlike theatrical performance *per se*, whereby an act can be exposed because of the acknowledged boundary between fiction and reality, when acting out gender roles 'there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality' (Butler 1988: 527) precisely because the act itself is constitutive of—hence, inseparable from—reality itself (in this sense, as we have seen, the act is said to be performative).

In her contribution to the inaugural *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, originally published in 1989 with the title 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' and then reprinted in 1991 in a volume by Diana Fuss, Butler again resorts to theatrical discourses in order to describe gender as inherently 'drag':

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized,

³⁸ For an anthropological study on 'drag', see Newton (1972; 1993). Butler's debt to Newton is explicitly acknowledged by Butler herself in *Bodies that Matter* (1993: 21).

worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If it is true that, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. (1991: 21)

Following on in Newton's footsteps, Butler sees the imitation of gender as performed by drag queens—men dressing up as women—as the paradigm for the imitative nature of gender itself. The theatrical terminology has here specific consequences. To say that gender can be 'worn, and done' comes very close to implying that putting on one's gender equates with choosing one's metaphorical costumes at will, so that gender would be but a theatrical performance on which the individual-actor exercises a certain degree of control. This is an interpretation that Butler has explicitly refuted. As she clarified during an interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal in 1993, published the following year with the title 'Gender as Performance', when asked 'what [do] you mean by 'performativity'', by describing gender as a performance [?]' she answered: 'it is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject' (Butler 1994: 33).³⁹ Whereas a performance, understood in a strictly theatrical sense, does, by definition, require an actor that pre-exists it, performativity is the constitutive effect of the very performance (repetition) of one's social script (gender): although here there also exists and individual in flesh and blood that repeats the normative gender ideal that is assigned to their sex, s/he comes into being socially, i.e., s/he acquire social signification, *through* the performance itself (and in this respect does Butler claim that the subject does not exist prior to, but is rather created through it). To clear up the doubts on the reception of *Gender Trouble*, and explicitly refuting to assimilate her theory of gender to a clothing analogy, Butler argues: 'The publication of *Gender Trouble* coincided with a number of publications that did assert that 'clothes make the woman', but I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman' (1993: 231).

Another key influence in Butler's elaboration of gender performance, and an overlooked interpretative key to understanding it, is Erving Goffman, an American

³⁹ It is also true, however, that, at times, 'performance' and 'performativity' in Butler's work seem to slide into one another, as she herself concurs: 'my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so' (1999: xxv).

sociologist and sociolinguist who, in the 1950s and 1960s, was working in social rituals and the way individuals enact specific scripts when performing certain social roles.⁴⁰ What interests me about Goffman's theory and its links with Butler's is its recourse to dramaturgical terms to underline people's everyday social life, drawing attention to the artificial, in the sense of socially constructed, nature of gender formation. As noted by Chris Brickell (2005) a retrospective rereading of Goffman can prove useful to better understand the performing subject of Butler's work. In his most widely known book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman advanced the idea that individuals are not in a position to choose their social images freely. Building up on the distinction between the 'self-as-performer' and the 'self-as-character' (Goffman 1959: 244), whereby the former is the thinking individual behind the performance and the latter is understood in theatrical terms as one's social role, Goffman maintains that it is the latter, rather than the former, to be likened to the self by society. For being modelled against others' validation, the self is thus seen as a social product whose existence is premised upon conformance to pre-established norms, behaviours and statuses. It follows, then, that the function of the individual-as-performer is reduced to attending the social scene, whereby s/he becomes a social construct—that is, s/he is imputed a self—an idea that Butler has made her own. What this means in terms of agency is that, far from being fabricated *ex novo* by the performers, such performances are 'chosen' by individuals, but only inasmuch as they meet the expectations and demands of society, so that choice turns out not to be a free choice at all.

What is, then, the relationship between performance and performativity? As early as 1988, in 'Performative Acts' Butler had already made a distinction between theatrical and gender acts, the fundamental difference between the two being that, whereas a theatrical performance presupposes a script taken up by the actor and recited at will, in the performance of gender actors 'are always already on the stage' (1988: 526). In other words, gender 'is what is put on' (Butler 1988: 531), but the choice of one's role already pre-exists the subjects. 'The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has

⁴⁰Goffman is mostly known for his study of social interaction, particularly for his analysis of how social roles, or 'frames', are dependent upon specific contexts; see Goffman 1974. In more recent times, his work has been reappropriated by gender theorists, especially with reference to the connections he has established between social identity and gender identity, an operation that is said to be 'crucial [...] in the shaping of American "gender theory"' (Berger 2014: 96).

been going on before one arrived on the scene' (Butler 1988: 526), whereby one's script has been awaiting on the stage since the beginning of one's social existence. Therefore, the act of 'putting on' a gender is restricted *a priori* by social expectations, 'a set of meanings already socially established' (Butler 1988: 526) and recognised as acceptable, which translates into the assumption that femininity should be the expression of a female (in the sense of biological) body in the same way as masculinity should be of a male body. Sara Salih addresses the distinction between performance and performativity in such terms:

Crucially, Butler is *not* suggesting that gender identity is a performance, since that would presuppose the existence of a subject or an actor who is *doing* that performance. Butler refuses this notion by claiming that the performance pre-exists the performer, and this counter-intuitive apparently impossible argument has led many readers to confuse performativity with performance. (Salih 2002: 11; Salih's emphasis)

Despite being accentuated in theatrical ways, the social nature of gender formation in Butler ought to be distinguished from stage performance *per se*, insofar as, in the performance of gender, the actors cannot exist outside their performance—which marks a significant departure from a strictly theatrical model.

Having acknowledged the problematic nature of the Butlerian notions of performance and performativity, two concepts that, by Butler's own admission, at times seem to be sliding into one another in her work, I shall resolve such terminological complexity for the purposes of this study. My reading of Maraini's, Sapienza's and Morante's works is premised upon a framework of analysis that focuses on the characters' gender *performances* (that is, the enactment of their femininity or masculinity); performances that, in compliance with the Butlerian theory of gender formation, are *performative* insofar as they reveal the facticity of the gender identities constituted in and through the performance itself ('gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be'; Butler 1999: 33). This process that I see, in a less or greater extent, in the texts herewith analysed, is Butler's *performativity* at work: 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1999: 43-44). Hence, drawing on the Butlerian formulations recalled above, in my close readings of Maraini's, Sapienza's and Morante's

texts, I will refer to the characters' performances of their genders to indicate the way in which they enact—or not—their femininity or masculinity, looking at what happens when they fail in their performances, that is, when they are not (performatively) constituted as normative subjects.

Of course a prolific and provocative thinker such as Butler cannot possibly be immune from criticism. Her notions of performativity and the socially constructed nature of sex are arguably amongst her most debated formulations. Barbara Epstein, for instance, rejects Butler's constructivism on account that 'the vast majority of humans are born male or female' (1995: 101), while Toril Moi accuses her of erasing 'the concrete, historical body that loves, suffers and dies' (1999: 51). In her defence, Sara Salih contends that 'it is not entirely accurate to claim that Butler rejects materiality or materialism, since in the preface to *Bodies* she goes out of her way to reassure the reader that she does accept the reality of 'primary and irrefutable experiences' such as eating and sleeping, pleasure and pain' (2002:144). Arguably one of the fiercest critiques of the Butlerian theories comes from philosopher Martha Nussbaum who, in her article 'The Professor of Parody' (1999), finds fault with Butler's concern with signification whilst also dismissing performativity as an undoable form of politics for 'oppressed women'. Along these lines, Lois McNay contends that a 'collective dimension is missing from Butler's account of performative resignification, whose underpinnings in a theory of psychic dislocation confine its explanatory force to the private realm of individual action' (McNay, 1999: 189). Again, Susan Bordo defines Butler's world as 'one in which language swallows everything up, voraciously, a theoretical pasta-machine' (1992: 170), thus taking fault with the Butlerian idea that we are discursively created, that is, created in and through language and any other signifying practice.

Whether we align ourselves with the criticism made against Butler or whether we decide to absolve the philosopher of the accusation of entrenched anti-biologism, the originality of her work goes unquestioned, and it is imperative to acknowledge, as even her opponents (such as Bordo and McNay) do, 'the importance of her theories that deconstruct and destabilize essentialist, normative and naturalistic assumptions about 'woman'' (Salih 2002: 141). In the present study specifically, Butler's interrelated notions of performativity and performance will prove useful theoretical tools that will help us think about the construction of gender in the texts herewith analysed, as well as its *deconstruction*. The

philosopher's ideas will thus assist in the reading of the treatment of gender, and of the interdependent notions of sexuality and identity, in the works of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante, tracing the process by which these authors place queer characters within given power structures; structures that they resist, thereby (de)constructing their identity against the normative grain.

1.2.2 Trans-National Approaches: A Queer Reading of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante

Butler was appropriated in the Italian context in the late 1990s and early-2000s. Interestingly, the translation of her works did not follow a chronological order and the first of her texts to appear in Italian was *Bodies That Matter* (*Corpi che contano*, 1996), the book with which she sought to address the criticism that sparked from the publication of *Gender Trouble*. The latter was translated only a decade later (*Scambi di genere*, 2004) before being re-translated (*Questione di genere*, 2013). This delay, and the circulation of a first translation later judged inadequate, has had specific consequences on the Italian reception of the Butlerian notions of performance and performativity as laid out for the first time in the first edition of *Gender Trouble* (1990). As confirmed by a roundtable organised by Marco Pustianaz and later published in *Italian Studies* with the title 'Qualche domanda (sul) queer in Italia' (2013), Italian academics and activists alike became acquainted with queer theory as autodidacts, reading directly the original versions of Butler's works.⁴¹ Due to the linguistic barrier, however, this also means that other sectors within the academia, as well as the general public, learnt about Butler and queer theory in general relatively late, which might partly explain the absence of curricula in Queer Studies in Italian universities, as well as a national widespread misconception as to what 'queer' really is. The implications of translating from one linguistic code into another should be taken into account. Francesco Ventrella has done so, appreciating, rather than problematising, the mediating role of a foreign language as an added value for queer:

La problematica della traduzione è parte costitutiva e distintiva delle teorie queer non anglofone, e quindi anche di quella italiana. Frintendimenti, traduzioni errate,

⁴¹ It should be noted that a distinctive trait of the Italian context is that 'gli studi queer non hanno [...] dignità istituzionale' (Pustianaz 2013: 263)—meaning that, in Italy, more often than not queer theorists are also activists.

slittamenti di significato, sono il prezioso materiale attraverso il quale, a fronte di un gergo accademico inglese altamente codificato, le teorie queer non anglofone, di fatto, sanno di più — perché la traduzione stessa è un raddoppiamento della scrittura che ne ispessisce il senso. Se si ragiona in questa prospettiva, trattare queer in maniera differente ci permetterebbe ogni volta di riteorizzare il termine e, dunque, farlo funzionare in maniera performativa. Il compito del traduttore e della traduttrice queer dovrebbe essere quello di riflettere sulla decolonizzazione tanto dalla norma eterosessuale quanto dall'amministrazione della sua critica. (Ventrella qtd. in Pustianaz 2013: 265-66)

Renato Busarello, on the other hand, identifies the roots of the Italian resistance to queer theory in its ideological difference with respect to the dominant feminist currents in the country:

il femminismo della differenza [...] ha fatto uno scudo da alzare contro chiunque mettesse in discussione la centralità del femminile materno e la naturalizzazione dei due sessi-generi. La sovrapposizione di questi ambiti culturali ha creato un cono d'ombra sulle teorie queer, spesso rappresentate come la riduzione del corpo a testo e del genere a parodia. (Busarello qtd. in Pustianaz 2013: 273)

Looking at the reception of queer among Italian difference feminists in the light of Busarello's remarks, we can note a certain endurance, even amid the most progressive sectors of the *pensiero della differenza*, to embrace the queer ideal advocated by Butler and by other queer theorists in her wake. Emblematic in this respect is the written exchange between Butler and feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, 'Feminism by Any Other Name. Interview' (1997). Here, Braidotti, despite embracing a theory of female subjectivity as ever-evolving ('nomadic') that would not be too dissimilar from the tenets of queer, also expresses her concerns towards what she sees as its perils, that is, the fragmentation of 'woman' into "'post-something" categories' (Butler and Braidotti 1997: 55), instead claiming the necessity of starting from 'the specificity of the lived, female bodily experience' (1997: 44).⁴² Despite not sharing many of the Butlerian assumptions, Adriana Cavarero is perhaps amongst the few Italian feminists to make an effort to engage in a dialogue with the exponents of queer theory. In a way, it could be said that it is Cavarero who has formally introduced Butler to the Italian public, which she did in the preface to the Italian translation

⁴² Butler has responded to Braidotti's remarks by expressing her concerns towards the possibility of a meeting between 'the bodily specificity of women' and the anti-essentialist sexual difference feminism advocated by Braidotti herself (Butler and Braidotti 1997:45). For more on 'nomadic' feminism, see Braidotti 1994.

of *Bodies that Matter* (*Corpi che contano*), praising the ‘onestà intellettuale dell’autrice’ (Cavarero 1996: xiv).⁴³ Less open to confrontation and more entrenched in the historical foundations of the *pensiero della differenza* is Luisa Muraro, one of the co-founders, alongside Cavarero, of the Verona-based philosophical community *Diotima* (established in 1983), who openly professed her disapproval of queer theory, publicly dismissing it as ‘an aberration’ (Bernini 2016).

At a more grassroots level, over the course of the past decade, queer has been adopted in Italy as a mobile identity category reconfiguring the vindications and practices of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) movement and marking a point of difference with respect to gay, lesbian and trans subjectivity. As a consequence, it is now possible to claim the existence of a LGBTQI movement in the country, with the letter ‘Q’ denoting, precisely, the inclusion of those who identify themselves with the more fluid signifier ‘Queer’.⁴⁴ This has occurred in concomitance with the translation of some of the founding texts of queer theory and with their reading in and outside of academia promoted by queer activists and scholars alike, which has created an original intersection between political activism and theoretical thinking. The most widely translated authors are Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Donna Haraway, but also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lee Edelman and Michael Warner.

Liana Borghi, Professor of Anglo-American Literature at the University of Florence and Marco Pustianaz, Professor of Literature and Theatre Studies at the University of Piedmont, are generally acknowledged as the importers of queer theory in Italy. Particularly, the scholars are credited for using the term ‘queer’ within the Italian context for the first time, which they did during the course of the first edition of the Gay and Lesbian Summer School (*Università Gay e Lesica d'Estate*), held in Livorno on 24-30 August 1997.⁴⁵ Worthy of notice are also the names of Federico Zappino, researcher in Political Philosophy at the University of Sassari and translator of Judith Butler (*La vita psichica del potere. Teorie del*

⁴³ Butler, in turn, welcomes Cavarero’s theory of selfhood and relationality as formulated by the Italian feminist philosopher in her *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), which she mentions and discusses in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler 2003).

⁴⁴ The inclusion of queer people within the movement has occurred alongside the incorporation of intersex people, to whom the last letter of the acronym (‘I’) refers.

⁴⁵ Both Borghi and Pustianaz, as the vast majority of Italian ‘queerists’, are active in and outside of academia. For more on the convention, see the conference proceedings (Malaroda and Piccione 2000).

soggetto, 2013; *Fare e disfare il genere*, 2014) and Lorenzo Bernini, researcher in Philosophy at the University of Verona and co-author of *Differenza e relazione. L'ontologia del soggetto nel pensiero di Judith Butler e Adriana Cavarero* (2009). A queer anthology, the first of its kind in Italy, has recently been published by Elisa A.G. Arfini and Cristian Lo Iacono (2012), with a comprehensive selection of the founding texts of queer theory that includes excerpts from the work of Butler, de Lauretis, Warner and Edelman amongst other thinkers, which the authors themselves have translated into Italian.

To somehow offset the welcoming, among academics and activists, of 'queer' understood as both a set of anti-identitarian theories and the adoption of the fluid subjective categories that stem from it, is a war against the so-called 'teoria del genere'—namely, a misappropriation and demonisation of 'gender theory' unduly conflated with 'queer theory'—that is currently taking place in Italy. This anti-gender crusade, waged by the defenders of traditional Catholic (heteronormative) values, includes thinkers, activists, politicians and Church leaders advocating a 'natural', heterosexual family.⁴⁶ Italian far-right, neo-fascist political parties *Forza Nuova* and *Lotta studentesca*, known for their radical positions, after professing their disapproval of same-sex marriages have now become the protagonists of a trenchant *campagna anti-gender* that, by means of public talks, mass mobilisations, pervasive posters and fliers spread across the main Italian cities, are opposing the teaching of Gender Studies in schools. Some have countered the campaign by trying to mediate between their religious faith and the rights of sexual minorities, as has done for instance philosopher and parliamentarian Michela Marzano in her *Papà, mamma e gender* (2015), where, without betraying her Catholic beliefs, she dismantles the misreading of gender theory advanced by representatives of the Church. Others, such as researchers and activists Lorenzo Bernini and Federico Zappino, have opted for a more militant counter-response to the Italian anti-gender crusade, assuming a critical stance even against Marzano herself, and her claim that 'gender theory does not exist', aligning themselves with national queer movements and promoting informational campaigns at universities in Italy and abroad

⁴⁶ The current Pope, Francesco Bergoglio, has also expressed his frustration towards gender theories on account of their alleged cancelling out of sexual difference. For more on the Pope's stance on queer theory, see 'Papa Francesco contro la teoria del gender: "Espressione di frustrazione"' published in the *Il fatto quotidiano* on 15th April 2015, available at: <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/04/15/papa-francesco-contro-teoria-gender-espressione-frustrazione-rassegnazione/1592287>.

(Bernini 2016). Among the philosophical community of *Diotima*, host to some of the leading feminist theoreticians in Italy, Luisa Muraro has taken a stance that is not too dissimilar to that of Church sympathisers, calling ‘*gender theory*, which preaches five genders [...] aberrant’ precisely because it denies, in her view, the unquestionable natural given that is sexual difference itself—a position that, in Muraro’s wake, has been taken up by other sectors of contemporary Italian feminism (Bernini 2016). What emerges then, is an obvious discrepancy, in Italy, between the adoption of queer as an ideological practice in and out of academia on the one hand and a persistent illiteracy among wide sectors of the population with respect to its actual meaning on the other. This is even more unsettling if we consider that national laws granting legal recognition to same-sex unions have only recently been approved in the country, which is hard not to impute to the weight of a pervasive Catholic morality and the undeniable fact that ‘religious life is central to the historical makeup of the Italian state and to ideologies about the family’ (Miguel Andrés Malagrecá 2007: 208).⁴⁷

Drawing on the formulations recalled in the previous sections, in what follows I argue for a notion of queer that stands for a non-normative and non-identitarian mode of enquiry that exposes the incoherencies of self-evident categories of identification—namely, those that take alleged relations between biological sex, gender and sexual desire as fixed patterns for identity formations. I will thus employ queer as a methodological paradigm that encompasses different manifestations, in the texts herewith analysed, ranging from the strategic subversion of pre-established gendered behaviours (in Maraini), to the experience of a mismatch between gender and biological sex and the creation of symbolic spaces that contest heteronormative social arrangements (in Sapienza), or to the deconstruction of the categories of femininity and masculinity, but also of their metonymic correlatives of maternity and paternity (in Morante). Their different nuances notwithstanding, what all these formulations have in common is a rebuttal of the culturally constructed idea of a monolithic identity whereby gender (masculine or feminine) would mirror one’s natural, in the sense of chromosomal, sex (male or female), instead turning to queerness as an alternative to institutionalised identity categories. An approach of this kind will allow me to investigate the ways in which, despite their differences, Maraini’s, Sapienza’s and Morante’s works can be

⁴⁷ In Italy same-sex marriage only became legal in May 2016.

said to celebrate '[the] instability at the very heart of sex and bodies, the fact that the body is what it is capable of doing, and what any body is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture' (Grosz 1995: 214).

Representations of queer identities in Maraini's novels have received scarce critical attention to date. Scholarly studies of her most explicit feminist texts included in this thesis have mostly focussed on their political quality (Pallotta 1984; Sumeli-Weinberg 1993; Tamburri 1990; Pickering-Iazzi 1989; Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 2000; Picchietti 2002) at the expenses of an equally pronounced gender fluidity imbued therein. The first queer study on Maraini, Tommasina Gabriele's article 'From Prostitution to Transsexuality: Gender Identity and Subversive Sexuality in Dacia Maraini' (2002), although groundbreaking in many respects, is limited to a (perhaps too) sketched analysis of a secondary, albeit important, character in *Donna in guerra* that does not take into account the gender identity of the protagonist and its evolution, around which the novel is built. Although a recent article by Elena Dalla Torre, 'Between "Men": Masculinities and Female (Perverse) Desire in Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra*' (2014) goes some way towards rectifying this scholarly neglect, using queer theories to frame the construction of male (homo)desire in the novel, what is still missing in Maraini's criticism is a comprehensive study that highlights the queer quality of her works, as made manifest in her 1970s feminist production.

In concomitance with the twentieth anniversary of her death, critical readings of Sapienza have flourished in this past year. Particular attention has been paid to the author's masterpiece *L'arte della gioia* (Di Rollo 2016; Bono 2016; Setti 2016; Ferrante 2016), with a focus on the protagonist's rethinking of sexual difference and her disruption of codified gender roles. These contributions have undertaken the important task of continuing the queer reading of Sapienza inaugurated by Charlotte Ross's analysis of the performative nature of the author's literary selves as staged in her autobiographical cycle (2012a; 2012b). However, for focussing almost exclusively on Sapienza's most famous novel at the expenses of other texts written by the author in the same years, these recent studies fail to situate her works contextually and to acknowledge the continuity and inter-textuality intrinsic to her literary production. Suggesting new ways to approach her oeuvre, I read Sapienza's texts as imbued with a sense of 'otherness' understood both as extraneousness to the normative ideal and, linked to it, as a spatial "elsewhere"—with physical and symbolic dimension sometimes

overlapping so as to further emphasise the dis/placement of a textual and autobiographical self who is profoundly misaligned with respect to the heterosexual norm.

With regard to existing criticism on Morante, on occasion of a dedicated symposium at the ICI of Berlin (11-12 April 2008), there started to emerge readings of her last and most disruptive text, *Aracoeli*, establishing fruitful connections with more recent philosophical formulations including queer theory. The focus of the queer readings of Morante's novel advanced at the Berlin symposium, and reflected in the conference proceedings *The Power of Disturbance* (Gragnotati and Fortuna 2009), seems to be privileging one particular aspect of the text, that is, the incestuous mother/child relationship and, thus, the interplay between Semiotic and Symbolic and the child's refusal to be incorporated onto the latter realm—a refusal that manifests itself, also, at a linguistic level. Along similar lines, more recent readings of *Aracoeli* (Wehling-Giorgi 2015) have also centred on the male protagonist's psycho-linguistic development. Without denying the validity of this approach nor its applicability to the Morantean text, I believe that a thorough analysis of the novel as a whole from the lens of queer is long overdue. Thus, I suggest a new way to read *Aracoeli*, one that emphasises the novel's defiance of constrictive identity categories and the way in which this is carried out not just through the mother/son dyad but at different textual levels, resulting in the coexistence of binary oppositions: male/female, masculine/ feminine and, ultimately, paternal/ maternal.

In the case of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante, a lot still needs to be said apropos of the queer quality of their texts, and in-depth comparative investigations, both of different works by the same author and of the authors themselves are needed. Inevitably, Judith Butler is a ubiquitous presence in almost all of the critical contributions mentioned above, which, moreover, seem to rely predominantly on the philosopher's formulation of the performative quality of gender as laid out in *Gender Trouble*. Although drawing, too, on this text and on the Butlerian performative, my analysis also incorporates other concepts that are key to understanding Butler's notion of queer, such as 'parody', 'citationality', 'drag' and 'undoing gender', as well as other theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Halberstam, Lee Edelman, Sara Ahmed and (my queer reading of) feminist Julia Kristeva—both to enrich existing critical debates on Maraini, Sapienza and Morante and in the belief that to restrict the plurality intrinsic to the formulation of 'queer' is also to limit its potential as a tool for

critical inquiry. Through close readings of a corpus of texts they wrote in the 1970s and 1980s, I will use queer theory as a line of enquiry to investigate their treatment of gender, sexuality, corporeality and identity. While it is true that the time was ripe for a radical approach to such issues, given the deep transformation in mores and costumes that society was then undergoing, it is also true that their works and the ideological agendas staged therein stand out from the main literary trends of the day. A queer approach will thus prove useful so as to group three writers who do not always share the same stance towards difference feminism—that is, the dominant theoretical paradigm of their time—and its primary concern towards the marginalisation of woman as ‘other’. To this, they respond with a mutual uneasiness towards the binary categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’; categories that are largely maintained by feminist criticism and that queer sets out to challenge (Butler 1999). The present study will thus demonstrate that, despite addressing important feminist concerns such as the relationship between man and woman and the power differential between them, Maraini, Sapienza and Morante also illustrate the problematics intrinsic to any sexual identity, positing ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ as cultural performances and exploring the blurring of the boundaries between the two. Even when tackling the topic of same-sex desire, they warn us against the risk of encaging sexuality into preconceived categories (be they ‘hetero’ or ‘homo’) that risk falling into the old traps of essentialism, instead exploring the possibilities available to sex and desire.

Chapter Two investigates a selection of Maraini’s works written between the mid-1970s and early 1980s. While critics have identified these narratives as an expression of the author’s most militant feminist phase (Pallotta 1984; Sumeli-Weinberg 1993; Tamburri 1990; Pickering-Iazzi 1989; Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 2000; Picchietti 2002), I will demonstrate that, their undeniable feminist features notwithstanding, a more productive way of approaching these texts nowadays is to consider how, albeit responding to the times in which they were written, they also go beyond the feminist positions that have conventionally been employed to read them; positions that risk constraining Maraini’s narratives within a label that the author herself has now come to see as anachronistic (Maraini 2003: 49).⁴⁸ My

⁴⁸ When interviewed by Grazia Sumeli Weinberg, Maraini made her stance explicit by claiming that ‘Il femminismo storico delle grandi manifestazioni, degli incontri, dei centri di autocoscienza, non c’è più’ (Maraini 2003: 49).

reading of *Donna in guerra* (1975) focuses on the text's strategic mimesis of conventionally accepted feminine and masculine gender roles, a strategy that complies with the Butlerian belief in the 'repetition of heterosexual constructs' as the 'inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories' (Butler 1999: 41). Disruption of normative gender roles constitutes the focus also of my analysis of *Storia di Piera* (1980), emphasising the queering of the traditional notions of family space and time understood, via Halberstam (2005), as normative categories functional to the organisation of everyday life around the (normo)reproductive heterosexual ideal. The most explicit of Maraini's texts herewith considered—and one of her most explicit works as a whole—*Lettere a Marina* (1981) seems apt to conclude my study on Maraini, for it stages the explosion of the gender binary and, following a queer logic, the rebuttal of both heterosexuality and homosexuality as fundamentally unstable identity categories (Butler 1991) in name of a more fluid sexual continuum. What the three texts have in common is an emphasis on the debunking of normatively established sexual and gender categories, which allows me to consider them as part of the same narrative project.

Chapter Three looks at the works produced by Sapienza between 1970s-1980s and borrows from Ahmed's analysis of how bodies orientate, or not, themselves into space through 'the repetitions of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken' (2006:16) to read them as creating symbolic "elsewhere", that is, places that are dis/located with respect to the norm. In Sapienza's works, these alternative spaces encompass different manifestations, ranging from queer kinship structures challenging social intelligibility in *L'arte della gioia* (written between 1967 and 1976 and published in 1998, posthumous) to a masculine, cinematic identification that, akin to the Butlerian 'drag', parodies the alleged sex/gender correlation in *Io, Jean Gabin* (written in 1979 and published in 2010, posthumous). Or again, they translate into the resignification of the prison space and the institution of Foucauldian heterotopias that silently question the outside world while also allowing for queer desires to occur in *L'Università di Rebibbia* (written in 1980 and published in 1983) and *Le certezze del dubbio* (written in 1981 and published in 1987).

Finally, Chapter Four considers Morante's last novel *Aracoeli* (1982). I will show the extent to which the text 'undoes' the normative dualist categories of masculinity and femininity, but also their metonymic correlatives of maternity and paternity. This is realised

through the male protagonist's failing to abide by the heterosexual script and refusing a sexual difference premised upon binary categorisations. The female main character equally fails to recite her gender script and deconstructs the normative traits of femininity, proving that the repetition of normative gender roles can also be undone (Butler 2004). The crumpling of femininity and masculinity in the text is replicated by the collapsing of the categories of maternal and paternal, with which the narration ends, in a harmonious meeting of opposites that echoes the Kristevan 'father-mother conglomerate' (Kristeva 1983: 40), feminine and masculine at once, and that well encapsulates the author's intent in the text—but also, by extension, the deconstructive project pursued, each in its own different way, by all of the three sets of works that I consider in this study.

Chapter 2 (Re)reading Sexual Difference in Dacia Maraini's Feminist Narratives

The second most translated Italian author after Dante Alighieri, Dacia Maraini (1936—) is a remarkable figure in the Italian literary panorama. Novelist, essayist, poet, journalist, and playwright, Maraini features a literary career that extends over more than fifty years. Her debut novel, *La vacanza*, was published in 1962, followed by *L'età del malessere* (1963), which was awarded the international prize Formentor. These novels are considered 'proto-feminist' on account of their initially alienated and apathetic female figures gradually reaching a form of self-awareness that prefigures that of Maraini's later works (Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 2000: 4). It is acknowledged that 1968 'marked the beginning of Maraini's feminist activities and activism: she conducted sociological inquiries (e.g., on conditions in women's prisons), published articles, wrote and produced plays' (Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 2000: 4)—concurrently reflecting in her texts the major concerns of the women's movement, such as abortion, conjugal abuse, violence against women and maternity. Bruce Merry notes that 'Maraini's early theatre was linked with an urgent, at times dogmatic, feminism' (1997: 12). Representative of her theatrical production of that period are *Il manifesto* (1969), denouncing the conditions of female prisons, and the controversial and much debated *Dialogo di una prostituta a un suo cliente* (1978) where, most provocatively, marriage is equated with prostitution. Looking back at her early theatre, Maraini recognises that 'la provocazione era necessaria' because, she explained, '[d]are voce alle donne significava raccontare una lunghissima storia di silenzi, di soprusi, di umiliazioni' (2005: 47). Conjugating her passion for the theatrical with her feminist activism, in 1973 the author started the women-only theatre collective *La Maddalena*, the first of its kind in Italy and a clear example of Maraini's dedication to the woman's cause. Her novel *Donna in guerra*, written in 1975 in the form of a fictitious diary, is generally recognised as not only the author's most explicit feminist text, but also as one of the most significant inputs of Italian feminist literature as a whole (Sumeli Weinberg 1993; Merry 1997; Lombardi 2002).

In what follows I propose a methodological paradigm for reading a selection of Maraini's texts written between the 1970s and 1980s that goes beyond the restrictive 'luogo comune della Dacia Maraini 'scrittrice femminista'' (Cattaruzza 2000: 30).⁴⁹ I do so whilst acknowledging the feminist message with which her works are clearly imbued, yet considering this as a point of departure (rather than arrival) to look at ways in which they can be read today in light of contemporary quandaries over gender and sexuality. Existing criticism on the texts under scrutiny focuses primarily on the theme of female identity and the development of a feminist consciousness (Pallotta 1984; Tamburri 1990; Sumeli-Weinberg 1993; Cavallaro 2007), or on the mother-daughter bond (Dagnino 1993), a bond that has also been read as transcending biological motherhood thus proving instrumental in the carving out of a space, for women, within patriarchy (Picchietti 2002).

Not a great deal of analysis has thus far been produced that thoroughly scrutinises the treatment of gender and sexuality framing it through the lens of queer, with perhaps the sole exceptions of two articles. The first is Tommasina Gabriele's 'From Prostitution to Transsexuality: Gender Identity and Subversive Sexuality in Dacia Maraini' (2002), reading some, but by no means all, manifestations of non-normative sexual desire in *Donna in guerra*, which she extends also to *Lettere a Marina* and other texts. The second is a more recent critical contribution by Elena Dalla Torre engaging in the exploration of masculinities in *Donna in guerra* (2014).⁵⁰ Gabriele's reading of *Donna in guerra* touches on the character of Suna, the protagonist's paralytic and sexually non-conforming friend, which the scholar considers 'the most important disruptive figure' in the novel on account of her engaging in a 'conscious disruption of traditional notions of sexual identity' (2002: 245). Regrettably though, Gabriele does not devote more than one paragraph to the subversion of fixed gender identities as carried out by Maraini's character. Dalla Torre's 'Between 'Men': Masculinities and Female (Perverse) Desire in Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra*' draws on Judith Halberstam to highlight 'non-dominant' forms of masculinity in the text understood as those whereby 'the bond between male and power is broken', noting how some male characters

⁴⁹ A sketched version of the analysis that I suggest in this chapter appeared in 2013 in *Aigne*, the peer-reviewed journal of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences of the University College Cork, later republished in Standen 2015.

⁵⁰ Gabriele's article considers also the play *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* (1973) and the crime story 'Chi ha ucciso Paolo Gentile', from the collection *Buio* (1999).

occupy a marginalised position because of their social status or sexual desire (2014: 130). These observations allow Dalla Torre to argue for a denaturalisation, in the novel, of the nexus between maleness and power, which she expands upon by looking, also, at how ideals of dominant masculinity is undermined through the representation of working-class Southerners, with class and geography playing an important role in the construction of male characters as socially disadvantaged and disempowered. My study aims to go some way towards adding to the few existing analyses of queer in Maraini's works. Specifically with reference to *Donna in guerra*, both Gabriele and Dalla Torre's studies start in *media res*, focussing on the characters' manifest sexual dissidence. My analysis takes a different angle. It follows the (main) characters' development from its inception, arguing that even when seemingly conforming to stereotypical patriarchal norms—specifically, at the beginning of the narration—they do so strategically, so as to expose the artificial construction of their gender identities. Butler's notion of 'parody' will allow me to read the gender performances in the novel as intentionally strategic, before moving on to follow their evolution, with particular attention to the characterisation of the female protagonist. In my study I will consider also *Storia di Piera*, a text neglected by critics written in the period between *Donna in guerra* and *Lettere a Marina*. Presented in an interview format, it shares with the other two works important connections on the grounds of gender and sexuality. Finally, my analysis of *Lettere a Marina* will problematise the terminology employed by critics, and particularly the use of 'lesbianism' (Gabriele 2010), which risks contradicting, precisely, their very same assumptions on the novel's sexual fluidity.

My queer reading of *Donna in guerra*, *Storia di Piera* and *Lettere a Marina* that informs the present chapter centres on the prefabricated essence of gender, that is, in Butler's words, the "'imitation' at the heart of the *heterosexual* project' and, stemming from it, the belief that 'hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations' (1993: 125; Butler's emphasis). In these works by Maraini that scholarship identifies with the author's most explicit feminist phase (Pallotta 1984; Sumeli-Weinberg 1993; Tamburri 1990; Pickering-Iazzi 1989; Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 2000; Picchietti 2002), the focus is on the social interpretation of the morphological difference between the sexes understood as the ways in which a woman's, but also a man's, sexuality is produced and maintained within a rigid system whereby gender roles are established *a*

priori.⁵¹ I suggest that, at a more structural level, the *sexual* fluidity portrayed in these narratives is mirrored by a marked *textual* fluidity, with sexuality and textuality becoming inextricably interwoven—a process that becomes particularly explicit in *Lettere a Marina*. I will thus look at the narrative strategies employed by Maraini so as to establish similarities and differences between the three texts and to show how these can all, ultimately, be considered as part of the same project, namely, the author's intent to partake in controversial debates on issues of gender and sexuality at the time. I by no means intend to bring Maraini's commitment to the feminist cause into question, for the political message that lies at the heart of the author's poetics would be impossible to deny. The original feminist purpose of these works notwithstanding, I suggest that a more productive way of reading them today is to do so through the lens of more recent queer theories exposing the constrictiveness and artificiality of gender roles and calling for more fluid identities. Specifically with reference to *Donna in guerra*, it should be noted that, for the period in which it was written, the text was clearly imbued with a feminist, in the sense of emancipationist, message. Yet, and this is my argument here, the novel still presents a good deal of currency nowadays. The methodological paradigm of going beyond a mere feminist approach that risks becoming anachronistic resonates with Maraini's own declarations over the importance of looking at the practices and initiatives of feminism as invaluable historical products whose current significance, however, is above all of testimony: '[i]l femminismo storico delle grandi manifestazioni, degli incontri, dei centri di autocoscienza, non c'è più. Quello delle iniziative culturali, fatte proprio in nome del femminismo, non c'è più' (Maraini 2003: 49).

⁵¹ Particularly with regard to *Donna in guerra*, critics seem to concur in the exceptional feminist quality of the novel. SumeliWeinberg writes: '*Donna in guerra* [...] dà prova di un processo di raffinamento del problema femminile che lo collocherà ancora più esplicitamente negli ideali del neofemminismo' (1993: 62). Sharon Wood also points out the 'feminist ideology' of the novel (1995: 222). Diaconescu-Blumenfeld's introduction to her monograph on Maraini argues the following: '1975 saw the publication of *Donna in guerra* (*Woman at War*), her first major feminist novel' (2000: 5). This is a position with which the author herself concurs, as is evident from an interview released the same year of the publication of the novel, whereby she stated: 'Questo è il mio romanzo più coscientemente femminista' (*Il Resto del Carlino* 1975). The connection between Maraini's text and the feminist movement, as well as between Vannina and her literary precursor, the protagonist of Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna* is pointed out also by Augustus Pallotta (1984: 359-62). Similarly, Ursula Fanning notes that 'it is remarkable that Aleramo's *Una donna* (1906, *A Woman*), written at the very beginning of the twentieth century, should find as many echoes and parallels as it does in Maraini's late-twentieth century output' (2007: 248).

In my study I will look at how, through parodic imitation of the gender ideal and the exploration of possible alternatives alongside the gender spectrum, Maraini's narratives underscore the restrictiveness of codified and rigid sexual roles. This is what brings these texts close to the definition of queer as a contestation of the patriarchal binary—a dualistic division between the sexes whose reiteration Butler sees as the paradoxical outcome of the rhetoric of difference feminism. Heralded as an empowering claim for women in the 1970s, the emphasis on woman's difference from man can, for Butler, become a double-edged sword insofar as 'the category of "women", the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought' (Butler 1999: 5). We can see a bridging of this seemingly irresolvable contradiction in Maraini's novels, which I read as a queering of sexual difference, for they acknowledge the materiality of a body made of flesh and blood whilst also eschewing the traps of facile essentialism. This twofold intent appears in line with Maraini's beliefs over the advances of women's emancipationist movements as she laid them out in an interview with Ileana Montini in 1977, invoking women's rediscovery of their bodies and calling for their liberation from strictly heterosexual intents:

Il bisogno di toccarsi, di vedersi, di capirsi, di conoscere i propri corpi è una forma di sessualità, di sensualità, di eroticismo che non necessariamente deve essere vissuta in maniera ossessiva e unidimensionale [...]. Però sono cose difficilissime; perché in un mondo eterosessuale, che ti impone l'eterosessualità come unico valore accettabile diventa impossibile parlare in questi termini di sessualità. Se tu ami le donne diventi subito omosessuale cioè a una categoria se ne oppone un'altra, che diventa anche un altro modo, se vuoi politico, di rompere con i ruoli. (Montini 1977: 115-16)

Maraini was then advocating more nuanced sexual categories, warning against essentialising categorisations that risk falling back into binary models—a theme that we see reflected in her works of those years.

2.1 *Donna in guerra*. Strategic Essentialism and the Mimicking of Womanhood and Manhood

In an edited collection devoted to the political nature of Maraini's writing, Giulio Ferroni defines *Donna in guerra* as 'il libro che più risente della rottura postsessantottesca e che può essere preso come emblema della scelta femminista di Dacia Maraini, del riconoscimento di

un'identità femminile che si dà nella separazione e nel distacco dal potere maschile' (2010: 32). Reiterating the generally acknowledged consensus over the ideological nature of the text, it is perhaps worth noting that *Donna in guerra* is the only work by Maraini that the author herself has explicitly referred to as 'femminista'.

The expression 'strategic essentialism' was originally coined in the 1980s by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to refer to those practices employed by subordinate or marginalised social groups to provisionally bypass local differences in order to build a sense of collective identity and to use this in forming political movements.⁵² I borrow this idea in framing Maraini's strategy of destabilising normative roles in *Donna in guerra*, an intent that is camouflaged behind the apparent dutiful repetition of codified patterns of behaviour on the part of both genders. This point resonates with Butler's position on the subversiveness intrinsic to parody: 'I do think that for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony it has to both mime and displace its conventions' (Butler and Kotz 1992: 84). In what follows I will analyse a similar parodic approach at play in Maraini's text, before moving on to explore the novel's more explicit queer features.

Written in the form of a fictitious diary, *Donna in guerra* opens with the monotonous holiday routine of Vannina, the protagonist, and Giacinto, her husband, while they are vacationing on the imaginary island of Addis. The first entries are a mere enumeration of the household chores to which Vannina complies in her role as a subservient wife. Indeed, at the beginning of the narration and for the most part of it, she appears as less a participant than an observer of what happens around her, which seems precisely to be happening *to* her, with no subjective involvement on her part. Vannina performs her duties in a mechanical manner: 'Ho pulito la casa da cima a fondo. Ho lavato, strigliato, sgrassato ogni cosa: pavimenti, cesso, pareti, lavello, finestre. Ho staccato la grossa tenda nera che separa la stanza da letto dalla cucina. L'ho insaponata e sciacquata' (*Donna in guerra* 140-41).⁵³ We have no insight of what she might think or feel, which led critic Grazia Sumeli Weinberg to invoke a degree of 'focalizzazione esterna' in the characterisation of the protagonist (1993: 63). Maraini had already employed the same narrative ruse in her debut novel, *La vacanza* (1962), with the fourteen-year-old protagonist Anna offering us a narration whereby '[l]a messa a fuoco è

⁵² For more on 'strategic essentialism', see G. Spivak, D. Landry, & G. MacLean 1996.

⁵³ Hereafter referred to as *Donna*.

sull'oggetto, dall'esterno, come a testimoniare la condizione di estraneità e di alienazione' (Sumeli Weinberg 1993: 40).

To return to my analysis of *Donna in guerra*, Vannina's perfunctory and almost unconscious repetition of her housewife chores is too striking, at times even hyperbolic, to be taken as coincidental. I suggest that a precise narrative strategy is at play here, which, due to the monotony of the narrative tone, Carol Lazzaro-Weis has called 'the mock chant of the archetypal housewife' (1993: 75). The author is showing us the position of house slaves as one of the roles by which women have traditionally been called to abide in a patriarchal society, alongside motherhood. In the case of Maraini's protagonist, this becomes a constituent element of her personality, not just within the household, but also in the workplace: 'corro sulle rotaie dell'inerzia [...] Seguo i programmi, come tutti gli altri, con sgraziata pedanteria' (*Donna* 27). At a narrative level, the tone is flattened accordingly, with the narration being reduced to a list of tasks carried out and reported in a telegraphic manner: 'mi sono messa a sparecchiare. Ho lavato i piatti. Ho sgrassato le pentole. Ho sciacquato i bicchieri' (*Donna* 4). Such repetition of enforced gender norms is for Butler a powerful tool against patriarchy, for it mimics the alleged facticity of 'man' and 'woman':

The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an "act", as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status. (1999: 187)

The meek and compliant Vannina spends her vacation performing endless domestic duties, cooking for her husband or making coffee for the men who come round to her holiday home, and she does so in a manner that suggests internalisation of, and indeed adherence to, institutionalised gender roles. With respect to this point, Maraini makes her stance utterly clear when she comments: '[l]a prostituzione rappresenta in qualche modo il paradigma della condizione femminile' (1987: 199). The author is here superimposing a distinctly feminist perspective onto the Marxist postulate that the figure of the prostitute is but a metonymy of the condition of the worker in a capitalist society on the grounds that each is somebody else's property. Maraini exchanges Marx's concept of the exploitation of the labour force for

that of the exploitation of prostitution and, stretching it even further, wifehood.⁵⁴ In the light of these considerations, I would argue that Vannina's behaviour exposes the roots of the sedimentation of gendered patterns of behaviour: '[r]epetition is of the essence: it is how essences reproduce themselves' (Sage 1998: 101). It is this notion of 'essence' that interests me here: the myth of femininity is fabricated upon the false assumption of a feminine quality emanating from a body for which, in confirmation of Freud's suspicion, biology has indeed become destiny. But essentialism in the novel is deployed strategically, with clear parodic effects. Butler is making this point when rectifying some of the most widespread misconceptions around her notion of gender as performance:

My whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that “performativity” is not radical choice and it's not voluntarism. [...] Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in. (Butler and Kotz 1992: 84)

Looking at the character of Vannina, we can identify the Butlerian performance of 'oppressive and painful gender norms' at work in the lethargic apathy with which she carries out her domestic tasks in a way that suggests blind adherence to the cultural and societal norms that produce gender, thereby underwriting the process of identity formation for which gender itself is 'instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler 1988: 519; Butler's emphasis). Quite emblematically, the first two entries in Vannina's own diary, ('1° agosto 1970' and '2° agosto 1970'; *Donna* 3, 5) start with the name of her husband, thereby sanctioning the position of superiority that he occupies in her value system. Vannina embodies and reproduces her feminine role by virtue of her acting like a prototypical woman and wife and, in doing so, she confirms the connection between her biological sex and its corresponding gender. What becomes apparent from the novel's opening is that a woman's body is at the mercy of patriarchal control and, as Butler would say, 'stylised' accordingly.

⁵⁴ Maraini's position on the matter of prostitution, here and elsewhere, seems in line with that of feminist Catharine MacKinnon (chiefly known for her militancy in anti-pornography campaigns), for whom paid sex is a metaphor of women's position within a heterosexual marriage, understood as a slavery-like condition for which the female is considered property of the male and intercourse a form of legalised violence perpetuated on the woman's body and, as such, indistinguishable from rape. For a discussion of MacKinnon's ideas on womanhood as prostitution, see Shannon Bell 1994 (esp. 80-81).

Vannina re-enacts such stylisation and she does so hyperbolically so as to expose its artificial construction.

