

**Dichotomous conceptualisations of female friendship in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Italian literature – a comparison of Alba de Céspedes, Anna Banti, Elena Ferrante, and Donatella Di Pietrantonio**

*Abstract*

Female friendship played a minor role in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian narrative and this theme seems to have emerged only recently in Italian and European literature. Nevertheless, it offers an interesting lens through which to reflect on female narrative across time. This paper will first analyse the conceptualisation of female friendship by two authors who were the cornerstones of 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian (female) narrative – Anna Banti and Alba de Céspedes. It will then compare it to the representation of female friendship in contemporary authors, like Elena Ferrante and Donatella Di Pietrantonio. I will argue that Banti and de Céspedes' representations of female friendships are dichotomous. The young protagonist of Banti's *Itinerario di Paolina* (1937) avoids female bonds as a consequence of her attempts to escape from patriarchal restrictions, while Alessandra in de Céspedes' *Dalla parte di lei* (1949) conceptualises female bonds as constitutive of her own and free identity from a very tender age. Building on this analysis, this paper shall then assess the extent to which 21<sup>st</sup> century authors like Ferrante and Di Pietrantonio have echoed or changed the representation of female bonds and in turn reproduce the dichotomous conceptualisation of female friendship in their narratives. It will argue that while reproducing a dichotomous representation of female friendships similar to that of de Céspedes and Banti, this is actually underpinned by the same ideological standpoint in both authors, because they both see female friendship as the ground to forge women's identities and fight the patriarchal struggles of their times.

Female friendship offers an interesting lens through which to reflect on female narrative across time. This paper will first analyse the conceptualisation of these bonds by two authors who were the cornerstones of 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian (female) narrative – Anna Banti and Alba de Céspedes. It will then compare it to the same representation in contemporary authors, like Elena Ferrante and Donatella Di Pietrantonio. I argue that Banti and de Céspedes’ narrativisations of female friendships are dichotomous. The young protagonist of Banti’s *Itinerario di Paolina* (1937) avoids female bonds as a consequence of her attempts to escape from patriarchal structures, while Alessandra in de Céspedes’ *Dalla parte di lei* (1949) conceptualises female closeness as constitutive of her own identity from a very tender age. Building on this analysis, this paper shall then assess the extent to which Ferrante and Di Pietrantonio change the portrayal of female bonds, recognising both their shaping power for women’s identities. It will argue that Di Pietrantonio and Ferrante offer two apparently different representations of it – pure and idealised friendships in Di Pietrantonio versus more complex and inherently difficult ones in Ferrante. Yet, this dichotomy actually leads to the same ideological stance in the two authors, who both conceptualise it as the ground to forge women’s identities and fight the patriarchal struggles of their times. This paper shall highlight this by building on the comparison with previous authors like de Céspedes and Banti, whose dichotomous representation of female friendships is underpinned by a divergent ideological conceptualisation of them. Only through the comparison between de Céspedes and Banti, and Di Pietrantonio and Ferrante, respectively as well as between the two pairs, we understand the difference in these authors’ conceptualisation of bonds between women and their relationship to their own feminist ideals.

### *A neglected motif*

Whilst friendship, in its broadest meaning, has received little attention in academic studies, female friendship has been further neglected and traditionally trivialised in academic literature. Some scholars have noted this negligence. O’Connor (1992) argued that the topic was academically underrated as it was often categorised as belonging to the «private», rather than the

«public» (1992, 1), and that women’s friendship was «systematically ignored», «derogated and trivialized within a very wide variety of traditions (including history, anthropology, sociology and psychology)» (1992, 9), and seen as «suspect (i.e. only as a lesbian relationship)» (1992, 26). The representation of female friendship has had the same fate in Literature – the subject has been «under portrayed» or portrayed as «two-faced, gossipy or as a juvenile phase in the progression towards “normal” psychosexual development» (i.e., a heterosexual relationship) (O’CONNOR 1992, 10). O’Connor observes that this phenomenon has developed further in the twentieth century (1992, 96): «The purpose it serves for the patriarchal society in which we live is to reinforce women’s dependence on men. For if women cannot trust or work for or be friends with women, then they must of course turn to men» (SEIDEN AND BART 1975, 194). Anderson (2010) explains how friendship between women has been underrated because traditionally and biologically considered impossible to develop in the same form between men and women – as such female friendship could not possibly have ethical and political connotations or consequences – Anderson calls this a «double exclusion» (2010, 247).

Today the motif is at the centre of some new novels by women writers – e.g., Sally Rooney’s *Conversation with Friends* (2017) and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021), Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time* (2016). In Italy, the theme seems to emerge in very recent novels such as those by Donatella Di Pietrantonio, or Loredana Lipperini’s *La notte si avvicina* (2020), Marilù Oliva’s *Biancaneve del Novecento* (2021), among others. Eschner (2018) cites Elena Ferrante as one of the first to have recovered this issue in her narrative. Clark (2016) notes that «recently, there has been a growth in the literary depiction of a particular type of friendship, one that has in the past found itself vulnerable to dilution and deflection by the ostensibly more powerful imperatives of heterosexuality and motherhood» (2016, 1).