The parodic imitation of gender that stands at the core of the narrative project in *Donna in guerra* is not an exclusive female province. Although, admittedly, privileging the woman's cause, it should not be forgotten that Maraini is also often quite subtle with respect to where sex and gender paradigms leave men too. In this sense, I see Vannina's husband as being affected by patriarchy in the same way, as I shall now explore. Giacinto is well aware of Vannina's psychological reliance upon him, as he enunciates on more than one occasion: 'ami me, hai bisogno di me, dipendi da me' (*Donna* 142).⁵⁵ When confronted with his wife's infidelity, his reaction is more than anything else one of manly pride intended to reassert his ownership over her: 'La gelosia è una merda, sei mia moglie, non c'è niente da discutere, non voglio fare il marito geloso, tu sei libera, però non mi devi rompere i coglioni con le tue verità del cazzo' (*Donna* 104). This begs the question of what lies behind the character's constant need to enunciate his male supremacy in a seemingly obsessive manner. My answer is that he does so in order to perform his masculine status, thereby trying to convince himself, and us readers with him, of its own ideological position, which confers a most theatrical quality to his performance of normative masculinity. Abiding by the patriarchal, strictly heterosexual script, however, comes at a price for Giacinto, for the performance of his gender commands that he repress his homosexual desires for the young Santino, which oftentimes leaves him frustrated and moody. Although their bond never acquires openly homosexual connotations it does, nevertheless, characterise itself by an overtly queer twinge. The time they spend together, mostly fishing, is, for Dalla Torre, 'queer time' insofar as it marks 'a temporal suspension of Giacinto's marital time' (2014: 132). What is more, Giacinto allows the boy's presence, and absence, to dictate his mood, as dutifully recorded by Vannina in her diary: 'Santino non è venuto neanche oggi. Giacinto è di cattivo umore' (*Donna* 40). On his part, however, the taciturn and moody boy shows little or no interest in the older man, instead maintaining an invariably detached attitude. With a stroke of irony on

⁵⁵ This is a concept that Vannina makes her own, blinding herself to the real state of things. Not only does she not dare question Giacinto's authority, she also perceives her position of subservience as a natural consequence of her role as wife: 'È vero', she concedes to herself in reply to her husband's asserting her dependence upon him, 'ha una forza terribile in quelle sue braccia bionde e con questa forza tiene in piedi il nostro matrimonio' (*Donna* 142).

the author's part, then, Giacinto's attachment to Santino can be taken as a caricature of the stereotypical heterosexual relationship that permeates dominant culture, whereby the woman is invariably cast in the position of the weaker, jealous term of the pair, longing for her man whenever he is not around. This is coupled with a role reversal at Giacinto's expenses, since, in his platonic relationship with Santino, he comes to occupy the 'feminine' position. It is on this 'feminisation' of Giacinto's character that I would now like to turn my attention.

Despite displaying a pronounced rigidity with regard to gender roles, Giacinto is not immune from contradictions that undermine and ridicule his alleged virility. For instance, he is initially reluctant to let his wife explore and stimulate his erogenous zones outside of the strictly reproductive ones ('Gli ho baciato i capezzoli [...] Fino a qualche anno fa si vergognava [...] Gli sembrava una cosa da vergognarsi avere i capezzoli sensibili'; *Donna* 45), judging this inappropriate and not quite manly ('Pensava che i capezzoli devono essere baciati solo alle donne'; *Donna* 45). What is more, at times he seems to display a certain degree of uneasiness with his ostentatious maleness. When this happens, a breach opens up, in the depiction of his character, that lets us glimpse the contradiction implicit in its characterisation. This becomes clearer when he is asleep, all huddled up like an infant, or when he is assuming other typically childlike postures, as for instance when he curls his lips into a pout ('la bocca arricciata in un broncio infantile'; *Donna* 45). These behaviours stand in stark contrast to his otherwise markedly masculine attributes, exemplified by his strong arms that Vannina describes in flattering terms: 'sono innamorata di quelle braccia'; *Donna* 142). I would maintain that Giacinto's fluctuation between normatively masculine and more feminine behaviours, coupled with his closeted desires for the young Santino, while casting some doubt over the character's virility, also allows some scope for the exploration of his gender incoherence. His characterisation provides us with a textual confirmation of the fact that 'masculinity' is but a social construct which cannot possibly be taken as a natural emanation from a male sexed body: 'masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects' (Halberstam 1998: 1). The somewhat infantile and needy aspects of Giacinto's character only surface in those moments when he lowers his guard—that is, when putting down his gender script and getting out of character, so to speak. Eventually, Giacinto will dismiss his patriarchal role entirely, going as far as to beg Vannina to go back to him, which he will do after she has aborted the son that he had enforced upon

her. The narration ends with a sorrowful and supplicant husband imploring his wife not to leave him, in a striking reversal of power differentials: ‘ma io ti giuro che non sono qui per rinfacciarti niente, sono qui per chiederti di tornare da me, comunque, anche così, con tutte le tue colpe, che non ti rinfacerò’ (*Donna* 268).⁵⁶ Interestingly, the evolution of the character of Giacinto is echoed, some years later, by that of Pietro, the husband of the protagonist of Maraini’s Campiello-prize winner *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990), who also goes from being a hideous master to becoming a weak husband. In her analysis of the latter novel Sharon Wood has observed that ‘il patriarcato colpisce in modo negativo anche gli uomini; anche loro ne vengono travolti’ (1992: 13).⁵⁷ Wood’s observations seem to be just as applicable to *Donna in guerra*, since Giacinto is also, in the same way as Pietro will be after him, ‘schiacciato psicologicamente dalle regole del conformismo sociale’ (1992: 13).

The ostentatious masculinity that we have said to affect the male protagonist of *Donna in guerra* is at play also in other characters in the novel, such as the male members of the Pizzocane family. During the episode when Giacinto and Vannina are invited over for dinner, much to their shock, we learn of a father boasting, with grotesque paternal pride, about the atrocities that his sons perpetuate against women. Such is the case with the young brothers’ accounts of the sexual assault on an English tourist whom they had found “guilty” of swimming topless, or again, the gang rape carried out at the expenses of a German woman who had tried to buy their sexual favours, allegedly offering them too little money. What is most shameful about these episodes, besides the obvious reaction of righteous indignation that they provoke in the reader, is the appalling approval, or one could rightly call it pride, with which Mr. Pizzocane listens to his sons’ braveries: ‘li guarda con occhi scintillanti come a dire: avete visto di che cosa sono capaci i miei figli?’ (*Donna* 35). Within the economy of the novel, the Pizzocanes serve the function of illustrating the abysmal

⁵⁶ The accentuation of Italian words ending in /i/ and /u/, here and hereafter, follows the rules of the publishing house from which I am quoting—hence the alternation between acute and grave accents throughout. In particular, Einaudi is among the few publishing houses in Italy to retain the acute accent on words ending in /i/ and /u/, as reflected in the majority of the primary sources quoted in this thesis.

⁵⁷ The episode where the protagonist Marianna—who in the novel goes from being meek and submissive to becoming a self-asserted woman in a trajectory that mirrors Vannina’s—refuses the sexual advances of her husband and former rapist Pietro and he lets it go, looking more disappointed than hateful, is important in this respect. It shows the evolution of both female and male characters in the domain of sexuality, one of Maraini’s favourite battlegrounds in her war against patriarchy.

consequences of a process of interiorisation of the patriarchal law, the very same one that affect both male and female protagonists in the text.

In Maraini's fictitious worlds, men are at the mercy of patriarchy in the same measure as women are. Both genders are pawns of the patriarchal game, called to dutifully perform their social scripts. In *Donna in guerra* this performance acquires hyperbolic, parodic features that expose the facticity of the performance itself: Vannina performs her duties as if she was ticking boxes off a checklist, while Giacinto enunciates his masculine status in a self-affirmative way. The female protagonist represents those women who identify with the definition that men give of them, which is well summarised in her husband's words: 'Tu di natura sei buona, calma, affettuosa, paziente, remissiva; oggi invece fai la stravagante, vai contro natura' (*Donna* 141). Those listed by Giacinto are alleged biological facts that mark a woman's 'nature' and that, taken as givens, are used to perpetrate and justify, women's dependence on—and hence, inferiority to—men. But if it is true that gender identity is, in a Butlerian fashion, a 'repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity', it is also true that these very same acts open up the possibility for 'a different form of repeating, in the breaking [...] of that style' (Butler 1988: 520). Subversion exposes, by way of denaturalising it, the social construction of gender. It is, precisely, this mechanism that we see at work through the character of Vannina—which, in turn, is mirrored in that of her husband. Although to different degrees, the two characters expose a twofold strategy within the economy of the novel, consisting in firstly uncovering and, subsequently, destabilising the mechanisms of representation of the sexes in patriarchal society. I will return to this point in the following sections, when I come to comment on the female protagonist's gradual taking control of her life over the course of the narration, moving from a 'grado zero' towards being a 'soggetto consapevole ed autonomo' (Sumeli Weinberg 1993: 94), which I see as concomitant to her discovery of alternative, explicitly queer, ways of being sexed.

2.1.1 Reclaiming One's Body: Against Patriarchal Motherhood

After learning of Vannina's intention to join her militant friend Suna on a trip to Naples to investigate the condition of women working illegally at home in exchange for miserable wages, Giacinto accuses his wife of violating what he regards as her 'true nature' (and thus, by extension, that of women as a category). Such would be the perverse and insidious

mechanism between oppressor and oppressed for which the exploitation of women is made possible within patriarchy:

But oppression cannot work if the oppressed refuse to identify with the oppressor's definition of themselves. Such refusal would signal the onset of hostilities between oppressor and oppressed. Oppression works best when the process of naturalising oppression actually structures both the oppressed's beliefs about themselves and their modes of relation to the world, that is, when the oppressed constrain their own possibilities while believing that these possibilities are constrained by some natural, inescapable facts about themselves. In other words, the hallmark of oppression is its invisibility to the oppressed. (Mackenzie 1994: 135-36)

Wary of Vannina's growing self-awareness as the result of her bonding with a series of emblematic female figures that will act as mentors on her path towards emancipation, Giacinto believes that a child would be the antidote to what he sees as his wife's violation of her true female nature. When Vannina refuses to bear his progeny, he goes as far as to rape her while she is asleep, thus coming to embody, through his brutal gesture, 'l'immagine per eccellenza dell'oppressione maschile della donna e del suo corpo' (Wood 1992: 11). Giacinto is here undertaking the task of restoring the patriarchal values that would have women's bodies reduced to their biological function and that he so adamantly believes in: 'una donna sposata senza figli è come una gatta senza gattini, che piange, si dimena, si mangia la coda che fa pena' (*Donna* 246). Defying the conceptualisation of motherhood as an institution and women as the perpetuators of the species, Vannina undergoes an abortion, thus reclaiming her right to give birth out of desire, rather than societal imposition. I see a queer potential in Vannina's contesting the patriarchal use of her body as a reproductive tool, instead reclaiming her autonomy for non-procreative intents.⁵⁸ In regaining the right to her body, Vannina also redefines her female sexuality, freeing it from a patriarchal definition and re(de)constructing it away from 'the path leading [...] to the reproductive object' (de Lauretis 1994: xiii). It is this resignification of motherhood that links Vannina to queerness,

⁵⁸ Some interesting connections between feminist and queer claims should be pointed out here. The assertion of the right to manage one's body (thus, also, to abort) is, by definition, a feminist concern. At the same time, however, it also intersects with the 'anti-social' thesis (also referred to as 'queer negativity') that has emerged in the work of queer theorists over the past decade, emphasising the queer's challenge to the heterosexual reproductive imperative. For more on this queer tendency, see Halberstam 2008.

understood by de Lauretis as ‘any forms of sexuality that appear to be heterosexual but are not so in the normative or reproductive way’ (1994: xiii).

Written when termination of pregnancy was still illegal in Italy, Maraini’s novel is less an exaltation of abortion as an empowering weapon in the hands of women than a call for their right to choose to become mothers. In this respect, it could be argued that the points made by the author in her essay collection *Un clandestino a bordo* (1996) apropos of her own therapeutic abortion could also be applied to *Donna in guerra*:

L’aborto sembra essere il luogo maledetto dell’impotenza storica femminile. Lì dove si rappresenta la perdita ripetuta del controllo sulla riproduzione della specie. L’aborto è dolore e impotenza fatta azione. È l’autoconsacrazione di una sconfitta. Una sconfitta storica bruciante e terribile che si esprime in un gesto brutale contro se stesse e il figlio che si è concepito. (Maraini 1996: 24)

Over the centuries, women were more often than not given no choice but to resort to abortion, usually performed under inhuman circumstances, as masterfully problematised in Maraini’s prose, where street and reckless abortionists abound. This, for the author, is the product of a faulty system whereby the lack of sex education and the Catholic prohibition of birth control are to blame. This stance is reflected also in *Donna in guerra* by posing women as the victims of regulatory mechanisms aimed at controlling their reproductive functions and by waging the ‘war’ contained in the novel’s title on the territory of a woman’s body (Gabriele 2004: 70). In those years Adrienne Rich was denouncing the fact that ‘the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the “human condition” any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are’ (1976: 34). This might have struck a chord with Maraini who, in her review of Rich’s text that appeared in *Signs* after the publication of *Donna in guerra*, wrote:

One of the things that most belong to women is motherhood. But motherhood has been manipulated by the ideology and power of the fathers who lied and mystified it for their own selfish reasons. What was once our absolute privilege, a moment of creativity and strength, was transformed into creativity and slavery. (Maraini 1979: 688)

Mothering as ‘*defined and restricted under patriarchy*’ (Rich 1976:14; Rich’s emphasis) is, precisely, the notion of woman’s role that Vannina challenges through her resolution to reclaim the right over her body and to abort the child that her husband has imposed upon her,

thus advocating women's choice to be, or not to be, mothers. Vannina is not the only woman in the novel to undergo this procedure, which is an experience she shares with Marta, the domestic servant of Suna's younger brother Oliver (who becomes pregnant by him), and also Mafalda, a member of the same political party of Suna and Vannina, and Suna's lover.⁵⁹

Donna in guerra uncovers the deep-seated beliefs of the day on the association between womanhood and motherhood, an enterprise that is especially relevant in a context, the Italian one, dominated by traditional Catholic values. At the same time, by contesting the notion of the female body as primarily designed for reproductive purposes, it also disenfranchises it from a binary, heterosexual system whereby we are compelled to adhere, through our bodies and what we do with it, to a heterosexual and normo-reproductive ideal (Butler 1993; 1999). Going as far as to vindicate the choice *not* to be a mother at a time when termination of pregnancy has not yet become legal, Vannina's is a radical gesture—the culmination of a process of self-awakening that is made possible thanks to the bond that she develops with emblematic female figures.

2.1.2 Subversive Language, Scabrous Stories and Ambiguous Bodies

Some key figures prove instrumental for Vannina to reconnect to a female experience and find the strength to embark on the road towards self-awareness. With the island laundress Giottina and her friend Tota, she replays the mother-daughter bond. With a taste for gossip and scabrous stories, the two matrons return her back to the pre-symbolic (semiotic) sphere. As has been noted by Pauline Dagnino, the secluded and dark space of the launderette, where their relationship develops, acts like the Kristevan *chora* (Dagnino 2002).⁶⁰ Predating the Symbolic, the *chora* is, for French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva, the place of the mother; it knows no language but only a chaotic mix of rhythmic pulsions, needs and feelings—a blessed sense of unity with the maternal figure (Kristeva 1984). And indeed, the erotically charged language that Tota and Giottina create, at times seems to be a non-

⁵⁹ *Donna in guerra* is not the first of Maraini's texts to stage this procedure. The protagonist of the author's second novel *L'età del malessere* (1963), Enrica, aborts clandestinely. In *Memorie di una ladra* (1972), the main character Teresa recalls having among her female fellow inmates women imprisoned for abortion. The text-interview *Storia di Piera* (1980), which is the next work to be discussed in this chapter, also tackles the termination of pregnancy, with Piera herself admitting undergoing nine abortions.

⁶⁰ This is also the position implicit in Virginia Picchiotti's argument: 'the return to the maternal realm that Tota and Giottina represent can actually lead to the re-evaluation of the pre-Oedipal mutuality in the daughter's life' (2002: 119).

language. Their talk is not just fast-paced, with the two of them frantically alternating voices, yet never overlapping ('Le voci si alternano, rapide, guizzanti, senza mai coprirsi'; *Donna* 13), but also quite vivid. With the recourse to dialecticisms taken from the Sicilian language to make it even more colourful, their prose is at times explicit, at other times it proceeds by innuendoes: 'Alla villa Trionfo l'amore si fa sputazza / La sputazza si fa semenza / La semenza si fa veleno' (*Donna* 12)—with 'sputazza' (a dialectal expression for 'saliva') and 'semenza' ('seed') clearly alluding to, respectively, smooching and lovemaking.

What interests me about the two matrons' stories, mainly revolving around the orgies that take place in the villas of the rich, is their deconstructing of taken-for-granted notions of gender and sexuality. The account of the sexually ambiguous body of singer Purea Willy, who is said to be a hermaphrodite ('mezza uomo e mezza donna'; *Donna* 48), and the maid enforcing sexual intercourse between her own mistress and the singer herself while the latter is asleep, provides a case in point for this deconstructive strategy. Although the attempt of raping a sleeping body might rightfully be seen as quite disturbing, what is worth noting is the threefold deconstructionist intent at stake here, problematising, at once, normative consolidations of sex, gender and social hierarchy. For being neither man nor woman but both at once, Purea's body denaturalises binary sex categories; s/he is a character 'beyond the genital arrangements of male and female' (Dagnino 2000: 239). Similarly, since the act of (enforced) lovemaking occurs between two women, the culturally and socially received gender categories that cherish opposite-sex object choices are equally undermined. Lastly, such defiance of sex and gender categories alike becomes productive of another subversion, this time at the expenses of social categorisations, with the hierarchy master/servant being ridiculed and finally overturned.

The reactions to the subject matter of these stories vary greatly between storytellers (Tota and Giottina) and listener (Vannina). Tota eats while talking ('masticava e parlava'; *Donna* 47), with food incorporation alluding to the drives characteristic of the mother-child symbiotic stage, so as to further confirm the semiotic nature of the space of the laundry room (Dagnino 2002: 239). Giottina, on the other hand, has 'gli occhi lucidi pieni di cattiveria e sensualità' (*Donna* 13), at times being so overwhelmed herself as to feel 'come in preda a una vertigine' (*Donna* 50). The two laundry women do not hide their fascination towards the scabrous anecdotes that they recount in a sacrilegious fashion. For her part, Vannina is

engrossed by such queer stories. Yet, she does oscillate between feelings of attraction and repulsion towards the ‘giochi dell’immaginazione’ (*Donna* 14) of the two matrons taking place in the ‘dark’ and ‘sweltering’ theatre that is the laundrette (‘è un teatro buio e afoso’; *Donna* 14). Following on from the scholarly interpretation of this space as the semiotic *chora* (Dagnino 2002), Vannina’s ambivalent feelings and her will not to return to its suffocating environment (‘Non entrerò più lí dentro, ho detto’; *Donna* 14) can be understood as an expression of the symbolic matricide advocated by Kristeva as the necessary traumatic loss, for the child, of its symbiotic identification with the maternal realm—the precondition for self-constitution.⁶¹ Most importantly though, and in line with my main argument here, Vannina’s ambivalent reaction would be dependent upon confrontation with a conceptual thinking that is new to her, a belief system, however, whose attraction does not leave her immune and to which she will ultimately yield (‘Ma so che ci tornerò’; *Donna* 14)—thus acting as the first step towards the queering of her character.

Feminists have long started to investigate the use of the female body to the service of men. Discussing the fetishisation of women and their confinement to their bodily sphere, Burstow notes that ‘Woman as Body performs many services for men. Unlike with other oppressions, the principal service appears to be sexual and erotic servicing’ (1992: 4). Although de Beauvoir is not mentioned in connection to this passage, her implicit presence is noticeable in Burstow’s reasoning over the reduction of women to their bodily self, that is, to their condition of ‘Immanence’. This last point is particularly important for understanding some key features of Maraini’s approach to female sexuality within a patriarchal frame and, as such, it is worth looking briefly at how this perspective develops within the novel. Vannina’s diary entries record only a few intimate encounters with her husband, which can hardly be described as sexual considering the lack of mutual physical gratification between the two partners: ‘Abbiamo fatto l’amore. In fretta, come al solito, senza darmi il tempo di arrivare fino in fondo’ (*Donna* 11); ‘Stamattina Giacinto si è svegliato con la voglia di fare l’amore. Mi ha stretta a sé con violenza mentre ancora dormivo [...] Quando stavo per raggiungerlo, lui è arrivato. Mi ha morsa sul collo, ha urlato, poi si è addormentato con la bocca sulla mia spalla’ (*Donna* 23); ‘Ho guardato Giacinto di spalle [...] Mi è venuta voglia

⁶¹ For more on the notion of ‘matricide’ as a necessary step in the child’s process of subjectivity formation, see Kristeva 1982.

di fare l'amore. Gliel'ho detto. Ha risposto: dopo cena' (*Donna* 45). What emerges from these accounts is the image of a woman who performs her conjugal duties with passivity, reduced to a mere instrument for her husband's sexual gratification. Vannina has become accustomed to, and to an extent complicit with, the idea that the female body is functional to male satisfaction, thus corroborating the view that '[t]raditionally women's pleasure is seen as irrelevant, undesirable, uncomely' (Burstow 1992: 4), a grim scenario aggravated even further in a conservative Catholic culture such as the Italian one, where female *jouissance* has been historically erased.⁶² With this mind, it is not difficult to understand the antithetic and at times uncomfortable feelings, that 'l'ubiquità del sesso, trattato dalle due donne [Tota e Giottina] in toni di mistificazione' (Sumeli Weinberg 1993: 65) brings forth in the character of Vannina. Such is the function of the metaphorical space created by the subversive tales of the two laundry women, which thus becomes a queer space in the sense understood by Halberstam as an alternative arrangement of kinship that evades the logic of the traditional family as a heterosexual unit with reproductive intents (2005). In this respect, the two matrons' non-conventional mode of living can be taken as a queer form of relationship to which Vannina will initially take part, initiating her into a process of, to say it *à la* Butler, 'gender insubordination'.

2.1.3 Gender Insubordination(s): "Pederasty" and Queer Masculinities

Vannina's consternation at the matrons' sexually charged talks, I maintain, acts as the first step towards what I read as a twofold, queering process that the author operates in the novel through her character. At the opening of *Donna in guerra*, the protagonist is made to behave in a way that is conventionally associated with her gender and marital status, with the mechanicity with which she accomplishes her domestic chores suggesting a mocking of the very same assumptions that such behaviour serves to purport—namely, 'the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender' (Butler and Braidotti 1997: 524). However, it is following the initiation into female complicity and sexual subversion imparted by the quirky and eccentric characters of Tota and Giottina—coupled with, and consolidated by, her

⁶² First used by Lacan, the term *jouissance* has been largely reappropriated by French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva among others. In particular, Kristeva sees it as a form of specifically feminine pleasure associated with the semiotic flow and the maternal *chora*. For a more detailed exploration of the polysemy of the word, see Marks and Courtivron 1980.

subsequent encounters with other emblematic female figures—that Vannina will eventually manage to untangle herself from a patriarchal net of expectations among which is the imposition of institutionalised motherhood.

On more than one occasion, during the course of the novel, Vannina will herself display a sexuality that goes against pre-established social norms. Of particular interest is the seduction scene with the adolescent Orio that ends with the two of them having sexual intercourse, an instance working towards the queering of socially prescribed sexual behaviours. With regard to the sexual initiation that the more mature and experienced Vannina plays out with Orio, some ten years her junior, I am doubtful of the interpretation suggested by Elisabetta Properzi Nelsen when she reads it as ‘the realization of a secret desire related to the desire for motherhood’ (2000: 91). I suggest that the sexual encounter, far from calling for maternal desire, allows instead for a fruitful queer reading. Thus, I agree with Dalla Torre when, in her study on masculinities in *Donna in guerra*, she borrows de Lauretis’ notion of ‘perverse desire’ to describe the non-normative, non-reproductive sexualities staged within the novel, among which the scholar situates Vannina’s affair with Orio (Dalla Torre: 2014). The degree of agency that the woman displays on occasion of her sexual encounter with her adolescent lover is remarkable, if compared with the passivity that marks her conjugal relationship. Orio offers to help Vannina carry her groceries and, on the way home, the woman cannot help but evaluate, appraisingly, his boyish body (‘L’ho seguito senza staccare gli occhi dal suo corpo di ragazzo delicato e robusto’; *Donna* 97), which provokes in her ‘un’ondata di calore al petto, brusca e lacerante’ (*Donna* 97). Quite surprisingly, it is Vannina who initiates the seduction game: ‘L’ho preso per mano e l’ho portato dietro la tenda, sul letto [...] L’ho spogliato. [...] Ci siamo sdraiati sul letto. Mi guardava attento. Aspettava che gli dicessi cosa fare’ (*Donna* 102-3). Lee Edelman argues that the defiance of queerness to normative conventions consists in ‘the unknowability that is sexuality as such: its always displaced and displacing relations to categories that include, but also exceed those of sex, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, and race’ (2004: xv). Returning to Vannina’s affair, I would like to add ‘age’ too, as part of that excess that Edelman postulates as a precondition of queer. Despite not qualifying as pederasty (from a strictly legal point of view, Orio has just crossed the threshold of the age of consent), Vannina’s affair is, nevertheless, cross-generational. The episode provides a queer perspective on this

issue, with an older woman seducing a younger boy, which overthrows conventional gender hierarchies whereby sexual initiation is generally assumed to be carried out by a male, and often more mature, partner.

During their sexual encounter, Vannina is well aware that Giacinto could be back at any time, but she is far from worrying about it: ‘speravo che tornasse e mi trovasse lì con Orio’ (*Donna* 102), thus confirming her awareness behind the defiance not just of gender roles, but also of the patriarchal norms embodied by her husband. Vannina is here, to put it in Wittig’s words, overthrowing the ‘heterosexual contract’—namely, the institution of the patriarchal family, which is, also, the organising principle of heterosexuality itself (Wittig 1992: 6). Giacinto’s reaction to his wife confronting him on the event is baffling: ‘Hai fatto l’amore con un bambino!’ (*Donna* 104), concerned as he is about his questionable notion of *pudore* rather than anything else. In a fit of anger, he comes back to hit her, thus setting a precedent for the violence (degenerating into conjugal rape) he also displays in an analogous situation when feeling threatened by Vannina’s decision to follow her friend Suna on a trip to Naples without asking for his consent. What scares Giacinto, in both the events recalled above, is Vannina’s gaining gradual awareness of her subordination to his patriarchal domination, with his violence serving the purpose of regaining control, through discipline, of his unruly wife. Giacinto’s fear is premised on the defiance of the patriarchal superiority he exercises in their marriage, which is now being shaken by what could be read as the onset of Vannina’s insubordination as is manifest in her willingness to tell him what happened behind his back. The sexual disobedience that Vannina displays with Orio is further nuanced by the episode when she brings herself to orgasm while watching Santino sleep (this is Orio’s older brother). Although, by her own admission, she does not desire Santino sexually, Vannina is here nevertheless reclaiming her right to seek sexual gratification, that which her conjugal relationship denies her. Both occurrences, I suggest, can be read through a remark made by Vittorio, the founder of ‘Vittoria Proletaria’—the political party with which Vannina will become involved—on the meaning of ‘devianza’. However, whereas the relentless Marxist leader speaks from a strictly capitalistic point of view, alluding to the interiorisation of societal strictures, I would like to take up his commentary to support my reading of devious sexualities in the novel, those very same ones, as I will later explain, that Vittorio openly censures: ‘[devianza è] [t]utto ciò che trasgredisce alle norme del potere, norme che il potere

considera valide nel tempo e nello spazio, come eterne, cioè come fatti dalla storia e non come prodotti della storia' (*Donna* 106). Redeploying it for the purposes of my analysis of Vannina's sexual 'deviance', and using it against itself, this very same commentary can be read alongside the Butlerian notion of gender performativity, whereby the assumption of gender formation as regulated by a cause/effect principle is disproven and upturned. Following on from this, the 'norme del potere' would come to signify, metonymically, the gender norms, and the acts that stem from them. In a Foucauldian fashion, Butler tells us that such acts are not performed *by* the subject; rather, they *performatively* constitute it—subjectivity formation being the effect of the norm rather than its cause. As a result, 'what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures' (1999: xv). Butler's statement summarises what has been my speculation here: Vannina, and Maraini through her, opens up the possibilities that are foreclosed by received notions of femininity, and in doing so she confronts us with non-normative models for thinking about sexuality.

Defeating the ideal of masculinity perpetuated by Giacinto and the Pizzocane family, Santino himself also displays a marked gender fluidity: 'Gli piacciono le donne, ma gli piacciono anche gli uomini, più le donne forse chi lo sa' (*Donna* 64). In confirmation of Santino's polymorphous sexuality, at the beginning of the narration we are told that he is sleeping with a waitress, Stella, and with a male Austrian student at the same time. Throughout the novel, we see him firstly engaging sexually with Suna, and finally ending up in an erotic triangle with her and Mafalda. Quite noteworthy is also the fact that the boy has sex with the male tourists of the island in exchange for money. What is interesting to note about his behaviour is that, when this happens, he accepts to assume the 'feminine', passive position, since it pays better than the 'masculine', active one. By accepting to be penetrated then, Santino confounds gender hierarchies, debunking the seemingly unproblematic assumption whereby homosexuality is understood as sexual attraction towards one's same sex. This last point is well exemplified in a brief, yet significant exchange on the nature of sexual behaviours between Orio and Vannina, when the latter learns about Santino's hustling:

- Ma se uno fa l'amore con un ricchione non è un ricchione pure lui?
- No, ricchione è chi gli piace.

- E come si fa a sapere chi gli piace e chi no?
- Si sa, se uno è maschio non gli piace. (*Donna* 102)

In this handful of lines Maraini engages in an ontological queer project that questions the self-evidence of identity categories while casting sexuality as a slipping domain which is ‘wonderfully suggestive of a whole range of possibilities’ and, as such, ‘challenge[s] the familiar distinction between normal and pathological, straight and gay, masculine men and feminine women’ (Hanson 1993: 138). Suna’s describing Santino as ‘un poco uomo e un poco donna’ (*Donna* 64) confirms the boy’s gender to be, just like Giacinto’s, highly ambiguous. Both characters denaturalise heterosexual beliefs on the intelligibility of the body, particularly the mistaken assumption that sees the latter as a canvas to be read on the basis of its biological marks—to which specific gender roles, and sexual dispositions, are arbitrarily assigned. Understood in this light, Santino’s queerness and Vannina’s “pederasty” can be seen as narrative strategies that aim at affirming the relativity of any theoretical effort to define (hetero)/(homo)sexuality, as well as any other fixed identity category.

2.1.4 ‘Un modo più ricco e fluido di essere sessuati’

Suna is the character that most exhibits in the novel a carefree sexuality, sleeping with men (Santino) and women (Mafalda) alike, and even with both sexes at once (as when she agrees to share Santino with Mafalda). She has no qualms in pleasing herself sexually in front of Vannina, or in asking the latter to do so to her, nor does she miss any opportunity to instruct the protagonist on the shortcomings of her heterosexual marriage with Giacinto on account of its unequal power differential. An advocate of sexual subversiveness, Suna is the emblem of the disengagement of sexuality from a binary system, as is well encapsulated in her words: ‘E l’uomo potrà amare un altro uomo e una donna un’altra donna?’ (*Donna* 187). She is aware of her unruly sexuality and defines herself as ‘half man half woman’, a position that resonates with Wittig’s assertion that there is no such thing as being a woman, or a man, for the category of sex has been created as a consequence of patriarchal oppression and has then become an alibi for social, economic, psychological differences between two artificially constituted sexes (1992).⁶³ Wittig’s formulation, however, brings her to essentialist grounds

⁶³ Wittig argues that ‘this mark’, namely sexual difference, ‘does not predate oppression’ but is rather the logical outcome of the same’ (Wittig 1992: 11).

and into the postulation of the existence of a ‘third gender’—namely, the ‘lesbian’. Instead, Maraini’s position on the matter moves towards a more marked fluidity. As we see it embodied in the character of Suna, Maraini is well aware of the pitfalls deriving from a reduction of the sexes to two available possibilities, which she avoids by coming closer to the Butlerian advocacy of more individual freedom in the fashioning of one’s sexual identity, thereby bypassing the restrictions imposed by biology and society.

The epithet of ‘half man half woman’ is taken up contemptuously by Giacinto, who calls Suna ‘mezza donna’, which, in turn, evokes the label ‘crippled’ with which the Neapolitan women also address her. Her own father’s referring to his daughter as a ‘spostata’ on account of her not being settled with a ‘buon marito da cui non si separi dopo due mesi di gravidanza’ (*Donna* 163) also follows this trajectory. If it is true that, following Butler, speech acts are ‘excitable’ (1997a: 14), that is, ‘exceed[ing] the moment [they] occasio[n]’, it is also true that derogatory labels are allowed to be positively recast. In the case of *Donna in guerra*, critics have done so in order to point out the outward mark of the Suna’s subversive gender identity (Gabriele 2002)—a process that follows the Butlerian trajectory of resignification (or ‘resigni-fication’, as Butler writes it) of *hate speech* (Butler 1997a: 41). This is how I read Gabriele’s assertion that ‘the metaphor of the “mezza donna” receives a positive charge when, obviously advocating an unconfined expression of sexuality and gender—“un modo più ricco e fluido di essere sessuati”—Suna affirms: “quello che mi piace in Santino è che anche lui come me, un poco uomo e un poco donna” (sic) (64)’ (2002: 246).

Suna’s father worries about his daughter, wishing her to entrap a man for economical support, a position that she straightforwardly summarises in these terms: ‘quello che cerca è un marito un po’ coglione a cui scaricarmi, magari bruttino e cafone, ma con un po’ di soldi, che mi prenda senza fare tante storie e buonanotte’ (*Donna* 73). Far from fulfilling his dreams of a conventional marriage for her, Suna disrupts the ‘heterosexual contract’ insofar as she fails to embody the patriarchal ideal. Maraini’s choice of staging a paraplegic character and making her the most explicit spokesperson of gender fluidity in the novel is, I would contend, not coincidental. Suna is disabled twice over, because of her physical impairment and unruly sexuality, metaphorically speaking. Her disability operates as a point of resistance to the system of ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ that is inextricably interwoven

with the idea of compulsory heterosexuality inasmuch as '[t]he most successful heterosexual subject is the one whose sexuality is not compromised by disability (metaphorised as queerness); the most successful able-bodied subject is the one whose ability is not compromised by queerness (metaphorised as disability)' (McRuer 2013: 492). Being both at once, Suna deconstructs normative identity categories built around the idea of a viable, heterosexual body. As such, just like her queerness, her disability also operates 'oppositionally [...]; not as a positivity, but as a positionality, not as a thing, but as a resistance to the norm' (Halperim 1995: 66).⁶⁴ Despite preaching liberation from restrictive gender roles and challenging Mafalda's complicity with the homophobic views of the political group, after being expelled from it Suna gives up not only on her lesbian lover but also on life itself, committing suicide. Her tragic fate leaves the reader in something of a quandary with regard to the outcome implicit in the defiance of codified sexual roles (the subversion of patriarchy that she herself embodies) and calls for several considerations. I shall advance my own by looking at the suicide note that she leaves behind and that I read as a summa of the ideological convictions of which her character is an unwavering representative within the novel.

Sumeli Weinberg defines Suna's letter as the encapsulation of 'la "politica" del femminismo della Maraini' (1993: 68). A feminist dimension informs also the interpretation of Dalla Torre who, stressing the homoerotic component of Suna's message, reads it as the vindication of 'lesbianism both as a particular desire for women (private) and a call for love of the oppressed (public)' (2014: 137). I would like to put forward my own interpretation, one that, without denying the feminist and political implications of Suna's note, looks at the corporeal dimension encapsulated in a most vivid prose. The passage in question is worth quoting in its entirety:

Le donne, ecco a cosa penso tutto il tempo. Io delle donne mi innamoro sempre di piú, vorrei baciarle tutte, con amore, nelle loro pieghe di grasso, nelle loro rughe sudate, nei loro culi disfatti, nelle fiche rovinate, negli occhi allucinanti, nelle bocche

⁶⁴ The social perceptions of queerness and disability are often conflated into one another on the premise that a queer individual is seen as metaphorically disabled—in the sense of having a 'crippled' sexual identity—and, conversely, a physically disabled person is perceived as 'queer'—in the sense of often not being able to have a 'normal' sexuality (McRuer 2013: 493).

sgangherate, dappertutto dove viene offesa e lapidata, per il trionfo del cazzo padrone. (*Donna* 261)

Suna's words here resonate with Maraini's own positions over the nature of female corporeality. In a slim volume revolving around the themes of abortion, maternity and the body, Maraini wonders why it is that 'la parola «corpo» pesa tanto sulla lingua delle donne' (1996: 39). To answer this quandary, the author goes on to analyse the historical paradox of the different interpretations between female and male body: the former is passive and receptive ('corpo *desiderabile*'), the latter is active and desiring ('corpo *desiderante*') (1996: 40; my own emphasis). These reflections have the potential to illuminate the concluding lines of Suna's letter recalled above, with which they share important analogies. Read in the light of Maraini's remarks, the ideological testament that Suna leaves behind would thus be a reclaiming of woman's body, here exhibited in all its decadence and imperfection, rather than being shown as static ('desiderabile') object for men's visual pleasure. This is, I suggest, the meaning behind the insistence on the quasi-grotesque features of these fat and wrinkly women ('pieghe di grasso'; rughe sudate') that, while queerly defying the heteronormative standards by which female beauty is traditionally constructed, are presented for what they are: perishable bodies made of flesh and blood. The visual representation conjured up by such vivid descriptions stands in striking contrast with the 'bellezza statica' that Maraini identifies as the aesthetic ideal that casts women as motionless beauties (1996: 41). As such, it provides some ways for thinking about the insidious mechanisms promoting certain aesthetic standards that, while objectifying women, are so culturally pervasive as to act at an unconscious level, becoming interiorised and normalised by virtue of the same performative process that Butler sees at the core of gender identity formation.

The importance of Suna's role within the economy of the novel cannot be overemphasised. It is her who discloses to Vannina the facticity of gender roles as the product of normative discipline and social inculcation and it is through her help that the protagonist will find the strength to free herself from the ties of a constrictive marriage and the self-identification with the definition of woman that comes from her husband. Furthermore, in advocating non-normative sexual practises, Suna acts as a Trojan horse that shakes the heterosexual frame of which *Donna in guerra* is strategically imbued, and eventually overthrows it. Her ultimate decision to take her own life has been positively

connoted by some critics reading it as the event ‘that strangely brings about Vannina’s rebirth’ (Lombardi 2002: 119). However incongruous it might seem, Suna’s suicide pushes the reader to explore the implications of a burning question that Butler has put in such eloquent terms: ‘Is the breakdown of gender binaries [...] so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?’ (Butler 1999: viii). Suna’s tragic fate leaves this question open, prompting us to confront how we think about gender and sexuality.

2.2 *Storia di Piera*. Overthrowing Heteronormative (Family) Time and Space

Written in the form of a dialogue between the author and stage actress Piera degli Esposti, *Storia di Piera* (1980) is a biography of sorts; in Maraini’s own definition, it is ‘uno strano caso di famiglia sconvolta e infelice che nello stesso tempo contiene in sé le ragioni arcaiche dell’unione e dell’amore’ (1980: 8). The inspiration for the book came to Maraini in 1977 on occasion of a meeting with stage and film actress Piera Degli Esposti (1939—) to discuss a possible joint theatrical project. Their dialogue resulted in the chronicle of the turbulent life of Piera, the sexual abuses she suffered as a child, the pulmonary illness that had been afflicting her since her adolescence before precipitating into hospitalisations and surgical procedures gone wrong, and, constituting the focus of her narration, the daughter’s forgiveness and acceptance of a highly subversive and scandalous maternal figure. Piera’s mother epitomises non-conformity to the symbolic order, the primordial forces of nature against culture, against patriarchal society and its restrictive gender scripts—specifically, those regulating female sexuality. It is on this character and on her sexual non-conformity, which results in the defiance of the Law, understood in its symbolic, Lacanian sense as a set of prohibitions that sanction the entrance of individuals into society, that I shall focus in my analysis of the text.

Storia di Piera has received scant critical attention to date. Existing criticism is limited to brief mentions or relatively little sections in monographs on Maraini (Sumeli Weinberg 1993; Merry 1997).⁶⁵ Looking at the family dynamics recounted in Piera’s story, in *Invito alla lettura di Dacia Maraini*, Sumeli Weinberg has argued for a role reversal in the

⁶⁵ Emblematic of this scholarly neglect is the fact that, in a monograph entirely devoted to the theme of motherhood and daughterhood in Maraini’s novels, plays, poetry and films (Picchietti 2002), no reference is made to *Storia di Piera*, despite the relationship between mother and daughter being central to the story.

mother/daughter relationship, while underscoring with relevant textual examples the highly sexualised characterisation of the figure of Piera's mother (1993). In his comparative study *Women in Modern Italian Literature*, on the other hand, Bruce Merry has emphasised what he reads as the textual (mis)treatment of women within the family and the boredom of their daily tasks, as well as within a self-righteous society ready to point fingers at non-conforming individuals (1990). No single study, however, has been produced that focuses exclusively on this text. The reasons of such scholarly neglect could lie behind its problematic classification within a specific literary genre, the complexity of its narrative style as well as, arguably, its treatment of incestuous family kinships in a most lighthearted way.⁶⁶ As we read it in the preface, Maraini decided to maintain a truthful account of Piera's story and even to mould the syntax according to the rhetorical style of her interviewee ('Ho subito pensato che bisognava lasciare il racconto com'era uscito dalla bocca di Piera, nella sua forma di monologo dai tempi imprevisti, a momenti sonnolento, sensuale, ironico, a momenti concitato, rabbioso, cupo'; Maraini 1980: 9). The autobiographical element notwithstanding, I agree with Sumeli Weinberg when she argues that Maraini's presence in the text acts as a mediator between the past (Piera's story) and the present (the moment of the enunciation), but also as an alter ego for Piera, thus bringing the narration onto a more objective level (1993: 73). It is this manipulative element, made even more explicit by the interview format, whereby the interviewer directs the exchange towards specific themes, that allows me to interpret *Storia di Piera* as not just a mere autobiographical rendition, but as a coherent narrative resulting from the merging of Maraini and Piera's voices, and, thus, to study it alongside the novels belonging to the same period in order to investigate the author's ideological positions at the time they were produced.

I read *Storia di Piera* as part of a continuum, in Maraini's most explicit feminist phase, in the treatment of female sexuality as expressed in this text as well as in those written just before and after it—respectively, *Donna in guerra* and *Lettere a Marina*. In what follows I will thus underscore the subversion of the laws of the family carried out through the figure of Piera's mother. This is a process that I read as coterminous with the rewriting and queering of female sexuality, free from the constraints of heteronormative family and

⁶⁶ On the reception of the text, Sumeli Weinberg comments: 'Libro considerato "complesso" da molti, per il modo in cui fa fronte ai tabù sociali, ai risvolti della follia e all'angosciato periodo della crescita' (1993: 73).

societal strictures alike. The formulations around the queering of the categories of time and space as advanced by Judith Halberstam (2005) will provide useful theoretical tools to frame my analysis of Piera's mother's overthrowing of the temporality and organisation of the domestic sphere—with 'family time' and 'family space' understood as temporal and geographical categories functional to the logics of the (heterosexual) household. Finally, I shall look at the way Piera herself lives her polymorphous sexuality, focussing on its ambiguous nature and her identification with both parents, oftentimes verging on incestuous desires.

2.2.1 Motherhood and the Queering of the Demeter Myth

Never called by her first name all throughout the narration, Piera's mother is merely referred to as 'mamma' or 'madre', which makes even more striking her extraneousness to the familial role that such signifiers conjure up. At other times, she is referred to by the epithet 'la moraccia', earned in virtue of her dark hair. Suggestive of beastly connotations, this appellation foreshadows the character's untamed sexuality—the dark-haired woman being traditionally a literary characterisation for the figure of the seductress (with her blonde counterpart, on the other hand, being stereotypically associated with angelic-like features), and thus seems to be an appropriate term to describe the nature 'scalmanata violenta selvaggia' of this provocative figure (*Storia di Piera* 62).⁶⁷

Piera is well aware of her mother's alienation from parental roles and sees her as 'strana' and 'diversa dalle altre madri' (*Storia* 15), an apt choice of adjectives to denote extraneousness to normatively accepted paradigms of familial behaviours. Initially hesitant to accept her mother's unconventionality, which is for her a source of distress ('mi vergognavo'; *Storia* 11 or 'ne soffrivo'; *Storia* 15), eventually Piera will come to accept and love her unconditionally and, retrospectively, to fully appreciate the revolutionary potential that she embodies. Maraini's own understanding of the maternal emerging from Piera's inconsequential stream of consciousness is particularly insightful in this respect, for it sheds some light on the subversiveness of such a controversial character, which is well captured by Maraini in these words: 'In un certo senso tua madre ha scaravoltato la famiglia, inconsapevolmente, ma l'ha fatta esplodere, non accettando di essere la "moglie", "la

⁶⁷ Hereafter referred to as *Storia*.

madre”, cercando di imporre la sua personalità, la sua sessualità, il suo piacere’ (*Storia* 15). Reluctant to fulfil the (hetero)sexual female script of ‘moglie’ and ‘madre’, Piera’s mother, instead, subverts the traditional organisation of the domestic sphere, understood as the set of functions she is called to perform because of her gender, functions that she refuses and overthrows, carving out a queer space and time for herself, as I shall explain. Bearing in mind that *Storia di Piera* is based on a biographical account, Maraini’s giving voice to this dysfunctional figure—shattering to the core the institution of the family—is a highly subversive choice, especially in light of the historical context she inhabits. The Family Law Act (1975) had only recently been approved when *Storia di Piera* came out in print. The new legislation, the most important principle of which was the sanctioning of the equality of both spouses before the law, marked a significant departure from the civil code of 1942 and the penal code of 1930, premised on the celebration of the family as a political institution and on the supremacy of the husband (Ginsborg 2003: 370). Yet, this legislative progress notwithstanding, Italian society was still deeply conservative and heavily influenced by the Church, with sexuality still being demonised and contraception and sex education considered taboo topics.⁶⁸ In overt opposition to the milieu to which she belongs, Piera’s mother eschews her marital roles and she is happy to leave the domestic chores to a loving daughter and a dutiful husband, whose devotion for her will always remain unquestioned. Already a single mother before marrying Piera’s father, she continues to live her sexuality unapologetically even within the marital ties; she loves men and women alike and she collects lovers without hiding it from her daughter. In fact, she goes so far as to instigate Piera’s sexual initiation, inviting her to share her own sexual partners.

Her unconventionality but also, at a metaphorical level, the clash between the Semiotic (nature) and the Symbolic (culture) embodied within her character and her adherence to the former realm, is exemplified by her behaving according to the cycle of the seasons: ‘mia madre era molto divisa, ma con dei cicli, dei periodi... durante l’inverno entrava in letargo... poi quando veniva marzo, aprile, cominciava a svegliarsi presto, [...] poi tornava ottobre e la sua vita cominciava a rallentare, la sua testa si appesantiva, cominciava a dormire’ (*Storia* 19). Here, the reference to the goddess Demeter, associated

⁶⁸ The ban on the advertising of contraception in Italy was only lifted in 1971.

with the flourishing of the earth and the cycle of the seasons, immediately comes to the fore. As the Greek myth goes, in order to look for her daughter Persephone who has been abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld, and taken to his realm, Demeter renounces her divine earthly functions bringing about winter and the sterility of the earth. In her revisionist philosophical work *Nonostante Platone* (1990), Cavarero appropriates the Greek myth and turns it to feminist ends. The myth of Demeter becomes, in Cavarero's hands, a timeless narration that stands for the right to generate, or not to generate, life; it is a cry for women's vindication of control over their bodies and sexuality. Opening some scope for women to disentangle themselves from the constraints of the institutionalisation of reproductive functions to which they have traditionally been relegated within patriarchy, I argue that this reappropriation of one's biological specificity also holds a queer potential, which is fully exploited in Maraini's text. In the same way as Demeter, Piera's mother is also attuned to the cycles of nature ('d'inverno dormiva e in estate si risvegliava'; *Storia* 18) thus failing to identify with socio-cultural gender scripts. In so doing, she can be said to embrace the notion of 'queer time' advanced by Halberstam as far as the leaving behind of 'the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and the family' is concerned (2005: 1). Her winter self-seclusions, when she shuts herself away, denote alienation from the familial obligations and her role as a dutiful wife. As Halberstam puts it, '[f]amily time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child-rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children's needs, and it relates to beliefs about children's health and healthful environment for child rearing' (2005: 5). Piera's mother knows no family time, for she fails to abide by her role as a maternal figure ('Il suo non essere madre'; *Storia* 14), while also backing out of the domestic chores: 'Tua madre non li faceva mai i lavori di casa?' / 'Mai. Odiava tutto quello che riguardava la casa. Di solito li facevo io. O il babbo' (*Storia* 14).

During her summer escapades, on the other hand, the 'moraccia' leaves the house and carves out another space for herself, one that allows her to unbridle her sexuality: 'cominciava così la sua gimcana: la bicicletta, gli uomini, i bar' (*Storia* 19). Piera's mother's subversion can be seen as an attempt to reconceptualise the patriarchal notions of space and spatiality understood, with Grosz, as the effacement of women and their confinement to the sphere of domesticity: 'the erasure of the bodies and contributions of women/mothers and

the refusal to acknowledge the debt to the maternal body that they owe' (1995: 121). In her study of the spatial organisation, both literal and metaphorical, of Western society and the position that the female body occupies within it, Grosz observes that 'women become the guardians of the private and the interpersonal, while men build conceptual and material worlds' (Grosz: 1995: 121). Defeating this logic of seclusion and marginalisation, Piera's mother rebels against the constrictive space available to women within patriarchy, which is emblematised by the enclosed receptacle of the maternal *chora*, taken as an image for maternity and femininity (Grosz 1995: 115)—an image that has permeated the philosophical tradition ever since Plato. Grosz's claim that '*Chora* emblemizes a common manoeuvre used to maintain this domination: the silencing and endless metaphorization of femininity as the condition for men's self-representation and cultural production' (1995: 124) chimes with Maraini's claim that 'il cervello della donna è un cervello che non si conosce, è sempre stato chiuso nei muri, negli interni, con quei furori sopiti, quelle lunghissime malinconie, quei torpori, quelle sensualità' (*Storia* 47-48). By refusing to remain confined within the domestic walls, Piera's mother disturbs the patriarchal logic of spatial organisation that would limit women to domesticity, and overthrows it. Deserting her marital and maternal duties, she flees the home to meet with her (younger) lovers, loving men and women alike: 'lei andava a fare l'amore di notte, o di mattina al fiume... Era molto amata dagli uomini ma anche dalle donne' (*Storia* 108). In doing so, she carves out a new space for herself that, including inter-generational and same-sex possibilities, becomes a queer space, understood as a field of possibilities free from the social and sexual obligations coming from a heterosexual marriage.

Displaying a non-normative sexual behaviour, Piera's mother is seen as dangerous in the eyes of society and, as such, she ought to be contained, regulated and, ultimately, corrected. Seclusion in a mental hospital is the price exacted for shattering to the core the foundations of the patriarchal family and the gender norms it sanctions. Foucault's theory of 'docile bodies' as foregrounded in his *Discipline and Punish* (originally published in 1977) is at work in the institutionalisation of gender roles that takes place in Maraini's text. According to Foucault, individuals are subject to all-pervasive forms of control operated by society as a whole, a notion that he associates to the model of the Panopticon, a prison designed in a way that allows for the constant surveillance of the prisoners, who thus become

their own guards out of fear of being constantly observed (Foucault 1991: 200-202). The philosopher sees this model as extending far beyond the Panopticon and into everyday life, as exemplified in the indoctrination of the individual carried out through a set of institutions (prisons, schools, asylums, hospitals, the workplace, or the family) that regulate every aspect of modern life. Disciplinary power is not, for Foucault, aimed at inflicting physical pain; violence in modern times manifests itself through the control of the ‘body’ of the individual, which is made ‘docile’—that is to say, made to fit the norm. This form of ubiquitous and insidious controlling mechanisms can be accounted for in *Storia di Piera*, inasmuch as ‘the behavior of individuals is regulated not through overt repression but through a set of standards and values associated with normality’ (McNay 1994: 95). The reason why Piera’s mother is confined to a normalising institution such as the asylum—a ‘place of tolerance’, in Foucault’s account—is, quite simply, because she ought to be ‘disciplined’ and corrected. In the eyes of society she is a deranged temptress, seclusion being the only viable measure to keep her out of sin, and to restore the decorum and order of the patriarchal family. Her cry against non-conformity will remain unheard and she will spend her last days in the seclusion of a mental hospital, her punishment for defying the symbolic order from which she is controlled and defined as a social subject. Sexuality—particularly here, female sexuality—is seen as sinful and as such it is disciplined into submission. In that respect, we could say that the treatment accorded to the character of Piera’s mother is reminiscent of that of Teresa, Maraini’s protagonist of *Memorie di una Ladra* (1972), insofar as theirs is a fate of marginalisation from society. Quite emblematically, Teresa’s incarcerations are also marked by solitude for months on end: ‘nessuno mi veniva a trovare, nessuno mi portava niente. Mai nessuno’ (*Memorie di una ladra* 63) and again, when she is confined to the mental hospital: ‘Mentre ero lì non m’è venuto a trovare nessuno della famiglia’; *Memorie di una ladra* 30). The isolation suffered by Teresa and Piera’s mother stands as an indictment, on the part of Maraini, of the social condition of women in a rigidly patriarchal environment whereby little space is allotted to them, outside the conventional social script of wife and mother. Not adhering fully to either role, ‘la moraccia’ is considered a dysfunctional woman, and as such she is rejected by a societal order that does not validate her as its member.

In her compelling study of the theme of the female double in the work of Matilde Serao, Ursula Fanning contrasts the archetypal of ‘the ‘angel in the house’ with ‘the monster

outside', a polarisation corresponding to two opposing, yet interrelated, literary images of women (1987: 67). The scholar's characterisation of the figure of the 'monster' as 'a female character who is firmly located outside the idyllic sphere of domesticity' (1987: 67) is applicable to Piera's mother. The subversiveness of this negative archetypal of 'woman' as brought to the fore by Fanning's study, helps cast some light on the disruptive potential of Piera's mother's unbridled sexuality and to understand the treatment that society reserves to this non-conventional character. Taking the two literary images recalled above as the projection of the male psyche as for, respectively, what makes for 'woman' and what does not, it becomes clear how the maternal figure in *Storia di Piera* fails to conform to the script of the 'angel', the role that Italian Catholic society would advocate for women—demonising, instead, the manifestation of female sexuality. Such is the paradox of the 'Virgin-Mother', that is, the contradiction whereby 'the notion that a mother is essentially a virgin who puts up with her husband's violence for the sake of her love for her son' (Accati 1995: 254). Identifying this as the founding principle of Catholicism, Luisa Accati stresses the difficulty in overcoming the perpetuation of the self-sacrificing wife as the role model to which Italian women are called to aspire, pointing out the repercussions that this has in terms of female sexuality:

The sex-phobic upbringing which Catholic (and Protestant too) women have undergone has thoroughly censored the sexuality of the mother, creating as a consequence some confusion between personal autonomy—which consists of being able to choose or reject a love object—and chastity or virginity, which result from repression and an incapacity to cope with a love object. Personal autonomy is different from the complete denial of sexuality. Only if we are able to feel desire can we freely choose to accept or reject a love object: to be freely unmarried or married, mother or not; to be daughters who identify with their father, with their mother, or with both. (1995: 255)

Accati's words aptly encapsulate the workings of sexual indoctrination in the shaping of one's subjectivity, that is to say, the production of the individual resulting from a process of normalisation that sets out normative and deviant behaviours—which, in Maraini's text, translates into exclusion deriving from non-compliance with societal expectations and electroshock therapy as the price for subverting the norm.

Piera's mother fails to conform to the laws of patriarchy, exhibiting instead her *jouissance*; culpable, in the eyes of society, of defying the symbolic order, she is declared

mad. Problematising the societal treatment of non-normative individuals, Maraini asks, rhetorically: ‘Una donna che ha voglia di fare l’amore così selvaggiamente, fuori dalle istituzioni, non può essere che una pazza, no?’ (*Storia* 109). However, what others perceive as an illness, for Piera, who will always refuse to listen to everybody else’s judgment, is but ‘una forza meravigliosa’ (*Storia* 108) that possesses all the power of attraction. Imperturbable when faced with people’s dirty looks and scorn towards her mother, the latter acquires in her eyes a somewhat mythical dimension as a victim of society, ‘una persona tragica’ (*Storia* 15). Piera’s mother epitomises the mechanisms of power played upon the body, particularly here, the female body. This is well encapsulated in Butler’s words when she reasons over the fact that ‘what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but [the] surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become [...] the limits of the social *per se*’ (Butler 1993: 167). As we see it at play with the mother of Piera degli Esposti in her semi-biographical account, then, one’s body can never be a mere biological fact, insofar as it is always, inevitably, interpreted and acted upon by the societal order in which one is enmeshed.

2.2.2 Incestuous Kinships and Non-conforming Gender Identifications

While it is true that Piera’s mother recalls the figure of Suna from *Donna in guerra* because of her promiscuity and tragic fate of marginalisation, Piera herself also displays affinities with the same character in virtue of her polymorphous sexual identification. She has no qualms in admitting her attraction towards both parents and the fact of sharing sexual partners with her mother out of a wish to possess her through their bodies (*Storia* 22). In doing so, she defies the incest taboo but also the Freudian Oedipal myth that would have the little girl re-route her feelings for her first love-object, the maternal figure, towards the father—thus attaining a ‘positive’ feminine identity. Instead, Piera fantasises about her mother’s body whilst continuing to feel an incestuous attachment for her father, which leads people at the hospice to believe that the two are lovers: ‘E io tornavo sempre a salutarlo: ciao

cocchino, lo chiamavo sempre così: cocco, cocchino... E andavo via. Tutti dicevano: ha una moglie così giovane' (*Storia* 59).⁶⁹

With regard to her sexual embodiment, Piera longs to possess virile attributes, thus pointing towards a more nuanced understanding of gender and sexual categories and identifying with a form of 'female masculinity', understood, according to Judith Halberstam, as 'a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity' (1998: 9). Her non-conforming gender identification, made even more striking by contrast with the effeminate looks of her brother, makes her feel, just like Suna in *Donna in guerra*, 'half man, half woman', and such is how her father perceives her: 'Ho l'impressione che delle volte mio padre credesse di aver fatto una specie di uomo: metà uomo e metà donna [...] sembrava invece che dubitasse a volte del mio essere femminile' (*Storia* 37). With her brother, Piera plays at disentangling gender from sex, in adherence to Halberstam's postulate that masculinity should not, or not strictly, be confined to the male body alone (1998: 1). She recalls:

P. Non tanto il corpo dell'uomo: le spalle, il collo, i capelli, il dorso, le natiche, non tanto. Il corpo di un uomo non mi interessa tanto, quello che guarderei da morire è il suo membro,

D. Vorresti averlo tu...

P. Sì ecco, con mio fratello per esempio – oltretutto mi somiglia, ha tutte le mie sembianze, ma è molto più femminile di me: sì naso più piccolo, bocca più carnosa, occhi verdi, è molto bello – io ero sempre lì a truccarlo, pasticciarlo; poi dicevo: ecco sei una donna. E io ero l'uomo. (*Storia* 39)

By queerly identifying as man and asserting the possibility for an incongruity between gender behaviour and biological sex, Piera is here embracing a central concept in Butler's formulation, namely, the artificiality of gender roles understood as parts to be learned and performed, that is, constructed through their repetitive performance (1999). By failing to recite the feminine role ('io mi vedevo ridicola con certi tacchi alti'; *Storia* 33), and entrusting it, albeit jokingly, to her brother, dressing him in women's clothes and making

⁶⁹ Incidentally, in the homonymous film based on *Storia di Piera*, produced by Marco Ferreri in 1983, the relationship between father and daughter is depicted in even more explicitly incestuous undertones, an ambiguity whose biographical ground is made plausible by the fact that Piera degli Esposti herself worked, alongside Maraini, on the screenplay.

him up, Piera's plays expose the imitative nature of gender and come to signify 'the occasion for the critical reworking of apparently constitutive gender norms' (Butler 1993: x).

Piera casts off heteronormative expectations on women's bodies and considers childbirth as a form of violence: 'Il parto io l'ho sempre visto come una cattiveria sul mio corpo, una violenza' (*Storia* 64). Discouraged by the image of her sister's (clandestine) pregnancy 'tutta fasciata, con la proibizione di mettere pure il naso fuori di casa, la pancia stretta, tutto di nascosto, la violenza addosso la paura' (*Storia* 63), she has her first abortion aged eighteen, which will be followed by eight more. What we understand, from her patchy and at times difficult to follow stream of consciousness, is that Piera would keep the baby until the third month, before deciding to terminate the gestation. Shockingly as it might seem, her choices demand to be regarded as the product of a coercive approach to sexuality and the lack of sex education ('quando io avevo diciotto anni non c'erano gli anticoncezionali, non se ne parlava nemmeno'; *Storia* 62). Aware of the social expectations deriving from the onset of her menstruation (*Storia* 63), Piera approaches her sexed nature in a way that chimes with the Butlerian idea that sex is also, in the same way as gender, the performative product of discursive and normative practices. Disentangling her body from its biological destiny and reaffirming instead her refusal to procreate, Piera overthrows the normo-reproductive logics of heterosexuality refuting the 'enforced cultural performance' (Butler 1994: 32) of woman's body as naturally preordained to bear progeny.

Her unconventionality and non-normative behaviours, however, do not leave Piera immune from contradictions, nor do they prevent her from falling prey to the very same heterosexual assumptions that, we have said, she would otherwise seek to dismantle. This incongruity becomes clear when she measures her femininity against what she sees as the 'real' one embodied by her mother, thus reasserting the assumption that gender roles stem 'naturally' from biological sex: 'una donna così roboante nel suo essere donna, così nerissima mia madre, con i capelli neri lunghi, quasi blu, un vitino stretto, un sedere a mandolino, un seno enorme, insomma una donna vera, bellissima' (*Storia* 37). Maraini seems to capture this incongruity when she asks: 'E tu non ti consideravi una donna vera?' (*Storia* 36; my own emphasis), thus exposing the heteronormative belief of a seemingly transparent correlation between gender and sex. As such, Piera oscillates between displaying a form of female masculinity and reasserting normative gender assumptions, ultimately

censoring the arousal of possible same-sex desires and subsuming her homosexual fantasies to traditional gender binaries: ‘Per me il corpo femminile è familiare, gli sono riconoscente ma non riesco ad andare più in là di questo formicolio...ma forse è una dimensione voyeuristica, forse mi piace vedermi come un uomo, come piaceva a mia madre...’ (*Storia* 133).

Maraini’s interview with Piera skilfully intertwines different, and at times even conflicting, discourses on sexual embodiment that reveal the powerful cultural constraints regulating it. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler explores the process of subjectivity formation as inevitably shaped by the dyadic relationship with the other, which she calls, significantly, ‘the frame of reference and normative horizon that hold and confer my potential for becoming a recognizable subject’ (2005: 23). Read in the light of Butler’s words, Piera’s discordant and contradictory sexual selves would then stand as a testimony to the impossibility of transparent self-knowability and the fact that our understanding of ourselves is always, already, shaped by ‘the social workings of normativity that condition both subject production and intersubjective exchange’ (Butler 2005: 23). In *Storia di Piera*, the Butlerian normative Other would thus be the highly censoring and constrictive society in which the protagonist and her mother live, and whose conditioning result in the conflictual subjectivity of the former and the marginalisation of the latter. Its ambiguities notwithstanding, the text presents itself as a call for more fluid gender roles, which is well encapsulated in Maraini’s concluding words on the necessity for exploring one’s sexuality and disenfranchising it from predetermined and fixed heterosexual obligations: ‘Ecco tua madre, mia madre; chissà cosa abbiamo perduto del primo amore con le nostre madri, del primo rapporto carnale dico...quell’essersi lasciate deviare verso i padri...se fossimo più libere saremmo omosessuali o bisessuali o magari torneremmo a scegliere il corpo maschile, è impossibile saperlo’ (*Storia* 134).

2.3 *Lettere a Marina*. The Lesbian Plot Rewritten

Published in 1981, *Lettere a Marina* consists of seventy-eight unsent letters that Bianca, the first-person narrating voice, writes to the eponymous addressee of the book’s title, who is also her ex-lover. What for Bianca begins as an epistolary correspondence, ends with the recreation of her own past, with the narration tracing the social and familial forces that the protagonist confronts as she struggles to untangle herself from a net of seemingly

inextricable dynamics: her love affairs, her porous sexuality, her inability to finish the book on which she is working as a professional writer. Accredited for the representation of the taboo topic of love between women, Maraini's novel exposes the process of sexualisation through the workings of societal disciplinary powers and challenges it by staging non-binary sexual practises that break down the normative ideal. By problematising sexual 'normality', *Lettere a Marina* raises important questions about one's identity and its alleged manifestation through corporeal and sexual acts. Most importantly still, and in line with a notion of queer subjectivity understood as 'the proliferation of sexualities beyond the notion of two' (Grosz 2013: 209), it attests to the myriad of possibilities and transformability of sexuality itself.

Critical studies on *Lettere a Marina* have centred on the recuperation of a female genealogy (Sumeli Weinberg 1993; Picchiotti 2002), its subversion of feminine writing in general and of the epistolary genre in particular (Zaczek 1997; Salsini 2001) or the treatment of the semi-autobiographical theme of abortion (Lucamante 2008). Criticism focussing specifically on gender has tackled the Irigarayan 'economy of fluids' subtending the narrative style (Masland 1994), the protagonist's anxiety towards her own lesbian desires (Ballaro 1996) or her resistance to a monolithic sexuality (Gabriele 2002). Others have seen the text as a utopian celebration of a woman-to-woman relationship (Merry 1990)—a reading that, as I shall explain, risks reiterating a stereotypical and romanticised representation of female homosexuality that obliterates its erotic nature altogether. Rather than discussing single lesbian moments in the narrative, I am more interested in investigating how *Lettere a Marina* calls into question heterosexual and homosexual identity categories alike, advocating instead fluid, non-binary possibilities. This subversion of pre-established categories is performed in the text at multiple narrative levels, the result being that textuality (the novel itself, and the language employed therein) and sexuality (the sexual experiences staged within the text) come to mirror one another.

Lamenting the scarcity of lesbian discourse in Italian Women's Studies, in her 'An Apology for Lesbian Visibility', Tommasina Gabriele refers to the scholarly blindness with respect to *Lettere a Marina* (2010: 257-8). The critic's preoccupations risk to deceive, precisely, what her previous study on the very same novel had aptly sought to uncover—namely, the unclassifiable sexuality staged through the character of Bianca (Gabriele 2002).

My qualms as to the pigeonholing of *Lettere a Marina* as a lesbian text rest on the assumption that ‘lesbianism and gay male sexuality are, as much as heterosexuality, products of patriarchy’ inasmuch as ‘[t]here is no pure sexuality, no inherently transgressive sexual practice, no sexuality beyond or outside the limits of patriarchal models’ (Grosz 1995: 181). This resonates with Butler’s position, when, via Foucault, she premises that ‘the affirmation of “homosexuality is itself an instance of a homophobic discourse”, insofar as this is defined according to, indeed measured against, heterosexual norms, the pre-condition for its existence (Butler 1991: 14). Rather than looking at Maraini’s text as a coming out narrative that presents woman-to-woman relationship as an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality (an interpretation that would replicate the very same binary that Maraini’s novel aims at challenging), I believe that a more productive way to read *Lettere a Marina* is to look at how it refuses to be contained within the straightjacket of clear-cut ‘destin[i] da etichetta’ (*Lettere* 87).⁷⁰ In her introduction to the special issue of *differences* entitled ‘Queer Theory’, Teresa de Lauretis expresses her concerns about encaging same-sex sexual practises within labels such as ‘lesbian’ (and its male equivalent, ‘gay’). In order to ‘avoid all these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities’, the scholar superimposes ‘queer’ to the term ‘lesbian’, and to any other encoding sexual label (1991: v). It is within a ‘queer’ epistemology of this kind, with a focus on the fluidity of sexual identity, that I shall frame my reading of *Lettere a Marina* and show how, by way of eroticising it and emphasising its plasticity, the novel succeeds in queering the traditional lesbian plot.

2.3.1 Eroticising the (Con)fusion with the Maternal

At the beginning of the narration, we learn that Bianca has left Rome for a Southern seaside town, from which she is now writing, in order to escape the fury of a ‘figlia che mi vuole

⁷⁰ Although Gabriele, in her 2002 study of *Lettere a Marina*, announces to follow this trajectory, and does so by emphasising the non-conformity of the protagonist’s sexual behaviour, she also refers to it as ‘bisexuality, fraught with dilemma’ (2002: 247). I find this claim problematic because it stands in contrast to the protagonist’s disagreement with a labelling of this sort, and with any other encoding sexual markers (‘destini da etichetta’, in her own words). Conversely, the point I am trying to put forward in my reading of the novel is its calling for the necessity of not encaging one’s sexuality in a pre-conceived label—be it ‘homo’, ‘hetero’, or even ‘bi’—based on something as transient and context-contingent, hence open to constant renegotiation, as *any* sexual choice inevitably is.

mangiare' (*Lettere a Marina* 21).⁷¹ Marina's ambiguity towards Bianca is well encapsulated in a definition by critic Barbara Maria Zaczek who refers to her as the protagonist's 'enemy-lover' (1997:152), which aptly summarises the sadistic and conflicting nature of the bond between the two women, a 'spinoso amore' (*Lettere* 6) made of 'una tensione violenta di torture e delizie' (*Lettere* 173). The ambiguity intrinsic to their relationship extends also to the physical characterisation of Marina, whom Bianca sees as split in two distinct yet harmonious halves: 'di sotto terreno massiccio di sopra leggero fragile' (*Lettere* 116). The passages recounting their sexual encounters abound with oral imagery, with smell and taste inscribed onto the page: 'Improvvisamente mi denudi un seno e lo prendi in bocca con grazia infelice. E io non oso fiatare. So che un rifiuto in quel momento sarebbe veleno. Marina per favore smettiamo. Ma tu non parli più ingolli il mio latte e ti ubriachi ingordamente' (*Lettere* 14). Although here it is Marina who initiates the sadomasochist seduction game, Bianca herself is not immune from impulses of carnal violence:

Come quella volta che ti ho spalmato di miele la pancia il collo le natiche ma non col miele dei gigli della mia rivale danese nel cuore di mio padre ma un altro miele più pesante e nuovo. Volevo cambiarti odore sapore volevo farti a pezzi e il miele era il tuo sangue troppo dolce e conosciuto che avrei inghiottito come un castigo. (*Lettere* 22)

The active and passive roles played out by the two lovers notwithstanding, what interests me here is the recurrence of images of orality, associated with food and/or incorporation ('latte'; 'miele') and gustatory and olfactory sensations ('dolce'; 'odore'; 'sapore'), which in turn, are replicated by evocative physical details that, condensing maternal subtexts, recall the generative potential of women's body ('seno'; 'pancia'). This stress on images and feelings associated with oral pleasures is highly suggestive of what Freud identifies as the first stage of psychosexual development in infancy, mouth being the child's primary erogenous zone. Bianca herself refers to their love making as 'il gioco della madre e della figlia' (*Lettere* 53), a maternal fusion that replicates the semiotic unity while powerfully eroticising it through the staging of masochistic games of quasi-murderous undertones, which dramatises the sexual act through disturbing wishes of 'tearing into pieces' or 'swallowing up' the other. In Freud's account of the formation of gender identity,

⁷¹ Hereafter referred to as *Lettere*.

the child would displace the attraction towards the parent of the same sex onto the opposite sex parent. What is the result of the fear of castration for the boy would thus be, for the girl, the consequence of the discovery of her mother's castration, which is also her own. In a transgressive revision of the old Freudian tale, Marina is less an incomplete, castrated mother, than a fertile and abundant one, as her physical characterisation clearly suggests: 'un sedere da feticcio africano che suggerisce idee di fecondità di ricchezza di potenza carnale' (*Lettere* 116). The roundness of the woman's body, with her 'fianchi larghi e accoglienti natiche come montagne di pasta lievitata' (*Lettere* 116) is replicated in the watery images that Bianca uses to describe the marine quality of hers, which is already contained in her name: 'il tuo nome mi faceva pensare a un acciottolato appena coperto da un'acqua fresca e lucente' (*Lettere* 29-30).

Water, the maternal element *par excellence*, conjures up an amniotic environment, providing a textual reminder of the mother/daughter bonding; but it also points to a lack of boundaries, a primordial fusion of mutual arousal between mother and child. Thus eroticised, the maternal metaphor comes to symbolise a challenge to the incest taboo (Ballaro 1996: 182), a looming threat to the symbolic order that works towards the deconstruction of gender hierarchies. And if Bianca's recalling the sway her young and beautiful father had over her heart, as a child ('Una bambina sedotta dal padre'; *Lettere* 23) would seem to contradict this last point, it is her mother that she ultimately desires. As re-enacted through her love with Marina, the more or less explicit maternal imagery that permeates the text would stand as a narrative hint that Bianca's desire for her lover is, also, a projection of her desire for the mother, a position with which she concurs: 'La tentazione d'incesto con la madre ha queste forme: è *vasto liquido* minaccioso ed esaltante' (*Lettere* 132; my own emphasis).⁷² The fluidity conjured up by the image of water that permeates the text—not only at a thematic

⁷² With regard to this point, critic Sumeli Weinberg notes that 'la figlia che tradisce la madre per rincorrere e contenere il padre, lo segue nel suo mondo dove infine si troverà persa, sola, in cerca della via del ritorno' (1993: 84) is a recurrent topos in Maraini's literary production. Two emblematic examples are *Storia di Piera* (1980), quoted by Weinberg, but also, I would like to add, the more recent *La nave per Kobe* (2001), the autobiographical account of Dacia's childhood, during her family's internment in a fascist concentration camp in Japan, and the sway that 'l'ostile e affascinante mondo dei padri' then held on her (*Storia* 10). The term is Maraini's own coinage. It appeared for the first time in the introduction to *Storia di Piera*. On the professed fascination of Maraini towards her own father, see *Bagheria* (1993) and *La nave per Kobe. Diari giapponesi di mia madre* (2001).

level but also, as we shall see, at a structural one—and that is embodied by the character of Marina, provides a unifying narrative thread and, at once, a metaphorical image of the breaking down of constrictive gender norms, among which is the incest taboo. Bianca's 'return to the mother', however, is not free from psychic anxieties. Admittedly, at first, abiding by the Freudian gender script that would want the girl to choose the father over the mother ('Chi vuoi sposare tu? Mamma. Non si può. Allora papà', *Lettere* 129), Bianca finally relives her wish of maternal fulfilment with Marina. This semiotic (re)union with the mother, however, appears jeopardised by the fear that the lesbian act generates in her: 'Solo di una cosa avevo paura. Il momento in cui mi sarei trovata a tu per tu con il tuo sesso' (*Lettere* 33). When this happens, Bianca goes as far as to see the reflection of her mother's face in her lover's sex. Critics have stressed how the act of making love to another woman is for Bianca a source of panic, which has led some to call the passages describing her sexual encounters with Marina 'the decisive moments of freaking out in the text' (Ballaro 1996: 184). Bianca's anxiety notwithstanding, I would argue that the character's deep-seated fears would rather stand as a point of resistance preventing her from ultimately lapsing into a pre-symbolic state, which is encapsulated in the image of the 'cave', used in the text as a signifier for Marina's sex and, metaphorically, the maternal womb ('quel frutto marino quel muscolo che respira dentro una cavità ombrosa'; *Lettere* 33). In opposition to those feminist formulations that would see the regression into a pre-verbal, pre-cultural semiotic as the only form of resistance to the patriarchal symbolic—a position that has women perpetually confined in a liminal province, outside of culture—Maraini presents us with an alternative scenario where, refreshingly, patriarchal strictures are defeated without lapsing into an undifferentiated maternal amalgam, a locus of primeval darkness of which the image of the cave provides a powerful textual reminder.⁷³

Bianca herself ultimately recognises the source of her distress to be 'una rimossa lontanissima tentazione d'incesto' (*Lettere* 34). This 'return of the repressed', to call it in Freudian terms, is emblematically rendered in a passage that stands out for the thematically suggestive choice of imagery. Told in a visionary fashion and as a stream of consciousness that is often deployed in the narration to recall the protagonist's dreams, the lover's sex

⁷³ On the pre-cultural semiotic, see Kristeva 1984. On the perils that this entails for women, see Butler 1999 (esp. 101-119).

becomes first a sea fruit, then the ruins of a childhood house, the garden statue of one of her father's lovers, the chapel of Bianca's college, the holy bread, her mother's hands, an unmade bed, a childhood dress of hers and, finally, a leaking tap (*Lettere* 33). This most original conglomerate of symbols cannot possibly be coincidental in a novel so deeply concerned with the exploration of language. All of the text's main themes are included therein: the maternal/watery imagery, the love for the father, childhood memories of religious undertones as well as the maternal presence, evoked both physically (the reference to the mother's hands) and psychologically (the anxiety Bianca admits these memories have awoken in her). Reminiscent of the technique of free association, the exploitation of the psychoanalytic device allows Maraini to uncover Bianca's childhood traumas and long repressed memories.⁷⁴ The character refers to her visionary whirlwind as 'un turbinio di cose perdute e rimosse che tornavano dandomi l'affanno' (*Lettere* 33). Crucial to our understanding of the passage is the use of 'rimoss[o]', alluding to long suppressed wishes, in this case, specifically, the desire for the mother that, bottled-up during her childhood, has now broken through the censorship of Bianca's ego. This passage, I would argue, casts new light on Bianca's fear, allowing us to ascribe it to the character's awareness of going against the 'proibizioni del padre' (*Lettere* 34)—with 'father' to be understood in Lacanian terms as the patriarchal restrictions on the management of one's sexuality rather than the ambivalence intrinsic to her alleged lesbianism, as some critics have implied.

What we see in the novel is a constant negotiation of one's sexuality, which is further endorsed by the plasticity of the masculine and feminine roles played by the two lovers:

Come sottrarmi a quella stretta? Finiamo sdraiate testa contro testa a baciarsi goffamente. Mi tiri via i vestiti ti impossessi di me con una violenza da mozzare il fiato. Sei repellente nella tua tiepidezza mi urli nell'orecchio non ti voglio più mi fai orrore non sai regalare niente ti rintani lontana da me mi respingi anche se sei qui mi respingi volgarmente tu gridi. (*Lettere* 14)

Here, a masculine sexual role does not denote masculinity. Marina is not acting as a surrogate male for the simple fact of displaying features that, being associated with activity,

⁷⁴ Free association is a psychoanalytic technique associated with Freud whereby the analysand is encouraged to talk spontaneously as to bring unconscious material to the surface and allow for its interpretation. For more on the practice, see Kris 1996.

are conventionally signified as masculine, in compliance with the Butlerian belief of gender as performative; a *doing* rather than a *being* (Butler 1999: 33). What is more, her alleged mannishness is offset by moments of child-like tenderness and mutual nurturance with Bianca:

Posso bere il tuo latte? Ti sei accucciata fra le mie braccia e hai preso a succhiarmi il seno. Era il gioco della mamma e della figlia. Dicevi che era un latte buonissimo denso e dolce e sembrava che inghiottissi davvero. Come il latte condensato Nestlé sai ma più buono dicevi. E io ti accarezzavo i capelli come si carezzano a una neonata. (*Lettere* 53)

Bianca herself calls their relationship ‘un gioco crudele e morboso’ (*Lettere* 12) oscillating between mutual masochistic fantasies (‘mi era venuta voglia di farti male di penetrarti’; *Lettere* 173) and maternal tenderness (‘ci siamo addormentate così abbracciate coi capelli umidi appiccicati alle guance un leggero odore di latte materno e pelle sfregata col borotalco’; *Lettere* 53-54). What this sexual role reversal highlights is the pliability inherent to the mother/daughter play staged by the two lovers, making the latter less a ‘mirror-stage duplicat[e]’ (Grosz 1995: 181) than a non-hierarchical, non-polarised sexual relation. By staging a same-sex relationship which is ‘no better, nor any worse, than the complexities involved in all sociosexual interrelations’ (Grosz 1995: 181), Maraini is explicitly refusing to adhere to a pre-conceived gender hierarchy and the comforting binarisms (male/female, active/passive) that this entails.

The problematisation of the assumption that sexual roles emanate from a natural substratum is described by Butler who, in a Foucauldian vein, premises that ‘[t]he notion that there might be a “truth” of sex [...] is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms’ (1999: 23). The performative displacement of the signifiers of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ elucidated by Butler and dramatised in Maraini’s text, challenges the naïve stereotype that sees love between women as less an actual sexual choice than an eroticised version of friendship. Queer critics concerned with the (mis)representation of homosexual female relationships have voiced their concerns towards a vision of lesbianism of the kind that Maraini’s novel seeks to oppose. Among them, de Lauretis has denounced what she sees as ‘the sweeping of lesbian sexuality and desire under the rug of sisterhood, female friendship, and the now

popular theme of the mother-daughter bond' (de Lauretis 1994: 116). Maraini was already addressing these preoccupations in her 1981 novel where, in contrast to the excess of sentimentalism commonly involved in thinking female-to-female desire, she confronts us with 'un mondo femminile pieno di spine e di dolcezze' (*Lettere* 59)—with the interplay of opposites, 'thorns' and 'sweetness', here recalling the ambiguity intrinsic to the characterisation of Marina, but also of the love and hate quality of her relationship with Bianca that my analysis has thus far tried to capture. Gender hierarchies thus subverted, the bond between the two lovers refuses to be read as an imperfect copy of a heterosexual one, that is, as a romanticised definition of woman-to-woman relationship that blurs lesbian desire by failing to see it as an actual sexual *choice*. I will expand on this last point in what follows, after discussing, in the next section, how fluidity in the novel is replicated at a structural level by the disruption of conventional syntax and the blurring of the literary genre of the epistolary novel, with sexuality and textuality becoming inextricably interwoven.

2.3.2 Sexual / Textual Fluidity: 'un gioco di rimandi che finisce nel vuoto'

Lettere a Marina complicates the 'hetero', 'lesbo' (and also 'bi') binary asserting that sexual identity is a slippery and unstable concept, rather than a clear-cut category.⁷⁵ It mocks dualistic thinking, advocating instead multiple sexualities. At the beginning of the novel we learn that Bianca, before starting a relationship with Marina, has suffered from a miscarriage. We also become aware that she was the lover of a married man, Marco, whom she was still seeing at the time she was dating Marina. By the end of the narration, she is having an affair with the barman Damiano, while fantasising about his (female) lover. She loves women and men, or both at once, and she will continue to do so unapologetically, with her sexuality never coming to occupy fixed positions, thereby resisting essentialist, prescriptive interpretations of sexual roles. Through the character of the protagonist, Maraini shows us that gender is not an emanation of biological sex; instead, it is a 'free floating artifice' (Butler 1999: 10) that uncovers the restrictiveness of adhering to prefabricated sexual imperatives.

⁷⁵ The author's own stance on same sex love would seem to encourage this interpretation: 'Io dico che l'eterosessualità, così come viene vissuta oggi, non è né "normale", né "naturale", né "sana"' (*Paese Sera* 1981).

The novel also shows how the defiance of heterosexuality takes a toll on the transgressors of the patriarchal norm, the loss of social intelligibility being the price exacted for subverting the Law.⁷⁶ As a woman, and one who loves women, Bianca is marked off by the system twice over. This is well exemplified in the text in the way in which she is constantly reminded of the need to escape a binary schema and the imposition of rigid sexual categories by people surrounding her. The obsession of neighbours and strangers with her being ‘alone’ is quite meaningful in this respect: ‘Il giornalaio mi chiede: è sola? Non capisco bene cosa vuol dire sola senza figli sola senza marito sola senza madri padri sorelle?’ (*Lettere* 20). In a similar manner, Bianca’s next-door neighbour, Basilia, gives her quizzical looks trying to figure out why, being approximately her same age, she is still unmarried and childless (*Lettere* 175). In another moment in the text, a passer-by offers Bianca his protection, claiming that a woman should not be walking the street alone and, with a twist of irony on Maraini’s part, this very same person will end up harassing her (*Lettere* 69). The ongoing preoccupations of people towards Bianca’s marital status would reproduce an enduring story, the allegedly weakness of women and their need for protection, besides the assumption that this can be provided by men alone. But it also alludes to the defiance, and criticism, of a pre-conceived stereotypical role by which women are called to abide in patriarchy and which coincides with reproductive sexuality. Being ‘sola’, Bianca is denying her reproductive potential, putting forward an alternative life choice to compulsory maternity. The image of the ‘grande letto dai buoni odori di vita coniugale’ (*Lettere*: 21) of the pension where she is vacationing becomes emblematic in this respect, and can be read as a reminder of the protagonist’s evading the constraints of marital life as the only option for women. For not fitting the cultural ideals for her category, and for not performing her gender right, Bianca reveals the flimsiness of the founding principle of heterosexuality predicated upon the belief that masculinity and femininity are to be seen as natural expressions of, respectively, being a man or a woman, each expected to be sexually and/or romantically attracted to persons of the opposite sex/ gender.

⁷⁶ On the regulatory regime of heterosexuality and its exclusionary mechanisms, Butler explains: ‘the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures [...]. Hence, it is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less “human”, the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable.’ (1993: 8; Butler’s emphasis)

The porosity intrinsic to Bianca's sexuality permeates the narration at different textual levels, becoming an underlying narrative thread that hints at the implosion of boundaries carried out in the novel—be they societal norms or literary restrictions. In doing so, the text draws an analogy between a fluid sexuality on the one hand and a fluid textuality on the other. Paralleling the slippiness intrinsic to her sexual identity, Bianca's novel 'si sfalda tra le mani' (*Lettere* 118). In a similar manner, Maraini's own novel also escapes the constrictions of punctuation and syntax, flowing freely in a way that parallels the water imagery contained within, while at the same time acquiring an oral quality that brings it in line with a spoken text. *Lettere a Marina* directs constant attention to the process of writing and, in a self-reflexive (meta) endeavour, of itself as a text in the process of being written. The protagonist is a professional writer whose life 'revolves around her novel, and the act of writing dominates it completely' (Zaczek 1997: 158). At the same time, Bianca is also the addresser of a unilateral epistolary correspondence. Despite speaking to a specific addressee, as confirmed by the incipit 'Cara Marina' that invariably opens each of Bianca's letters, hers does not appear as a traditional epistolary exchange, but rather an inner monologue. Bianca wanders through the meanders of her past and her reminiscences are rendered in the written form, memories poured onto the page in a stream-of-consciousness like fashion. Marina, on the other hand, becomes but a literary expedient. She lives in Bianca's memory as a projection of their past affair, and we are told nothing of her, besides her physical description and her role in the relationship, a narrative neglect of the addressee which has led Rita Signorelli-Pappas to dismiss the text as a not too convincing use of the letter form (1988: 31-32).

Bianca is thus narrating voice (of Maraini's novel), author (of her own book and of her letters to Marina) and character at once. For writing in the first person, and for privileging the use of the present tense, she reduces the distance between the fictitious author (herself) and the readers, thus inviting the latter's identification. With this respect, her name is quite significant, suggesting as it does a blank piece of paper awaiting to be written up (Dagnino 1993: 186) or a fill-in-the-blank character, which contributes to further diminish the author/reader distance, calling us to occupy the space opened up by her name. On the other hand, the protagonist's continuous self-reflexive account of the process of her own writing underscores the activity, rather than its result. This emphasis on the *making* is in turn

evocative of a sexual identity in constant flux, which is as ‘unfinished’ as Bianca’s writing enterprises (her own novel and her epistolary correspondence) recalled within the text. As the narration ends, having finished her novel, Bianca admits her dislike towards it: ‘A casa ho riletto un pezzo del romanzo. Mi è sembrato bruttissimo’ (*Lettere* 203). Given such dismissive judgement, it would not be too arduous for us to advance the possibility of her deciding to discard it and, quite possibly, to rewrite it all over again. Bianca’s book is, in her own words, ‘Un gioco di rimandi che finisce nel vuoto’ (*Lettere* 102) insofar as it denies fixity of meanings. The metaphor of writing as ‘void’ was used, in those very same years, in another Italian novel, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, by Italo Calvino (1979), a text hailed by critics as a masterpiece of postmodern literature.⁷⁷ I would suggest that, in *Lettere a Marina*, it is less about a lack of ultimate meaning, as is for Calvino’s book, than a generative proliferation of the same. Translated into queer terms, and to borrow Grosz’s definition that I recalled at the beginning of this section, this implies a shattering of the hetero/homo dualism, as well as going beyond ‘the notion of two’, pointing instead to the instability of identity categories.

Bianca wishes to recover that unity which is attainable only through the ‘text’ of one’s life story: ‘Tu amavi una donna senza storia nata ogni giorno dalla pancia buia del tempo’ (*Lettere a Marina* 5), as the incipit of her diary goes. In the act of pinning down the genesis of her past love affair, Bianca, immersed in the ‘spontaneous auto-narration of memory’ (Cavarero 2000: 33), re-lives the recollections of her lesbian relationship for which the present, what she thinks or feels, works as a trigger, in a process which is vaguely reminiscent of a Proustian *rechère*. For being the product of the ‘uncontrollable narrative impulse of memory’, her diary-life story is ‘necessarily discontinuous – fragmentary, fleeting, and even casual’ (Cavarero, 2000: 35). As a result, at a micro-level, the narration seems to reproduce the rhythm of her thoughts coming close to a form of *oral* writing; an incoherent transcription of past recollections that does not submit to any internal logic, in a sort of interior monologue which gives the reader the illusion of being inside the mind of the protagonist. And it is indeed striking how we will not encounter a single comma in the novel

⁷⁷ Calvino’s text is permeated with metaphors of writing, the latter depicted as an almost disconcerting experience: ‘every void continues in the void, every gap, even a short one, opens onto another gap, every chasm empties into the infinite abyss’ (1979: 82).

with the sole exception of the passages when Bianca is quoting from other texts.⁷⁸ These exceptions aside, the only signs of punctuation are periods and question marks. Language cracks under the constraints of linear structures and, free from graphic barriers, it proceeds through accumulation of metaphors becoming as fluid as the watery metaphors disseminated throughout. Bianca's physicality being virtually absent from the page, one could say that her character lives in the text through her sexuality. This lack of bodily contours implicit in the characterisation of the protagonist is, in turn, paralleled in the amalgam of genres to which the novel can be ascribed. In this respect, it could be argued that Maraini refashions the epistolary form and it does so by borrowing from different literary categories: epistolary novel, diary, autobiography. The composite nature of the result is hinted at in the text, in yet another self-referential passage: 'Non lo dici anche tu che le donne hanno sempre scritto memorie confessioni diari lettere?' (*Lettere* 39). *Lettere a Marina* is all of the above: 'memoirs', 'confessions', 'diaries' and 'letters' at the same time—the porosity of the novel once again mirroring its protagonist's sexual indefiniteness.

Not only is Bianca at odds with the gender roles that society would expect her to fulfil, she is equally unwilling to embrace a monolithic homosexuality either. In doing so, she manages to eschew the traps of an essentialist discourse lurking in heterosexual and homosexual manifestations alike, showing how these are but the two faces of the same (essentialist) coin. Thus, I will now turn my attention to the implications that aligning Maraini's prose with a typically feminine narrative style inevitably entails, attempting to rectify how the text has been interpreted by scholars in a way that exposes the novel to charges of essentialism. The style I am here referring to is the deconstructive practice of French feminism known as *écriture féminine*, whereby resistance against the male-centredness of Western traditional thought takes the form of a specifically feminine form of writing aimed at reactivating the nature of female corporeality (*jouissance*) and inscribing it onto the page. Bringing the discourse on the grounds of sexual difference as rooted in the body and invoking a pure or natural essence as constitutive of the subject, such practice

⁷⁸ Specifically, from the poems of Emily Dickinson (*Lettere* 101) or from the criticism of the latter's mentor, the critic Thomas W. Higgins (*Lettere* 100) or, again from Charlotte Wolff's psychoanalytical essays (*Lettere* 87).

would, however, run the risk of falling into the trap of essentialism—a charge that, as I will explain, does not apply to *Lettere a Marina*.

2.3.3 Semiotically Otherwise: the Critique of a Double-faced Essentialism

Although they have never come to represent a unitary group and their differences notwithstanding, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva are acknowledged to be the most significant representatives of *écriture féminine*, consisting in a new approach to thinking, and writing, about women's bodies and desires.⁷⁹ By unchaining a style that resembles a linguistic play, it inscribes feminine writing onto the fluidity of the body, or, in Kristeva's formulation, the pre-symbolic feminine, thus opposing it to the masculine repressive desires for linearity. This idea of reproducing in writing an almost erotic pleasure would be in line with Maraini's stance on literature as something 'profoundly feminine and maternal' (Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 2000: 29). On the erotic quality of writing, the author herself admits, in Barthesian undertones, 'Non vedo altro motivo che il piacere: si scrive spinti da un desiderio quasi erotico' (Gaglianone 1995: 5). It is not surprising, then, given Maraini's stand on the relationship between language and what are acknowledged as typically female qualities, that certain critics have linked her works and especially her early ones, to *écriture féminine* (Masland 1994; Properzi Nelsen 2000). Specifically with reference to *Lettere a Marina*, it has been noted how the almost ubiquitous liquid imagery, with water and milk being recurrent signifiers, would show affinities with the Irigarayan 'economy of fluids', a feminine imaginary whereby the dual structure of female genitalia is seen as metonymic of the plurality of women's pleasures (Masland 1994).

To align Maraini's prose to a typically feminine style such as the one advocated by French feminists of difference, however, is to place women's bodies, and their sexuality, at the centre. This claim is far from unproblematic, coming as it does dangerously close to biological essentialism, insofar as women's "natural" body, that which sanctions their difference from men's, is, precisely, the mark upon which their alleged inferiority has been historically constructed and maintained. Within the context of my reading of *Lettere a Marina*, Butler's criticism of Kristeva offers an interpretative key. I would thus like to take it

⁷⁹ Their prominence has been recognised, among others, by Toril Moi, in her seminal study of France-based contemporary feminist literary theory, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985)

up in support of my argument that some caution is necessary when ascribing Maraini's prose to a style that celebrates writing as the expression of a quintessentially female *essence*. Butler finds fault with Kristeva's theory of marginality, that is, the belief that feminist struggle can be carried out at a semiotic level, the realm of the incestuous fusion between mother and child where there is no language. Confining women at the margins of the patriarchal order, however, this theory can be seen as frustrating its own interests, for it would relegate women to a libidinal economy that, for being pre-verbal, is also pre-cultural (Butler 1999: 102).⁸⁰ This marginality of women in language would be exemplified in Maraini's novel through Bianca's struggle to find her own voice, as evinced by her initial inability to tell her life story, but also the story on which she is working as a professional writer. If we agree with a Lacanian interpretation that the acquisition of gender categories is concomitant with the acquisition of language, Bianca's writer's block, then, would symbolise the impossibility of women to speak, their remaining outside the realm of discourse, in the liminal condition exemplified by the pre-verbal Kristevan maternal.⁸¹ Besides, Bianca is writing from an unnamed place on the Southern coast of Italy, with the name of the city remaining unmentioned all throughout the narration further denoting marginalisation and physical displacement of the 'I' of the protagonist. Nonetheless, instead of leaving her character irremediably trapped in the condition of a marginalised other, as the narration progresses, Maraini restores her metaphorical aphasia. Bianca will eventually succeed in finishing her book. Metaphorically, one could say that, in doing so, she has found her own voice or, if we agree that language is a male province, that she has appropriated a masculine tool and made it her own; she has secured herself a place within a masculine symbolic, rather than keeping herself outside of it. Productive agency has thus been chosen over ineffectual separatism: not only will Bianca recuperate her life story, a process

⁸⁰ Braidotti makes an apology for the charge of essentialism with which *écriture féminine* has often been dismissed, particularly among some sectors of Anglo-American feminism, claiming that 'body', for French feminists, is not akin to the biological one or, rather, is contained into, but by no means limited to, it (1991: 219). Braidotti's arguments notwithstanding, the fact remains, however, that it is hard to resist reading some of the most suggestive evocations of the anatomical specificity of female corporeality as coming dangerously close to biological determinism—such as, for instance, Cixous's reference to an exclusively feminine form of writing whereby ink has been displaced by maternal milk (Cixous 1976).

⁸¹ This impossibility, for women, to occupy the position of subjects in language has long been a concern for Italian feminists. The historical silence of women is the subject matter also of Maraini's Campiello prize-winner novel *Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) that, following the life of a mute duchess living in the eighteenth century, can be read as a timeless narration of the silencing of women in patriarchy.

prompted by the letters that she writes to Marina and which become a pretext for delving into her own past, she will also, eventually, finish her novel.

Looking at the historical context in which *Lettere a Marina* was produced and, particularly, at the relationship between lesbianism and feminism, can be useful in order to fully appreciate the extent to which the text can be taken as a timely response to the debates that originated in those years as far as the addressing of what today we would call queer issues is concerned. In Italy, as in most Western countries, the years following the unrest brought about by the 1968 movements called for the destabilisation of existing hierarchies, among which was the heterosexual patriarchal society, and the representation of minority groups, such as gays and lesbians—who reunited around the revolutionary front *FUORI!*, the acronym for *Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano* (Malagrecia 2007: 98). Although the movement has been recognised as exemplary for its pioneering of a ‘theoretical framework for notions like radical difference, desire and gender performance’, its members were nonetheless more preoccupied with the needs of homosexual men than with those of homosexual women (Malagrecia 2007: 99-100). As a result, lesbians were doubly marginalised, being as they were excluded within the feminist groups and male homosexual movements alike. It has been noted that the 1980s in Italy marked a time of reticence on matters of sexuality. Emblematic in this respect is the stance adopted by the collective *Libreria delle donne di Milano*—a major point of reference within the context of Italian feminism of difference—for whom the prominence of sexual choices would indeed be detrimental to a female-identified politics (Dragone 2008: 49).⁸² It was within this context of struggle for public representation that the first lesbofeminist groups, such as *Identità Lesbica* and *Collegamento fra Lesbiche Italiane*, emerged in the mid-1980s (Gramolini, qtd. in Malagrecia 2007: 136). Lesbofeminism soon replaced its initial *doppia militanza*, the practice whereby lesbian women were seeking private spaces for self-analysis while still part of the feminist organisations, with a more markedly separatist stance. This latter strategy

⁸² An often cited turning point in the history of Italian lesbofeminism, and one indicative of the search for visibility by lesbian feminists, is the polemic following the publication, in 1983, of the issue *Più donne che uomini*, known as *Sottosopra verde*, by the Milanese *Libreria delle donne*—the document that put forward the notion of *affidamento*. Lesbians found fault with what they saw as a sociosymbolic practice whereby *homosexual* was reduced to belonging to the same sex, thus obliterating the erotic nature of lesbian specificity. For more on lesbofeminism, see Dragone 2008; Bono and Kemp 1991.

however, proved counterproductive, for it ultimately denied them the visibility they were seeking to achieve (Gramolini qtd. in Malagrecia 2007: 136).

Lettere a Marina echoes the tensions that generated in those years by the claims of lesbian voices on the one hand and the invisibility of discourses on sexuality on the other. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are presented in the novel as non-mutually exclusive; in fact, one could argue that they are but two sides of the same essentialist coin. The remark of Bianca's friend, Chantal, that 'amare il corpo dell'uomo è un atto di intelligenza col nemico' (*Lettere* 22) is emblematic in this respect. For her, the only "true" lesbian in the novel, to be bisexual is to negotiate with heterosexual society at large. In an almost parodic reversal of binary terms, lesbianism is seen here as the only viable alternative to heterosexuality, a separatist ideology whose self-defeating nature is apparent in Chantal's position: the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality is carried out through the perpetuation of the very same binary structure laying at its foundations or, to say it with Butler's words, the 'radical disjunction between straight and gay replicates the kind of disjunctive binarism [...] of the straight mind' (1999: 155). For Butler, a lesbian utopia would be but a repetition of the hierarchy, however reversed. Indeed, to say that women love men, and cannot love women, is the same as to say that women love women, and cannot love men, in short, a homologation of lesbian love to heterosexual one. This is a stance shared by Bianca, who wonders why it is that one cannot love both men and women at once: 'Un uomo e una donna? Perché no?' (*Lettere* 156), wishing instead for a 'più ricco e fluido' way of being sexed (*Lettere* 87). The remark that 'Chantal [è] sempre innamorata di una donna più vecchia di lei pronta a curarla servirla fino alla perdizione di sé' (*Lettere* 38-39) is indeed remarkable, as it is hard not to read it as a parodic reversal of the stereotypical patriarchal (heterosexual) relationship whereby womanhood is equated with servitude. Another illustrative textual example of a representation of lesbianism which is thought of heterosexually is staged through the couple of Ada e Bice, whom Bianca sees as 'due vecchi coniugi lei un po' maschio di casa pronta ai lavori duri agli scontri protettiva e materna l'altra' (*Lettere* 11). It is impossible not to read this as another hyperbolic characterisation of a husband and wife dualism modelled on the master/slave binary, recalled by the explicit reference to a typically 'masculine' personality,

inclined towards fighting, and a more ‘feminine’ one, dedicated to caring for others.⁸³ The ideal of a lesbian utopia (in Bianca’s terms, ‘comunità unisessuale’; *Lettere* 47) is thus debunked in Maraini’s text, proven to be but a fantasy premised on the same exclusionary, binary structure it aims at defeating. In sum, *Lettere a Marina* rejects the hetero/homosexual binary logic and queers it by relocating the notion of a fixed and abiding self within a discontinuous and incoherent (non)identity which, while escaping classifications of any sort, remains as slippery and fluid as the watery images that permeate the novel.

2.4 Conclusions

The sexual non-compliance staged by Maraini in *Donna in guerra*, *Storia di Piera* and *Lettere a Marina* emblematises the author’s stance at the time of their writing, as she will eloquently express it some years later in a collection of her articles written between the 1970s and 1980s: ‘Il mondo della sessualità si è ampliato, è diventato complesso, polimorfo, sfaccettato, variegato, con doppi tripli e quadrupli fondi’ (1987: 10-11). Referring to the limitedness of any attempt to constrain the gender spectrum within the straitjacket of binary conventions, Maraini is here providing a theoretical underpinning of the narrative strategy that she had already staged, almost a decade earlier, in her texts.

In *Donna in guerra*, the mocking of the factuality of sex and the relativisation of notions of the normal as we see it in Tota and Giottina’s tales prefigures Vannina’s own queering process, which will become manifest through the defiance of socially accepted sexual performances (of which her intergenerational sexual relationship with Orio provides a useful example), the inversion of codified sexual roles (as encapsulated in her engaging in homoerotic activities with Suna), and, finally, the dismantling of discursively constructed codes of behaviour (as evident, firstly, in her verbal questioning of Giacinto’s notions of natural femininity and, secondly, in her acting against what he perceives as her true ‘nature’). The protagonist’s ‘gender insubordinations’ are, in turn, mirrored by those of other characters such as Santino, Giacinto, and Suna, each contributing, to different degrees, to the queering of gender relations in the novel. Furthermore, Maraini’s formulation of the female

⁸³ This paradox is replicated also in another work by Maraini, the short story ‘Maria’ from the collection *Mio Marito* (1968), where, incidentally, the incommunicability underlying the relationship between the unnamed female narrating subject and the Maria of the title seems to mirror that of the Vannina-Giacinto couple in *Donna in guerra*.

experience finds its balance between the essentialisation of the subject (the accusation against difference feminism generally moved by queer theorists) and its deconstruction of the corporeal sphere (the accusation against theory generally promoted by feminists of difference). In a most provoking written exchange between two great and influential thinkers such as Butler and Braidotti, the former asked the latter ‘whether the notion of the bodily specificity of women is compatible with the notion of difference that [she] want[s] to applaud’ (Butler and Braidotti 1997: 45). Engaging Maraini’s novel in dialogue with Butler and Braidotti, and taking *Donna in guerra* as a fictional rendition of the author’s stance on the nature of the female subject, it is legitimate to argue that the author’s answer would be in the affirmative. Indeed, if it is true that *Donna in guerra* is Maraini’s most explicit feminist text, it is also true that the feminism it promotes is not of the kind that reduces sexual difference to biological difference.⁸⁴ Rather, while stemming from the irreducible disparity between the sexes, it also ‘rejects the straightjacket of sexual orthodoxy, servant to a culture of dependency which disinherits women’ (Wood 1995: 224), thus stirring that kind of gender trouble that Butler, and other postmodern thinkers with her, aims at promoting. The political project carried out by Maraini, a project of which her 1975 novel is a most emblematic example, is neither an essentialisation nor a devalorisation but, rather, a queering of sexual difference.

In *Storia di Piera* the figure of the mother transgresses the social mores and queers the domestic space by disenfranchising herself from her twofold role of wife and child carer, the stereotypical gender script dictated by patriarchy, instead finding enjoyment and sexual liberation outside the home. Absolving her mother’s sins, Piera is also partaking in her rebelliousness. The daughter’s complicity, coupled with the fact that she is undertaking the task of restoring the woman’s memory through the personal account of her experiences, makes the text a queer literary venue for the depiction of womanhood and motherhood outside dominant cultural models. Published in 1980, Maraini’s interview with Piera degli Esposti is a timely response to women’s demands for new relationships between mother and daughter, an on-going debate dating back to the publication of *Manifesto*, in 1966, by the

⁸⁴ This is a concern that Butler has addressed in *Gender Trouble*, born, by her own admission, out of her frustration with feminist positions of this kind (Butler 1999).

feminist group *Demau*, with women questioning their role within the family and the rift between the domestic and the public sphere.

In *Lettere a Marina*, moving beyond an essentialist and naturalising way of being sexed, for the protagonist, and the author through her, it is not a matter of becoming heterosexual, as some critics have implied,⁸⁵ nor of being and remaining homosexual. By renouncing an arbitrary resolution of the sexual identity of her protagonist, Maraini is warning us against the relativity of culturally determined gender roles, reminding us instead of the wide spectrum of permutations that gender might take. The shattering of the social pretence for gender intelligibility, that is to say, the process whereby ‘the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality [are deprived] of their central protagonists: “man” and “woman”’ (Butler 1999: 187) is emblematised in the text by the preoccupation of people with Bianca’s being ‘sola’, but also with Chantal’s anxiety towards her loving both sexes, under the assumption that ‘amare il corpo dell’altro’ is a crime (*Lettere* 115). Ultimately, Bianca will not make her return to Rome, but will head to Sicily instead, with the non-coincidence between the point of departure and arrival suggesting non-closure—of both the novel and the sexual identities portrayed therein. Disentangling herself from a binary system where the number of options is restricted to two available possibilities, Bianca thus maps out an alternative way of being sexed, one that remains open to endless negotiations.

Borrowing from Porter Abbott’s definition of “diary fiction”, in his comparative study on diary writing across four different cultures, Giancarlo Lombardi analyses *Donna in guerra* as emblematic, in 1970s Italy, of the use of first-person writing for feminist ends. The scholar describes the genre he sets out to explore as encompassing ‘[w]orks of fiction which are not fully written in the diary form [...] as well as those epistolary novels which are composed of unmailed and, therefore, unanswered letters’ (2002: 28). This definition is relevant to my study, for it extends also to the other two works by Maraini investigated in this chapter. In the same way as *Donna in guerra*, *Storia di Piera* and *Lettere a Marina* also

⁸⁵ Ballaro’s position is that the novel ends in heterosexuality, a conclusion that she evinces from Bianca’s statement ‘ho preferito il figlio per una tendenza malefica colpevole all’abbraccio con l’altro da sè il diverso’ (*Lettere* 114-115). I agree with Gabriele that Bianca’s statement ‘need not be interpreted as an indication of a definitive sexual identity’ (2002: 249). In an attempt to rectify Ballaro’s position, Gabriele goes on to argue that Bianca’s feeling attraction for Damiano’s stepmother and lover would be, precisely, a textual indication of the inconclusiveness of the protagonist’s sexuality (2002: 249).

partake in the ‘veritable widening of the [diaristic] genre’ identified by Lombardi (2002: 28). The feminist perspective embedded in these first-person narratives goes unquestioned. And yet, read today, Maraini’s “‘diary fiction[s]’” also appear in line with more recent queer approaches that take into account the interplay between subjectivity and sexuality and the way this impacts on the text, thus understanding first-person writing as a ‘meta-tropic genre, as a genre that can critique assumptions about the formation of sexual memories, sexual consciousness, sexual roles, sexual subjectivity’ (Johnston 2007: 1); a trope used to ‘question the institution of patriarchy and its reification [...] of heterosexual desire as the only normal desire’ (Johnston 2007: 1).

What Butler pioneers theoretically in her claim that there is no identity behind the expression of gender, because this is the effect of a reiterated performance of gender roles, Maraini had dramatised in what critics have recognised as her most explicit feminist texts. As emblematically fictionalised in her works, the explosion of heterosexuality as a natural category goes less in the direction of the attainment of a fixed identity, of any sort, than in the exploration, and experimentation, of the many potentialities of one’s sexuality and its investment outside of binary tracks. Maraini’s works, then, can be read through a Butlerian lens as a denunciation of the sedimentation of gender roles, as well encapsulated in a passage from *Lettere a Marina*:

È buffo accorgersi dopo quarant’anni che si portano le stesse scarpe con la stessa noncuranza imbecille di chi è nato dentro che ci stanno strette. Sono un numero più corto e non lo sapevamo. Ti guardi i piedi e li trovi rattappiti pieni di calli nati dalla costrizione intorpiditi ed esangui. Ti accorgi che il tuo modo di camminare è sempre stato doloroso anche se spedito. Provi a toglierti le scarpe e non riesci più a camminare perché quella costrizione era diventata parte del tuo modo di incedere parte del tuo stile della tua visione del mondo. (*Lettere* 38)

Out of metaphor, this position resonates with Butler’s account of gender and sexuality as being performatively instituted through the repetition of ‘gestures and acts that construct the apparent uniformity of heterosexual positionalities’ (1991: 24). Disciplining oneself in the repetition of the same old habits, interpreted as the blind adherence to preconceived gender norms, here suggestively encapsulated in the image of the worn-out shoes that are far too tight, is precisely what Maraini’s works argue against. Instead, they celebrate the plasticity of

identity calling for the exploration of less constrictive and more liberating possibilities of being sexed.

Chapter 3 Queer Identity Fictions in Goliarda Sapienza's Works

The only child of two prominent anti-fascist exponents of Italian socialism, Maria Giudice (1880-1953), a key figure for trade unions, and Socialist lawyer Peppino Sapienza (1884-1949), Goliarda Sapienza (1924-1996), writer, poet, dancer, playwright and film and stage actress, grew up in the most unconventional of ways. Living in the infamous neighbourhood of San Berillo, in Catania, together with the children that Maria and Peppino had from their respective previous families, Sapienza failed to attend public school out of her father's opposition to the fascist education, a stance that he made unequivocally clear by burning the school uniform of his daughter—as narrated in *Io, Jean Gabin*. From that moment onwards, Sapienza's stepbrother Ivanoe, alongside the people that populated San Berillo, mostly criminals and sex-workers, served as the author's mentors and substitute schoolteachers during the years of her childhood and early adolescence.

In 1941 Sapienza moved to Rome to attend the *Accademia d'Arte Drammatica* alongside figures of the like of Vittorio Gassman and Antonio Pierfederici. Although she will never complete her studies after they were interrupted by the German occupation in 1943, she will co-found the avant-garde theatre company T45 based on the Stanislavskij method, an experimental technique relying on sub-conscious mechanisms and premised upon the actor's improvisation. The Roman years will prove decisive not only in perfecting Sapienza's natural inclination towards acting, but also in the shaping of her literary career. Whilst in the capital, she entered the circle of neorealist directors of the like of Luigi Comencini, Cesare Zavattini, Alessandro Blasetti, Luchino Visconti and Francesco (Citto) Maselli and of politically *engagé* intellectuals including Massimo Bontempelli, Paola Masino, Carlo Levi, Cesare Garboli, Carlo Emilio Gadda, and Alberto Moravia. The Roman milieu was the privileged site of intellectual and political *impegno* in Italy at the time and was strongly influenced by the Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.). Not only was Sapienza tied, both professionally and sentimentally, to Maselli, the one responsible for the *sezione informazione* and *stampa e propaganda* of the P.C.I., she also worked alongside Neorealist

director Luchino Visconti.⁸⁶ The relationship that the author established with the dominant cultural panorama, however, was an ambivalent one: ‘Goliarda possedeva una personalità poliedrica da «intellettuale off», definita oggi «eccentrica» ed «eretica» per il suo tempo’ (Trevisan 2016: 11). Sapienza was torn between fascination towards its ideology, the very same one she had inherited from her parents, but also of agony over the Party’s contradictory politics, an ambivalence that will result in Sapienza’s ideological crisis upon disclosure of the Soviet war crimes, in 1956, which coincided with her seeking psychoanalytical treatment.⁸⁷ The communist Roman circle, on the other hand, was reluctant to acknowledge her literary talent, which played a major role in the anonymity the writer had to endure during her life.

As noted by Sapienza herself in her writing, there could be various reasons for the troubled relationship she had with this milieu: ‘viene fuori chiaro e preciso da parte di Citto e del suo clan che sono in colpa [...] venendo bollata come borghese individualista che invece di scrivere per la causa del proletariato scrive del privato, d’amore’ (*Il vizio*, 118). Arguably, it was also because of this self-marginalisation that most of the author’s prose had to face editorial rejection during her life. Yet, Sapienza remained always adamant in her unwillingness to compromise her ideology, as clearly expressed in her *Taccuini*:

Per fortuna non mi sono mai inserita, come si dice oggi, per fortuna non faccio parte del parlamento o altro. Per fortuna non ho mai scritto una riga in un giornale di destra o di sinistra, per fortuna non ho recitato in nessuna di quelle commedie bugiarde che mi proponevano in teatro né ho scritto una parola di nessuna sceneggiatura./ Certo sono povera [...], ma non me ne importa niente. / Il mio animo è tranquillo, e spero solo di conservare questa serenità che per me, da sempre, è tutto. (*Il vizio* 26)

Manifest in these lines is the author’s detachment from authority as well as her firm resolution not to be aligned with clear-cut political positions of any sort.

⁸⁶ Sapienza worked as background actress in *Senso* (1954) and as assistant director in *Le notti bianche* (1957) and *Siamo donne* (1953). Always for Visconti, she played in *Medea* at the *Manzoni* Theatre of Milan, in 1953-55. She also collaborated with Maselli in the realisation of some of his documentaries, including *Lettera aperta a un giornale della sera* (1970) where she played herself; in 1955 she starred in Maselli’s film *Gli sbandati* (1954) in the role of Maria, the aunt of the protagonist Lucia, a factory worker played by Lucia Bosè.

⁸⁷ Sapienza was particularly hostile to the Party’s cult of the figure of Stalin.

At a literary level, Sapienza's estrangement from her environment is made explicit in her 1950s poetry, gathered in the collection *Ancestrale*, a title evoking a sense of *ancestralità* that is both a return to her Sicilian origins and a refusal of the cultural context of the Italian Left in which she was enmeshed—thus sanctioning her disillusionment towards 'Roma, l'alienazione mondano-cinematografica, un certo snobismo borghese e intellettuale, la Bloomsbury staliniana fra piazza del Popolo e via Veneto' (Pellegrino 2013a: 12).⁸⁸ Sapienza, who, aged twelve, had already read all of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy (Pellegrino 2015: 13), did not partake in the literary concerns of her contemporaries, and instead looked mainly towards English and French literature for inspiration (she was particularly interested in the work of Richardson and Stendhal). On her 'autonomia letteraria' Anna Toscano noted:

Per formazione personale, per educazione, per la storia della sua vita, per le sue capacità di scrittura, Sapienza sembra destinata, nel bene e nel male, a collocarsi al di fuori di ciò che è collocabile: rimanere in quei margini che costringono un autore nella semi-oscurità ma che al contempo gli assicurano una grande libertà da vincoli e mode. Goliarda era questo, aveva deciso di essere questo, dagli anni Cinquanta in poi: una scrittrice senza vincoli e senza costrizioni. (2012: 194)

Sapienza's scepticism towards the dominant political and cultural climate of the day extended also to the feminist movement, which for her was but one of the many 'isms' of the century (Pellegrino 2015: 19). The daughter of two well-known figures in the Italian socialist milieu of the time and a member of the Resistance, fighting alongside her father, and equipped with a wide-ranging literary and cultural background acquired in the unconventional political and intellectual environment of her own home, it comes as no surprise that Sapienza was an anomalous figure in the cultural and literary panorama of the day, 'queer', also, in the sense of nonconformist and provocative.

Giovanna Providenti has identified two distinct autobiographical phases in the author's writings, with *L'arte della gioia* acting as a divide in the period before and after

⁸⁸ In her private correspondence to writer and journalist Antonio Ghirelli (dated 31st January 1985) Sapienza defines the evolution of the female protagonist of *L'arte della gioia* in such terms: '[l'] acquisizione, man mano che la sua personalità si fa adulta, della morale, difficile e "diversa", di una donna moderna. Donna libera e completa, nemica di qualsiasi smania di potere' (Sapienza-Pellegrino Archive, unpublished 213-14). In the light of the author's literary and ideological non-conformity with her milieu as discussed above, these words would thus seem just as applicable to Sapienza herself.

1963-1968. Mariagiovanna Andriago, on the other hand, has suggested that Sapienza's incarceration be used as a narrative break between a more introspective phase marked by 'autobiografia' and 'autoanalisi', in the years 1950-1980, and a second phase of 'autoricostituzione' that would mark the years 1980s-onwards (2012: 118). Without denying the validity of either approach, in the case of such complex an author as Sapienza, it is equally important to note that any classification of her oeuvre cannot but be an arbitrary one. The whole of her literary production is permeated by cross-references, with elements of connection between texts and common themes that are constantly developed and redeveloped. All of Sapienza's works are written in the first person, with the sole exception of *L'arte della gioia* whereby, however, the narration oscillates between the first and the third person, leading critics to refer to it as part of the same autobiographical cycle.⁸⁹ Significantly, Sapienza labelled her autobiographical project inaugurated with *Lettera aperta*, originally published by Garzanti in 1967, as 'autobiografia delle contraddizioni' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 117). To call one's autobiography 'contradictory' is a most emblematic self-definition that foreshadows the incongruous nature of the material contained therein, with clearly subversive intents with respect to the traditional autobiographical genre. The import of such a literary project has been pinned down by Pellegrino when he claimed that 'Goliarda intendeva mostrare così, di contro alla rigida autobiografia tradizionale che tende ad appiattire fatti e persone contro un fondale fortemente idealizzato dal tempo trascorso, il continuo, inarrestabile mutamento della coscienza e dei suoi giudizi, la trasformazione dell'io nei confronti del proprio passato e in relazione al presente' (Pellegrino 2010: 117). Not only is traditional autobiography challenged and adjusted to the complex nature of a self in continuous becoming, the ostensibly ambiguous nature of its content is also subverted accordingly, sitting as it does at the threshold between reality and fiction.

⁸⁹ On the autobiographical quality of *L'arte della gioia*, Domenico Scarpa notes what he identifies as 'interferenza tra la finzione romanzesca e la cronaca reale dei fatti di famiglia' in the novel (2008: 519). Giovanna Providenti goes as far as to proclaim a perfect biographical coincidence between the last year of Modesta's life and Sapienza's: A romanzo finito [...] un'altra porta s'apre nella vita di Goliarda. Una porta che la conduca a far coincidere l'ultima parte della propria vita con l'ultima parte del romanzo *L'arte della gioia*: quando Modesta, raggiunta l'autonomia personale e presa coscienza che l'impegno rivolto a trasformare la società passa solo per la propria trasformazione e non richiede adesioni a ideologie di alcun tipo, intraprende quel "viaggio ancora più entusiasmante di ogni spostamento fisico", che è l'amore' (2010: 166).

The relationship between gender and genre thus established is worth exploring. In terms of gender, specifically, the label ‘autobiografia delle contraddizioni’ anticipates the fragmentary portrayal of a multi-faceted identity alternating between the internalisation of prescribed gender scripts and, what interests us here, the will to subvert them.⁹⁰ As for the chosen literary genre, although the formulation of an all-encompassing definition of ‘autobiography’ goes beyond the scope of the present study, its original use by Sapienza demands consideration. In this respect, the remarks made by Laura Fortini (quoting Monica Farnetti) on occasion of the conference *Goliarda Sapienza in Context. International Relationships with Italian and European Culture*, held at the School of Advanced Studies of London on 31st May – 1st June 2013, seem apt to capture the specificity of Sapienza’s first-person writings:

Grazie alle scrittrici è ormai evidente che rendere narrabile la vita così com’è e come la si è vissuta non è possibile. Di questa semplice e dirompente premessa pare finalmente persuasa la critica letteraria, che discutendo oggi di autobiografia ha abbandonato i propri postulati — sincerità, verità, realtà, autenticità — per accogliere invece, in tutte le sue implicazioni, il presupposto che l’esperienza non sia traducibile in linguaggio; non si discute più dunque in termini di sovrapposizione fra vissuto e scrittura, ma piuttosto di trasposizione dal vissuto all’inventato. Si tiene conto dello *scarto d’invenzione* che ogni scrittura produce e su questo scarto si lavora. (Fortini 2013; my own emphasis)⁹¹

These observations mark a rupture with the ‘pacte autobiographique’ with which French theorist and literary critic Philippe Lejeune, in his homonymous work (1975), proposed a definition of the autobiographical novel as a ‘pact’ between author and reader whereby autobiographers are committed to providing a linear and truthful account of their private life, or of a particular moment of it. In opposition to the pretence of transparency explicit in

⁹⁰ A lot could be said apropos of the relevance of the gender/genre nexus in women’s writing. Ursula Fanning has investigated the issue at length in her analyses of Sibilla Aleramo (1999) and Anna Banti (2006), focussing on the fictional representation of the (female) self and on the interplay between fiction and autobiography. Useful in this respect—though dealing with cinema and masculinity—is also Maggie Günsberg’s work suggesting an interconnection between the genre of ‘spaghetti western’ movies and the masculine gender portrayed therein (2004).

⁹¹ The podcast of Fortini’s intervention, titled ‘Oltre il canone: Goliarda Sapienza e la tradizione letteraria italiana del Novecento’, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeLNsOLPzsI>. In the above excerpt Fortini is quoting from a study by Farnetti on the childhood memoirs in female writings. Although the title of the study remains unmentioned, it is most likely she is referring to *Il centro della cattedrale: i ricordi d’infanzia nella scrittura femminile: Dolores Prato, Fabrizia Ramondino, Anna Maria Ortese, Cristina Campo, Ginevra Bompiani* (2002).

Lejeune's definition, Fortini—via Farnetti—shifts the focus onto the opacity of one's life material, that which cannot be unproblematically translated into words. A breach thus opens up, between life and writing, and it is, precisely, within this 'scarto d'invenzione' that Sapienza's autobiographical project places itself, an autobiographical writing, as she expounds in her *Taccuini*, 'incentrato sulla mia persona ma «in progress», e cioè non letta – come in tutte le biografie – a una specifica età, avanzata o giovanile non importa, invece raccolta man mano ogni decennio e nell'arco di tutta una vita, sempre con l'idea cardine di afferrare più le contraddizioni che le coerenze' (*Il vizio* 25).⁹²

After a long period of oblivion, articles, talks, conferences, blogs and websites dedicated to the author are now rapidly increasing, in and out of Italy.⁹³ The first critical collection on Sapienza was published by Farnetti in 2011, while the first biography was published by Giovanna Providenti one year later. Other two edited collections have followed in the past four years, one in Italian (Providenti 2012) and one in English (Bazzoni, Bond & Wehling-Giorgi 2016). This year, among the most recent works on the author, which seem to have flourished on occasion of the twentieth anniversary of her death, are the volume edited by Anna Maria Crispino and Marina Vitale focussing on Sapienza alongside other women writers (2016) and Alessandra Trevisan's monograph featuring the most comprehensive bibliography on the author published to date (2016). Scholars have pointed out Sapienza's ambivalence, indeed her 'contraddizioni', towards her non-normative desires. In particular, in her contribution to the second critical collection on the author published in Italy, Charlotte Ross (2012a) stresses the ambiguity intrinsic to Sapienza's textual and sexual autobiographical selves in *Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, *Le certezze del dubbio*, and *Io, Jean Gabin*, emphasising the oscillation between adherence to, and rejection of, normative gendered behaviours. Particularly with regard to the author's first autobiographical endeavour, *Lettera aperta*, the scholar highlights the tension between the

⁹²In this respect, an interesting connection can be drawn with Georges Gusdorf's seminal work on autobiography 'Conditions and Limits in Autobiography' (originally published in 1956), accounting for the genre as a revision and modification—rather than a linear account—of one's past: '[autobiography] does not show us [...] the individual as [s/]he was, no[r] as [s/]he is, but as [s/]he believes and wishes [her/]himself to have been' (Gusdorf 1980: 44-45).

⁹³The first international event on Sapienza is the above-mentioned conference 'Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture', held at the School of Advanced Studies of London on 31st May – 1st June 2013. The podcast of the event is available at: <http://goliardasapienza2013.weebly.com/conference-podcast.html>

awareness of Sapienza's culturally constructed identity and the interruption of her self-exploration due to interiorised social norms. Along similar lines, Maria Teresa Maenza (2012) reads *L'arte della gioia* through Irigaray's theorisations on the specificity of female desire and the mother/daughter bond as formulated in, among other texts, *Ce sex qui n'en est pas un* (1977) and *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère* (1981). Maenza notes a common critical stance, in the work of both authors, on the patriarchal order understood as the cancelling out of woman's subjectivity and her being defined against codified heterosexual parameters (to which, however, she oftentimes submits), but also a discrepancy as for the treatment of the mother-figure: while Sapienza would have no qualms in resorting to Machiavellian and unorthodox—indeed, literally, murderous—ways to get rid of negative maternal models in order to replace them with their positive counterparts, Irigaray would exhort us, against Freud, never to forget our love for the mother.

My study on Sapienza focuses on the works composed between 1970s-1980s, thus: *L'arte della gioia* (written between 1967 and 1976 and published in 1998, posthumous); *Io, Jean Gabin* (written in 1979 and published in 2010, posthumous); *L'Università di Rebibbia* (written in 1980 and published in 1983); *Le certezze del dubbio* (written in 1981 and published in 1987). Adding to existing scholarship on Sapienza, it introduces some new notions, such as 'kinship' and 'space', using them as theoretical tools to investigate how the author's works, in different yet complementary ways, disrupt normative assumptions on gender. I suggest reading Sapienza's texts as permeated by an implicit spatial metaphor, understood not as a utopian space outside of the dominant patriarchal ideology, but rather as a "space-off" (de Lauretis 1987: 26) that contests heteronormative social arrangements and produces new ways of being and relating to others.⁹⁴ This chapter begins with an analysis of *L'arte della gioia*, a six hundred page novel that is considered Sapienza's best work to date. Integrating existing critical enquiries that focus on the theme of familial relations from the mother/daughter perspective (Maenza 2012; Scarparo and Di Rollo 2015; Di Rollo 2016), my analysis emphasises the overall queer quality that kinship acquires in Sapienza's text, framing the protagonist's debunking of the patriarchal family structure as in line with queer alternatives to the heterosexual nuclear family model (Butler 2004; Ahmed 2006). Taking

⁹⁴ In *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis borrows the concept of "space-off" from film theory to suggest that women must inhabit a space outside the patriarchal discourse (1987).

the debate over the legalisation of gay marriage as a starting point to tackle the issue of social and institutional recognition for those living in alternative familial arrangements, in *Undoing Gender* Butler notes how ‘the sexual field is circumscribed in such a way that sexuality is already thought of in terms of marriage’ (2004: 106). *L’arte della gioia* contests this notion and challenges the heterosexual institution of marriage by replacing it with new possibilities for thinking about kinship. Adapting it for the purposes of my study, I borrow from Ahmed’s definition of ‘orientation devices’ as ‘signs of queer desires as deviations from the straight line’ (2006: 23), to show how, in her masterpiece, Sapienza resorts to a queer logic of instability to challenge normative assumptions on kinship, gender identity and desire. My analysis follows the anti-normative trajectory of Sapienza’s heroine, with a focus on the metaphorical meaning behind the ‘directions’ taken, in the sense of life choices, or the twists and turns that make one subject deviate from the straight path—with ‘straight’ signifying both ‘heterosexual’ and ‘normative’. I then move on to analyse Sapienza’s second autobiographical work, *Io, Jean Gabin*, which she had started to write before *L’arte della gioia* and which she interrupted for almost ten years to devote herself completely to her epic novel. I will highlight the process of gender construction undergone by the adolescent Goliarda by means of her queer identification with the French film actor, a performance she carries out while roaming the streets of her native Catania. This will allow me to link the treatment of gender in Sapienza’s text as consonant with Butler’s subversive repetition of gender performance. Borrowing from the philosopher’s work on ‘drag’, a (usually) male performer impersonating a woman, I will explain how Goliarda’s masculine identification in *Io, Jean Gabin* unmasks the assumption of a ‘natural’ correlation between sex and gender and, thus, of a gender system built around binary lines. Finally, I will consider Sapienza’s prison writings *L’Università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio* in the light of the author’s treatment of prison as an amniotic-like environment built upon forms of female relationality that posit themselves as an alternative to a male-centred system. The form of kinship thus created, while sharing affinities with the feminist practices coeval to the writing of these texts also departs from them—thereby, to an extent, exposing their limits.

Spatiality, sexuality and (anti)normativity are some of the most recurrent variables that permeate these texts, intersecting each time to create new meanings. Private spaces such as the family (in *L’arte della gioia*), or public ones such as the streets of Sapienza’s native

city but also the *Mirone* cinema whereby her masculine identification begins (in *Io, Jean Gabin*) or, again, the space of the prison and its symbolic association as a piece of a larger disciplinary apparatus (in *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*) all become, in Sapienza's texts, sites of normative resistance. They operate in opposition to the institution of heteronormativity, developing instead alternative practices and modes of being that open up new relations with the space occupied not just physically but, first and foremost, symbolically, allowing for unpredictable and ever-transforming self-fictions.

Although Sapienza's textual self oftentimes struggles with her queer identity (Ross 2012a; Ross 2012b; Maenza 2012), her gender incongruities can be recast, via Butler, into a positive light as the expression of a performative identity in constant flux. However contradictory, such are the tensions that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in a most illuminating definition capturing all the force, but also the manifold manifestations, and even inconsistencies, that queerness implies, has described as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' that are intrinsic to the process of identity formation (1993: 8). In Sapienza's writings, these constituent inconsistencies are acknowledged as the instability that lies at the heart of *any* identity or, in Sedgwick's terms, 'of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality [that] aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically' (Sedgwick 1993: 8).

3.1 *L'arte della gioia*. An Heretically Queer Novel

Sapienza worked on *L'arte della gioia* from 1969 to 1978, almost a decade in which she dedicated herself entirely to the creation of her heroine Modesta. After years marked by severe depression, analysis, electroshock and an attempted suicide, the author finally found some solace in the creation of what would become her most famous work to date. However, the times were not ripe for a character like Modesta, unquestionably a groundbreaking and a most original figure in the Italian literary panorama, but also a Machiavellian murderer and a ruthless adulterer. Sapienza died before seeing the publication of her work, facing years of editorial refusals. It was only after her death, in 1996, that, thanks to the devotion of her widower Angelo Pellegrino, the entire version of *L'arte della gioia* was finally published in Italy by Stampa Alternativa (1998) in the wake of the international success of the foreign

translations circulating in France, Spain and Germany.⁹⁵ The publishing house initially agreed to print only one thousand copies, entirely at Pellegrino's expenses. Nobody, arguably not even Pellegrino himself, was able to foresee that the novel would swiftly become a *caso letterario*. Its unexpected success led to a second edition by Stampa Alternativa, in 2003, and finally to a new edition by Einaudi, in 2008, with which it became a bestseller. This fostered the reissue of previously published works (*Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, *L'Università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*) and the publication of other manuscripts by Sapienza, such as her notebooks—collected in two volumes, *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa* (2011) and *La mia parte di gioia* (2013). The collection of poetry *Ancestrale* (2013), the short stories gathered in *Destino coatto* (2002) and the autobiographical text *Io Jean Gabin* (2010) were also published posthumously. Sapienza, who during her lifetime had to endure the lack of recognition both from the major publishing houses and the left-wing circle of which she was part, is finally being granted the critical attention she deserves.

Sapienza was an eccentric presence in the cultural panorama of the day, in the sense that she always kept herself at the fringe of any specific literary trend. Yet, and this is particularly true in the case of *L'arte della gioia*, through her works she always sought to establish a dialogue, more often than not a critical one, with her time. Pellegrino, who worked with Sapienza on the novel's first draft from 1976 to 1997, maintains that the book could not be but a product of the Seventies, of the disillusionment that followed the crashing of the utopian beliefs that had accompanied the students' protests, but also of the socio-political turmoil of the so-called 'lead years', marked by right and left-wing terrorism and, lastly, of the denunciation of the Stalinist crimes, which meant the collapse of the belief system that Sapienza had inherited from her family.⁹⁶ The protagonist Modesta represents an unprecedented literary figure, one whose creation required Sapienza to study a whole range of female figures, from Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1740) to Rossella O'Hara, the

⁹⁵ The novel had already appeared in print in Italy, although in a trimmed version of just 158 pages, in 1994—published by Stampa Alternativa.

⁹⁶ Personal conversation with Pellegrino (Rome, 16th May 2016). On his contribution to *L'arte della gioia* Pellegrino notes: 'Ho lavorato per ventun anni con Goliarda Sapienza. Quando sono arrivato aveva scritto circa due terzi de *L'arte della gioia* [...] Goliarda terminò il romanzo il 21 ottobre 1976 [...]. Finito il romanzo, bisognava tuttavia rivederlo: andava asciugato, sottoposto a un attento editing' (2011: 76-77).

protagonist of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), while looking also at some male characters for inspiration, as is the case of the protagonist of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1954).⁹⁷ Modesta kills for necessity, has sexual affairs with both men and women and stands in opposition against the dogmas of the time in which she lives: patriarchy, fascism, Catholicism and feminism, which is arguably the reason that earned her the fitting epithet of 'l'hérétique' (the heretic) among French critics.⁹⁸ In an unpublished letter to Ghirelli dated 31st January 1985, Sapienza defines the revolutionary quality of her heroine, and her standing at odds with her times, as 'un'infanzia quasi amorale, solo tesa a sopravvivere con tutti i mezzi leciti e non' (Sapienza-Pellegrino Archive, unpublished 213).

Recent critical contributions have read *L'arte della gioia* in line with post-structural thought, queer and gender theory, postcolonial studies and psychoanalysis. In the field of gender and sexuality, Charlotte Ross's book chapter 'Identità di genere e sessualità nelle opere di Goliarda Sapienza: finzioni necessariamente *queer*' (2012a) and her article 'Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions: multiple selves, gender ambiguities and disrupted desires' (2012b) examine *L'arte della gioia* alongside *Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, *Le certezze del dubbio* and *Io, Jean Gabin*, investigating the autobiographical 'identity fictions' staged within and arguing that these allow to be read as queer alter egos of the author. The scholar sees Sapienza's fictional selves as alternating between observance and defiance of heterosexual assumptions, an ambiguity that she attributes to the author's partial interiorisation of the patriarchal norm. More recently, three essays reunited in the edited collection *Dell'ambivalenza: dinamiche della narrazione in Elena Ferrante, Julia Otsuka e Goliarda Sapienza* (2016) tackle issues of sexuality and corporeality with regard to the character of Modesta. Paola Bono's contribution 'Le multiple ambivalenze di Modesta' explores the 'polivenza' intrinsic to the protagonist highlighting how, by answering uniquely to her body and desires, she places herself in a marginal position with respect to the dominant norm; a 'queer' subject in the broad sense of the term, that is, 'nella sua più ampia ambivalenza identitaria e di rimessa in gioco' (2016: 124). *Jouissance*, corporeal pleasure and sexuality are the themes explored by Nadia Setti in 'Il genio dell'ambivalenza', whereby the critic identifies the body as the driving force in the novel, an expedient to break free from

⁹⁷ Personal conversation with Pellegrino (Rome, 16th May 2016).

⁹⁸ 'Romanzo anticlericale' was also the subtitle of the 1998 Italian edition printed by Stampa Alternativa.

‘una situazione di imprigionamento e di sottomissione a un ordine e desiderio che le sono profondamente avversi’ (2016: 116). Finally, the essay by Antonia Anna Ferrante, ‘Elena e Modesta oltre l’ambivalenza’ reads *L’arte della gioia* against the ‘counter-sexual’ theory of queerist Paul B. Preciado (and against Elena Ferrante’s works), identifying the protagonist as the queer archetypal of the ‘donna-dildo’, one that displaces the Lacanian phallus with that of a sex toy: ‘Modesta [...] come un dildo obbliga a ripensare la differenza [sessuale] oltre l’ambivalenza, dunque non più come un dato tra due, ma come un interrogativo rivolto al molteplice’ (2016: 158). Among the analyses of gender relations in *L’arte della gioia*, maternity has drawn considerable critical attention. In ‘Fuori dall’ordine simbolico della madre: Goliarda Sapienza e Luce Irigaray’, Maenza (2012) understands *L’arte della gioia* and *Lettera aperta* as accomplishing the creation of a new female symbolic. Specifically in relation to *L’arte della gioia*, Maenza’s thesis is that Sapienza decides to dispose, metaphorically, of negative maternal figures through the character of Modesta, thereby marking a point of departure from Irigaray, for whom the mother is central to the creation of new female genealogy and, as such, ought to be always loved. Also focussing on the mother/daughter relationship is Alessandra Trevisan’s brief contribution ‘«La gioia è più che ogni voluttà». Sessualità e maternità ne *L’arte della gioia*’ (2012). Trevisan establishes an original parallel with Valeria Parrella’s notion of ‘spazi bianchi’ with regard to the narrative ellipses of Sapienza’s text, which she links to symbolic maternal spaces: ‘l’ordine del corpo, la sessualità, la maternità’ (2012: 59)⁹⁹. However, the critic’s claim that ‘l’etica maternale è altresì la modalità secondo cui Modesta vive la propria sessualità, soprattutto nei rapporti omessuali’ (2012: 59) is less convincing, insofar as it underplays the *eros* of Sapienza’s heroine, her tending constantly toward pleasure, which is, precisely, the driving force of the protagonist and, thus, of the narrative structure as a whole.¹⁰⁰ More recently, Susanna Scarparo and Aureliana di Rollo (2015) in their joint article ‘Mothers, Daughters and Family in *L’arte della gioia*’ have discussed motherhood in the novel against the coeval

⁹⁹ The concept of ‘spazio bianco’ refers to Parrella’s homonymous novel (2008), and it is associated to the time inside the incubator where the premature daughter of the protagonist is placed at birth and, at a narrative level, to the ellipses that omit the maternal, highly sensual mother/daughter bond that eludes any signification.

¹⁰⁰ Domenico Scarpa, in the foreword to *L’arte della gioia* notes: ‘Nel romanzo, Modesta è unico fuoco geometrico dell’eros. La mappa dei legami amorosi e affettivi si dirama interamente da lei. Proprio come succede per la politica, il sesso funziona meglio senza ideologia né degustazione verbale (2008: 522)

formulations of Italian feminists around the same theme, arguing that Sapienza's text is ahead of its time in the articulation of the mother-daughter relationship as one that situates itself outside of a male-dominated system—thus anticipating by some decades Luisa Muraro's *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (1991).

In this chapter I demonstrate how Sapienza's novel challenges the heterosexual paradigm by deconstructing the gendered structures upon which it relies; structures of which the family is an emblematic example. To date, critical enquiries of familial relationships in *L'arte della gioia* have focused almost uniquely on the mother/daughter bond (Maenza 2012; Trevisan 2012; Scarparo and Di Rollo 2015; Di Rollo 2016). My study explores how Modesta performs maternity by means of establishing a family structure dislodged from mere biological constraints, one that is based on an ethics of care that Butler sees as the founding principle of kinship (1997a; 2004). Moving beyond the mother/daughter pattern, I analyse the overall queer quality of kinship arrangements in the novel—from incestuous to intergenerational bonds and from prostitution to same-sex experiences. Sapienza's overthrowing of the traditional family structure and its gender-biased organisation is in line with queer studies examining the possibility of creating an alternative to the patriarchal (heterosexual) nuclear family model and replacing it with one that, following Butler, is premised upon 'a socially contingent and socially transformable account of kinship' (1997a: 276; Butler's emphasis). Following a Marxist critique of kinship, for Butler 'the family is not a natural given', being as it is 'a specific social arrangement of kin functions' (1997a: 272) and, as such, it is transient and subject to change. In a similar way, the queer family staged in *L'arte della gioia* also displaces 'the link between kinship and sexual reproduction' (Butler 1997a: 276) and presents itself as a four-generational, ever-expanding unit dislodged from mere biological constraints. Sara Ahmed's work on the queer disruption of conventional social arrangements as laid out in her *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) will prove useful for framing the protagonist's 'eccentricity'. I suggest that the orientation Modesta establishes in relation to the societal space in general, and the familial space in particular, is a *queering* device aimed at stretching out the contours of the 'straight line'. It follows, then, that 'disorientation', which Ahmed considers a prerequisite of orientation (2006: 5), becomes, for Sapienza's protagonist, a permanent condition of (in)stability.

3.1.1 Physical and Symbolical Dis/locations off the Normative Path

The protagonist of *L'arte della gioia* is born on 1st January 1900. Her personal history is interlaced with nearly a century of Italian national history, with two world wars and their aftermath, communism, socialism, and the rise and fall of Fascism serving as background for the narration. Modesta spends her childhood in abject poverty in Sicily in the company of an inept mother and a mentally disabled sister and, still at a young age, she is raped by her alleged father. Instead of succumbing to the course of events, the girl kills her rapist along with her mother and sister by setting the house on fire, an event that will mark her personal ascent. All of Modesta's subsequent maternal figures—be they biological or not—will follow the same tragic fate. Resorting to Machiavellian plans, Modesta orchestrates also the deaths of Leonora, the Mother Superior of the convent where she is sent after becoming an orphan, and Gaia Brandiforte, Leonora's natural mother and the matriarch of the Brandiforte estate.¹⁰¹ These three matricides hold symbolic connotations. Commenting on the dynamics between Modesta and her negative role models and victims-to-be, Farnetti notes that '[Modesta] fails to accept the distorted images of her own self and ends up hating them. She rejects any sort of connection with women whom she regards as submissive, who are confused and get involved in unequal relationship with men' (2016: 65). Expanding on the symbolic implications behind Modesta's killings, I would like to suggest a queer reading of the correlation between body and space in this first part of *L'arte della gioia* that is metaphorical as well as geographical. To this end, I will borrow from Ahmed's observations on the relationship with one's surroundings and the queer effects produced by the 'nonalignment' of those subjects that are 'kept in line' through normative social arrangements (Ahmed 2006: 83). In the case of Modesta, the places she is initially assigned (first, the convent, and then the Brandiforti estate) are not just physical, since they act as castrating institutions that carry specific implications, as does her resolution to break free from them. Because the direction taken brings her off the normative path, Modesta's own 'orientation devices', her survival strategies, can rightly be read as *queer* devices.

¹⁰¹ Modesta kills Mother Leonora by means of sawing the balustrade against which the nun used to lean to gaze at the stars. As for Gaia Brandiforti, Modesta gets rid of her by failing to administer the prescribed pills to the old and sick matriarch, thus sanctioning her death.

Through Leonora and Gaia, Modesta acquires education and social recognition and, guided by an impulse to satisfy her physical pleasure, which is her hidden agenda throughout the novel, she will love men and women alike and continue to do so also in her adulthood, moved by an inexorable desire to dominate events. The novel appears as a journey through the discovery of the multiple pleasures of the flesh, which the protagonist embraces fully and free from self-constraints from the first to the last page, with the text framed, emblematically, by two orgasm scenes—respectively, of Modesta as a child and of Modesta in her mature years. Her mother’s prophecy that to be woman is a cursed condition because it entails the subjection to man’s domination (‘«È una disgrazia nascere femmine, ti viene il sangue e addio salute e pace! Quelli non cercano che il loro piacere, ti squartano da cima a fondo e non si saziano mai»’; *L’arte della gioia* 15)¹⁰² seems to find confirmation in the rape episode that opens the narration. And yet, what could have become an indelible trauma, prompts Modesta to resort to her uncanny instinct of survival and, instead of letting the events crush her, she commits the first of a series of killings, which have been rightly read by critics as carrying symbolic implications insofar as they are perpetrated against mothers (real or metaphorical) that in some respects hinder her (Farnetti 2011; Maenza 2012). Their differences notwithstanding, these maternal figures all fail to provide a point of reference for the ‘daughter’ in a male-dominated system and, instead, become complicit with patriarchal structures.

Sapienza’s discourse on motherhood here would thus seem consonant to that of second-wave Italian feminists on the importance for women of a symbolic point of reference and the perils that the lack of a relationship of this sort entails. In *Non credere di avere dei diritti*, the compendium firstly published by the Milanese collective *Libreria delle donne* in 1987, the authors offered a retrospective account of 1970s Italian feminism and its theoretical legacy. The Milanese group recognised the necessity of maternal mediation for the female subject to secure herself a position within the Symbolic: ‘Senza madre simbolica, ossia senza mediazione sessuata, le ricchezze prodotte da donne circolano nel corpo sociale sotto un segno neutro e non tornano a vantaggio del sesso femminile’ (Diotima 1987: 134-

¹⁰² Hereafter referred to as *L’arte*. The words of Modesta’s mother here recall those of her mentor, Professor Jsaya, for whom to be born a woman is also a cursed condition (*Io, Jean Gabin* 16).

35). More than a decade prior to the publication of the collective's text, Sapienza was already postulating a new female symbolic. Yet, and this represents the major point of difference between her work and the Italian feminist thought on the same issue, the author also put forward symbolic matricide as a necessary condition 'per portare avanti il programma di costruzione dell'io', understood as 'la costruzione della nuova identità [che] deve comprendere l'eliminazione delle immagini negative della donna e della madre' (Maenza 2012: 244). Modesta's biological mother, who, significantly, remains unnamed for the whole narration, represents all from which she has to escape, as is clear from the few glimpses we have of her: 'occhi dilatati dal silenzio'; 'cuoce in un cantone'; 'non rideva mai' (*L'arte* 5-6)—with silence here becoming, metaphorically, the plight of women in early 20th-century patriarchal Italy, mostly relegated to the domestic sphere and with no material possibilities for emancipation. Mother Leonora, on the other hand, would want to confine Modesta within the convent walls where the young girl experiences first-hand the treatment the Catholic Church reserves for its female members, whom it castrates both figuratively, through the cancelling out of their femininity—as happens with breast binding, which Modesta herself has to practice—and literally, through the silencing of their bodies: 'Quelle donne sospiravano sempre. Forse perché non parlavano mai? O perché non si accarezzavano e non vedevano mai uomini?' (*L'arte* 19). The nuns' silence is the silence of Modesta's mother. These are voiceless figures, patriarchal products resulting from the cancelling out of women and, ultimately, their internment, be it within the convent or the domestic walls. But there is more behind Modesta's decision to get rid of Leonora: she discovers that, hidden by a façade of moral integrity, lies a woman made of flesh and blood, who even desires her sexually, but who is too weak to let her body speak, instead abiding by familial and societal constraints. For Sapienza's heroine to be the emancipated woman she will become, she first has to eliminate the negative role models with whom she is confronted, and Leonora is one such threat. To conclude the trilogy of negative maternal figures, and victims, in *L'arte della gioia*, is Gaia Brandiforte. Although the old matriarch has appointed Modesta as her chosen daughter, she has also decided that such right is dependent upon the girl never leaving the estate; significantly then, and in the same way as Leonora before her, Gaia would also want to tie Modesta to a certain place.

As Ahmed's reminds us, '[i]f orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails' (2006:11). Applying these reflections to the character of Modesta, we can say that her condition is that of being 'out of place', profoundly disoriented and dislocated within the places that have been allotted to her, and the symbolic connotation they carry with them. The convent of Mother Leonora exemplifies the prison of the flesh, a form of physical castration that is visually epitomised by the bandages that flatten her chest in the convent. Modesta repels the idea of having her corporeality muted and negated and of becoming just like the other nuns: 'Quelle donne non facevano nessun rumore quando ti passavano accanto o entravano e uscivano dalle loro celle: non avevano corpo. Non volevo diventare trasparente come loro' (*L'arte* 42). On the other hand, the Brandiforte estate grants Modesta wealth and social recognition, but it also castrates her symbolically, since it signifies immobility and detachment from the rest of the world. What is more, Gaia's ban to leave the property is accompanied by the ban to have children, given that Modesta has conveniently married her son Ippolito (who is affected by Down's syndrome). Modesta, who has married him so as to assume the title of *Principessa*, is now pregnant to Carmine, the *gabellotto* of the Brandiforte's estate. The ultimate rationale behind her killing of Gaia is her illegitimate pregnancy—once again, the body that speaks for itself advocating its freedom: 'Doveva morire. La mia pazzia – volontà di vita contro la sua pazzia – volontà di morte' (*L'arte* 118). After the three matricides have taken place, the narration dwells on Modesta's relentless endeavours to forge a liveable space for herself embracing a queer mode of living, 'ama[ndo] donne e uomini in un carosello al confine dell'incesto' (Bono 2016: 124), free from the spectres of her harmful mothers who, albeit in different respects, were all grounded in male-centred structures and, as such, constituted a menace to her autonomy and free will. As Di Rollo points out apropos of Modesta's matricides, '[e]specially in the case of Gaia, the killing of the mother is necessary for Modesta to occupy her space and to develop a female genealogy' (Di Rollo 2016: 43). Taking our cue from Ahmed's phenomenological reading of queer, we could then say that the space Modesta carves out for herself is the result of a process of personal 're-orientation' of an individual who nevertheless chooses to always be disoriented with respect to the normatively designated path.

3.1.2 Resignifying the Patriarchal Family: Alternative Kinship Arrangements

Modesta is sceptical of words and, in a post-structuralist fashion, she dismantles universal truths and accommodates them in her own understanding of things:

Il male sta nelle parole che la tradizione ha voluto assolute, nei significati snaturati che le parole continuano a rivestire. Mentiva la parola amore, esattamente come la parola morte. Mentivano molte parole, mentivano quasi tutte. Ecco che cosa dovevo fare: studiare le parole esattamente come si studiano le piante, gli animali... E poi, ripulirle dalla muffa, liberarle dalle incrostazioni di secoli di tradizione, inventarne delle nuove, e soprattutto scartare per non servirsi più di quelle che l'uso quotidiano adopera con maggiore frequenza, le più marce, come: sublime, dovere, tradizione, abnegazione, umiltà, anima, pudore, cuore, eroismo, sentimento, pietà, sacrificio, rassegnazione. / Imparai a leggere i libri in un altro modo. Man mano che incontravo una certa parola, un certo aggettivo, li tiravo fuori dal loro contesto e li analizzavo per vedere se si potevano usare nel «mio» contesto. (*L'arte* 135)

Unable to come to terms with the fixed meaning carried by words, Modesta recreates them anew through a deconstructive process of extrapolation (from their original context) and reformulation.¹⁰³ A similar operation of subversion and resignification is accomplished in the novel with regard to gender roles. Holding on with Butler, gender and sex are discursive constructs, that is to say, categories that are performatively created through the discourses that aim at regulating them and keeping them within the matrix of social viability (1993). In the same way as she does with words, Modesta refashions centuries-old conventions around gender relations, starting from the recreation of a new form of family, thereby 'rearticulating her kinship in the light of her own desires' (Scarpato and Di Rollo 2015: 102) rather than normative (heterosexual) constraints.

Modesta marries for convenience Gaia's disabled son Ippolito only to escape the possibility of returning to the convent, as well as to secure herself a position of social and financial stability by becoming the head of the Brandiforte estate. Although a point could be made with respect to Sapienza's conventional treatment of disability, it should also be noted

¹⁰³ Modesta's sceptical approach toward words would mirror Sapienza's. In a passage from the unpublished manuscript of *Lettera aperta*, the author engages in a similar metaphysical reflection on the nature of 'love', putting into question the meaning conventionally attached to it: 'Mi viene il dubbio di non avere mai capito niente dell'amore, perché di tutte le parole, essendo essa la più vitale e libera, può diventare una leva pericolosa per la ricerca di se stessi e quindi lo strumento attraverso cui si smascherano falsi concetti, false leggi, false imitazioni fisiche e morali. È questa la ragione per cui *amore* è la parola più snaturata, incarcerata fra le sbarre dei codici' (*Lettera aperta*; Sapienza-Pellegrino archive, unpublished manuscript 131).

that, precisely because of her husband's Down's syndrome, she entertains barely any relationship with him at all, which grants her absolute freedom, including the sexual freedom of having multiple affairs with both male and female lovers. Indeed, the overall use of masculinity by Sapienza (not just of Ippolito, but also of Modesta's numerous male lovers) seems rather functional to the emergence of the protagonist's queer subjectivity.¹⁰⁴ Although the topic would certainly deserve more attention in future studies of the novel, let it suffice to say here that masculine characterisation in *L'arte della gioia* is also somewhat linked to queer: by divesting men from their phallic position of superiority within the patriarchal order, and by entrusting power and autonomy to a female character, Sapienza is attempting a radical, deconstructive operation of subversion of codified gender roles.¹⁰⁵

Modesta never engages in sexual intercourse with her husband, but arranges for a nurse, Miss Inès, to take care of him, and she is pleased to notice that the two are developing feelings for each other. Besides entrusting her man into the arms of another woman whom she pays for relieving her from her marital duties thereby, literally, encouraging her into prostitution, Modesta does not bat an eyelid when Inès tells her she is pregnant with Ippolito's son and reacts with extreme pragmatism to the woman's profession of guilt: ' - Ma che colpa e colpa Inès, torna in te! È figlio di un mongoloide, perdinci!' (*L'arte* 180). At the prospect of having a handicapped child, she even suggests that Inès has an abortion and, faced with the woman's adamant rebuff, she tries to persuade her that 'i tempi sono cambiati. Con un buon medico e una buona anestesia l'aborto non è niente' (*L'arte* 189). For the time in which *L'arte della gioia* was written, some twenty years prior to the legalisation of abortion in Italy, to approach the thorny question of the termination of pregnancy in such a light-hearted and provocative manner was certainly a bold decision on the part of Sapienza, and yet another proof of the author's uncompromising outspokenness. Modesta herself will some pages later abort the unwanted son she is expecting from Carmine. She confesses the deed to him only when he mockingly threatens her to get her pregnant against her own will:

¹⁰⁴ There are, however, some exceptions. A case in point is, of course, Modesta's alleged father, whose appearance is functional exclusively to the rape scene. It should also be noted how it is only women who are killed by Modesta. Laura Fortini suggests a convincing answer to the quandary when she affirms that 'non v'è motivo di uccidere il padre quando questi ha perso ogni componente paterna' (2011: 126).

¹⁰⁵ By her own admission, Sapienza's exclusive objects of enquiry are women. As she conceded in a letter to critic Enzo Siciliano: 'le donne [...] sono il mio pianeta e la mia ricerca' (Sapienza-Pellegrino archive, unpublished 167).

‘- E io, da pochi giorni, in una stanzetta linda e senza soffrire, con una semplice operazione, di una maledizione mi sono liberata. E lo rifaccio se ti prende intenzione di inchiodarmi. Modesta non ha padroni’ (*L’arte* 209). By emphasising that she is a *free* woman, Modesta is claiming her right to choose to generate, or not to generate, life, against the patriarchal belief, here incarnated by Carmine, that the female reproductive body is wholly at the mercy of male domination.

Besides Prando (Eriprando), the child conceived with Carmine, and Jacopo, the biological son of Ippolito and Inès whom Modesta eventually keeps as her own, other figures will add to form a queer family unit: Beatrice’s daughter Ida (also nicknamed Bambù or Bambolina); Jacopo’s wet-nurse Stella and her son ‘Ntoni; Carlo, the child Stella conceives with Prando; Ippolito’s attendant Pietro and his daughter Crispina and an orphan named Mela. The kind of kinship thus formed approximates to a family structure, albeit one that is not necessarily premised upon biological ties. Besides transcending the foundations of a conventionally configured heterosexual family, such as bloodlines and a normatively acknowledged age for motherhood, the family unit staged in the novel comes to engage in incestuous practices, while also defying heteronormativity itself.¹⁰⁶ Beatrice is the daughter of Mother Leonora (who, in turn, acts as Modesta’s second mother), besides being also her lover. Modesta has an affair with Carmine, Beatrice’s biological father, and has a son with him. But she will also become the lover of Carmine’s son Mattia, who will eventually fall for Beatrice’s daughter Bambù—at once his partner and niece. This was not the first time that Sapienza approached the taboo topic of incest in her works. She did so as early as her first novel, stating provocatively:

L’attrazione carnale e della fantasia non sopporta limiti e non ne nascono mostri né sventure se non come in tutti gli accoppiamenti. Non userò più la parola «incesto»: o meglio, la userò per me quando per consuetudine, compassione continuerò a vivere con un uomo che non mi attrae più e che non è più attratto da me. La userò per te quando per pietà, per dovere, abitudine, continuerai a rotolarti nel letto di tua moglie che non ti dice più niente. Questo è il vero incesto dal quale nascono sicuramente mostri, dolori, sventure umilianti (*Lettera aperta* 132).

¹⁰⁶ The novel is marked by incest right from the start, beginning with Modesta’s rape by her alleged father.

Appealing to false values made stale from centuries-old conventions, Sapienza thus unmasks the hypocrisy behind taken-for-granted beliefs on conjugal fidelity and shows that these can be no more natural than what are conventionally considered non-normative sexual behaviours.

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler poses the interrogative: ‘Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?’.¹⁰⁷ *L’arte della gioia* can be read as answering in the negative to this query. As noted by Scarparo and Di Rollo, ‘Modesta’s family structure challenges the traditional episteme of family intelligibility on two counts: the uncertain legal status of some of its members and the lack of clear, socially recognizable, bloodlines’ (2015: 102). The kinship unit thus created contemplates ties that are disjointed from marriage and childbirth; as such, it queerly defies the heterosexually grounded family model and posits ‘kinship practices’ as ‘those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency’ (Butler 2004: 103) without, however, necessarily specifying what these practices should be limited to. One example of such arbitrary practice can be identified in the kinship that forms between Modesta and Stella when the latter, while in her mature years, becomes pregnant with Prando. Not only does Modesta overlook the generational gap between the middle-aged woman and her much younger son and the fact that the child has been conceived outside of wedlock, from that moment onwards she starts to regard Stella as her sister. In *L’arte della gioia* the traditional model of the heterosexual family is thus debunked and replaced by a queer form of kinship whereby bloodlines are made redundant and power dynamics rely upon personal value rather than hierarchal structures, as Modesta herself explains to her biological son Prando: ‘noi abbiamo deciso tanti anni fa di essere diversi da tutte quelle case dove fingono di volersi bene e invece non fanno che opprimersi l’uno con l’altro’ (*L’arte* 377).

Modesta’s family can hardly be called so, if one considers the common acceptance of the word premised upon the marriage assumption, since the latter equates to ‘the purchase on legitimacy’ (Butler 2004: 106). Yet, it is a community of individuals who, although unrelated by blood, are, in no way less intimate with each other than those made legitimate by the sanctifying institution of marriage. This becomes manifest in the exchange between

¹⁰⁷ In *Undoing Gender* Butler devotes to this question an entire chapter with the same title (2004: 102-130).

Modesta and her son Jacopo when the latter, upon discovering that she is not his natural mother, nevertheless claims the right to call her so: ‘mai chiamerò mamma quella donna [Inès], mai! Tu sei la mia mamma vero? Tu lo dicevi, e non lo capivo, che Bambolina ti era più figlia di Prando, che Ntoni ti era nipote anche se Stella non ti è sorella... Tu sei la mia madre vero? abbracciarmi mamma...’ (*L’arte* 392). Furthermore, the disability of Modesta’s husband makes her the only one responsible for raising her children. This condition of single motherhood, traditionally presented as undesirable and detrimental for the progeny, is not only purportedly embraced in the novel, but also valued, thus dismantling the belief that ‘culture itself requires that a man and a woman produce a child, and that the child has this dual point of reference for its own initiation into the symbolic order’ (Butler 2004: 118). In *L’arte della gioia*, then, kinship is posited as performative, that is, ‘a kind of doing, one that does not reflect a prior structure, but that can only be understood as an enacted practice’ (Butler 2004: 123) and, as such, as a mobile and shifting signifier.

3.1.3 A Queer Commitment to Rethinking Female Subjectivity

Through her heroine, Sapienza prompts us into rethinking taken-for-granted assumptions on sexuality and identity, offering us a textual space for envisioning a queer subjectivity that defies the notion of a fixed and monolithic self. Modesta constructs herself queerly in relation to her alternative family, ‘mettendo in questione la monoliticità del soggetto e pensando a un nomadismo interiore [...] senza per questo escludere possibili, parziali e mobili ancoraggi di carattere identitario’, which, however, remain ‘aperti sempre a interrogazioni e mutamenti’ (Bono 2016: 124). Of particular interest here is the heroine’s position with regard to non-normative sexual practices and to her own sexual identity, which she always keeps fluid and open to change.

Modesta takes male and female lovers—sometimes both at once—and she approves of her adoptive daughters Mela and Bambù when she discovers that they are engaging in homoerotic games. The author’s stance here resonates with a queer, Butlerian critique of predetermined gender and sexual roles and their performative, rather than biological, nature. Mela will continue to love only women also in her adult years, whereas Bambù will enter a heterosexual relationship. Their subsequent sexual choices notwithstanding, Modesta’s libertarian attitude towards them is important because it leaves them free to explore their sexuality at such a crucial stage that is the onset of their psychosexual development. Through

her protagonist, Sapienza thus controverts the ‘naturalization of heterosexuality’, understood as a trajectory ‘that directs bodies [and that] depends on the construction of women’s bodies as being “made” for men’ (Ahmed 2006: 71), instead opening up the possibility for alternative paths off the straight line. This last point recalls a passage in the original manuscript of *Lettera aperta*, later censored for publication, in which the author distinctly addresses the hypocrisy of the norms of sexual conduct for girls, calling for a more broadminded approach to sexuality:

Ma perché non ci lasciano giocare col nostro corpo? Perché ci impediscono di modellare, conoscere la terra...di carezzare, conoscere il corpo? Che cosa sono queste “carezze solitarie” o con una amica, che chiamano masturbazione, che cosa sono se non un prendere coscienza del proprio corpo, di quello di una persona che è come te, alta come te, non sconosciuta e paurosa come i grandi o i maschi, così differenti e misteriosi? Non è forse un abituarsi ad usarlo, questo nostro corpo carnale che la natura ci ha dato? Conoscerlo, allenarlo per essere in grado poi di abbracciare quell’altro corpo differente, misterioso che solo se preparata puoi accettare e conoscere e non subire solamente, come spesso avviene? (*Lettera aperta*; Sapienza-Pellegrino Archive, unpublished manuscript 115)

Modesta leaves her foster daughters free to discover and experiment with their bodies in the same way as she had done before them, offering an implicit criticism of normative constructions of sexual and gender behaviours and of heterosexuality when it becomes a compulsory orientation.¹⁰⁸

Following Ahmed, ‘[g]ender is an effect of the kinds of work that bodies do, which in turn “directs” those bodies, affecting what they “can do”’ (Ahmed 2006: 60). At a spatial level, what bodies “can do” reflects on the activities that one can perform in a given space, so that, by subverting the relationship with the space one occupies—that is, by disrupting the pattern of what is done and where—one can also destabilise ideas about gender. We see Ahmed’s formulations at play in Sapienza’s novel, with the female protagonist occupying symbolically a traditionally masculine space, that of the head of the household, thus moving along ‘diagonal lines’, in the sense of non-straight (prescribed) lines (Ahmed 2006: 61) and redefining the contours of the patriarchal family. Although Modesta has to get married to

¹⁰⁸ Expanding on Adrienne Rich’s coinage of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, de Lauretis defines heterosexuality ‘compulsory’ when it is institutionalised to the point that it becomes itself ‘an institution, or even [a] macroinstitution that subtends and on which are founded other institutions and social technologies’ (2002: 125).

gain economic independence and social recognition, thereby seemingly conforming to the social conventions of the time, she does so only to turn the system against itself. Her pragmatism and generosity prove instrumental for her offspring, and especially for the female members of her family, among whom she encourages self-growth and self-gratification. Challenging the gender stereotypes of Italy, and of rural Sicily in particular, at the beginning of the twentieth-century, where not much scope for personal fulfilment was granted to women, Modesta offers moral and financial support to her adopted daughter Mela so that she can become a talented musician, thereby defeating the heterosexual assumption that '[v]ariations of kinships that depart from normative, dyadic heterosexually based family forms secured through the marriage vow are figured not only as dangerous for the child but perilous to the putative natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility' (Butler 2004: 104).

An independent woman herself, in control of both her wealth and her body, Modesta uses her maternal authority to promote emancipation among her foster daughters. Dismissing Mattia's plan to get rid of her handicapped husband in order to get married, she is firm in her conviction that '[s]olo per bisogno ci si sposa' (*L'arte* 241) and refuses to resort to Bambù's inheritance in moments of need, aware that a woman's independence starts with her economic freedom. Thanks to Modesta, as a grown up, Bambù will become a financially autonomous woman who has no need to marry and can be happy with her partner—Modesta's former lover Mattia—outside of wedlock. *L'arte della gioia* was written in 1970s, when much debate was being devoted to redefining the role of the mother outside of institutionalised motherhood, 'a time when women, in real life and in literature, start[ed] to express their ambivalence *vis-à-vis* motherhood and to affirm their right to self-determination and to abortion' (Giorgio 2000: 222).¹⁰⁹ Sapienza partook in this debate, putting forward a refreshed, new vision of the maternal, one that is not distorted by the

¹⁰⁹ Valid examples in this respect are Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (1975) and Lidia Ravera's *Bambino mio* (1979), both tackling women's choice to be mothers. For a discussion of motherhood and of the troubled mother/daughter relationship, see Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1977), a seminal text that found wide circulation within Italian feminist circles. Rich was, alongside Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson, among the most widely read authors in autocoscienza meetings.

stereotyped ideal of sacrificial motherhood—which is, indeed, the image fostered by patriarchy.

Within the character of Modesta, gendered behaviour is queerly dislodged from biological determinism. Not only is she described by other people as ‘forte e generosa come un uomo’ (*L’arte* 176), and calls herself half man and half woman (‘mezzo carusu e mezzo maredda’; *L’arte* 201), she also engages in typically male activities such as smoking the pipe and riding a bicycle (*L’arte* 200-201; 219-20)—thus embracing what Ross holds true for Sapienza’s literary self, which she sees as ‘un modello di femminilità mascolina: una mascolinità senza il maschile che snaturalizza e mostra la mascolinità come una costruzione, mettendo in discussione l’ipotesi che il sesso biologico porti inevitabilmente ad una identità di genere predeterminata’ (2012a: 227).¹¹⁰ Modesta’s adoption of masculine behaviours here could be said akin to the common self-fashioning of women as men in order to gain power, a position that would risk to bring her close to those homologising behaviours that she reprimands in her contemporaries (‘quelle forsennate del Continente, le suffragette, [...] uomini sembrano, con quei capelli corti e senza busto’, *L’arte* 130). Nonetheless, it should be noted that this form of masculine femininity that makes Modesta ‘una donna forte e volitiva come un uomo’ (*L’arte* 61) is but a contingent one—that is, functional to her social ascent and attainment of freedom, given that, ‘[u]na volta ottenuta la ricchezza e il potere necessari all’esercizio della propria libertà, Modesta abbandona l’aggressività e la volitività maschili per progressivamente lasciarsi andare all’erosione di ogni opposizione fra i sessi’ (Bazzoni 2012: 40), thereby performing her identity in yet different ways—‘carusu’ or ‘maredda’, or both at once. At other times, Sapienza’s heroine defends her being woman and reprimands her same-sex lover when she tries to suppress her femininity. Her homosexual relationship with Joyce ends, admittedly, when the latter starts betraying her own sex and behaving like a man: ‘l’ho amata finché donna mi sembrava, finché le mie mani trovavano quella pelle delicata, quei seni pieni, quel ventre dolce. Ma ora che la vedo rinchiusa in quella durezza sorda di uomo impotente m’è finita ogni fantasia’ (*L’arte* 402). This intrinsic ambiguity has been noted by Ross who has interpreted it as a fruitful contradiction: ‘this eccentricity has value in its ability to provoke us into reflection, to interrogate discourses that

¹¹⁰ In the Sicilian dialect ‘carusu’ and ‘maredda’ mean, respectively, ‘ragazzo’ and ‘ragazza’.

risk becoming consolidated into unexamined, received norms, and as a largely unheard strand of feminist self-fashioning and self-theorizing' (2012b: 16).

For Modesta to love both men and women is a 'normal' condition: 'sono una donna, [...] e per me la normalità è amare l'uomo e la donna' (*L'arte* 409). Her broadmindedness and untroubled polysexuality, on the other hand, is offset by the self-loathing of her lesbian lover Joyce, who is well aware of the social norms establishing who counts for a liveable life and who does not, norms that she has interiorised and made her own, reprimanding Modesta for her carefree attitude: 'Penso che in questo tuo volermi mostrare a tutti c'è un desiderio di legalizzare un rapporto che non può essere legalizzato mai' (*L'arte* 328). On her part, Modesta does not feel the need for a coming out, but would not exclude that either, positing it as an educational opportunity for her children to be confronted with '[la] realtà e vedere se la reggono questa realtà, o perderli' (*L'arte* 328). What she cannot forgive Joyce is her agonies of guilt, which infuse her feelings with shame and self-loathing:

Prima non capivo il perché di quei pianti dopo i baci e le carezze. Quei pianti, quel non vedermi, sfuggirmi, che m'hanno sempre tenuto in un'altalena d'angoscia per anni. Ma ora so: sei tu che senti il nostro rapporto come una colpa, e mi sfuggi appena appagata come se il mio viso fosse il simbolo della tua colpa. Sei tu che – cosa ancor più grave – non inconsciamente vorresti legalizzare il nostro rapporto. Ti è sfuggito una notte t'è sfuggito quel: se fossi un uomo! (*L'arte* 328)

Butler's work on social intelligibility and human's desire for recognition (2004) provides us with the theoretical underpinnings of the character's inner battle. Joyce lives her sexuality conflictingly and she goes as far as to harm herself due to the insurmountable sense of shame that she feels over not recognising herself as what Butler would call a socially 'viable' human:

Certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life. Certain humans are not recognized as human at all, and that leads to yet another order of unlivable life. If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that "undo" the person by conferring recognition, or "undo" the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not. (Butler 2004: 2)

For Butler, to *undo* normative laws around sex and gender bears specific consequences for the transgressors, because it impacts their social recognition as beings whose life is, or is not, worth living. We find this at play in Sapienza's novel, epitomised by the character of Joyce, the woman who loves women but hates herself for doing so, and who tries to cancel out her femininity by dressing and acting like a man. As Modesta puts it: 'Tu vuoi essere come un uomo, li imiti [...], è questo che ti fa sentire un essere mutilo. Questo mi fa pena Jò! Jò! non pronuncerò mai più questo nome mutilato. Joyce, tu sei intera e donna' (*L'arte* 349). Joyce considers herself 'un essere deviato' (*L'arte* 349), which is the reason why she resorts to psychoanalysis, only to discover that years of counselling have proven useless to correct what she sees as a 'deviazione' (*L'arte* 349). She has interiorised the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality and considers her life as not worth living insofar as it holds no promise for a reproductive future: 'ogni rapporto omosessuale è senza futuro' (*L'arte* 352).¹¹¹ Modesta reprimands her for her homophobic stance, a stance that is fostered by her reading of Freud and his pathologisation of homosexual desire:

Il tuo Freud è un bravo vecchio medico stanco, malato da anni di cancro alla bocca. Vogliamo per una volta tirarlo giù dal piedistallo e guardargli questo cancro, e magari applicare a lui le sue teorie, come lui ha fatto con Michelangelo? Chissà che questo cancro non sia un punirsi alla bocca perché ha parlato troppo, infranto tabù, codici, religioni... Mi fissi e indietreggi come madre Leonora quando mutamente mi leggeva nel pensiero che le negavo il suo Dio. Proprio non potete vivere senza una religione.... (*L'arte* 349-50)

The demystification of the power structures that create knowledge thereby constituting us as subjects brings us back to *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, written at the same time as *L'arte della gioia* and hinging on Sapienza's criticism of the heteronormative assumptions of her analyst of the time, Ignazio Majore, on her own homosexual relationships, which he dismissed as 'emozioni infantili' (*Il filo* 81). In *L'arte della gioia*, and precisely in the passage recalled above, Sapienza entrusts the character of Modesta her fierce condemnation

¹¹¹ This idea of equating queer people with the death drive is provocatively expressed by Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, where queer is said to challenge reproductive futurism understood as that which works to 'affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of the Child' (2004: 30).

of psychoanalysis as an example of false universal truths centring on binary (hetero)sexual models.¹¹²

What Judith Butler calls a ‘livable life’ (2004: xv) is the way human existence is organised within a regime premised upon the enforcement of (compulsory) heterosexuality. However, this controlling mechanism might sometimes fail to standardise and orientate our bodies and desires. When this happens, new directions are created and bodies are pushed into contact with the objects that have wandered off the straight, heterosexual line. This is a ‘queer commitment’ that entails the ‘opening up of a life worth living’ (Ahmed 2006: 178). In *L’arte della gioia* we are given an example of how this can be accomplished, with the novel endlessly teasing the reader over the infinite possibilities open to sex and desire. The character of Modesta dislodges womanliness from both biological motherhood (by creating a queer family that is not premised upon bloodlines) and femininity (usurping roles that are traditionally of male domain, such as the head of the household, or engaging in typically masculine behaviours). What is more, within the queer family structure thus formed, Sapienza’s heroine confers full legitimacy to non-normative sexual behaviours, from same-sex relationships (Modesta herself and her female lovers: Beatrice, Joyce and Nina; Bambù and Mela) to incestuous bonds (Bambù and Mattia), or from extra marital affairs (Modesta and her men: Carmine, Mattia, Carlo Civardi, Marco) to inter-generational affairs (Stella and Prando),¹¹³ thus re-orientating herself, and the readers, toward a queer way of inhabiting the world that, from a straight perspective, seems inappropriate and ‘out of place’, but that draws its force, precisely, from its freedom to move in different and unpredictable directions off the normative path.

3.2 *Io, Jean Gabin. Performative Sexual Politics and Masculine Identifications*

In her ‘autobiografia delle contraddizioni’, we follow Sapienza—at once author, narrator and protagonist—as she tries to disentangle herself from a net of oppressive normative

¹¹² *Il filo di mezzogiorno* is entirely devoted to Sapienza’s criticism of psychoanalysis. As the author puts it eloquently in the text, addressing her reader: ‘Ma ti dico: se siamo morbosi, malati, pazzi, a noi va bene così. Lasciateci la nostra pazzia e la nostra memoria e i nostri morti. I morti e i pazzi sono sotto la nostra protezione’ (*Il filo* 60).

¹¹³ One of Modesta’s lovers, the Milanese doctor Carlo Civardi, is named after Maria Giudice’s former partner, with whom she cohabited and had seven sons before meeting Goliarda’s biological father—once again a form of contamination between life and fiction in Sapienza’s work.

apparatuses, of which her mother, mentor and family members are illustrative examples.¹¹⁴ Her ‘gender fictions’ (Halberstam 1994: 210) bravely challenge normative desires, encompassing queer identities that range from same-sex love to incestuous drives or, in *Io, Jean Gabin*, masculine performances. Written in 1979 and only published fourteen years after the author’s death, the text represents, after *Lettera aperta*, the second chapter of Sapienza’s autobiographical cycle (which she had interrupted for almost ten years to devote herself entirely to her heroine Modesta) and is dedicated to the exploration of her adolescent identification with the French actor.

The increasing, yet still limited, corpus of literary criticism on Sapienza features only a handful of studies devoted exclusively to *Io, Jean Gabin*, which are included in Giovanna Providenti’s collection recalled above. Martín Clavijo (2012) approaches it from the point of view of the formative places, both private and public, of Sapienza’s childhood and adolescent years, analysing especially their influence in the shaping of the author’s complex personality. Particular attention is granted to the contrast between the ‘luoghi della realtà’, that is, places that are tangible (Sicily, the neighbourhood of San Berillo, her family) and the ‘luoghi del fantastico’, that is, places that afforded the young Goliarda some scope for reshaping reality (the *Mirone* cinema, but also the act of finding solace in her readings or writings). Gensabella’s short contribution, ‘Lei, Jean Gabin’ (2012), on the other hand, appears as a synopsis of the story, enriched with some textual examples and biographical anecdotes. The scholar does, nevertheless, make an important point when, with regard to Sapienza’s relationship with the feminist movement of the day, she notes: ‘risulta quantomeno difficile comprendere perché Goliarda sia oggi così spesso eletta a icona di quello stesso movimento femminista, basato sull’omologazione dei sessi, verso il quale l’autrice nutriva quasi terrore’ (2012: 178). Although not focussing exclusively on *Io, Jean Gabin*, one of the few contributions in terms of the analysis of the gender relations portrayed within the text seems to be the one advanced by Ross (2012a), included in the same collection as the other two mentioned above. Ross analyses Sapienza’s work against the rest of her autobiographical cycle, demonstrating how it contributes in reinforcing the author’s

¹¹⁴ Although the distinction might result at times not so clear-cut, for the sake of clarity I shall specify that I will hereafter use ‘Sapienza’ when referring to the author, and ‘Goliarda’ when referring to the author’s autobiographical self.

ambivalence with regard to the queer desires of which her ‘autobiografia delle contraddizioni’ is imbued. The scholar aptly stresses the process of gender self-fashioning, or gender ‘construction’, undergone by Goliarda through her masculine identification with the French film actor of the book’s title, a process that reveals the Butlerian, performative nature of Sapienza’s idea of gender. In what follows I will build on Ross’s findings in order to deepen the analysis of *Io, Jean Gabin* with regard to its deconstruction of fixed gender roles and to further spell out its link with the Butlerian performative. To this aim, I will resort to the trope of ‘drag’ so as to frame my argument and accentuate ‘the inner truth of gender [as] a fabrication’ (Butler 1999: 1756) as made explicit in Sapienza’s text. The Butlerian drag will allow me to posit that Goliarda’s gender performance, by playing upon the mismatch between the sex of the “performer” (female) and the performed gender (male), can be linked to queer insofar as it challenges ‘heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality’ (Butler 1993: 125). At the same time, I will emphasise the metaphorical notion of ‘space’ implicit to *Io, Jean Gabin*, which is missing from Ross’s analysis and which I see as central in Sapienza’s oeuvre. Finally, I will underscore Sapienza’s at times ambivalent relationship with feminism, a polemical stance that is made particularly explicit in this second chapter of her autobiographical project and that will return in her subsequent works.

Io, Jean Gabin has been defined as ‘opera corale’ (Martín Clavijo 2012: 160) on account of it being populated by a multitude of figures, some of which recur all throughout Sapienza’s opus. The text is an *a posteriori* exploration of the public and private places informing Sapienza’s adolescence: the neighbourhood of Civita, her native Catania, Sicily under Fascism, but also her family, her school and the mythical *Mirone* cinema where she would enjoy the movies of her favourite actor, French anarchist and socialist icon Jean Gabin, whilst also finding a safe place away from home, a frequent Fascist target at the time. *Io, Jean Gabin* tells us of the author’s unusual upbringing in an extended family alongside the numerous children that her parents, who lived together in free union, had from their previous partners. For the first sixteen years of her life, Goliarda was raised by the men in her family, years that she recalls as ‘i miei primordi tempestosi, sballottata fra braccia e petti duri pieni di peli’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 63), with Maria Giudice and Peppino Sapienza spending most of the time in prison due to their anti-fascist propaganda. She grew up learning different practical skills, such as sewing costumes for marionettes and chair weaving, and

failed to attend public school, which her father considered as a hotbed for Fascist ideas: ‘C’è sempre tempo per la scuola! Non è che una fabbrica di disoccupazione, o anche peggio ad ascoltare la voce dell’avvocato, una fucina di fascisti ottusi e crudeli’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 62).¹¹⁵ Sapienza’s peculiar formation is tellingly described by Pellegrino as a ‘formazione leggendaria [che] s’è fatta fra le mura di casa-oasi di luce nelle tenebre fasciste, e nei vicoli di S. Berillo a Catania (uno dei quartieri più esaltanti per vita e trasgressione di tutto quanto il Mediterraneo), rigurgitanti d’impareggiabile umanità’ (Pellegrino 2013b: 167).

The text opens with a polemic against a type of feminism based on female homologation to male behaviour that the author recognises as emblematically epitomised in the figure of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, taken as a symbol for those women usurping traditionally masculine domains, whom she gathers under the label of ‘donne di ferro’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 3)—a politics of ‘sameness’ that, for the author, can come dangerously close to annulling differences and reducing women to being just ‘like men’. Through identification with the French film actor and icon of the pre-war period Jean Gabin, Iuzza—the nickname that Goliarda earned as a child—does nevertheless trade this ideal of femininity for one that bears the traits of the maternal, evoked by the imagery used to describe it: ‘Questo ho imparato da lui e per me la donna è stata sempre il mare. [...] il mare segreto di vita, avventura magnifica o disperata, bara e culla, sibilla muta e risposta sicura’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 3). Liquidity has traditionally been used in literature as a symbol of femininity, with the woman’s body seen as ‘prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid’ (Showalter 1991: 81). Here particularly, its association with the nurturing function is further strengthened through terms such as ‘culla’ and ‘segreto di vita’, once again appealing to women’s biological destiny as child bearers. It would seem, then, that at the onset of the narration at least, Sapienza gets very close to an essentialist, and essentialising, construction of female subjectivity, one that relies heavily on biological determinism. The comments of Pellegrino, who edited the posthumous text reading it as ‘il rimpianto per la femminilità perduta di una bambina degli anni Trenta’ (Pellegrino 2010: 121), would also seem to point in this direction. Yet, and more in line with Sapienza’s overall treatment of gender as we find it throughout her opus, I argue that what follows in the

¹¹⁵ The epithet ‘l’avvocato’ is often used by Sapienza in her autobiographical cycle to refer to her father.

narration is far from a return to biological determinism, opening up instead a space for more fluid gender positions that mock the notion of a 'true' gender identity.

During her adolescence, Goliarda spends her afternoons in the darkness of a theatre room, watching the films starring her favourite actor Jean Gabin over and over, to then act them out for her neighbours, the brothers Nino and Bombolo, in exchange for money. Gabin, whose true name was Jean-Alexis Gabin Moncorgé, incarnates for the young Goliarda an escapist fantasy, and the cinematic identification becomes a gateway from everyday life: '[Jean] avrà il potere, lo so, di farmi dimenticare tutti i dolori grandi e piccoli che la società, accordandosi al lato cattivo della natura, ti butta tra le ruote' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 75). This escapism, I contend, is facilitated by the actor's Frenchness, his belonging to the more progressive *Continente*—as opposed to a culturally rich yet deeply retrograde *Meridione*—which must certainly have exerted a strong appeal on the Sicilian young girl. Iuzza sees him as 'bello e atroce, onesto e disonesto, crudele e dolce' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 94), in an oxymoronic merging of antithetic oppositions. But he is also an anarchist figure, a rebel and an out-law. As such, by identifying with him, she not only complies with her mother's teachings on not becoming a 'donnetta', she also keeps within the maternal philosophical and political beliefs.¹¹⁶ Gabin thus becomes a metaphor for dis/placement—both sexually (as a man) and geographically (as a French and a Northerner) that highlights Iuzza-Goliarda's 'disorientation', understood as the feeling of being at odds with one's world (Ahmed 2006: 159). Borrowing Ahmed's suggestive allegory for disorientation as what 'occurs when we fail to sink into the ground' (2006: 160), we can argue that Goliarda's cinematic escapism and the blurring of the nexus between fiction and reality that this entails is the manifestation of a profound sense of estrangement with the space occupied, which is further strengthened by her choice of identifying with an outcast who, for living outside the law, is himself normatively displaced. The *Mirone* cinema thus becomes an alternative symbolic space allowing for Goliarda's queer embodiments, with a contiguity being established between the screen and the theatre room. Unlike Roland Barthes's cinema spectator, who is glued to the screen in a trance-like state but who can swiftly come out of their hypnosis upon leaving the

¹¹⁶ It should be noted that Sapienza was not completely foreign to French culture, considering that, only an adolescent, she had already read Voltaire and Diderot amongst others—as is documented in several of her works, including *Io, Jean Gabin*.

movie theatre, Iuzza's identification with the screen continues while she is roaming the streets of her native Catania, which thus become a metonymic extension of both the physical space of the cinema where the fruition of Gabin's films takes place and of the cinematic space staged within the films themselves.¹¹⁷

The French actor represents for the young Goliarda a romanticised version of masculinity that knows no rules but those of the heart. Iuzza never gets tired of watching his films, of which *Il bandito della Casbah* (*Pépé le Moko*, 1937) and *Il porto delle nebbie* (*Le quai des brumes*, 1938) are two of her favourites.¹¹⁸ In the first, Gabin is a Parisian gangster on the run who takes his life after being separated from his beloved, while in the second, with little variation on the plot, he is an army deserter who falls for an unattainable lover and who is eventually assassinated. Iuzza embraces this version of idealised love and makes it her own: 'lei, fragile, schiva, muta e misteriosa, [...] pura, fundamentalmente pura e celestiale, perseguitata da qualche bruto' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 4). Such is how she sees her mother, a 'colomba [...] braccata dal falco' whereby the hawk hunting the dove is her father: she is 'pura', and he is the 'bruto', her rival in love. In the light of these textual clues, we can evince that Iuzza's identification with the tragic and ineludible version of love that Gabin's cinematic roles embody is indeed the expression of her non-normative, incestuous desires towards her mother. Her masculine identification with Gabin allows her to speak the unspeakable:

Mi metterei a piangere davanti a questa mia colpevolezza se la sonorità splendente della voce di Maria, la grazia sapiente con cui infila frasi su frasi fino a comporre un disegno magnifico di forma e contenuto, non mi entusiasmasse a tal punto da desiderare di buttarle le braccia al collo e dire t'amo. / Ecco la donna che avrei potuto amare! Ecco la donna che Jean non avrebbe potuto non amare se l'avesse incontrata. (*Io, Jean Gabin* 11-12)

Maria is Goliarda's primary love-object and, by her own admission, a source of distress deriving from the impossibility of fulfilment: 'e serrando le braccia al torace per non fare

¹¹⁷ Roland Barthes's essay on the hypnotic cinematic experience is 'Leaving the Movie Theatre' (originally published in French in 1975), contained in *The Rustle of Language* (1986).

¹¹⁸ *Il bandito della Casbah*, originally, *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier 1937), was released in Italy in 1946; *Il porto delle nebbie*, originally, *Le quai des brumes* (Marcel Carné 1938), was released in Italy for the first time in 1943 and then in 1959 in its integral version (Trevisan 2016: 109).

gesti incauti mi stringo a questo amore che non posso esternare e soffro a piene mani' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 11-12). Goliarda embraces herself in the impossibility of embracing an ever-distant mother, a gesture that brings us back to an analogous episode of self-repression in *Lettera aperta*, following the maternal punishment of her queer desires. The first volume of the intricate puzzle that is Sapienza's 'autobiografia delle contraddizioni' sees Goliarda and her stepsister Nica explore their sexuality by playing the husband and wife game, which affords them the occasion to experiment a series of queer identifications, since both girls can perform both genders at once. Upon catching them, Maria Giudice exhorts them to get dressed, summons up Goliarda and, in silence, slaps her. With regard to this last point, Maria Teresa Maenza notes that, despite the liberal ideal of which she is a representative, the feminist socialist Maria Giudice is at loss with words when it comes to instructing her daughter on female *jouissance* and resorts to corporeal punishment to sanction the morally harmful nature of her sexual games and the breaking of the Law that these entail (2012: 252-53)—in a way that, I would like to add, seems to recall the repressive attitude of Mother Leonora in *L'arte della gioia*. Following this incident, Goliarda would want to establish a physical contact with Nica and embrace her, but instead hugs herself looking for the reflection of her stepsister in the mirror: 'non potei fare a meno di spogliarmi davanti allo specchio e cercare di abbracciarmi come lei mi abbracciava' (*Lettera aperta* 97), in a way that, retrospectively, echoes the analogous self-censored behaviour in *Io, Jean Gabin*.¹¹⁹

Taught by her mother not to behave as a 'donnetta' (*Lettera aperta* 110), the young Goliarda espouses the rules promoted by such maternal rigorousness and carves out an anti-feminine model for herself.¹²⁰ This, however, at times risks bringing her close to essentialising and heteronormative notions on gender since, as noted by Ross, 'Sapienza-Gabin rifugge dal docile ruolo di «donnetta», ma tratta le altre donne come oggetti del desiderio o come damigelle in pericolo che hanno bisogno di essere salvate, e quindi non come esseri paritari' (2012a: 234). A case in point, while reminiscing on her past crush for

¹¹⁹ We will see this tension between queer desires and self-repression at play also in *Le certezze del dubbio*, which I discuss in the next section.

¹²⁰ Maria Giudice's stance on gender roles here would be in line with that of Sapienza's brothers, who warn her against talking about love, dismissing it as '«Melensaggini!»' or '«Cose da donnette»' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 53), while her uncle compliments her on her "masculine" vocabulary: '- Brava! Questo è parlare da uomo' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 42). The misogynist remarks of her mentor, Professor Jsaya, from whom women are 'femminacce castigo di Dio' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 16) would also move in this direction.

an American woman called Jean, Goliarda justifies resisting the urge to embrace her on account that ‘sarebbe un atto troppo carnale, lei non si aspetta questo, Gabin non l’avrebbe fatto’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 68).¹²¹ I suggest reading these contradictions implicit to Goliarda’s masculine fictions as the consequence of moving within a space that, similarly to the “space-off” envisaged by de Lauretis, is both outside and inside (in the sense of in relation to) the patriarchal discourse and its disciplinary structures, by which the subject is inevitably restrained.¹²² Although contradictory at times, her identification with the French actor does nevertheless afford Iuzza-Goliarda the occasion to voice her queer and incestuous desires towards the maternal object, while also disarticulating her sex from her performed gender, thereby exposing the artificial nature of gender itself in a way that prefigures the Butlerian ‘drag’.

3.2.1 Sapienza, Gabin, and the Butlerian ‘Drag’: the Parody of Gender

In *Io, Jean Gabin*, the Sicilian neighbourhood of San Berillo, in Catania, metamorphoses into the Casbah of Iuzza’s favourite actor in the film *Pépé le Moko* to provide the setting for the girl’s queer performances. Iuzza-Goliarda confesses that she would want to become not just like Gabin, but *Gabin* himself, an identification that is almost accomplished, since it is the reflection of him that she expects to see in the mirror: ‘la mia convivenza con Jean si era ormai approfondita talmente da farmi sussultare dalla sorpresa ogni qualvolta il mio viso mi appariva nello specchio del bagno o nei cento specchi dei bar e dei negozi scintillanti di via Etna’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 92). She adopts a masculine gait while roaming her Casbah: ‘adattavo i miei piccoli piedi alla camminata piena d’autosufficienza virile di Jean Gabin’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 3), which makes her the object of ridicule by her neighbours on account that ‘non s’addice a una signorina quel galoppo continuo con tutte le gambe di fuori’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 19).

¹²¹ We learn of Jean half way into the narration of *Io, Jean Gabin*, when Sapienza interrupts the account of her adolescent years and, in flash-forward manner, tells us about how they two met in 1944, when they were both hiding from the SS at a convent in Rome. Sapienza had already written about Jean in *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969), where the woman was called Jane (1969: 131-33). The different names notwithstanding, the perfect coincidence of the situations and narrated events would make it safe for us to believe that Jean/Jane are indeed the same person.

¹²² In de Lauretis’s words: ‘no social reality exists for a given society outside of its particular gender-sex system (the mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories of male and female)’ (1987: 25-26).

As a girl performing masculinity, Iuzza confounds perceptions of inner and outer self, parodying the alleged reliability of one's biological traits as a valid benchmark for gender identification—an uneasiness that finds confirmation in people's remarks. In doing so, she accomplishes what Butler holds true for drag, insofar as she, too, 'subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space' (1999: 174). In Butler's account, the drag performer, that is, a man passing as a woman, exposes the performative nature of gender: 'In *imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*' (1999: 175; Butler's emphasis). Indeed, for being neither male nor female but both at once, drag confounds and destabilises the categories on which we base our understanding of *normative* gender as the distinction between the two available possibilities of 'male', entailing 'masculinity', and 'female', entailing 'femininity', thus achieving the parodic effect of unmasking the heterosexual pretence of an alleged correlation between gender/sex (sexuality) that moves along a binary frame. Since the parody here is not of the original but, precisely, 'of the notion of an original' (Butler 1999:175-76; Butler's emphasis), it follows, then, that all gender identities are imitations of an alleged natural (heterosexual) ideal and, as such, they are all intrinsically parodic, for there is no original (true) gender in the first instance. Drag exposes the artistry implicit in gender formation and, for showing how the latter is an emulation of an *a priori* established social convention, reveals the imitativeness of the original (of heterosexuality, that is) thus performed: 'To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that "imitation" is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations' (Butler 1993: 125). For Butler the practice of drag is parodic insofar as '[it] plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed' (1999: 175), thus compelling 'a reconsideration of the *place* and stability of the masculine and the feminine' (1999: 177; Butler's emphasis) and proving gender imitative from the start.¹²³

¹²³ Some critics have questioned the subversive potential of drag in undermining heterosexuality; see for instance Tyler 1991. In this respect, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler clarifies her use of drag by claiming that, although it might not be enough in itself to displace hegemonic norms, 'drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality' (1993: 125).

In virtue of its contingency, the performance of gender also holds the promise to resist the normative structures of power that impose the mimicry of certain gender identities, as we see it at play through Goliarda's embodiment of her cinematic icon. For Butler, 'gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, [...] setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility' (1999: 189). Embracing the Butlerian critique of codified identity categories, Iuzza's masculine performance points at the vulnerability of gender norms and, as such, produces a 'performative surprise' (Butler 1999: xxvi) for the Bruno brothers, who see her as a 'maschiaccio' rather than 'una signorina' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 19). She responds with laughter to the epithet that 'a loro sembrava intensamente offensivo, ma che a me fa ridere, semplicemente ridere' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 19), thereby carrying out a process that, borrowing Butler's own terminology, we can call of 'resignification', consisting in the reformulation of demeaning appellations used for derogative purposes—here specifically pointing at a breach in the heterosexual script. This calls for several implications, and demands that the relationship between sexuality and politics be considered.

Butler maintains that the practices that engender us, that is to say, that mould us into gendered subjects, carry within them some scope for resistance and agency. Moya Lloyd's reading of the Butlerian performative is illuminating in this respect: 'Gender is simultaneously a mechanism of constraints (a set of norms which define us as normal/abnormal) and a locus for productive activity' (Lloyd 1999: 200). This view on personal agency has specific implications since 'construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible' (Butler 1999: 187). Thus, the deconstructive project at stake here, and the very same one we have in *Io, Jean Gabin*, consists in 'locat[ing] strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions' (Butler 1999: 188). By clearing herself of the guilt derived from not performing her gender normatively—namely, for not behaving like a 'signorina'—Iuzza is claiming the right to disrupt the correlation between sex (female) and gender (femaleness) and consciously uses the French actor to refashion her identity: 'io che, anche se nata femmina, ho spalle larghe, braccia lunghe e nodose, e passo rapido' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 17; my own emphasis). If it is true that gender is a performance that one acts out following a part that has been established *a priori*, then Goliarda's is less a re-enactment,

than a subversion, of the traditional, normative role, moved by a wish to escape a fate of subjugation to, and dependency on, men, which Zia Grazia and Professor Jsaya see as the inescapable outcome for women—a fulfilment of the Freudian dictum that ‘biology is destiny’. She refuses to identify with those flaccid and submissive women queuing outside her father’s office and whom she sees as incarnating the epitome of female subjugation to the patriarchal system. Encouraged by her unorthodox background and exposed to the plasticity of gender roles already at a young age, when roaming through the narrow alleys of Catania and stumbling upon transvestites and underage prostitutes was an everyday occurrence, Goliarda adopts a refractory attitude towards social mores. Hers can be read as a point of anti-normative resistance that stands as a rebuttal of the dominant, patriarchal, models of femininity, but also of the new ones advocated by certain feminist tendencies at the time of her writing—models that have been said to revolve around the aping of male behaviours. To these, Sapienza counterposes multiple, and nowadays we would call them queer, subjectivities, ‘interpretando le contraddizioni, andando contro i pregiudizi e travalicando le credenze sociali, esplorando cioè il femminile... nella sua immanente frammentarietà’ (Trevisan 2012: 57).

Although Goliarda’s identification with Gabin occurs mainly at a mental level, and although the text does not offer explicit instances of ‘cross-dressing’, I will take my cue from a passage in which Iuzza is said to be confounding masculine and feminine dress codes and read it as complementary to Butler’s clothing metaphor debunking the pretence of a strict adherence between one’s body covers and the marks of one’s gender. In the passage in question, Iuzza expresses her pride for wearing a red carnation in her jacket’s lapel, whereas the custom, for women, is to wear the flower on the hair or on the cleavage: ‘donne e uomini a mo’ di riconoscimento portavano un garofano rosso vero o finto: le donne nel seno o nei capelli, gli uomini naturalmente all’occhiello’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 109). Moreover, her jacket is a man’s style, ‘nuova di velluto nero a coste [...] tagliata dal sarto di fiducia dell’avvocato’ (*Io, Jean Gabin* 109), arguably, one of the sort she had seen on Gabin in his movies. In this passage, I suggest, clothes are used performatively to queerly dislodge gender from a biologically sexed body, thus disrupting the metonymic chain whereby gender relies upon generally acknowledged meanings assigned to a morphologically female or masculine body. The effect is a Butlerian incongruity between appearance and reality that reveals the

possibility for a hiatus between body and gender to occur. As a synecdoche of the bodies they are called to cover, clothes become at once more or less conscious performances (whether of pecuniary status or gender for instance) but also performative tools for subverting existing hierarchies.

In her fictitious biography of writer and cross-dresser Vita Sackville-West titled *Orlando: A Biography*, a work thoroughly troubled by questions of gender identity, Virginia Woolf memorably noted that ‘there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them’ (Woolf 1995: 92). By fusing the question of the construction and deconstruction of gender identity with the issue of clothing, the author’s words bring specific concerns to the foreground. The protagonist of her novel engages in an endless series of masquerades, wearing feminine or masculine garments according to the social occasion, thereby seemingly sanctioning the correlation between clothes and identity. However, upon closer reading, it becomes clear that the author’s ideology goes beyond the naïve assumption that a mere change of clothes is a sufficient precondition for gender constitution. By producing her/himself through conscious self-fashioning, Orlando is able to escape the claustrophobic, socially prescribed, adherence between one’s mode of being and one’s own anatomical sex at his/her own will, and can thus be read as Woolf’s demystification of the absurdity implicit in the straightjacket of conventions. A similar handling of the clothing imagery is present in *Io, Jean Gabin*, with Iuzza-Goliarda mocking the alleged natural correspondence between appearance and essence. It is known that Sapienza read Woolf, whom she also cites in her *Taccuini*. What we do not know, however, is whether *Orlando* could possibly be accounted as a direct source of inspiration for *Io, Jean Gabin*, written some forty years later. The fact remains, however, that what holds true for Woolf, that is, the belief that clothes can be not just external displays of what lies beneath but a deceitful disguise of a multi-layered identity, is also true for Sapienza.

In *Io, Jean Gabin*, masculine behaviour (and, on some occasions, masculine garments) affords the author’s textual and autobiographical selves the possibility to disrupt the correlation between exteriority and interiority, since, as happens in the parodic performance of the Butlerian drag, ‘underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above’ (Woolf 1995: 93). Following Butler’s trajectory, then, Sapienza the author and Goliarda the character—and first-person narrator—reconfigure gender relations so as to

overthrow the belief that the ‘truth’ of gender is inscribed onto the body, thus ‘mock[ing] both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’ (Butler 1999: 174). In doing so, Goliarda’s masculine masquerade as Gabin can be aligned to the practice of drag, for it, too, ‘brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original’ (Butler 1999: 41), a process whereby dichotomies (male/female) are overthrown and the concept of ‘natural’ is rejected.

3.3 *L’università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*. A Revision of Prison Literature

L’università di Rebibbia (written in 1980) and its sequel, *Le certezze del dubbio* (written in 1981) recount, respectively, the experience of Sapienza’s five-day incarceration in the homonymous Roman penitentiary and her homo-erotic desires for a fellow inmate, whom the author met for the first time while in Rebibbia, and whom she met again just less than a year after her release.¹²⁴ As noted by Laura Fortini, with these texts Sapienza subverts the literary genre of prison literature, of which the works by Silvio Pellico, Antonio Gramsci and Primo Levi amongst others are emblematic examples within the Italian tradition (2016: 139). Fortini also points out how specific features such as ‘associations with the concentration camp universe’ that constitute a ‘representative element, in descriptions of prison life in canonical narrations of Italian literature’ are absent in Sapienza’s texts (2016: 139). What we have is, instead, ‘the joyful, carnivalesque subversion of the [literary] norm’ (Fortini 2016: 140) that, filtered by the autobiographical experience, becomes a liberating tale of female relationality.

To date no critical study has systematically analysed Sapienza’s prison memoirs through the lens of the gender relations portrayed therein. Issues of materiality are approached by Barbarulli (2011) in her essay ‘Essere o avere il corpo: «L’Università di Rebibbia»’, with the scholar tackling the sense of corporeal possession and dispossession in the text by the same title. With quite an apt and counter-intuitive move, Barbarulli links the experience of corporeal ‘possession’ within the space of the prison as a consequence of one’s exposure to other bodies and the subsequent, unexpected, creation of ‘una sorta di afflato collettivo’ (2011: 137) that is reminiscent of the fusionalità among feminist groups at the

¹²⁴ Sapienza was incarcerated from 4th to 8th October 1980.

time of the author's writing. On the other hand, in her contribution mentioned above, Ross (2012a) analyses one specific passage in *Le certezze del dubbio* whereby Sapienza is confronted with the awakening of her homosexuality, and, thus, with the 'spettro del desiderio lesbico' (2012a: 239). Ross points out the disruptive consequences, at a psychic level, in terms of Sapienza's self-repression of her queer desires, linking it to the interiorisation of normative socio-cultural discourses on compulsory heterosexuality. The present section expands from my recently published 'The Heterotopic Space of the (Female) Prison in Goliarda Sapienza's and Dacia Maraini's Narratives' (Morelli 2016a), where I read Sapienza's prison texts in conjunction with Dacia Maraini's *Memorie di una ladra* (1972) with regard to the authors' use of the heterotopic space, alternating between adherence to hegemonic discourses on gender on the one hand and the creation of alternative practices of female relationality on the other.

The incipit in *Le certezze del dubbio* establishes a clear link with the previous work: 'Da quando m'avevano sbattuta fuori dal carcere in attesa di giudizio avevo preso anch'io a percorrere quelle piccole strade lastricate di sanpietrini...' (*Le certezze del dubbio* 3).¹²⁵ The paved streets are those of Rome, which Sapienza roams while on her way to witness a trial for rape on which she is meant to write an article when, unexpectedly, she stumbles upon Roberta, her fellow inmate with whom she had shared the 'cella 27' in Rebibbia: 'Non è passato che un anno da quando ho ascoltato per l'ultima volta quel suo ridere infantile e rauco nello stesso tempo, eppure è come se le modulazioni di quella voce sortissero da un passato così remoto da dare brividi di paura ultraterrena' (*Le certezze* 3-4). For the scope of the present study, given the narrative, thematic and stylistic contiguity between Sapienza's prison accounts, two rather slim volumes written one year apart from one another, I will read them together as the same, conclusive, piece of Sapienza's autobiographical puzzle.¹²⁶ The prison space, around which these two texts revolve either directly, in providing a setting for the narration (in *L'università di Rebibbia*) or indirectly, in echoing the author's written memoirs (in *Le certezze del dubbio*), conjures up an amniotic-like environment that is

¹²⁵ Hereafter referred to as *Le certezze*.

¹²⁶ On the stylistic characteristics of Sapienza's prison texts, which would set them apart from the rest of the author's more introspective literary production, Bicchietti notes that 'Lo stile narrativo [...] muta considerevolmente rispetto alle opere precedenti, soprattutto quelle che precedono *L'arte della gioia*. La scrittura si fa lineare, asciutta, non compaiono grandi salti temporali o lunghe divagazioni' (2012: 186).

premised upon a form of female-to-female identification bearing similarities with the feminist practice of *autocoscienza* that was developing at the time of Sapienza's writing although, ultimately, departing from it.

My study expands on the author's relationship with feminism and posits that, through her prison writings, Sapienza provides an implicit critique of the women's movement of the day and, specifically, of its tendency toward separatism and the sense of fusionality that this entails—namely, the symbiotic merging into the other group's members—reminding us instead of the importance of promoting difference(s) between women. I will also explore Sapienza's ambiguous relationship with her queer desires for another woman which, following Ross, I will link to the coercive approach to sexual education that she received as a child, a disciplining strategy aimed at limiting the experience of one's body as a primarily procreative concern and casting sexual binarism as the norm. Sapienza struggles with her non-normative desires, yet she never succeeds in silencing them—which stands as a testimony of a queer identity that strives for recognition. As a result, the coercion into (hetero)normativity to which she is subjected is put into question, opening up the possibility for a breach into what de Lauretis has identified, via Foucault, as a normative and normalising process for which, just like sex, 'gender, too, both as representation and self-representation, is the product of various social technologies [...], and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life' (de Lauretis 1987: 2). In Sapienza's writings we can identify two such corrective institutions at play, either explicitly or implicitly: the prison and the family. In what follows I will first analyse how the former is positively charged, but also used by Sapienza to criticise a coeval separatist tendency of the Italian feminist movement and the limiting approach to sexuality that it entails before moving on to explain, in the next section, how the influence of the latter institution reverberates through the author's inner struggle with her queer sexuality.

3.3.1 Amniotic-like Prison Space and Feminist Separatism: an Implicit Critique?

On 4th October 1980, Goliarda Sapienza is convicted of theft. Standing by the author's own words, one would learn this to be an act of rebellion against society, her response to the exasperation of the last few years marked by eviction and economic difficulty, the expression of her disenchantment towards the exhaustion of the revolutionary potential of the Seventies which, despite the initial promise, did not lead to a dissolution of the privileges of the few,

and of class differences in particular.¹²⁷ Whichever meaning lies behind her crime, be it a punishment of a corrupted social body or be it self-penance, one might safely assume that thirst for first-hand knowledge of what in the text she calls ‘la febbre che rivela la malattia del corpo sociale’ (*L’università di Rebibbia* 110)¹²⁸ has certainly been a driving force for ending up in prison, perhaps motivated by the same ‘ideological mysticism’ (Barbarulli 2011:132) that had inspired the social and political activism of her mother, a previous inmate herself.

Sapienza depicts prison not just as a mirror of society but as *society* itself, although on a smaller scale: ‘Agenti inconsci del genio della centrifuga sono le detenute stesse...come all’esterno sono i cittadini tutti’ (*L’università* 44). Society is described as a ‘penal colony’ and, in turn, prison becomes ‘lo spettro o l’ombra della società che lo produce’ (*L’università*, 109). Encapsulated in these words is an echo of some of the key principles laid out by Foucault in his 1966 lecture on ‘heterotopias’, an original reinterpretation of the concepts of space. In the philosopher’s formulation, ‘heterotopias’, which can be either real or unreal (places of the mind) are places of marginality and transgression that are linked to all other places, though physically removed from them. Similarly, in Sapienza’s account, although detached from it, prison is seen as a by-product of society and, in a way, a symbolic extension of the latter.¹²⁹ Since its English translation, in 1986, Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopias’ as he originally laid it out in ‘Of Other Spaces’ has found wide application in literary studies among other fields, where it has been appropriated in different, sometimes even contrasting, ways.¹³⁰ What interests me here, and what makes the heterotopic trope

¹²⁷ Such is also the interpretation of her gesture by her former husband (personal conversation with Pellegrino, Rome, 16th May 2016). In an interview published in *Noi Donne* in April 1982, Sapienza defines herself ‘criminale per protesta civile’ (qtd. in Providenti 2010: 160).

¹²⁸ Hereafter referred to as *L’università*.

¹²⁹ We find the first occurrence of ‘heterotopia’ in Foucault’s work in his preface to *Les Mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), published in 1966, where he used it to refer to some sort of mythical textual space that can exist only in the realm of language. In the same year, during a radio talk as part of a series on the concept of utopia, Foucault revised his initial thoughts and defined heterotopias as ‘mythic and real contestations of the space in which we live’ (2009: 25), offering examples of such ‘counter-spaces’ that include the prison, the cemetery, the garden, the brothel, the mirror, and so on. The transcript of his lecture appeared in print in 1984 with the title ‘Des espaces autres’ (translated into English in 1986 as ‘Of Other Spaces’). The concept of heterotopias has since then generated also much criticism, see for instance Edward Soja’s *Thirdspace*, criticising Foucault’s heterotopologies as ‘frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent, incoherent’ (1996: 162).

¹³⁰ For a comprehensive list of applications of the Foucauldian heterotopia, see Peter Johnson’s blog *Heterotopian Studies*: <http://www.heterotopiastudies.com/author/peter-johnson/>.

relevant to my reading of Sapienza's texts, is its ability to call into question categories and assumptions about the world that one inhabits, to which it stands in metonymical relation. Foucault's heterotopias are tangible places that 'mirror, reflect, represent, designate, speak about all other sites but at the same time suspend, neutralize, invert, contest and contradict those sites' (Johnson 2006: 78). They serve the purpose of offering a picture of, and a reflection on, society, either by imitation (reenactment) or modification (recreation) of the same. Similarly, the heterotopic mirror at play in Sapienza's texts, gives us back the reflection of alternative forms of female relationality that resist hegemonic discourses on gender roles. When this happens, the space of the prison becomes akin to what we have seen apropos of de Lauretis's "space-off", here translating into forms of non-hierarchical relationships that run counter to the pervading logocentrism intrinsic to patriarchal discourse. As such, the homosocial quality of prison life results in the collapsing of boundaries between the inmates, thus generating a queer mode of living that is unthinkable within the economy of conventional societal arrangements. During an interview with Biagi originally released in 1983 by Retequattro for his programme *Filmstory* and later broadcast in 2011 by *Rai Storia*, Sapienza put forward an unorthodox idea of her prison experience, one that runs counter to the common belief on the topic. Indeed, by claiming, as she did, that in prison there is a sense of recognition of one's skills and attention to the other that is missing in everyday life, Sapienza reminded us of its heterotopic quality and of its potential for becoming an improved version of the outside world.

Among debris, milk that tastes like bromide and sordid environments, female bonding is the only hope to which one can cling in order to preserve their equilibrium, however precarious; the only balm to the loss of dignity that a system premised on punishment inevitably entails. Using a Foucauldian approach, we could say that the penal institution is only one tiny portion of the societal net of power operating toward the polishing of the (female) body within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, an overarching, omnipresent control system that is made emblematic in the repressive approach to sexuality that Sapienza herself has received from her mother—an approach that, interestingly, seems to clash with an otherwise liberal education, as evinced from the account of her formation

years in *Io, Jean Gabin*.¹³¹ Yet, in *L'università di Rebibbia*, the space of the prison is stripped of its negative connotation and provocatively used to create new discourses around society while providing, also, an interpretative key to the author's stance on the nature of female relationality. It does so through the creation of heterotopias that, because of their otherness, silently question the world in which one lives by way of presenting alternative images of the latter.

In an uncanny reversal of the public perception of prison life, Rebibbia is depicted as a protective environment, a womb-like receptacle where maternal symbiosis and identification with one another serve as powerful weapons against social marginalisation. Within those walls, Sapienza bears witness to, and takes part in, fruitful exchanges capable of transforming the squalor of the prison into 'un ambiente vivificante di scambi mentali e meditazioni' (*L'università* 72), as for instance those taking place within the cell of the Chinese inmate Susy Wong in the forms of enjoyable tea parties. It is hard to resist interpreting this form of female bonding through the lens of the Italian feminist practice known as *autocoscienza*, whose onset is virtually contemporaneous to the writing of Sapienza's book. These women-only groups were being used by the women's movement as a liberating practice: 'Il piccolo gruppo di autocoscienza fu per molte il luogo sociale in cui poterono per la prima volta parlare apertamente della loro esperienza e questo parlare aveva un valore riconosciuto' (*Libreria delle donne di Milano* 1987: 33). Similarly, in Sapienza's text, the 'salotto' that forms in Susy Wong's cell is capable of transforming prison, oxymoronically, into a 'confortevole ambiente' (*L'università* 87-88). Here, words become a therapeutic tool, and the sense of commonality that derives from opening up with the other transforms forced detention into an all-female heterotopia, 'a "safe space" for women to explore the dissonances between their experiences and the dominant [patriarchal] discourse' (Mui and Murphy 2002: 60).

There is, however, a downside to such a feeling of being in symbiosis with the other group's members, which is a trait characterising separatist movements in those years. A double-edged sword, the (con)fusion with and into the other would come to mirror the

¹³¹ 'A casa mia nel Continente anche i piccoli sono individui coscienti che i grandi aiutano a crescere e a scegliere la propria identità. Vuoi essere donna? lo sarai, vuoi essere un giornalista, un monaco buddista o una monaca cattolica? lo sarai, basta che studi e cerchi dentro di te qual è veramente la tua vocazione' (*Io, Jean Gabin* 79).

primary symbiotic relationship of the child with the maternal; a total fusion in one single being for which *she* is also *myself* (Minetti 1992: 117). This is paralleled in Sapienza's autobiographical account of her own prison experience in a way that calls for the necessity of self-boundaries, that which makes possible a differentiation from the m/other—which is, also, the precondition towards self-constitution—and confronts us with negative and self-destructive examples of what could happen otherwise. The warning comes from one of her cohort: 'Ma ti devo avvertire che qui i rapporti si fanno così essenziali che se non si è più che prudenti possono essere fonte di tragedia' (*L'università* 98). One case in point, we will learn shortly thereafter, is the suicide of a prisoner in Perugia, who took her life after being separated from her cellmate. The advice, then, is 'tenere sempre a mente che da un momento all'altro possiamo venire separate' (*L'università* 98), which can be read as a hint to Sapienza's misalignment with the separatist feminist practice, as criticised elsewhere in her writings.

Discussing the author's references to the women's movement as we find them disseminated in her works and private correspondence, Ross maintains that 'Sapienza's remarks about Italian feminism [...] are too cryptic for us to really assess what is meant' (2016: 95). Although it is certainly true that Sapienza's hints to the feminist movement are for the most part implicit and much is left unsaid, I also believe that looking at the broader context, be it a novel or a letter, in which they are made, and linking them to other inter-textual cross-references can tell much about what is implied. Sapienza found fault with the separatist politics of her contemporary feminists, as inferred in her letter to Siciliano recalled in the introduction, whereby 'dividere l'uomo dalla donna' would refer to a precise political strategy of 1970s Italian feminism.¹³² "“Separatism”" was the name Italian feminists gave to the mode of their meeting and discussing activity, a way they sought as necessary to advance their issues and enhance their gender awareness' (Guaraldo 2013: 68) with the aim of achieving a level of complete autonomy from traditional, male-regulated structures premised upon the erasure of 'woman' as a subject. The practice of *autocoscienza* (and, later, of *affidamento*, although the passage from one practice to another was not so clear-cut and the two often overlapped) was one of the ways through which separatism was put into effect by

¹³² Personal conversation with Pellegrino (Rome, 17th May 2016).

second-wave feminism. Looking at the ideological treatment of the prison space in Sapienza's memoirs and at its links with the women's movement, if it is true that, as Barbarulli has aptly put it, 'nel carcere [...] sembra quasi riproporsi una forma delle pratiche femministe dell'autocoscienza e del racconto di sé proprio dei piccoli gruppi' (2011: 141)—as in the case of the makeshift tea parties recalled above—it is also true that Sapienza herself is aware of the emotional dangers that this (con)fusion with the rest of the group brings about.

Within the prison walls Goliarda soon starts to feel overwhelmed by the exclusive presence of women around her: 'Mai il pensiero di essere soltanto fra donne si è impossessato di me come in questo momento' (*L'università* 92). From her fellow inmates she learns about same-sex relationships, such as those between Cinzia and Marina or between Marilú and Oliva, which, however, seem less spontaneous than they are contingent, as evidenced by the exchange between two members of her cohort: 'Io l'amore fra donne non lo capisco...' / 'Perché non hai avuto mai da stare qui molti anni' (*L'università* 104). In the wake of French group *Psychanalyse et Politique*, some 1970s Italian separatist groups such as the *Via Lombroso* collective, embraced the practice of political lesbianism as a form of valorisation of the female experience. This idea that women can *choose* to become lesbians has been retrospectively questioned by queer theorists. Among them, de Lauretis has found fault with 'the affirmation of lesbianism as a particular relation between women that is not only sexual but also sociosymbolic; that is to say a relation between women that entails a different production of reference and meaning, if not always in the terms of feminism' (1994: 198). Similarly, in her writings, Sapienza adopts a critical stance towards a situational form of lesbianism that, moreover, would entail the replication of the same hierarchical structure of the heterosexual couple: 'Io lo capisco invece [l'amore tra donne], quello che non mi piace è che si ricostruiscono i ruoli del maschio e della femmina. Io se mi dovessi innamorare di una donna vorrei non avere un ruolo...Allora tanto vale stare con un uomo' (*L'università* 104-105). To be promoted, instead, is a more spontaneous and role-less way of feeling and desiring. Sapienza herself embraces a queer sexuality, which does not succumb to the pressure of having to choose to be homosexual, nor does it exclude the possibility of being attracted to both sexes at once, as appears clear by her inner turmoil unchained by the presence of a male guardian inspecting her cell: 'Perché dunque quell'orgasmo irrefrenabile

che solo due o tre volte nella vita mi si è scaraventato addosso?’ (*L’università* 127). Sapienza does not yield to the contingency of same-sex love, yet she will develop feelings for her former cellmate Roberta while also continuing to desire men, thus espousing the Butlerian ideal of the constructed and performative nature of (hetero)sexual desire, which, precisely in virtue of its artificiality, can be questioned and subject to change.

3.3.2 Between Queer Desires and (Hetero)normativity in Sapienza’s Prisons

In *L’università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, the social institution of the prison works not just as the setting for the narration but also, at a symbolic level, as indicative of a series of normative apparatuses responsible for carrying out a process of realignment of women’s bodies, and sexualities, into the heteronormative path. We have seen this at play in the author’s education as emblematised in her mother’s castrating intervention towards her queer desires for her stepsister Nica when they are caught playing the ‘matrimonio’ game. Maria Giudice, with her slaps, censors the psychosexual development of Goliarda, channelling it towards a binary, normative frame that does not admit other possibilities (‘Sapevo che era male quel matrimonio, e che la punizione sarebbe arrivata’; *Lettera aperta* 97). Similarly, Professor Jsaya, another key figure of Goliarda’s formative years, instructs her on the naturalness of gender roles and exhorts her to behave accordingly: ‘aveva ragione [lui]: anche se parlavo bene non ero che una bestiolina femmina: una donnetta [...] «Ognuno deve sapere i propri limiti». Non ero che una donnetta. Dovevo imparare a cucinare e a lavare’ (*Lettera aperta* 83). In her more mature years, this inculcation of predetermined roles finds culmination in the ambivalent figure of her psychoanalyst, Ignazio Majore, who dismisses Sapienza’s homosexual adventures as idealised ‘amicizie femminili’ (*Il filo di mezzogiorno* 69). Maria Giudice, Professor Jsaya and Ignazio Majore exemplify, respectively, the institutions of the family, the school and medicine, those cultural practices that, borrowing from de Lauretis, we can call ‘technologies of gender’.¹³³ This analogy between the physical space of the prison and the symbolic one of the institutions is better understood if we read a passage from Sapienza’s *Taccuini* dated 15th October 1980, just

¹³³ The analogy between Sapienza’s critique of coercive institutional apparatuses and de Lauretis’s formulation of the ‘technologies of gender’ would find further confirmation in a passage in *L’università di Rebibbia*: ‘Il fatto è, Goliarda, che noi donne reggiamo meglio il sistema carcerario. Certo, questo è possibile perché abbiamo un passato di coercizione e qui in fondo troviamo uno stato di cose che non ci è nuovo: il collegio, la famiglia, la casa...’ (*L’università* 125).

fifteen days after she had been released from Rebibbia: ‘Passeggiando con Silverio comprendevamo che da un carcere siamo passati ad un altro carcere. Carcere di lusso nel quale incontro Titina [Citto Maselli’s sister]: la amo ma lei non capirebbe, e come Titina tutte le donne che ho amato ma che sarebbe stato «un delitto» amare’ (*Il vizio* 120). The (self)castration of Sapienza’s queer desire (here addressed toward the sister of her former partner), here and elsewhere in her oeuvre seems to hint at a legacy from the maternal intervention on the exploration of her polymorphous sexuality that dates back to her childhood years. It comes as no surprise, then, that after *L’università di Rebibbia*, prison will continue to be a looming presence, albeit a metaphorical one this time, in the conclusive piece of Sapienza’s autobiographical puzzle.

Sapienza wrote *Le certezze del dubbio* as an act of love to the young and beautiful Roberta, a testament of the bond that links the two women and that eludes any definition. It is, finally, an attempt to defeat the insidious presage of a premature death looming over her ex inmate:

«Perchè scrivi, Goliarda!»
 «Per allungare di qualche attimo la vita delle persone che amo» [...]
 «Bene, allora forse un giorno scriverai anche di me»
 Questo Roberta voleva da me? rinascere letterariamente, personaggio che vive in un libro? [...] Riuscirò io, privata dalla natura malvagia dalla gioia di partorire, riuscirò io a forgiare dentro di me quel piccolo bozzo informe di carne in una bambina [...]?» (*Le certezze* 188)

As aptly noted by Giulia Bicchietti, manifest in these lines is the appropriation by the author of the childbirth metaphor (2012: 188) widely used to refer to the act of artistic creation by women writers—for which Sapienza can, through the written page, generate the child she has never had in real life, thus amending, albeit fictitiously, her failure to adhere to the desirable social script for a woman of her time. Critics have positively recast the contradictions implicit to Sapienza’s sexual and textual selves, reading them as the acceptance of the inconsistencies inherent to the ‘self’ and the co-occurrence of different polarities within one’s sense of identity (Ross 2012a; 2012b). This is made emblematic in *Le certezze del dubbio*, where queer desires coexist with the fear of not performing one’s gender right. And yet, the act of writing performs a liberating function for Sapienza. Ursula Fanning’s observations on the construction of the autobiographical self in Sibilla Aleramo

seem particularly apt here when, despite recognising that '[i]t is not possible to speak of a healing of the subject-object split', the scholar nonetheless notes that 'the process of writing proves critical for the narrator in her attempt to understand herself and it proves to be therapeutic on some level' (1999: 171). Similarly, although Sapienza-Goliarda will ultimately fail to explore fully her sexuality, the act of writing becomes a beneficial practice for her because it inhibits her frustrations and aborted sexual tensions. The result, as expressed in the quote above, is a somewhat queer act of giving birth, one that does not rely on male agency, but on the sole generative force of women, here powerfully conveyed through the metaphor of the creation of the text, understood as a metonymic extension of the literary subject narrated in it.

For Goliarda the sight of Roberta's naked body is 'evocativa di dolci abbandoni da compromettere anche la più ferrata salute mentale' (*Le certezze* 81), which is indicative of her inner effort not to succumb to her feelings. Her apprehension originates from a deeply seated anxiety towards a too long-repressed sexuality that Roberta now threatens to explode in all its disruptive force. This apprehension becomes apparent during the episode when the author is showering with her and Barbara, another former cellmate of theirs:

Sorride adesso e nel sorriso veri fasci color miele invadono le sue pupille ma io stremata mi auguro solo che lei tolga le braccia dalle mie spalle che ormai più che premere sono diventate un tutt'uno caldo con la mia carne. Ma non c'è niente da fare, quel tutt'uno di carne calda, piena di brividi, non solo non se ne vuole andare ma s'avvicina paurosamente facendo scomparire i suoi occhi sostituiti da un aereo vorticare di linee; nel vortice due labbra chiuse, carnose e resistenti si stampano sulle mie, un attimo che dura un secolo e che solo la voce di Barbara ha il potere di staccare. (*Le certezze* 86)

The girl's kisses unleash a whirlwind of emotions: 'Quel bacio inaspettato finisce di stravolgere tutte le emozioni che dal pomeriggio Roberta mi ha scaraventato addosso con un'intensità così continua da farmi apparire quelle ore come un lungo tempo così pieno di «eventi»' (*Le certezze* 87). Goliarda finds herself locked in a psychological battle charged with tension and anguish:

Mai la vicinanza carnale di una donna, delle tante da me amate mentalmente, aveva risvegliato i miei sensi. E perché, natura maligna, mettermela sotto il naso proprio quando, appagata dall'incontro felice con un uomo (o ne è proprio questa la causa?),

avevo riposto il mio lato omosessuale nel cantuccio sereno della sublimazione dove, a dispetto di tutte le mode, c'è anche la felicità? (*Le certezze* 87-88)

By her own admission, Goliarda had sublimated her homosexual side, storing it safely 'nel cantuccio' of the heterosexual closet. Roberta's sexual advances now threaten to awaken her foreclosed desires; they demand that, in the middle of her adulthood, she reconfigure her identity and recognise the illusory nature of the sense of fullness deriving from '[un] incontro felice con un uomo'. Being charged with frustration and pain, female homosexuality here acquires a somewhat pathologising bent, thus conforming to the dominant view for which outcomes of the process of sexual identity development other than heterosexuality are seen as deviant and unacceptable. Goliarda seems to be conscious of her own self-censorship: 'Maledetta natura [...] deve essere androgina questa dea spensierata e amorale che si diverte a oppormi barriere su barriere' (*Le certezze* 88). She is aware of, but she restrains herself from, exploring fully her own 'homosexual side'—that is, any unruly sexual manifestation that the proximity to her former cellmate has generated. As epitomised in the shower episode, this is for her a source of guilt impossible to bear, perceiving it as she does as a stigma, a betrayal to that normative self to which she feels compelled to conform. With this in mind, it is not difficult to perceive the slaps that Goliarda gives to Roberta as a form of self-punishment ('come avessi schiaffeggiato me stessa'; *Le certezze* 113) that is to say, an attempt to silence her own sexual desires, of whose arousal Roberta is the trigger. As suggested by Ross, these slaps are, also, a re-enactment of those that Maria Giudice gave to Sapienza when, still a child, she was caught playing naked with her childhood love, Nica; these slaps, Ross reminds us, Sapienza had interiorised and already re-performed on her analyst Ignazio Majore faced with his pathologising treatment of her homosexual tendencies (2012a: 231-32).

Given the erotic nature of Sapienza's attachment towards Roberta (by her own admission: 'quella preoccupazione affascinante ma troppo erotica per me'; *Le certezze* 89), the speculations laid out by her partner of thirty years in the literary portrait of her that has recently been published in French, cannot be convincing:

Que représentait Roberta pour elle? Une personne qu'elle aimait fougueusement sans aucun doute, mais de l'amour d'une femme de presque soixante ans pour la jeunesse dangereuse d'un être vivant dans l'excès, miroir de toutes les contradictions

de la société qui les entourait. Elle y retrouvait sa propre jeunesse lointaine et se retrouvait dans cette jeune femme telle qu'elle aurait pu être elle-même avec trente années de moins; Roberta était aussi la fille qu'elle n'avait pu avoir: la blessure de cette stérilité et impossible maternité ne s'était jamais cicatrisée en elle. (Pellegrino 2015: 49)

What was Roberta for her? Without a doubt, a person whom she loved passionately, but of the kind of love of a woman approaching her sixties towards the dangerous youth of someone who lives in excess; a mirror of all the contradictions of the society surrounding them where she would find the reflection of her distant youth, what she could have been if she were thirty years younger. Roberta was also the daughter she could not have: the open wound of her infertility and impossible maternity. (my own translation)

Similarly, I do not find entirely persuasive Bicchietti's assumptions when she reduces the relationship between the two women to 'maternità [...] un senso di protezione e di inquietudine [che] vengono indirizzati alla ragazza' (2012: 188). Although what Goliarda feels for Roberta at times remains ambiguous, verging on empathy (and, thus, protection) for this young woman that a heroin addiction has aged far too soon, she also desires her sexually and her presence is sufficient to provoke in her 'onde di piacere' (*Le certezze* 130) that throw her 'nell'occhio del ciclone' (*Le certezze* 87). What is problematic about a stereotypical reading of female-to-female eroticism that flattens it by reducing it to mere maternal instinct, is that it keeps it within well-established narrative codes of reference, those regulating, in de Lauretis' words, 'what *can* be seen and represented' (de Lauretis 1994: 85), thus ultimately denying the specificity and erotic component of homosexual desires. Goliarda's yearnings are eventually thwarted by self-repression: 'E poi, dovevo sistemare nel mio organismo preindustriale forgiato al «decoro», il ridicolo – oh, non agli occhi degli altri – dello spettacolo di un risveglio dei sensi così tardivo da indurre al sospetto di sopraggiunta senilità?' (*Le certezze* 87). The use of the adjective 'preindustriale' is of particular interest here. It could denote the generational divide between Sapienza and Roberta, which elsewhere in the same text is referred to as 'pudore d'altri tempi' (*Le certezze* 72), that is, the modesty and reserve that characterise Sapienza who, unlike her fellow inmate, has not been affected by the changes in mores brought about by the extensive industrialisation in the post-war years and, as such, has remained 'pre-industrial'—further marking a gap between the rigid sex education she received and her impulse to subvert it. At a deeper, psychological, level, prison thus becomes a metaphorical space, which coincides with Sapienza's awareness of the

prescriptive nature of gender stereotypes and, at once, of her own self-imprisonment, understood as her perpetual struggle against her devious desires.

The relationship that Sapienza develops with her fellow inmates while in Rebibbia acquires the metaphorical configuration of a form of kinship that, in positing itself as alternative to the conventional household structure, is for some aspects akin to what we have seen apropos of *L'arte della gioia*. Here, too, bloodlines are made redundant, while the male presence is not even contemplated. Read against Ahmed's phenomenological model arguing that queerness unsettles and rearranges conventional relations by way of suggesting new solutions, then, the confines of Sapienza's prisons become a queer spatial tool. As explained to an incredulous Enzo Biagi during the interview mentioned above, in Rebibbia Sapienza reevaluated her initial misconceptions around incarceration and realised that the whole experience had been instrumental in grasping a sense of female solidarity that she could not find outside—hence, the message contained in the book's title, spelled out in the text where prison is explicitly posited as 'una grande università cosmopolita dove chiunque, se vuole, può imparare il linguaggio primo' (*L'università* 91).¹³⁴ 'Linguaggio primo' could here be understood as the primordial language between mother and child in the Kristevan semiotic, that is, the 'linguaggio profondo e semplice delle emozioni' (*L'università* 90), which would indeed be in line with the amniotic-like environment that is recreated within the prison walls. Defeating the initial aversion of the other inmates and her own sense of estrangement and fear, Goliarda eventually gains inhabitancy into the inhabitable prison space, which is made liveable in a move that challenges not only the traditional genre of prison memoirs but also the social perception of prison itself.¹³⁵ This process entails a collapsing and reversal of the spatial categories of interior/exterior, whereby the world outside is seen as '[un'] immensa colonia penale' (*L'università* 103) and what is inside a copy of society, '[il] regno degli archetipi eterni' (*L'università* 139). When this happens, Rebibbia becomes an 'orientation

¹³⁴ An excerpt of the interview is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojXxjHr6MU0>. The analogy between Rebibbia and the university is further spelled out in the text, during a moment of cheerfulness among the cohort: '- Fosse sempre così! Rebibbia diverrebbe un posto da pagare per entrarci. / - Sì, un posto da pagare a caro prezzo... come una grande università famosa; si potrebbe anche darle un nome suggestivo: *Rebibbia University*' (*L'università* 96).

¹³⁵ Behind the initial aversion of her fellow inmates is Sapienza's bourgeois appearance, which is immediately picked by the other women in prison who see her as different: 'Il mio modo di essere qui non va. Saranno i vestiti, anche se sporchi, di lusso; qualsiasi donna capisce il taglio di un paio di pantaloni e di una camicia, il taglio dei capelli...' (*L'università* 15).

device' (Ahmed's term) allowing Sapienza to align herself in critical relation to normative social assumptions. Besides, the spatial proximity with her fellow inmates leads her to negotiate a more fluid sense of subjectivity and self-boundaries that derives from a quasi-symbiotic relationship with the other, a relationship that painfully confronts her with her queer desires.

In *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, the space of the page to which Sapienza entrusts her memories is a metonymic extension of the prison space itself, and the act of writing inevitably pushes her into reliving the same feelings of helplessness that had accompanied her sexual attraction to Roberta whilst in prison. By putting her inner battle into words, however, Sapienza accomplishes what she dares not do in real life and manages to keep her beloved close to herself: 'Scriverà di Roberta perché scrivere è un modo di allungare la vita degli altri e la propria, o piuttosto anche – forse – di non staccarsi da Roberta, dall'attrazione che prova per lei' (Barbarulli 2011: 146). With her prison writings the author concludes her autobiographical project, offering no resolution to her conflicting approach to sexuality and leaving it as open-ended and ambiguous as the discordant sexual personas portrayed therein. Nevertheless, in pinning down onto the page her inner struggles and queer desires, one must certainly acknowledge Sapienza's merit in attesting the multifarious possibilities of a queer sexual self that enables 'new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms' (Butler 1999: 185); a self in continuous becoming that years of training into normative compliance have not possibly succeeded to put to silence, nor to fully channel within the heteronormative path.

3.4 Conclusions

Falling within the autobiographical genre, Sapienza's cycle is a most unconventional one that allows for the exploration of the author's queer desires, which, despite their inherent contradictions, imputable to the awareness of infringing constrictive normative roles, challenge received ideas around gender and sexuality.¹³⁶ The result is an ambiguously queer identity, that which Butler recognises as vital in order to 'open up the field of possibility for

¹³⁶ On the gendered nature of first-person writings, in one of her notebooks dated December 1977, Sapienza concedes: 'Ho sempre odiato i diari, forse perché il diario mi era stato indicato come una cosa femminile' (*Il vizio* 35). Raised like a man and taught not to indulge in feminine occupations, it is significant that Sapienza eventually reappropriates what she considers as a gendered literary genre—autobiography—turning it to her own ends to stage queer literary selves.

gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized' (Butler 1999: viii). First-person narratives have traditionally been closely linked to female writing on account of women having historically been excluded from public spaces and confined within their homes, 'favour[ing] the autobiographical mode, at least for their first ventures into the sphere of writing' (Fanning 1999: 166). Contemporary feminist scholarship has seen it as an occasion, for women, to appropriate a traditionally masculine tool—that is, language—and use it for purposes of self-representation. In this respect, Graziella Parati has noted its agentive potential maintaining that '[a]utobiography is a hybrid and malleable genre [...] where a woman can experiment with the construction of a female "I" and, sometimes, a feminist identity' (1996: 2).

Writing at the height of the Italian women's movement, Sapienza re-imagines the feminist autobiographical project engaging in a queer interplay between representation and identification that is less concerned with refashioning and redefining herself once and for all than it is with exploring a self in continuous transformation, raising questions about what identity really is. An approach of this sort appears in line with recent queer readings on autobiography and its deconstructive potential emphasising 'the multiple "I"s embedded in all autobiographical narratives' (Bory 2013: 247). From this perspective, which is also that of Sapienza's, clear-cut divisions between fiction and reality are questioned and problematised, moving away from the notion of unity and towards a multiplicity of selves. In doing so Sapienza opens up a space for inconsistencies and gaps—indeed, 'contraddizioni'—between narrated and life material, which queers the mimetic pretence of canonical autobiography, re-imagining it as 'an act of identification-making rather than of identity-claiming' (Bory 2013: 250). Angelo Pellegrino maintains that Sapienza 'relives' her memories in the act of pinning them down onto the page.¹³⁷ This implies the idea of an identity that is constantly performed and reperformed, encompassing masculine identifications (in *Io, Jean Gabin*), hybrid alter egos that are both masculine and feminine at once (in *L'arte della gioia*) or the self-portrayal of a middle-aged woman struggling with queer, intergenerational desires (in *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*).

¹³⁷ Personal conversation with Pellegrino (Rome, 18th May 2016).

All of Sapienza's texts gathered in this study are linked by a sense of 'otherness', understood as a spatial elsewhere of which Ahmed's notion of *disorientation* provides a useful theoretical paradigm. Space is rendered metaphorically as a form of misalignment with respect to the normative dimension, which is, in turn, represented 'in terms of the straight body, a body that appears "in line"' (Ahmed 2006: 66). At times a physical and symbolic dimension overlap in Sapienza's writings, as is the case of her masculine identification with Jean Gabin taking place in the mythical *Mirone* cinema, a queer gender performance that parodies the heterosexual assumption of a "true" gender identity exposing instead, in a Butlerian fashion, its performative nature. This is also the case of Sapienza's prison memoirs that, because of their otherness, can be read as heterotopias that silently question the outside world by presenting alternative images of the latter and, as such, they can be seen as sites for contestation and transformation that offer new ways for rethinking female relationality. At other times, as we have seen in *L'arte della gioia*, the spatial dimension becomes a metaphorical rearticulation of societal arrangements generating alternative and non-normative kinship structures that prefigure, albeit in diverse ways, those occurring in Sapienza's prison writings.

Their different nuances notwithstanding, the pieces of Sapienza's 'life puzzle' herewith analysed all confront the reader with, to quote the definition that Paola Bono gives of Modesta, a subjectivity 'variegat[a] e mobile, capace di molteplici identificazioni e appartenenze, eccedente a ogni singola definizione' (Bono 2016: 123)—a definition that well captures Sapienza's own displacement, understood symbolically as a spatial dis/location with respect to conventionally established gender norms.

Chapter 4 The Undoing of Gender in Elsa Morante's *Aracoeli*

Elsa Morante (1912-1985) is a distinctive figure in the Italian literary panorama, and the 'inability of critics to pinpoint exactly [her] "ideology" (Christian? Marxist? anarchic?) has been the source of endless frustration among them' (Re 1993: 371). Emblematic of her literary anti-conformism is her debut novel *Menzogna e Sortilegio* (1948), a nineteenth-century style family saga published when the dominant trend in the post-war Italian literary scene was Neorealism, with its penchant for plots set during the Resistance and grounded in social reality. Morante shows a predilection for, amongst other themes, the conundrums of the human psyche and the power of imagination to transfigure reality. One of her favourite topoi is the lost innocence of childhood, as we find it for instance in her 1957 Strega prize-winner *L'Isola di Arturo*, set in a mythical island and dominated by an a-temporal quality. In her most famous and much discussed novel *La Storia* (1974), unfolding against the horrors of WWII, Morante chooses to follow the private story of two nobodies, a schoolteacher of Jewish origins and her son. Stefania Lucamante addresses and rectifies the early accusations of anachronism and ahistoricism moved against the novel in these terms: 'the scandal of the pervasiveness of linear history compels Morante to create a voice for the voiceless'—or, as Primo Levi would say, 'the drowned' rather than 'the saved' (2015: 97).¹³⁸ Morante's ideology, indeed her unique vision of realism in literature, can be better understood in her 1959 essay 'Sul romanzo' and, particularly, in her claim that the novelist cannot be content with exploring reality, for what is needed is a reinterpretation of the latter: '[romanzo è] un'opera che, attraverso la *realtà* degli oggetti, renda la loro *verità* poetica: è inteso da tutti che questa verità è l'unica ragione del romanzo, come di ogni arte' (1987: 44-45).¹³⁹

In the colossal corpus that constitutes the literary criticism on Morante, it is possible to detect some main strands, among which the most recurrent ones seem to be: the depiction

¹³⁸ Lucamante uses the words 'history's "winners"' and "'the drowned'" with reference to Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986, *I sommersi e i salvati*).

¹³⁹ The essay was originally published in *Nuovi Argomenti* and later included in the 1987 essay collection *Pro o contro la bomba atomica e altri scritti*.

of childhood (Zlobnicki Kalay 1996), the relationship with the feminist movement, also linked to the treatment of womanhood and motherhood (Jeuland-Meynaud 1989; Pickering-Iazzi 1989; Patrucco Becchi 1993; Lazzari 2006), the alleged autobiographism of her writings (Siti 2006), and the psychoanalytical (mainly, but not exclusively, Freudian) substratum that subtends her opus (Bardini et al. 1990; Bardini 1999; Lingiardi 2009; Holzhey 2009). In the last few decades a new trend has emerged, broadening the frame of inquiry on the author's work and promising to deepen the literary analysis of the gender ideology at play within it. After having long been neglected, arguably as a consequence of its initial unfavourable reception, *Aracoeli* (1982) has received particular attention in this respect. Morante's last novel stands out from her literary opus both chronologically—since it followed *La Storia* by almost a decade—and thematically—for it challenges normative gender categories in a way that is unprecedented in the Morantean repertoire. What brings it in connection with the coeval works of Maraini and Sapienza that I have thus far analysed is its treatment of issues of gender, sexuality and identity and, specifically, its challenge of binary identity categories. In what follows I will firstly examine recent critical studies that approach *Aracoeli* from the lens of gender and queer theory. Secondly, I shall advance my own queer reading of the novel and spell out its originality with respect to existing literary criticism.

Adalgisa Giorgio (1994) was the first to tackle the binary dichotomy 'Nature vs Culture' in *Aracoeli*, which she did by looking at the relationship between the bourgeois societal order and the Symbolic as staged in the novel. In their edited volume *The Power of Disturbance* (2009), Manuele Gragnolati and Sara Fortuna have gathered original scholarly approaches to the text, placing it in relation to contemporary philosophical discourses such as psychoanalysis, political thought, feminism and queer theory. Although from a somewhat different angle, their own contribution to the collection takes up Giorgio's study recalled above, and engages in an exploration of the semiotic dimension in *Aracoeli* in order to propose a Kristevan reading that accounts for a bodily relationship between language and identity.¹⁴⁰ The essay by Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky (2009), in the same volume, puts forward a formulation of Morante's queer feminism that is achieved through the

¹⁴⁰ For an analysis of the maternal semiotic in *Aracoeli* by Gragnolati and Fortuna, see also their joint article 'Attaccando al suo capezzolo le mie labbra ingorde' (2008).

allegorisation of names in *Aracoeli*, suggesting *Baubo* as an additional one for the eponymous character. From Nietzsche's reading of the Greek mythical figure as the bearer of the meaning of life, Deuber-Mankowsky argues that the novel encapsulates a feminist message whereby, in a queer turn, the mother and son couple of the virginal Madonna and her Child is superseded by that of the obscene *Baubo* (the goddess of fertility) and Iacchus/Bacchus protruding from her vulva. More recently, the conference organised by Professor Stefania Lucamante at the Catholic University of America (Washington DC) in 2012 on occasion of the centenary of the birth of the author, hosted a panel devoted to issues of gender and sexuality in Morante's work. The critical interventions given on this occasion have been gathered in a dedicated section titled 'Queering Morante: Bodies that Matter from *Diario 1938* to *Aracoeli*' and have been included in *Elsa Morante's Politics of Writing: Rethinking Subjectivity, History and the Power of Art* (Lucamante 2015) in a chapter by the same name. It comprises queer readings of the author's oeuvre, with specific attention to *Aracoeli*. The chapter includes contributions by Wehling-Giorgi (2015: 193-203), Gragnolati (2015: 205-18) and Morelli (2015b: 219-31). In "'Tuo scandalo tuo splendore'", Wehling-Giorgi analyses the mother-child relationship in *Diario 1938*, 'Lo scialle andaluso' and *Aracoeli* and argues for continuity in the portrayal of the maternal figure in some of Morante's early works, which would foreshadow the ambivalence marking her last female character Aracoeli in the homonymous novel. 'Differently Queer: Sexuality and Aesthetics in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Petrolio* and Elsa Morante's *Aracoeli*' by Gragnolati, offers a comparative analysis of the narrative techniques between Morante's *Aracoeli* and Pasolini's *Petrolio*, looking at how they both escape linearity in name of an inconsistent and unpredictable narrative mode that, precisely in virtue of its incongruity and fragmentary nature, can be linked to the non-normative sexualities of their male protagonists.¹⁴¹ Finally, in 'Kaleidoscopic Sexualities: Defying Normative Resistance and Maternal Melancholia in *Aracoeli*', I read *Aracoeli* through Butler and Kristeva's notions of, respectively, 'undoing

¹⁴¹ With regard to a recent queer reading of Pasolini's *Petrolio* (1992) in conjunction with *Aracoeli* advanced by Gragnolati (2015), I wish to draw a distinction between the homosexuality of Carlo, the protagonist of Pasolini's text, and the more fluid characterisation of Manuele, Morante's main character. In my view, while they are both remarkable figures in the Italian literary panorama of the day in terms of sexual subversiveness, only Morante's protagonist would truly epitomise a queer stance that successfully deconstructs hetero and homo identity categories alike—as I will discuss in more detail in the present chapter.

gender' and 'abjection' so as to investigate the male protagonist's process of subjectivity formation and to argue for the textual interplay between a societal order that would want to annihilate the subject on the one hand and the subject's movement towards the attainment of wholeness on the other. The present chapter draws on my study recalled above, expanding it and integrating it with an analysis of the queer subversiveness of the female protagonist and, in Butler's terminology, the novel's 'undoing [of] gender' categories.

What interests me here is not so much assessing the revolutionary potential of the maternal semiotic in *Aracoeli*, nor reading it as a textbook example of a symbiotic union with the (m)other. Instead, and without discarding the thesis of the textual interplay between Nature/Semiotic and Culture/Symbolic, I propose to look at Morante's textual project as a whole, and to approach the complexity of the novel at different levels, rather than focussing on one particular aspect of the gender relations staged therein. I will adopt a Butlerian reading to argue that *Aracoeli* deconstructs the identity categories it sets to portray, thus opening up new possibilities, for the subject, arising from the coexistence of opposites: male and female, masculine and feminine and, ultimately, paternal and maternal. *Aracoeli* violates the social order by disrupting the process of reiteration of normative identities, which, if we agree with Butler, is the very same mechanism that makes them appear 'natural' in the first instance. To the categories of masculinity and femininity the text superimposes, respectively, the figure of the androgynous 'homosexual' and that of the mother/whore—a process resulting in Manuele's anxiety towards the forcible production of a male ideal impossible to emulate on the one hand, and in his mother's grotesque transfiguration from a caring figure into a sexually voracious prostitute on the other. Ultimately, the collapsing of the pairings male/masculinity and female/femininity as carried out through the figures of Manuele and Aracoeli respectively, is mirrored into, and reinforced by, the merging of maternal and paternal, as we shall see. The unwillingness of the male and female protagonists alike to recite their genders normatively links them to queerness for, through their failed performances, they expose the intrinsic artificiality of gender identity. Produced at a time when Italian women were addressing the question of female identity, Morante's novel undoes the categories of 'woman' and 'man', showing, in a Butlerian twist, how these are but reiterated performances, rather than expressions of a prior essence. Butler's models of 'performativity' and 'undoing' gender will provide a useful theoretical framework to

consider the gender non-compliance of the novel's main characters (1999; 2004). Edelman's formulations on the queering of the category of time as a point of resistance to the reproductive imperative of heterosexuality (2004), on the other hand, will allow me to liken the degeneration of *Aracoeli*'s femininity to the contestation of regulatory gender regimes that is characteristic of queer practices.

The theory of the performative character of gender argues that the mechanism of reiteration of culturally instilled gender roles can be interrupted and undone. As Butler sums up, 'it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged' (Butler 2004: 216). In the same way as Manuele resists the conventional, patriarchal male role, his mother, too, defies the traditional maternal script and, as such, she can be read as a form of queer resistance to the gender identity assigned to women within a patriarchal order. In a postmodern fashion, in *Aracoeli* gender, be it male or female, is posited as an inconsistent, unstable and ever-shifting affair, at once contested and demystified.¹⁴²

4.1.1 Vittorio Maria Emanuele. Masculinity Undone

Aracoeli is the story of the protagonist's quest in search of his late Andalusian mother, who gives the text its title. The narration extends over a time-span that ranges from the Fascist regime to the death of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco—with clear, recognisable historical events marking the progression of the story—and is recounted by the forty-three-year-old Manuele in the form of a monologue.¹⁴³

Aracoeli replicates a quasi-ubiquitous paradigm in Morante's novelistic production: the attempt to recover a pre-Oedipal unity that, in this case, follows a twofold loss that the

¹⁴² I use the problematic term 'postmodern' here in the sense understood by Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino in their *Le filosofie femministe* as 'un termine generale che corrisponde a un'area di pensiero assai variegata e complessa, caratterizzata da [...] una decisiva frattura all'interno della monolitica sostanza autocosciente del soggetto [che] mett[e] in crisi la sua fondazione razionale' (2002: 106). In a similar fashion, in *Aracoeli*, too, identities are shown to be the performative effect of reiterative patterns (of behaviour, speech, desire and so forth) rather than empirical givens; patterns that both the male and the female main characters will break, as we shall see.

¹⁴³ The novel is marked by recurrent references to both Fascism and Francoism. Besides contextualising the narration, these totalitarian regimes serve also a symbolic purpose in *Aracoeli*, denoting as they do the realm of the Lacanian Father that stands, also, as an emblem of masculinity. Their failure is paralleled in the text by the shattering of the marks of masculinity itself—that is, virility (accomplished through the character of Manuele) and fatherhood (carried out through the character of Manuele's father).

protagonist and first-person narrator has long ago experienced but is nevertheless unable to overcome. First, his mother's inexorable descent into madness and consequent demise and, prior to this, his expulsion from the maternal realm, the androgynous world where gender categories have not yet been activated, prior to the fall into adulthood, this latter lived as a 'stupro innominabile' (*Aracoeli* 50) that marks the expulsion from the body that has given us birth.

The narration begins in Milan, from where Manuele embarks on a flight that will take him to his mother's native land, the Spanish region of Andalusia, in the village of El Almendral, which he will later learn to mean 'almond grove' in Spanish and 'mirror' in Arabic. Since the onset of the narration, Manuele appears entrapped inside a societal order that risks annihilating him as a subject. Behind the 'forastico and misantropo' (*Aracoeli* 8) homosexual, a drug-addict social pariah with manifest suicidal instincts, hides a 'bambino, attorno al cui corpo inconsapevole è cresciuta la carne di un vecchio' (Cordati 1987: 10). Manuele will continue to perceive himself as extraneous to his own body also in his adulthood, as made emblematic in the passage whereby he engages in metaphysical considerations that incisively sum up his sense of alienation from himself:

E alla fine, la nostra esperienza totale risulta un ibrido, di cui ci appare solo il tronco esposto e mutilato, mentre la parte confitta ci scompare nella foiba. Quest'ibrido è il mio stesso corpo, è il tuo: sei tu, sono io. E forse, il nostro corpo intero, straziato dalle nostre proprie forbici, all'ultimo ci si farà incontro dalla croce spaziale, carnivoro balzano e sconosciuto. (*Aracoeli* 291)

As Nadia Setti has noted, commenting on this passage, in *Aracoeli* 'the hybrid overcomes the subject'.¹⁴⁴ This phantasmagoric creature, she asserts, 'holds together all the characteristics of *Aracoeli*: the young girl, the ill woman and the dead mother'; it is, she goes on, both male and female at the same time. Consonant to the androgynous character of Manuele's subjectivity would also be his dream about metamorphosing into a beautiful Indian dancer who in turn transforms herself into a phoenix: 'Una fenice la quale, sollevandosi a volo, si dileguava in alto' (*Aracoeli* 140). The image of the shining phoenix

¹⁴⁴ The quote above is taken from 'Androgynous, Hybrid or Queer? Gender Reveries in Morante's Writing', the paper that Setti delivered on occasion of the Davy Carozza International Conference 'Elsa Morante and the Italian Arts', held in October 2012 in Washington D.C.

deserves some attention. Traditionally symbolising Christ's resurrection and immortality, in Christian mythology it is seen as a phenomenon of change and perennial overcoming. Morante had already employed this topos in *Menzogna e Sortilegio*, where, after appearing in the dedicatory poem, it returned repeatedly throughout the novel as, in Sharon Wood's words, 'a symbolic trope of fiery splendour and ashes, of death and resurrection, and, on the level of the enunciation and narration, of metamorphosis and transformation' (2007: 78). Just as in *Menzogna e Sortilegio*, the phoenix is an implicit presence also in *Aracoeli*, where characters metamorphose in a complex staging of unresolved gender relations and, as such, it can be read as the 'principale modalità di rappresentazione del mondo [che] non tollera la chiusura dentro formule troppo univoche' (D'Angeli 2003: 18). On the other hand though, precisely for its sitting at the threshold between life and death, the phoenix also alludes to division and split—a dichotomy that aptly illustrates Manuele's ambivalent sense of self as made emblematic in the passage above. Within my queer reading of the novel, the hybridity encapsulated in this textual image offers an interpretative key to the text and allows me to expand on the elision of the gender boundaries staged therein.

The legacy contained in Manuele's name, which stands for 'Vittorio Emanuele, in omaggio al re d'Italia' (*Aracoeli* 133) is for its bearer a difficult one. It incarnates an ideal of power and masculinity that he will never be able to emulate. Besides, Emanuele/Manuele is the Italian form of Manuel, the name of Aracoeli's late brother, the protagonist's mythical uncle whom he has never met in real life and who nevertheless appears frequently in the narration, in the anecdotal tales recounted by his proud sister or in the protagonist's hallucinatory dreams ('Il mio EROE fu e rimane, a tutt'oggi sempre uno: mio zio Manuel'; *Aracoeli* 5). Both the King of Italy and Manuel thus stand as Manuele's ego ideals, whose legacy is encapsulated in the imperative '*Comportarsi virilmente!*' (*Aracoeli* 286), coming from his paternal grandparents. This ideal of virility, however, is counterbalanced by the addition of the second name 'Maria' to (Vittorio) Emanuele, in compliance with the maternal will to pay homage to the Virgin. While on the one hand Maria as a masculine second name was until recently a fairly common practice in Italy, especially among families of noble descent, within the economy of the narration it serves to reinforce the idea of Manuele's

androgynous subjectivity, thus foreshadowing the novel's 'mixing of gender'; an order of 'transgender kind' (Lingiardi 2009: 64).¹⁴⁵

Manuele's childhood is marked by two stages that correspond, spatially, to 'Totetaco' (in Manuele's baby talk, the neighbourhood of Monte Sacro, in Rome) and 'Quartieri Alti' (literally, 'the high quarters'). The former refers to the place where Manuele lived with his mother before the officialisation of his parents' wedding was granted by the navy; the latter is his father's house, located in a rich residential area. Whereas 'Totetaco' marks a period that, although lived clandestinely, for Manuele corresponds to a 'fusione incantenvole' (*Aracoeli* 108) with the maternal heaven, the 'Quartieri Alti' denote 'un'altitudine geofisica' as well as 'sociale' (*Aracoeli* 27) that is symptomatic of the child's entrance into the paternal realm—that is, symbolically, his entrance into adulthood, the order of societal norms and, from a gender standpoint, the end of his androgynous existence and the awareness of sexual difference. The admittance into his father's house, which symbolically corresponds to Manuele's initiation into manhood, is sanctioned by the ritual of the cutting of his locks, a process recorded by the boy as 'un sacrificio cruento' (*Aracoeli* 132), in that it marks the beginning of his gendering. For Butler, genders are made to approximate the heterosexual norm, or, to use her own words, 'to 'cite' the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject' (1993: 232). This repetition is not, of course, 'the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment' (1993: 232). This is eloquently expressed by Sara Salih in the following terms:

To claim, as Butler does, that sex is always [...] performative is to claim that bodies are never merely described, they are always constituted in the act of description. When the doctor or the nurse declares 'It's a girl/boy!', they are not simply reporting on what they see (this would be a constative utterance), they are actually assigning a sex and a gender to a body that can have no existence outside discourse. In other words, the statement 'It's a girl/boy!' is performative. (Salih 2002: 88-89)

¹⁴⁵ For more on the theme of androgyny in *Aracoeli*, see the study by Hanna Serkowska (2006), linking it to the Platonic formulation of an original hermaphroditism. While Serkowska's analysis centres on the androgynous figure as the product of a wished-for mother-son fusion whose retrieval is at the centre of Manuele's voyage-quest, I use 'androgyny' to support my reading of the breaking down of the gender binary (male/female) around which the novel is structured.

Salih goes on to explain that the statement ‘It’s a girl’ thus becomes ‘an interpellation that initiates the process of ‘girling’, a process based on perceived and *imposed* differences between men and women, differences that are far from ‘natural’” (Salih 2002: 89; Salih’s emphasis). Going back to Manuele’s entrance into ‘Quartieri Alti’—that is, out of the spatial metaphor, into manhood—and borrowing from Salih’s reading of Butler, we could call this a process of ‘boying’. In this context, the cutting of his hair acquires the same performative function of the declaration ‘It’s a girl/boy!’ inasmuch as, by installing sexual difference, it compels the subject ‘to cite both sexual and gendered norms in order to qualify for subjecthood’ (Salih 2002: 89). The Morantean male protagonist resists this process of assimilation: ‘io non volevo crescere e mi pareva scandaloso farmi uomo’ (*Aracoeli* 72), so much so that the first signs that mark the onset of puberty are for him a source of anguish and pain.¹⁴⁶ The appearance of facial hair, the attribute of virility that for those around him is ‘l’onore del maschio’ is perceived, in Manuele’s inverted value system, as ‘una denuncia flagrante dello scandalo’ (*Aracoeli* 72). The character’s gender non-conformity is the result of the severing from the maternal realm and the impossibility to overcome such traumatic separation:

Vivere significa: l’esperienza della separazione: e io devo averlo imparato fino da quel 4 novembre, col primo gesto delle mie mani, che fu di annaspere in cerca di lei. Da allora in realtà io non ho mai smesso di cercarla, e fino da allora la mia scelta era questa: rientrare in lei. Rannicchiarmi dentro di lei, nell’unica mia tana, persa oramai chi sa dove, in quale strapiombo. (*Aracoeli* 18)

The womb, here conjured up by the allusion to a welcoming ‘den’, is the maternal *chora*. Used by Plato to signify an enclosed space, psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva borrowed the Greek work in order to develop her theory of the child’s early stages of psychosexual and linguistic development. In Kristevan terminology, the *chora* becomes the pre-linguistic stage that marks the baby’s first months of life. This is an instinctual phase characterised by the lack of boundaries between self and other, thus between the child and the (m)other:

¹⁴⁶ Manuele’s process of ‘boying’ would replicate the analogous training into femininity of his mother, initiated when the poor, barbarian and uneducated Andalusian meets the upper class navy officer who will later become her spouse (a meeting significantly described as ‘*rapimento*’; *Aracoeli* 44) and continued by aunt Monda’s ‘*tirocino da signora*’ (*Aracoeli* 138). I will expand on this latter point in my analysis of the character of *Aracoeli*.

Per me tra l'unità e i suoi multipli non esistevano confini precisi, così come ancora l'io non si distingueva chiaramente dal tu e dall'altro, né i sessi uno dall'altro. Per tutto il tempo di Totetaco, io non ebbi nozione di essere maschio, ossia uno che mai poteva diventare donna come Aracoeli. (*Aracoeli* 118-19)

To prolong this gender (con)fusion with the maternal and complete lack of awareness of sexual difference between Manuele and his mother is Aracoeli herself, and the woman's unusual and excessive reticence to show her body to her infant son. Aracoeli is, in Manuele's eyes, a sort of virginal mother ('immune da ogni tentazione erotica', *Aracoeli* 103), whose religious association is further strengthened by the iconography of the Virgin and her Child that we find in Manuele's childhood recollections. These sacred images function as metaphorical mirrors in the novel. The first-person narrator finds himself gazing at them in the hope of glimpsing the desired image of himself. Instead, what is reflected back to him is an extraneous Other, a self disconnected from, and imprisoned into, a sexed body that he cannot possibly acknowledge as his own.¹⁴⁷ Unlike the Lacanian child, who recognises him/her-self in the specular image as separate from the maternal body, the topos of the mirror in *Aracoeli* is a symbol of reunification, rather than separation, with the mother:

Ora, la primissima visione postuma di me stesso, che fa da sfondo a tutti i miei anni, si presenta alla mia memoria (o pseudo-memoria?) non direttamente ma riflessa dentro quella specchiera, e inquadrata nella nota cornice. [...] Ci si vede, seduta su una poltroncina di peluche giallo-oro, (a me già familiare) una donna con al petto un lattante [...] e sono io quel lattante dalla testolina nera che ogni tanto leva gli occhi verso di lei. (*Aracoeli* 11)¹⁴⁸

Manuele's voyage *à rebours* to his mother's native village has a twofold aim. It is an introspective and retrospective endeavour aimed at retrieving Aracoeli's past. But it is also nostalgia for the lost maternal womb that prompts his search: 'Manuele's voyage-quest, which structures the novel' is aimed at regaining 'that primary androgynous unity and completeness, prior to the binary system that holds gender as its goal' (Serkowska 2006: 158). The longed-for return to his mother's womb is, it has been said, a return to his

¹⁴⁷ In a perfect fusion with the maternal, Aracoeli's eyes also become a mirror for Manuele: 'C'era una volta uno specchio dove io, mirandomi, potevo innamorarmi di me stesso: erano i tuoi occhi, Aracoeli, che mi incoronavano di bellezza nelle tue pozze incantate' (*Aracoeli* 107).

¹⁴⁸ For more on the theory of the mirror stage, see Lacan 2006b (75-81).

childhood, and to the pre-gendered blissful merging with the maternal realm that this entails, a place where sexual difference has not yet been activated. Because ‘[t]o be born sexed is partly also to die, in the sense of having to lose, or fragment, the original unity’ (Serkowska 2006: 165), Manuele’s yearning for his place of birth, the maternal womb, is, also, a wish for self-annihilation: ‘Ma tu, mamita, aiutami. Come fanno le gatte coi loro piccoli nati male, tu rimangiami. Accogli la mia deformità nella tua voragine pietosa’ (*Aracoeli* 109).¹⁴⁹ The ‘tana’ here becomes a ‘voragine’. The return to the origin is a return to the state of pre-existence, marked by the loss of distinction between subject and object. Because the establishment of boundaries is what prompts the parting from the *chora*, Manuele’s is a wish that moves in the opposite direction, not a departure from, but rather a falling back into, the maternal womb. Thus, the androgynous structure of Manuele’s quest can be read as an attempt at destabilising, in Butler’s own formulation, ‘the norm [that] governs intelligibility’ (2004: 42), namely, the borders of a patriarchal and heterosexual economy that would have the sexes fall neatly into preconceived categories.

Weaned from the maternal breast, the grown-up Manuele recreates the lost object of his desire in his dreams, going so far as to crawl into his mother’s bed to suckle at her breast while she is asleep. In adulthood, this fixation with orality is mirrored in his ‘avventure a pagamento’ (*Aracoeli* 63), sexual adventures consummated in exchange for money, which replicate the act of suckling:

La massina grazia che potevano, essi, concedermi, era di lasciarsi succhiare da me. A pagamento. Loro, simili a statue regali. Io, come fossero santi, in ginocchio ai loro piedi. E la mia pupilla, al berli, si velava, nello sguardo adorante e assonnato che ha l’infante allattato dalla madre. (*Aracoeli* 97)

Looking at Manuele’s seemingly arrested psychosexual development, then, it is hard to resist identifying his failed masculinity as a textbook example of a Freudian case of male homosexuality deriving from excessive maternal love. This is, however, an oversimplification against which Hanna Serkowska warns us: ‘It would be to fly in the face of textual evidence, then, to limit the matter to a question of homosexuality, to be explained

¹⁴⁹ Manuele’s fantasy of returning to the womb would exemplify what, in Freudian psychoanalysis, is associated with death instincts. For more on the death drive, especially in connection with the absent/dead mother see Freud’s 1920 essay ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (Freud, Strachey, & Freud, A. 1955: 3-66).

away by the failed or at least disturbed identification of the boy [...] because of the mother's obsessive love' (2006: 160). The passage staging an imaginary process that Manuele sets up with, and against, himself, provides a textual confirmation that the psychoanalytical reading is a too restricting approach to interpret the complexity embedded in Morante's last novel:

D. (la Difesa) «...Risulta infatti che durante la gravidanza di Aracoeli, la zia Monda, nell'allestire la culla per il nascituro, secondo i propri auspici la rivestì di cortine e festoni di mussola azzurra (azzurro: colore dei maschi) provocando una certa timida resistenza da parte di Aracoeli che li avrebbe voluti rosa (rosa: colore delle femmine)».

I. «Ma quella culla, poi, non fu mai usata. Io volevo dormire con Aracoeli. E lei con me».

X.Y.Z. (Uno dell'Uditorio) «Direi che il caso rientra nel comune schema edipico»

D. «Ricascare nei soliti schemi d'obbligo mi sembra, qui, fuori luogo. Il nostro caso non si adatta a nessuno schema prefisso. (*Aracoeli* 114-15)

In what seems to be a conscious foreshadowing of possible critical interpretations, and arguably to rescue her text against dogmatic readings, Morante discards the old Oedipal tale calling it 'reperto da seduta psicoanalitica' (*Aracoeli* 107). Defeating dominant psychoanalytical interpretations, Manuele fails to succumb to feelings of rivalry towards his father even after witnessing the primal scene of his parents having sexual intercourse, that is, in Freudian terms, after experiencing the fatidic 'seduction scene': 'E nemmeno allora, ne sono certo, non soffersi alcuna gelosia di mio padre' (*Aracoeli* 241).¹⁵⁰

Manuele's recalcitrant gender entails the debunking of the normative categories imposed by society, the result being a collapsing of binaries that, on a larger scale, is reflected in the novel as a whole—as we shall see. His failed masculinity exceeds the heterosexual matrix, exposing its flimsiness. In Butler's words:

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (Butler 1993: 241)

¹⁵⁰ Buried deep into the recesses of the unconscious, the primal scene will be reactivated only some time later during an adolescent voyeuristic sexual experience (*Aracoeli* 240-41).

As Butler suggests, there exists the possibility to recite one's social script differently, which means that gender can also be undone. Manuele's failure to perform the heterosexual role allotted to him seems to point in this direction. Significant in this context are his two unsuccessful (hetero)sexual encounters, which are revealing of his impossibility of framing himself within an order—the patriarchal one—with which he does not identify. The first to be recounted, early in the narration, is the 'avventura da spiaggia' (*Aracoeli* 73), which sees the young protagonist on the point of consummating sexual intercourse with a drunken girl. Despite Manuele's 'disperata imitazione virile' (*Aracoeli* 68), however, the act cannot take place because of the intervention of a macho-boy, depicted as the embodiment of "true" virility standing as the protagonist's positive counterpart, who literally throws himself onto the girl's body. Significantly, Manuele and his rival's respective displays of masculinity occupy the opposite ends of the gender spectrum, whereby the failed maleness of the former is opposed by the stronger, more active virility of the latter. The second, inconclusive, sexual experience dates back to an eighteen-year-old Manuele confronted with the old, decadent body of a prostitute, with the graphic depiction of her sex representing 'la prima e l'unica dell'intera produzione morantina' (Rosa 1995: 333). The animal-like yet benevolent sensuality of the girl from the beach episode (Rosa 1995: 333-34) is here displaced by a sense of horror and abjection conjured up by the sight of the old woman's genitalia, whose monstrous features prevent a horror-struck Manuele from consummating the act. I agree with Serkowska's reading of Manuele's aversion towards the sexual act, which she explains in these terms: 'L'eros gli provoca repulsione, perché l'eros fa appello alla corporeità sessualmente declinata al singolare' (2002: 147). Manuele fails in his performance of masculinity, with the insistence on the theatrical quality of his 'avventur[e] di donne' (*Aracoeli* 76) underscoring his extraneousness to the masculine role. In resisting the heterosexual script, he wilfully positions himself in an eccentric position with respect to the order of heterosexuality. Butler defines the 'heterosexual matrix' as the heterosexual assumption of a tripartite correlation between sex, gender and desire, for which maleness is the expression of a biologically male body in the same way as femaleness is of a biologically female body, and whereby both genders are attracted to the individuals of the opposite sex (1999: 45-100). According to this definition, Manuele would not classify as 'intelligible', as

Butler puts it, inasmuch as he establishes a relation of incoherence and discontinuity between his biological sex, his socially inculcated gender and, finally, his actual sexual choices.

Adopting the dramaturgical analogy, we would say that Manuele remains a marginal character on the gender stage, failing as he does to abide by the script of heterosexuality. Remarkably, he does not only fail in his performance of heterosexuality, but also in that of homosexuality, as evidenced in the relationship he entertains with the only two male lovers named in the text—one real and the other one platonic. His fling Mariuccio disparagingly accuses him of not fulfilling his ‘homosexual script’ correctly: ‘Non sei nemmeno una vera checca, sei un maschio fallito’ (*Aracoeli* 48). With the young Pennati, on the other hand, the adolescent Manuele performs maternal functions: ‘Io da quel corpo pigmeo [...] ricevevo un senso d’ilarità quieta [...]. *Maternità*, non c’era altro nome per quella mia stranezza’ (*Aracoeli* 92). Similarly, his sexual encounters with male prostitutes—which are but replicas of his oral fantasies that stand as a substitute for his lost maternal breast—are not so much fulfilling experiences than a desperate request for love: ‘Ma le avventure a pagamento furono sempre un affare triste per me. La mia prima, disperata domanda fu sempre, infatti, di essere amato’ (*Aracoeli* 63). As such, Manuele’s status as a homosexual, which is indeed the generally acknowledged critical reading of this character, is far from unproblematic. Rather, what seems to be one of the most interesting features of the Morantean protagonist, and one that makes it particularly fit for my analysis of the blurring of gender categories in the novel, is its hybrid quality of ‘creatura asessuata’ (*Aracoeli* 87) failing to occupy either end of the hetero/homo gender spectrum. As such, Manuele can be read as a queer character, unaligned as it is with any identity category, in confirmation of the Butlerian belief that sees both hetero and homo as invariably measured against—be it by correspondence or opposition—the heterosexual ideal and, as such, as derivatives of the latter (Butler 1991: 14).

In his childhood Manuele had wished to be a little girl, the ‘muñeca’ that his beloved Aracoeli longed for. Instead, he has become part of what he considers the ‘razza triste’ (*Aracoeli* 135), in opposition to the semi-divine nature of his father, the embodiment of ‘VIRILITÀ’ (*Aracoeli* 184), written in capital letters in the text in a way that is exemplary of the violence that this regime of masculinity exercises over an individual who, imprisoned as he is in a sexed body, will never come to terms with a clear-cut gender categorisation. Stressing how, far from being a cause, the subject is rather an effect of a series of

Foucauldian structures of power, Butler's explanation of gender roles critically addresses the dynamics of relational identity. 'Normative violence' is the term used by the philosopher to refer to the power of particular norms—whereby 'norms' ought to be understood as an apparatus of 'social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*' (Butler 2004: 41; Butler's emphasis) in determining those bodies that do or do *not* matter. Manuele experiences an insuperable disaffection from his own body and, because of this self-abjection, he fails to recognise the reflection of himself unclothed. The mirror that in his childhood memories sanctioned his fusion with the maternal now becomes a distorted kaleidoscope giving back to him the image of an extraneous other:

Ma quando i panni, che mi scollavo di dosso meccanicamente, sono caduti sparsi in terra d'intorno a me, d'un tratto mi ha sorpreso, nello specchio, l'apparizione del mio corpo nudo. [...] Mi è sempre più difficile (quasi un esercizio innaturale e penoso) riconoscermi nel mio corpo, voglio dire in quello esteriore. Nell'interno di me, secondo il mio senso nativo, il mio mestesso s'incarna ostinatamente in una forma perenne di fanciullo. Questo ammasso di carne matura, che oggi mi ricopre all'esterno, dev'essere una formazione aberrante, concresciuta per maleficio sopra al mio corpo reale. (*Aracoeli* 106)

Encapsulated in his thoughts is the gnostic conception of an inherent duality between body and soul, between the mortality of the flesh and the immortality of the spirit—an opposition that is here quite tellingly conjured up by the terms 'exterior' and 'interior'. This connection, which was first noticed by Serkowska in her analysis of the similarities between the treatment of corporeality in *Aracoeli* and a pre-Christian (Platonic) ideology that sees the human body as a sepulchre (2006: 184), proves particularly fruitful in the context of the mirror scene. Perhaps even more striking, in the quotation above, is the antithesis between the idea of a spotless, timeless childhood ('perennial boyish form') and the stark reality of an ageing, perishable body ('bulk of aging flesh'), which is a recurrent topos in Morante's literary production. And it is indeed significant, in the context of our reading of the novel as a narrative attempt to elide rigid gender categorisations, that Manuele withdraws his look at the sight of his genitals, the bodily markers of his sex, '[le] parti genital (gli «attributi della virilità») donde io súbito allontano la mia vista umiliata' (*Aracoeli* 106).¹⁵¹ This happens

¹⁵¹ The mixing of Italian and Spanish ('donde', in the quote above) is characteristic of both Manuele and *Aracoeli*.

precisely because, to him, ‘the sexed body seems an imposture, seems to belong to someone else’ (Serkowska 2006: 163).

If we hold, with Butler, that the body becomes sexed in the act of description (1993), Manuele’s physical disaffection and indignation towards his virile attributes can be interpreted as his refusal to ‘read’ his body and to assign it a sex on the basis of its biological marks.¹⁵² In doing so, he defies arbitrary gender categorisations for which sexual, in the sense of biological, difference between man and woman becomes the only parameter ascertaining the role to be performed within an economy that is strictly dependent upon gender binarisms. In refusing to endorse the masculine role that has been allotted to him, Manuele challenges ‘the coherence of the categories’ of heterosexuality and shows that, for being ‘malleable and transformable’, gender also holds the potential to be undone (Butler 2004: 216).

4.1.2 Aracoeli: ‘Santa’ and ‘Meretrice’. Femininity Undone

During the course of the narration we witness the inexorable fall of the eponymous character of the novel’s title in a way that, as Giorgio aptly puts it, ‘The Madonna literally becomes the Whore’ (1994: 97). The scholar goes on to argue that Aracoeli’s is a metamorphosis that stands as a rebellion to the strictures of the Symbolic demanding that women adhere to predetermined social scripts, namely, that they be virgins *and* mothers (1994: 93–116).¹⁵³ *Aracoeli* disturbs, through its eponymous female protagonist, the domestic fiction of the Catholic patriarchal family as a sacred union between husband and wife blessed by progeny and premised upon man’s duty to provide and woman’s duty to be submissive and nurturing (towards both her husband and her offspring). Two thirds way into the narration, triggered by the premature death of her daughter Carina soon after her birth, the Aracoeli of Totetaco becomes an apathetic and uncaring maternal figure consumed by erotic drives:

¹⁵² One of the most original formulations of Butler’s thought is the collapse of the traditional sex/gender system that sees gender as the socio-cultural interpretation of the sexed body: ‘If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not *accrue* social meanings as additive properties, but rather *is replaced by* the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces “sex”’ (1993: 5; Butler’s emphasis).

¹⁵³ Significantly, Aracoeli’s name comes from the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome, on the Capitoline Hill, its meaning in Latin being ‘altar of heaven’; but it also conjures up Regina Coeli, a famous Roman prison in the Trastevere neighbourhood (Tuck 2008: 202)—an oxymoronic twofold signification that prefigures the ambiguity intrinsic to the Morantean character.

‘Aracoeli viene posseduta da una forza misteriosa e sacra che uccide la maternità mentre santifica [...] il piacere *contro il ventre*, la vagina [...] *contro l’utero*’ (Garboli 1995: 197). After undergoing what, although not explicitly spelled out in the text, is most likely to be hysterectomy, Aracoeli gives up her maternal qualities altogether, and ‘[h]er vital energies, diverted from the vocation of life-bearing, appear to subject her to a dangerous physical drive’ (Valisa 2015: 154).

When an overriding nymphomania takes control over Aracoeli, nothing is left of the nurturing mother of Manuele’s first childhood memories: ‘«E invece io non sono più la tua mammita»’ (*Aracoeli* 268). Aracoeli’s malaise will consume her with unquenchable erotic drives, leading her to a series of transgressive acts that include the seduction of strangers, men she meets when out with her son, or even Daniele, the young orderly of her husband who also acts as Manuele’s babysitter.¹⁵⁴ These sexual encounters are reported by Manuele in an almost obsessive narrative rhythm that seems to replicate, textually, Aracoeli’s uncontrollable yearnings. It should here be specified that Aracoeli’s sexuality, albeit heterosexual, fits within a queer logic that, in de Lauretis’s wake, reads ‘perverse desire [...] in relation to [...] forms of sexuality that appear to be heterosexual but are not so in the normative or reproductive way’ (1994: xiii). The character is thus linked to queerness because of the transgressiveness that accompanies her nymphomaniac phase, thereby ‘undoing’ her femininity and disenfranchising it from social expectations. The former Madonna leaves space to its degenerate double, a maternal figure who has no qualms in seducing strangers while she is in the company of her son, leaving him behind at the beach (*Aracoeli* 243-44), or else consummating her encounters in the lift of her apartment building, riding this up and down before Manuele’s disconcerted eyes (*Aracoeli* 247-48). This debauched version of Aracoeli refuses to be domesticated under social dictates, a subversion that starts from the body, that which was once lived as exclusive property of her husband, and as such guarded against prying eyes: ‘Il massimo valore del suo corpo era per lei, di

¹⁵⁴ After her malaise, Aracoeli’s maternal role is taken up by the male nanny Daniele, in a role-reversal whereby the categories of femininity (understood as coterminous with maternity) and virility are no longer seen as mutually exclusive: ‘Lui possedeva davvero delle qualità materne: con in più certe rudezze involontarie che mi attestavano la sua grandezza virile’ (*Aracoeli* 225). We find the same pattern in another novel by Morante, *L’Isola di Arturo*, where the male nanny Silvestro nurses the eponymous protagonist, feeding him on goat milk after his mother has died giving him birth. Incidentally, the affinity between the characters of Daniele and Silvestro is further strengthened by the fact that they are both navy attendants.

appartenere a mio padre: e lei lo difendeva dagli altri, come una cagna [...] difende la proprietà del padrone' (*Aracoeli* 172-73). That very same body is now a source of arcane energy: 'E quali tumulti e frane [...] dovettero prorompere, allora, nel buio fitto del suo corpo' (*Aracoeli* 235). As such, the woman's former virginal sexuality changes in a way that 'comes to figure the bar [...] the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form' (Edelman 2004: 4).

The character's denial to recite the gender norm marks a queer departure from her initial theatrical-like adherence to predetermined cultural dictates, a performance of femininity that entails the embodiment of the patriarchal script for which women are linked to a specific set of social expectations. This is Butler's performativity at work: performativity is not a volitional act, for 'it has to do with repetition, very often the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms' (Butler and Kotz 1992: 84). Similarly, the 'first' *Aracoeli* is also made to reiterate 'painful', in the sense of constrictive, gender dictates. Under the wings of her sister-in-law, she plans regular visits to the tailor's shop, partakes in social occasions and comes to master dining and social etiquette. During this initial phase, not only is she a respectful *signora*, but also a self-effacing mother. *Aracoeli*'s initial performance of femininity is so convincing that Manuele himself sees his mother as biologically destined for child-bearing: 'dentro di te comincio l'aspettazione involontaria del seme', one that is void of sexual gratification and only designed for reproductive intents: 'Non per la tua felicità sensuale (questa non fu mai promessa alla tua sorte) ma perché [...] da quel seme gettato dentro il tuo nido spunterebbe viva la tua muñeca' (*Aracoeli* 103). It is precisely by virtue of her initial adherence to normative gender ideals that *Aracoeli*'s later rebellion marks an even greater point of resistance against what Edelman identifies as queer's negation of 'reproductive futurism' (2004)—that is, the rerouting of one's sexuality towards non-procreative paths. The former Madonna now goes as far as to accomplish a blasphemous act, her 'trasgressione definitiva', consisting in pleasing herself sexually in front of a Church: 'E s'era data a un febbrile moto oscillante che accompagnava con un dondolio meccanico della testa, come assorta in un'estasi ottusa – mentre i suoi occhi si tenevano fissi alla facciata della chiesa in uno stupore torbido, avverso e quasi vendicativo' (*Aracoeli* 269). Alongside Manuele's failed masculinity, *Aracoeli*'s rebellion thus marks yet another breakdown of fixed notions of gender and sexuality in the text.

Since women have traditionally been identified with their bodies, in compliance with the age old binary Nature (femininity)/Culture (masculinity), it follows that ‘[t]utti i momenti di rottura della norma, i soli a cui è concesso alla donna di esprimere il suo conflitto, sfruttano la stessa potenza di cui è stata caricata ed oppressa’ (Magli 1974: 82) Similarly, in *Aracoeli*, the body of the female protagonist, the very same signifier of male supremacy over the female, is used as a site of resistance against normative and idealised versions of womanhood and motherhood, whose defiance manifests itself through the character’s mental and physical degeneration—a deterioration that will make her unfit to comply with the maternal role, while also disenfranchising her from the aesthetic canons that up until that point had characterised her. The beautiful and charming Andalusian has now become a bad copy, a ‘brutta sosia contraffatta’ (*Aracoeli* 303) of the loving maternal figure framed in the mirror image of mother and son belonging to Manuele’s childhood memories. Because *Aracoeli*’s initial characterisation is modelled on a clearly identifiable religious iconography, its subversion acquires an even more blasphemous quality. The choice of Morante’s ‘bestiario’ to signify the character’s metamorphosis into an insatiable and lustful caricature of the former, chaste mother and wife is worth considering.¹⁵⁵ The ‘cucciola inesperta’ (*Aracoeli* 173) gives space to descriptions that are allusive of her uncontainable sexual drives, and are reminiscent of a Dantesque *lonza*, the epitome of lust, conjured up in Morante’s text by locutions such as: ‘una presenza animalesca’; ‘pelle maculata’; ‘muso vorace’; ‘un’intrusione felina, innominata che [...] s’incorporava in *Aracoeli*’ (*Aracoeli* 235). While the recourse to animal imagery clearly indicates a return to Nature, it does so less to reinstate allegedly innate female qualities than to overturn the essentialising paradigm that would have women as inherently— ‘naturally’, that is—pure and chaste. Through her character, Morante exposes the cultural origin of the socially inculcated Madonna/whore dualism that in *Aracoeli* is coterminous with a desecration of femininity, achieved by hitting at the heart of its most normative manifestation, motherhood, whose idealisation is typical of a Catholic society such as Italy.

Aracoeli’s story, told via flashbacks and in the first person, is recounted by the non-linear perspective of the protagonist-narrator Manuele. The result is a merging of sacred

¹⁵⁵ I borrow the term ‘bestiario’ from Martínez Garrido’s study of Morante’s *La Storia* (2003: 85-107) to refer to the animal imagery that connotes *Aracoeli*’s transformation.

(‘[la] prima Aracoeli di Totetaco’; *Aracoeli* 235) and profane (‘questa seconda Aracoeli’; *Aracoeli* 25); of high and low, realised textually in a way that shows affinities with the Bakhtinian grotesque:

S’era ingrassata, e sul suo corpo gracile di bambina cresceva un corpo diverso, più colmo e vistoso. I fianchi, in ispecie, le sporgevano con una sorta di ostentazione involontaria, e le accompagnavano il passo con un dondolio di danza lenta, quale si vede in certe giovani africane. Il ventre, dopo l’ultima gravidanza, non aveva più ripreso la sua piattezza verginale, e le si rilassava in una turgidezza pigra, visibile sotto la gonna stretta. Anche le mammelle, sempre piuttosto piccole ma fatte ora più molli, le pendevano libere. E queste sue forme, non contenute da fasce o busti, davano al suo giovane corpo un senso di abbandono e di languore. In lei si svolgeva una qualche azione subdola e cruda, a cui la sua materia si assuefaceva servilmente. Le sue guance, piene e rotonde per natura, sembravano cedere un poco al proprio peso, e si rivelavano, specie nel pallore, di una pasta piuttosto densa e granulosa, non così fresca e tenera come una volta. (*Aracoeli* 233)

The grotesque body theorised by Bakhtin is premised upon ‘degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high’ (Bakhtin 1984: 19) and its bringing it down to the corporeal and sensuous sphere, which is concomitant with the undoing of the body so that a new one may be reborn. Morante’s description of the bringing down-to-earth of the chaste and Madonna-like figure of Aracoeli would manifest physically through the Bakhtinian grotesque, with rebirth being visually conveyed through the woman’s protruding stomach, reminiscent of a pregnant belly. What characterises the grotesque body is the collapse of the binary (old and young; holy and sacrilegious; earth and heaven and so forth) through the coexistence of seemingly antithetical pairings, which translates into the liberation from a dualistic vision of the world. The collapse of opposites is conveyed visually in the characterisation of Aracoeli, whereby an old body ‘più colmo e vistoso’ is outgrowing a younger one, ‘di bambina’. Improper and impossible to contain, Aracoeli’s body is transgressive to the limits of exaggeration; it is a queer body that stands as a site of resistance, one that allows to displace and remap identity through the deconstruction of the cultural inscriptions exerted upon it.

Within the context of my queer reading of the novel, *Aracoeli* can be looked at through a bio-political discourse that considers the construction of femininity attempted upon her, and what happens when she emancipates herself from a stereotypical definition of womanhood, thus failing to perform her gender normatively. Sexuality, Foucault asserts, was instituted as a science through extensive discursive practice claiming to illuminate the “truth”

on sex. Specifically in the case of women, this proliferation of discourses around sex is seen as responsible for intensifying the link between their alleged essence and their biological sphere—thus accounting the latter for their mental pathologies.¹⁵⁶ In Morante's last novel the medical discourse of sexuality surfaces in *Aracoeli*, firstly through other characters' attempts to discipline her body and to make it socially and culturally viable, as exemplified by the 'tirocinio' into womanliness orchestrated by aunt Monda and, secondly, by the diagnosis of her disease. Morante emphasises the attempted polishing of *Aracoeli* into a 'signora' and her introduction to society: 'ora cresciuta in virtù dei tacchi alti – aveva imparato a mangiare la frutta con forchetta e coltello e a fare le presentazioni – con altre simili nozioni indispensabili' (*Aracoeli* 172). Despite eventually learning how to wear high heels and mastering dining etiquette and good manners, however, the peasant Andalusian will never truly conform to the dictates demanded by the society of her husband, a navy officer of noble birth; rather, she will forever keep herself on the fringe of a social order that does not validate her as a subject (Giorgio 1994: 102). *Aracoeli*'s subversion is a rebellion to the Law-of-the-Father that was always, already there, fire smouldering under the ashes that erupts in all its disruptive force. As for the rationalisation of her malaise, this epitomises the impossibility of society to exert its control over women's sexuality, so much so that its pathologisation is the only means to regulate anti-normative and subversive behaviours—as is the case with *Aracoeli*'s use of her body for its own ends. It is once again aunt Monda that intervenes, providing the young Manuele with a scientific explanation for his mother's undignifying behaviour and blaming a brain tumour for it, thus attributing *Aracoeli*'s demeanour to unforeseeable causes ('un sintomo...una conseguenza della sua malattia'; *Aracoeli* 318), an interpretation that is meant to discard the possibility of woman to 'naturally' exist outside of the binary modelled around an angelic nature (positive femininity) and its monstrous counterpart (negative femininity). Giorgio provides an illuminating answer to this epistemological quandary when she claims that 'Morante does not connote this marginality [to the Symbolic] as lack, but as an empowering condition, because it allows her character to resist being crushed by History' (1994: 102). Reading it through a Butlerian lens, what this means is that 'the very formation of subjects, the very

¹⁵⁶ For Foucault's notion of bio-power, see Foucault 1990.

formation of persons, *presupposes* gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that [performativity] is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in’ (Butler and Kotz 1992: 84; Butler and Kotz’s emphasis). It follows, then, that Aracoeli’s freedom is also curtailed by the possibilities that are allotted to women and that are encapsulated in the Madonna/whore antinomy.¹⁵⁷

Morante’s representation of motherhood asks to be read as a product of a specific milieu, namely, of social-historical conditioning, rather than a biologically innate trait. This is not too far from saying, as Butler does, that cultural processes can lead to a naturalisation of pre-determined identity categories—of which femininity and, metonymically, motherhood, can be seen as illustrative examples. Aracoeli’s gender disobedience, or ‘insubordination’, as Butler would have it (1989), is then to be interpreted as a form of struggle against the patriarchal system and the assignment of gender roles that it validates. Aracoeli ultimately refuses to abide by the script of ‘womanliness’ demanded by aunt Monda’s ‘tirocinio’, consisting in the transformation of her biological features into predetermined social roles. The ambiguous and split nature of this character is made manifest in the various costumes in which she disguises herself in order to haunt her son’s dreams: ‘Pastora. Idalga. Santa. Meretrice. Morta. Immortale. Vittima. Tiranna. Bambola. Dea. Schiava. Madre. Figlia. Ballerina’ (*Aracoeli* 124). Her metamorphoses can be grouped up in antithetical pairings that correspond to the split image of woman as the angel(Madona)/whore dichotomy (Giorgio 1994: 99). Thus, Morante’s novel centres on the necessity for women to overcome binary gender categories, with the chaste mother and the fallen woman being invariably polarised alongside the gender spectrum. Soon after her entrance into society, spatially signified by the ‘Quartieri Alti’, Aracoeli conforms to the role she is expected to perform—namely, that of a compliant wife and mother. Significantly though, her subsequent rebellion manifests itself psychically, hitting the very same body that societal strictures had tried to polish and make fit. When nymphomania sets in, Aracoeli’s femininity is undone. Her resistance to a heterosexual regime premised upon fixed notions

¹⁵⁷ In this respect, it could be argued that this ‘seconda Aracoeli’ still behaves according to a scripted behaviour (from ‘mother’ to ‘whore’). However, and in line with Giorgio’s quote above, I would contend that the textual trajectory of Aracoeli is functional to Morante’s critique of stereotypical gender roles outside of the mother-and-wife script—that is, the lack of valuable alternatives for those women who, like her Andalusian female protagonist, emancipate themselves from it.

on gender and sexuality such as we see it at play in Morante's text is a queer form of contestation, focussing on the social abjection of the individual who is deemed as 'improper'. That *Aracoeli*'s subversive intent eventually ends in failure, with her malaise ultimately bringing her to death, I believe, cannot exhaust her dissident, queer potential. The desecrating intent behind the decision to stage a character that hits at the core of femininity, and maternity, dismantling them both, was aptly captured by Garboli when he claimed:

Siamo soprattutto in presenza di una Madonna (*Aracoeli*) capovolta, sconsacrata, rovesciata dalle cui estremità impiccate il manto azzurro ricasca lasciando scoperte le cosce finalmente liberate e indecenti. Quale punto della realtà è più buio, più sconosciuto di quello che si consuma, nelle viscere femminili, questa contiguità? Questa concorrenza di valori fisiologici? Le donne stesse non ce ne parlano [...] La voracità di conoscenza della Morante ha sventrato questo luogo [...]. (Garboli 1995: 197-98)

I believe that, in *Aracoeli*, Morante is being less idealistic or ideological, and more practical about women's immediate prospects for change. As such, I read the author's literary testament as a critique against 'the extremely limited array of roles available to women' (Valisa 2015: 153). *Aracoeli*'s demise does not undermine her subversive potential: she constitutes a threat to the patriarchal order, and the pathologisation of her rebellion is the only means the latter has to control her. The character's gender insubordination is thus to be taken as a call for subverting what Butler has identified as the categories determining the matrix of social 'intelligibility' and for opening up a space to (re)define gender relations beyond constrictive normative limitations.

4.1.3 The (Maternal) Semiotic via the (Paternal) Symbolic: a Return to the Mother with a Queer Twist.

Discussing the organisation of the traditional Italian family, historian Luisa Accati (1995) suggests that the Madonna-child imagery provides a metaphorical paradigm for the familial organisation of a Catholic society premised upon the interdependence between a mother and her son, the censorship of the mother's sexuality, and the idea of maternity as sacrifice.¹⁵⁸ In what follows I will look at how, in *Aracoeli*, despite the initial characterisation of the fusion

¹⁵⁸ For an exploration of the Kristevan psycholinguistic stages of Semiotic and Symbolic contained in the title of the present section (concepts that are reformulations of Lacanian theories on the child's psychosexual development), see Kristeva 1984.

between Manuele and his mother and the references to the sacred iconography that strengthen this religious association, the dramatic falling from grace of the maternal figure deconstructs the Catholic model recalled by Accati, the very same one framing the beginning of the narration—whilst also leaving space for the recuperation of the paternal. This is not, however, a mere overturning of the hierarchy (in the sense of a reversal maternal/paternal), nor a return to the Father, understood in Lacanian terms as the representative of the societal strictures and the regulator of one's desire, but rather, as I shall argue, a merging of Semiotic and Symbolic, or better still, a recuperation of the maternal Semiotic via the paternal Symbolic.¹⁵⁹

The dynamics of Manuele's retrieval of the maternal realm, subsequent to the separation from the ghost of his late *Aracoeli*, follows the Kristevan thesis of the symbolic *matricide* of the mother, which is a precondition for the child in order to acquire an independent sense of the self.¹⁶⁰ The pre-subjective condition of fusion with the maternal that is now lost is what Kristeva names the Semiotic, the realm of the mother that knows no language or meaning but only babbles, drives and impulses. It is the stage preceding the Lacanian Symbolic, the domain of the father sanctioned by the infant's acquisition of language. Manuele follows this trajectory of initial separation from the maternal (although this will be retrieved later on) and entrance into the paternal, symbolic order. While it is unlikely that Morante had Kristeva's theories in mind while writing *Aracoeli*,¹⁶¹ the fact remains, however, that the latter bears similarities with the work of the French philosopher written around the same year, whilst also adding a queer twist to it.

The twofold meaning of 'almond grove' and 'mirror' that are encapsulated in the name of Aracoeli's native land will turn out to be but delusional mirages. El Almendral will appear to Manuele as a pile of stones, a distorted mirror providing for a visionary encounter with Aracoeli, who materialises to him in the form of an empty sack only to dissolve into dust after a brief, empty linguistic exchange. Manuele is looking for answers from Aracoeli,

¹⁵⁹ This move is consonant to the textual trajectory of Morante's novel consisting in the deconstruction of binary categories in name of more fluid gender positions.

¹⁶⁰ In *The Black Sun* (1987), Kristeva calls the separation from the mother—in her words, 'matricide'—a precondition for self-individuation.

¹⁶¹ This is a speculation over which Daniele Morante, Elsa's dearest nephew and son of her brother Marcello, has expressed his doubts (personal conversation with Daniele Morante; Washington D.C., 27th October 2013).

but he will get none, being simply told that ‘non c’è niente da capire’ (*Aracoeli* 308). This is Aracoeli’s farewell to her son, who has set out on a search for his mother in the hope of finding, through her, the idyllic time of a pre-gendered existence. What he has found, instead, is the rocky desert of El Almendral and an alcohol-induced maternal vision. Walter Siti reads this final visionary encounter between mother and son as a return to the maternal (2006: 286). I find more convincing Deuber-Mankowsky’s thesis that ‘[w]hat happens is rather a separation from the dead’ (2009: 75). Indeed, after haunting his dreams in a multitude of different guises, Aracoeli takes the form, or rather the non-form, of a shapeless sack. Having melancholically introjected his mother, it is against her that Manuele’s self-hatred is addressed.¹⁶² But now, having severed the tie that anchored him to the maternal—in Kristevan terms, separating the ‘I’ (self) from the ‘(m)other’—he is ready to see her dissolve into dust, just like the shadow of his vision. In doing so, Manuele has ‘abjected’ his mother and, as such, he has finally renounced his symbiotic union with her in order to become a distinct ‘self’; in order to become a subject.¹⁶³

Analysing the maternal figure in *Aracoeli*, Laura Benedetti comes to the conclusion that, in the novel, ‘the search for the mother is revealed to be an inadequate solution’ (2009: 82). This is a position that can be read as bearing similarities with Cesare Garboli’s, for whom in *Aracoeli* ‘il vecchio schema glorioso (madre/figlio; Nunziata/Arturo; Ida/Useppe) viene lapidato e dato in pasto ai cani perché ne facciano strazio’ (1995: 199). The question remains, however, whether, as Benedetti and Garboli have it, the bid to recover the lost maternal body in Morante’s last literary effort does indeed end in failure. I suggest that the unfolding of events that follow the final reunion between mother and son hints at a negative answer. It is after the encounter with Aracoeli, even though this is revealed to be only an imaginary one, that Manuele can recover the maternal language, which allows him to confidently ask directions in his mother’s native Spanish from a passer-by while in Almería. This linguistic recuperation would thus symbolise a return to the maternal sphere that

¹⁶² Kristeva elaborates and reconceptualises the Freudian theorisation of ‘melancholia’ as a linguistic malady that manifests itself through the failure of language and symbolic signification. It springs from the denial of ‘matricide’, that is, the separation from the mother that, for Kristeva, is the first step towards a non-pathological psychic development of the subject (Kristeva 1987).

¹⁶³ ‘Abjection’ is for Kristeva the process by which ‘a body becomes separated from another body in order to be’ and consists in the separation from the maternal realm (1987: 10).

precedes the symbolic realm dominated by the paternal idiom, that is, the Italian language (Gragnolati 2008; Gragnolati and Fortuna 2009); a return that does not exclude, but rather fosters, the possibility of also recovering the paternal realm. The imaginary encounter with Aracoeli described above is followed by another visual reconstruction of the adult narrator when, aged thirteen, he decides to call on his father, in his ramshackle flat just behind the cemetery where his mother has been buried. From here onwards the narration is told in a flashback manner, and the narrated events provide an interpretative key to the novel's queer turn consisting in the subversion of the categories of the Symbolic.

It is generally acknowledged that in Morante's works fathers are absent or otherwise negatively portrayed.¹⁶⁴ Eugenio himself is remembered by Manuele as a distant figure marked by absence ('Fino dalla mia nascita, per me *paternità* significava *assenza*'; *Aracoeli* 183). This pattern of paternal ineptitude notwithstanding, as argued by Benedetti, her last text can be read as Morante's attempt to break this negative narrative cycle (2003: 82). When Manuele pays him a visit, his father is in a state of complete physical and psychological abandonment. A Navy deserter, he has become a drunkard left stranded after the insurmountable grief of his wife's death, with his fall from glory paralleling that of Aracoeli into madness. Eugenio represents the patriarchal system of values that runs throughout the male lineage of his family and that finds figurative expression in the image of the 'Doppia Statua' (*Aracoeli* 286) that, used by Manuele to describe his paternal grandparents, signifies fixity and rigour. During their final encounter, however, his aura of 'VIRILITÀ' has weakened, and the downfall from his public and private functions has become beyond repair with his desertion from the Navy. Significantly, his treason parallels that of his much admired King of Italy Vittorio Emanuele of Piedmont (incidentally, the same region Eugenio himself is from) who, in negotiating with the government of the 1946 Republic, betrayed the monarchy and thus, also, himself.¹⁶⁵ Within the economy of the novel, Eugenio's desertion

¹⁶⁴ This is true for instance for Wilhelm-Parodia, the repressed homosexual and negligent father of *L'Isola di Arturo* (1957), or Gunther, the Nazi soldier who in *La Storia* (1974) rapes the defenceless Ida Ramundo making her pregnant with the protagonist Usepe. On the theme of the alleged conformity of Morante's female characters to patriarchal stereotypes, see Lucia Re's reading of *La Storia* from a feminist perspective (Re 1993). The scholar highlights what she identifies as the pre-Oedipal state of the characters of Ida and her son Usepe, stressing their marginality to the Symbolic and patriarchal order.

¹⁶⁵ This historical event is recorded in the text: 'Il nostro Re [...] «non aveva mantenuto l'onore»' (*Aracoeli* 317-18).

signifies the fall from the Symbolic, the realm of the father of which he had been, up to that point, a metaphorical representative in the text. The manhood against which Manuele could not measure himself has now irreparably been shattered, making room for a ‘new’, more relatable paternal figure who, just like his son, lives under the spell of Aracoeli’s ghost. The collapse of the ideal of manhood in the novel is exemplified not only by the fall of Manuele’s paternal figure, but also by that of the other ego ideal of his: uncle Manuel. The latter appears to the protagonist in a dream, disguised as Aracoeli (*Aracoeli* 167-69). This detail, I argue, is far from coincidental if we consider that Eugenio opens the door wearing the same dressing gown of Indian silk worn by his wife during her last summer visit with her family (which, read retrospectively, also parallels Manuel’s travesty). I find it remarkable that both father and uncle ‘cross-dress’ with female garments—which, in both cases, are Aracoeli’s—confirming Morante’s predilection for clothing and masquerading as metaphorical images for the collapsing of gender dichotomies.¹⁶⁶

To return to the detail of Aracoeli’s nightgown worn by Eugenio, I suggest that, besides attesting to the man’s desire to hang on to the memory of his late wife, this can be read, also, as a signifier for the merging of maternal and paternal—a gender confusion further strengthened by what follows in the narration, that is, the image of the hybrid figure half-human and half-animal, but also half-female and half-male, that Manuele encounters while descending the staircase of his father’s flat:

Ma all’altezza dell’ultimo ripiano mi colpirono, giù dal fondo, delle risate senili, grosse e catarrose, non si capiva se di femmina o di maschio. E arrivato al piede della scala, quasi inciampai su una donna anziana, corta e obesa, che stava rovesciata sul dorso, là per terra, agitando i suoi miseri braccini e le gambucce, come una tartaruga capovolta. (*Aracoeli* 324)

Strategically placed at the end of the narration of both Manuele’s life memories and of the novel itself, but also of Morante’s literary opus as a whole, the queerness of this creature, its

¹⁶⁶ On the theatrical quality of Morante’s oeuvre, Stefania Lucamante notes that theatricality, in all its forms, ‘Teatro, passione, immaginazione, melodramma’, represents a conspicuous part of Morante’s production as a whole (1996: 41-42). Two emblematic examples of the recourse to the dramaturgical model in the Morantean corpus are ‘Il gioco segreto’ (1937) and ‘Lo scialle andaluso’ (1953), where theatre provides not just an actual setting for the narration, but also an explicit metaphor that stands for the artificial, imitative quality of gender performance.

being positioned in-between the male and the female gender, but also in-between the human and the animal kind ('donna anziana'; 'tartaruga'; 'orca astuta'), well encapsulates the collapsing of binary systems that underscores the text as a whole. The carnivalesque and grotesque nature of this creature is reminiscent of the depiction of the late Aracoeli that we have recalled above. If it is true that the woman's physical transformation, as we have said, hints to a death of an old body and to the rebirth of a new one, conjured up visually by her protruding belly, then, it would not be too hasty to claim that this ogre-like figure could as well be the last of Aracoeli's masks, her materialising to her son into a creature whose body incorporates the merging of opposites. Indeed, this alleged last apparition of Aracoeli performs a salvific function upon Manuele, for it reroutes his feelings of love towards his father, with which the narration ends.

While reminiscing on his visit to Eugenio, Manuele feels or, rather, thinks he is feeling, 'un pungiglione di vespa gigante che dal collo mi penetr[a] fino in fondo alla gola' (*Aracoeli* 327). The sting of a large wasp that penetrates his throat, a clear phallic metaphor, is here used as a literary ruse to anticipate Manuele's subsequent declaration of love for his father (Deuber-Mankowsky 2009: 81).¹⁶⁷ Although this is just another visionary experience on his part, it is through it that Manuele discovers the love that he failed to profess to Eugenio on the occasion of his visit: 'Amore di chi? ... Di Eugenio Ottone Amedeo' (*Aracoeli*: 327-28). Manuele, who went on a quest to find his mother, has found his father instead. This unexpected turn of events allows the renegotiation, just a few lines before its ending, of the reading of the novel as a whole: the unuttered 'Ti Amo', an unspoken declaration of love that defies heterosexual and incest taboo norms alike, encapsulates Manuele's longing for an existence freed from gender constraints, the chimera that has guided his quest for the maternal Eden. Manuele's acceptance of the paternal figure is a process that only happens *a posteriori*, triggered by his recollections of the event. When he calls on Eugenio, he feels 'La solita, invincibile riluttanza' that prevents him from pronouncing 'le due sillabe: *pa-pà*' (*Aracoeli* 321). The same hesitation to utter the word

¹⁶⁷ The stinging bee is always female, for males cannot sting. Therefore, taking the stinger as a phallic signifier, we can read the image of the bee as hinting to the collapsing of the female/male binary towards which the novel ultimately tends. Before *Aracoeli*, Morante had already employed the bee in a similar manner in *L'Isola di Arturo* where, coupled with the more 'feminine' signifier of the rose, it referred to the bisexuality of the protagonist's father.

‘father’ had already marked the fusional bliss of his childhood memories: ‘nel suono stesso di queste due sillabe, mi si faceva sentire un che di ridicolo, quasi d’indecoroso’ (*Aracoeli* 184). That this resistance repeats itself at the concluding stage of the novel, just before the reconciliation with the paternal figure takes place, is no coincidence. Because the return to the father in *Aracoeli* does not postulate the repression of the maternal in favour of the paternal, but entails the insertion of the former into the latter, I argue that Manuele’s speech inhibition stands as his refusal to subject himself to the signifying order of the symbolic (the realm of language) that would require the abandonment of the recently retrieved maternal.

If it is true that Manuele will eventually recognise the love for his father, it is also true that ‘father’ here does not refer to the bearer of the paternal Law—and indeed, given his present state, Eugenio’s aura of ‘manhood’ has long vanished in Manuele’s eyes. Rather, it appears more in line with what Kristeva calls the ‘imaginary father’, or ‘father-mother conglomerate’ (1983: 40), feminine and masculine at once, of which the seemingly sexless turtle-like creature that Manuele sees on the stairs of Eugenio’s flat would be but an emblematic metaphor. Kelly Oliver, a philosopher who has written extensively on Kristeva, reads the ‘imaginary father’ as a recuperation of the maternal dimension attained through a separation from the semiotic body and subsequent identification with the mother’s desire (for the father), which allows the child to enter language, that is, the realm of the Symbolic, via the mother (1993: 79).¹⁶⁸ Similarly, in *Aracoeli*, Manuele’s return to the father ought to be understood as less a substitution of the paternal for the maternal function than a dialectics between the two. As such, it stands as a challenge to traditional psychoanalytical discourses based on the Oedipal rivalry and castration threats, in favour of an intensification of the maternal dimension (Oliver 1993: 70). Far from foreclosing a reunion with the paternal, the quest of Morante’s protagonist is a search for ‘a fantasy of wholeness’ (Oliver 1993: 81) that contests the Lacanian paradigm of a relentless symbolic father threatening the child with castration and, in a queer twist, calls instead for a negotiation between maternal *and* paternal, seen as equally indispensable for a healthy sense of subjectivity.

¹⁶⁸ Oliver accounts for the invention of the ‘father-mother conglomerate’, which she explains as ‘the imaginary father who loves like a mother’, in such terms: ‘She [Kristeva] is looking for an identification that can provide [...] a sense of completion and wholeness that combines the maternal gratifications and the paternal prohibitions (1993: 82).

4.2 Conclusions

In my reading of Morante's novel I have argued that the undoing of masculinity and femininity as carried out by, respectively, Manuele's androgynous subjectivity and Aracoeli's maternal degeneration, is functional to a larger narrative project consisting of the dismantling of the opposition between Semiotic and Symbolic—or, rather, to the co-existence of the Semiotic *within* the Symbolic.¹⁶⁹ It is towards this that the narration ultimately tends, resolving in what Deuber-Mankowsky, referring to Manuele's declaration of love to his father, has called the text's 'most 'queer' happy ending', that is, 'a love which has left the ideal of the norm of heterosexuality behind, and which is not channelled through the prohibition on homosexual relations' (2009: 81).

The narration in *Aracoeli* is told at three different levels: the present time of Manuele's enunciation, the flashbacks to his mother's past, which is also his own, and the imaginary, more psychic, level marked by his hallucinatory encounters with Aracoeli—the unsettling sense of time mirroring, spatially, the continuous change of the narrative settings.¹⁷⁰ The result is a defocalisation of perspectives that is mirrored into and, in turn, reinforced by, the disrupted subjectivities of male and female protagonists and the deconstruction of their respective gender roles. Although Aracoeli appears as split for most part of the narration, in the retrospective reasoning of an adult Manuele, the good and the bad mother become one, 'the 'whole' personification of all [the] Mothers, a unique face wearing all masks at the same time — Medusa, Medea, the Madonna' (Lingiardi 2009: 63). Not only is Manuele aware of his mother's duplicity, he also condones her for her sins, in an unconditional declaration of love and acceptance ('L'una Aracoeli mi ruba l'altra; e si trasmutano e si raddoppiano e si sdoppiano l'una nell'altra. E io le amo entrambe'; *Aracoeli* 25). In doing so, Manuele, and Morante with him, dismantles patriarchal beliefs on motherhood, instead showing 'what a mother can be and what she may become—a giver of life and a tyrant, and idol and a monster, a source of love and hell, a caring individual and a witch' (Capozzi 1990: 19). Manuele himself, on the other hand, fails to recite the

¹⁶⁹ We find an early occurrence of the erosion of the maternal in the Morantean repertoire in 'La nonna', one of the author's first short stories (written in 1933 and first published in 1937), where a morbid mother metamorphoses into a witch, eventually committing suicide and causing the death of her two grandchildren.

¹⁷⁰ For an analysis of the displacement of the concept of time in *Aracoeli* see also Stellardi 2014.

heterosexual norm, that is, the socially prescribed gender script that, following Butler, pre-dates our existence and that is assigned to us at birth.

Contrary to the critical reception that sees the novel as Morante's bleak literary testament, namely, a pessimistic tale of existential failure (Fortini 1982) or the defeat of the healing power of literature (Capozzi 1988), my thesis here is that *Aracoeli* ends on a positive note, with Manuele's cry for love (for his mother as well as his father) hinting at the blurring of societal taboos and affirming the split and never accomplished nature of subjectivity formation. After all, as Manuele himself comments in a way that seems to be encapsulating the renegotiation of binary identity categories that underlies the novel as a whole, 'Maschio o femmina non significa niente' (*Aracoeli* 124).

Conclusion

Ideas on gender, identity, and sexuality permeate the works of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante which I have brought together in this study. In line with the task of ‘queer’ as framed here, these authors challenge and problematise institutionalised binaries which can be recognised as strongly implicated within the realm of sexual identity—such as woman/man, hetero/homo, normative/other.¹⁷¹ Maraini, Sapienza and Morante contest the notion of a unified subject premised upon normative dichotomies and, in doing so, they expose the transiency intrinsic to gender identification. Thus, whilst embracing some of the positions advanced by contemporary Italian feminists of the 1970s and 1980s under the rubric of *pensiero della differenza sessuale*, these authors were also able to formulate alternative discourses. The tenet of sexual difference feminism ‘holds that there is an essential and original difference for everyone born female, a difference that is non-negotiable and must be explored in order to create a socio-symbolic order in which each woman can realize her individual and autonomous liberty without having to deny her female nature’ (Lazzaro-Weis 1993: 40). In Maraini’s, Sapienza’s and Morante’s texts, on the other hand, what is at stake is not so much the constitutive difference between man and woman, but rather the way in which the body is subjected to normalising practices that require the incorporation of femininity and masculinity as a style. This is a process that Butler has interpreted as ‘performative’ insofar as it establishes a nexus between biological sex and gendered identification; a nexus that, through sustained (heterosexual) performance, comes to be taken as the norm.

The works that I have considered for my analysis followed by just a few years Carla Lonzi’s *Sputiamo su Hegel* (1974), a document marking a shift of focus, in the Italian women’s movement, from the gaining of equality onto the acknowledgment of the uniqueness of woman and her existential difference from man—a passage that has been read

¹⁷¹ The definition of sexual identity is dependent upon a series of codified elements. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identified these parameters as always divided into oppositional binaries, such as ‘your biological (e.g. chromosomal) sex, male or female / your self-perceived gender assignment, male or female (supposed to be the same as your biological sex)’ and so forth. (1993: 7).

retrospectively as a move from a liberationist *femminista* to a more symbolic *femminile* (Rasy qtd. in Lazzaro-Weis 1993: 42). Writing, then, acquired a clear political aim and was seen not just as a powerful weapon in the hands of women to document and to denounce their plight in a patriarchal society, but also as a means to achieve the creation of a new signifier for ‘woman’. The gender politics promoted by Maraini, Sapienza and Morante moves alongside complementary, yet different lines. Whether they are speaking from within the feminist movement (in the case of Maraini), or outside of it (in the case of Sapienza and Morante), they treat “‘female’” and “‘woman’” as ‘troubled and unfixed’ identity categories (Butler 1999: xxix). A discourse of this kind chimes with Butler’s assessment of what is at stake in feminist theory, that is, the assumption of ‘some existing identity, understood through the category of women’ (1999: 3) and her readdressing the question in queer, deconstructive terms: ‘Within feminist political practice, a radical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity appears to be necessary in order to formulate a representational politics that might revive feminism on other grounds’ (1999: 8). In a way that seems to be addressing the Butlerian imperative, the alternative ‘grounds’ envisaged in Maraini’s, Sapienza’s and Morante’s works are those that do not follow a normative path; they thus become ‘orientation devices’, understood, recalling Ahmed (2006: 11) as a conceptual category comprising of symbolic elsewherees that occupy an eccentric and dis/located position *vis à vis* the norm.

It is not coincidental that all the texts gathered in this study are first-person narratives, written in the form of semi-autobiographical or fictional diaries, or else, of unmailed letters or interviews of sorts. Resorting to different forms of life writing, Maraini, Sapienza and Morante demonstrate that there is no univocal interpretation of this slippery genre.¹⁷² In line with recent formulations on women’s (autobiographical) writing (Larco and Cecchini 2011; Fortini 2013), these authors seem less preoccupied with offering a representation of what one’s “self” is and how it came to be, than they are with exploring a process of continuous becoming, with a shift of focus onto the multiplicity intrinsic to the

¹⁷² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have drawn a distinction between autobiography and other forms of related life writing (2010). Adopting a rather scientific approach, the two scholars have identified fifty-two different types of life narratives. A formulation of this kind seems to stand in contrast with Maraini’s, Sapienza’s and Morante’s use of the first person. Indeed, in their writings, the boundaries between different genres are much less clear-cut and, besides, they are intentionally left blurred—for reasons that I explain below.

notion of “I”. Besides, the works that I have thus far considered appear as ultimately inconclusive and open-ended. They do not give the idea that the characters arrive somewhere at the end of the narration, which thus becomes more of a point of departure, so to speak.¹⁷³ I read a narrative strategy of this kind as coterminous with the task of queer as orientated not so much towards the past as towards the future and what this could be, representing the multiplicity of a self in continuous evolution, or else, ‘a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance’ (Halperim 1995: 62).

Given Maraini’s status as one of the strongest advocates of the woman’s cause in Italy and her direct involvement with the legal battles of feminism—from campaigning for abortion rights to openly denouncing women’s physical and psychological abuse in a patriarchal society—to situate her beyond a feminist discourse requires a degree of caution. Though being credited as a historical figure of the Italian women’s movement, Maraini, who has never called herself a feminist preferring instead the locution *dalla parte delle donne*, in more recent times has expressed her uneasiness toward the commonplace of ‘la Maraini scrittrice femminista’ (Cattaruzza 2000: 30), which she has come to see as anachronistic. With my study I have demonstrated that, as early as her most explicit feminist phase, which coincides with the writing, between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, of *Donna in guerra*, *Storia di Piera* and *Lettere a Marina*, she was ahead of her times in her treatment of gender and sexuality, thereby gesturing towards more contemporary queer approaches. Maraini’s trilogy centres on the prefabricated essence of gender, using parody to debunk age-old gender stereotypes and the (hetero/homo) binary logic that subtends it, and advocating more fluid ways of being sexed.

Comparing it to Maraini’s texts of those years, Adalgisa Giorgio suggests that Morante’s *Aracoeli* ‘does not appear to be emancipatory reading for women’ (1994: 116). Apt in this respect is Sharon Wood’s reading of Morante’s prose ‘non come esempio di

¹⁷³ Of all the texts thus far considered, Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* seems to be the one that most gives the idea of something being accomplished by the protagonist—namely, the awakening to her subordination and subsequent emancipation. Yet, the reader is not given to see, but only let to imagine, what follows the novel’s famous concluding line ‘Ora sono sola e ho tutto da ricominciare’ (*Donna* 269), which Giancarlo Lombardi has aptly read as the character’s realisation that ‘her fight has just begun, and so has her life’ (2002: 123). In this sense, then, *Donna in guerra* is, just like the other works gathered in this thesis, ‘inconclusive’, to be understood positively as denoting a self in perpetual becoming.

liberazione femminile che ci offre immagini di donne soddisfatte', but rather 'come esempio di narrativa femminile, al di sotto della sfera di appagamento dei desideri e della gratificazione conscia, per raggiungere il territorio più profondo del desiderio inesprimibile che il più delle volte non può neanche dirsi' (1990: 48). Expanding on Wood's observations, my reading has identified yet another level of analysis to Morante's ideology, one that takes into account the Butlerian performative. In her literary testament *Aracoeli*, written just a few years before her death, Morante shakes the traditional image of the heterosexual family to the core, confronting us with both a mother who is slave to nymphomania and an androgynous son who, caught up in an unresolved Oedipal drama, fails in his performances of both heterosexuality and homosexuality. In *Aracoeli*, through her female and male characters, Morante deconstructs the identity categories of femininity and masculinity, a process that mirrors, whilst also anticipating, the overall textual trajectory towards the debunking of institutionalised maternity and paternity with which the narration ends.

Similarly to Maraini and Morante, Sapienza also engages in the representation of fluid and multiple selves. Her works composed between 1970s-1980s, thus: *L'arte della gioia*; *Io, Jean Gabin*; *L'Università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, all share an implicit spatial metaphor, creating alternative spaces that contest heteronormative social arrangements and produce new ways of being and relating to others, that is, 'portals to other temporal, social, and cultural realms, to other subjectivities' (Ross 2016: 99). Yet, Sapienza does not ultimately 'want to escape her own lived environment, or her embodied self', but rather '[to] realign and transform them' (Ross 2016: 99). She does so, I have argued, by creating symbolic spaces that take the form of alternative familial or social arrangements, or even of alternative masculine identifications, which are all linked by a sense of otherness, understood by Ahmed as a misalignment with respect to the normative trajectory (Ahmed 2006: 62-63).

In my analysis 'queer' has served as a methodological paradigm to investigate the anti-normative substratum underlying the gender politics of Maraini, Sapienza and Morante, with normativity referring to 'the network of power in which the performativities of gender and sexuality function as disciplining forces' (Brady and Schirato 2011: 65). Given the potentially countless applicability of queer, for the purposes of this study, the field of enquiry has been restricted to the realms that are, to a greater or lesser extent, always

implicated with the sexual—that which is inextricably linked to the process of identity formation. The findings thus generated encompass different manifestations of queerness, from fluid ways of occupying sexed and gendered positions to the exploration of alternative kinship structures or to the subversion of seemingly self-evident categories such as (heteronormative) ‘space’ and ‘time’.

Without disregarding either the ideological positions of their authors or the socio-cultural context in which they have been produced, the approach that I have adopted is one that focuses on the texts. Through close textual readings of a corpus of works written during the same period of time, accomplished by means of engaging them in direct dialogue with a number of queer theorists selected on the basis of my understanding of ‘queer’, what has emerged is that, despite belonging to authors that do not always partake in the same ideologies and beliefs, and despite adopting different narrative strategies, these works share a number of affinities and recurring thematic patterns. They all attest to the fact that one can never simply ‘be’ a certain identity, but only perform it by means of repeating a certain coding; yet, the way in which this is accomplished varies, producing different outcomes each time. Throughout my study I have foregrounded the diverse yet complementary ways in which the idea that the “self” is a perpetual self-construction—influenced not so much by one’s will but by normative apparatuses and, as such, instable and open to change—is realised in Maraini’s, Sapienza’s and Morante’s works. ‘Parody’ and ‘drag’ are two such ruses ‘that reveal ontological inner depths and gender cores as regulatory fictions’ (Butler and Salih 2004: 93). The parodic imitation of gender shows the working of the norm within, and against, itself. Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* underwrites and illustrates this practice through the protagonist’s initial dutiful repetition of the essentialist house/wife script that hides her gender insubordination (which, in turn, is mirrored in that of other characters in the text). As the narration progresses, this is shown both sexually—through extra-marital, homosexual and intergenerational affairs—and ontologically—through Vannina’s questioning her husband’s notion of femininity by which she had thus far abided. On the other hand, the practice of drag also reveals that gender is a performance from the start, producing even more hyperbolic results than parody does. This is what Sapienza achieves in *Io, Jean Gabin* by means of an embodied experience through which her autobiographical self identifies with her cinematic hero. This produces destabilising effects on her neighbours, effects that we

have said to betray a certain gender anxiety, that is, the preoccupation of ‘maintaining a stable distinction between surface and depth, sex and gender, the body and the psyche, homosexual and heterosexual, masculine and feminine’ (Butler and Salih 2002: 93).

Queer theory reminds us that those individuals who fail to perform their gender correctly, thereby exposing its artificial construction, are punished by a culture that does not recognise them as ‘viable’ subjects (Butler’s term)—namely, as normative beings. I have showcased an example of such instance at work in the character of Manuele, the misanthropic asexual protagonist of Morante’s last novel. Non-heterosexual, he does not convincingly fulfill the homosexual script either. In doing so, he not only deconstructs the gender/sex nexus, but he also confounds the opposition between normative and non-normative. As such, Manuele is subjected to the punitive consequences awaiting those who violate what Butler calls the ‘matrix of intelligibility’ that sanctions the limits of what makes for a socially tolerated life. Such limits are established *a priori* by ‘a number of social technologies, of techno-social or bio-medical apparati’ (de Lauretis 1987: 3) that shape the way we think, and act, about gender. These very same ‘technologies of gender’ are at play in Sapienza’s prison texts in the self-censorship of her queer desires—with prison becoming a metaphor for her struggle against her devious yearnings. Yet, for Sapienza, the prison provides also the occasion for a positive resignification of the term and the creation of alternative forms of female bonding that, in defeating normative social arrangements, present themselves as counter-spaces; sites of contestation with their own organisation and internal logic that ‘provide an utter contrast with the rest of space creating [...] a meticulously arranged enclosure that exposes the jumbled mess that we tend to live in’ (Johnson 2006: 79).

The queering of ‘family space’ in these works is oftentimes linked to the queering of ‘family time’, a form of normative temporality understood as the overthrowing of ‘the frames of bourgeois reproduction’ (Halberstam 2005: 1), as we have seen it for instance in Maraini’s *Storia di Piera*. Both family space and time are queered at once in *Aracoeli* through the figure of the eponymous protagonist when, after an overriding nymphomania has taken control of her and her body, she flees her home—a symbolic extension of the desertion from her maternal role. In these works, the spatial category is productive of yet another queer outcome, which, at a symbolic level, can be read as a spatial elsewhere challenging strictly

heterosexual kinship arrangements and providing viable alternatives to the patriarchal family model; queer families within which bloodlines are made redundant, and whose members are valued regardless of their ancestry. A configuration of this kind is emblematised in *L'arte della gioia*, offering an example of how kinship can be performatively constituted, that is, created not as an imitation of a prior model, but rather as an original structure that is open to change and transformation (Butler 2004).

Their differences notwithstanding, what all these manifestations of queer have in common is a refutation of the socially inculcated idea of a fixed identity whereby one's gender would mirror one's biological sex, instead turning to queerness as an alternative to institutionalised identity categories. The characters staged in Maraini's, Sapienza's and Morante's texts are 'eccentric' in the sense understood by de Lauretis as at odds with the centre, that is, profoundly dislocated with respect to the norm (1990b)—an eccentricity that can, at times, be reinforced by their geographical extraneousness, as is the case for instance with the characters of Aracoeli, who is Spanish by nationality, or Iuzza-Gabin, who looks to the *Continente* to fulfill her escapist fantasies. Their most interesting feature, however, is that they all share (with perhaps the sole exception of Aracoeli) the open-endedness and sexual fluidity that characterises their gender performances and the fact that they cannot identify as either 'hetero' or 'homo'. The only "true" homosexuals in these works, the characters of Chantal in *Lettere a Marina* and Joyce in *L'arte della gioia*, are negatively portrayed. They are presented as either the spokespersons of a homosexual utopia that is faulted from the start because it is built upon the same exclusionary logic underlying the heterosexual system they seek to oppose (in Maraini), or else, as abiding by the very same norms that define them as deviant beings (in Sapienza). Butler provides us with the theoretical underpinnings for understanding the authors' rationale here: 'Lesbianism that defines itself in radical exclusion from heterosexuality deprives itself of the capacity to resignify the very heterosexual constructs by which it is partially and inevitably constituted' (Butler 1999: 163), given that it is premised on the same exclusionary logic of heterosexuality itself.

In the light of these considerations, it could be safely argued that, should these texts be considered as part of the same narrative project, their underlying thread would indeed be the one encapsulated in the quote introducing the present study (taken from *Lettere a Marina*), calling for 'un modo più ricco e fluido di essere sessuati'. Such a fluid approach to

gender and sexuality resonates with Butler's claim, in a recently published book that constitutes the summa of her earlier works on gender formation, that "'I' [...] never gets done with being undone' (2015: 16). The philosopher is here once again positing identities as normative creations, the effects of mechanisms of power and cultural expectations that act upon the body determining its social behaviours, pleasures and desires—thereby 'doing' it. Because of this contingency, however, what constitutes us as subjects can also be used productively so as to *deconstitute* us. This occurs when the mechanisms through which we come into being are revealed, or else, when they are undone. It is this process of 'undoing', a queer project aimed at 'expos[ing] the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power' (Butler 1999: xxix) that I see at work in the writings gathered in this thesis.

In my study I have drawn on queer approaches to acknowledge how, resorting to different thematic and stylistic tools, Maraini's, Sapienza's and Morante's vision on matters of gender and sexuality as we find it expressed in their texts could move beyond dominant cultural and philosophical positions active within the Italian landscape at the time; positions that assumed 'woman' as a distinctive category. Appropriating a queer logic of instability, these writers depart from any coherent representation of identity, focussing instead on moments of rupture with normative expectations. This is accomplished through the fictional staging of "'queer performances'", that is, performances of gender that 'draw attention to the naturalisations of constitutive power that structure and produce sexual subjectivity' (Brady and Schirato 2011: 67). Their texts written at the height of Italian *femmismo della differenza* appear aligned with the queer suspicion of identity categories stemming from the impossibility to think of them outside of a performative process of social and cultural construction. Despite certainly being preoccupied with notions of materiality and the body, Maraini, Sapienza and Morante seem less interested in the process of 'being' or 'becoming' woman than in questioning whether one actually ever 'becomes', and whether the process of becoming itself, perhaps, has no end or goal, thus positing the transiency intrinsic to not just the category of 'woman' but also to all other forms of identitarian anchoring in a move that is boldly *queer* and *queerly* political.

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