Against this background, friendship has also been recognised as a factor in building identities - particularly, women’s identities. Minnich (1985) argues that by telling women’s stories – not only our own stories – a feeling of friendship develops which helps in discovering our own subjectivities. From the rise of second wave feminist movements in the US onwards, «the bonds between women were openly acknowledged as an organizing force for political

change» (Friedman 2015). In Italy, the Diotima group strongly believed in the political value of bonds between women. Luisa Muraro (1990) wrote about female homosexuality, conceptualised as not only in couples but also and most importantly within a community, thus denouncing the need for women to gather and create emotional links between each other (192). Finally, from a psychoanalytical point of view, Abel (1981) and Gardiner (1981) - both building their arguments on Chodorow's<sup>1</sup> theories – argue that the self-identification and the process of creating or discovering their own subjectivities comes through friendships and female bonds: «Through the intimacy, which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to another who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self» (ABEL 1981, 416). In light of the lack of attention towards this theme in academia, as well as the political importance that the above-mentioned theories have attributed to similar bonds both within society and literature, it is interesting to take into consideration different case studies and explore the ways in which the representation of female friendships has changed throughout time.

Focussing on Anna Banti and Alba de Céspedes allows me to draw an opposite parallelism not only in the representation of female friendships, but also in its conceptualisation by two authors with very different political stances on feminism. I will argue that this dichotomous representation does not imply a greater political impact of one author compared to the other. Rather, it will demonstrate how the urgency to reflect, albeit in different ways, on female friendship was deeply rooted in the time when this debate emerged. On this note, this analysis will position Banti's 'anti-feminism' in the context of the author's profound awareness of the subjugated condition of women in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy. In parallel, a similar analysis of Di Pietrantonio and Ferrante is interesting firstly because of their editorial success, which made this theme popular in an unprecedented way; secondly because their representation of female friendships mirrors the dichotomy which will be highlighted for Banti and de Céspedes – I will argue that between these two authors the opposition is merely formal, while they share the same ideological purpose.

## *Female friendship in Alba de Céspedes and Anna Banti's novels – a dichotomous representation*

In order to analyse the representation of female bonds in de Céspedes' texts, it is useful to acknowledge the author's views on friendships among women as expressed outside of her novels and in dialogue with other female authors, such as Natalia Ginzburg, since this will help us understand the extent to which de Céspedes' ideological framework informs the conceptualisation of this motif in her work. In 1948, on number 36-39 of «Mercurio», Ginzburg writes an article titled *Discorso sulla donna*, to which Alba de Céspedes, director of the magazine, replies with *Lettera a Natalia Ginzburg*. Ginzburg uses a suggestive metaphor of a well to describe a melancholic status of torpor which they have the habit of falling into – «[...] le donne hanno la cattiva abitudine di cascare ogni tanto in un pozzo, di lasciarsi prendere da una tremenda malinconia e affogarci dentro, e annaspate per tornare a galla: questo è il vero guaio delle donne» (GINZBURG 1948, 105). The article ends with the invite to women – and herself – to no longer fall into the well because they would not be free beings: «[...] un essere libero non casca quasi mai nel pozzo e non pensa così sempre a se stesso [...]» (GINZBURG 1948, 110). In her reply, Alba de Céspedes is enthusiastic for Ginzburg's thoughts, but her conclusions are different. According to de Céspedes the well represents the burden of the 'sexual difference' which, in her view, is strength and a feminist tool for female emancipation. Indeed, she writes:

Ma – al contrario di te – io credo che questi pozzi siano la nostra forza. Perché ogni volta che andiamo nel pozzo noi scendiamo alle più profonde radici del nostro essere umano, e nel riaffiorare portiamo in noi esperienze tali che ci permettono di comprendere tutto quello che gli uomini – i quali non cadono mai nel pozzo – non comprenderanno mai (DE CÉSPÉDES 1948, 111).

If for Ginzburg women in the well are destined to loneliness, for de Céspedes they form a sympathetic bond that saves them:

Le donne possono farci cadere nell'ira, nella cattiveria, nell'invidia, ma non potranno mai farci cadere nel pozzo. Anzi, poiché quando siamo nel pozzo noi accogliamo tutta la sofferenza umana, che è fatta, prevalentemente, dalla

sofferenza delle donne, siamo benevole con loro, comprensive, affettuose. Ogni donna è pronta ad accogliere e consolare un'altra donna che è caduta nel pozzo: anche se è una nemica. Poiché è appunto a prezzo di questa pietosa comprensione del dolore umano che noi a poco a poco ci risolviamo e riusciamo a venir fuori dal pozzo (DE CÉSPEDES 1948, 111).

This fundamental difference in the interpretation of the same issue is traceable also in the authors' respective narratives. In Alba de Céspedes' narrative there are many examples of friendship. The same melancholy and the social disadvantage Ginzburg's protagonists live on their own, in de Céspedes are contrasted by the awareness that this malaise is not unique to the individual but shared among women. They create bonds built on this shared sorrow and, precisely, built on its collective nature. Through this bond, women find the strength not to surrender. Male responsibility and female gathering are also present in de Céspedes' novel *Dalla parte di lei* (1949):

Nel cortile le donne vivevano a loro agio, con la dimestichezza che lega coloro che abitano in collegio un reclusorio. Ma tale confidenza, piuttosto che dal tetto comune, nasceva dal fatto di conoscere reciprocamente la faticosa vita che conducevano: attraverso le difficoltà, le rinunce, le abitudini, un'affettuosa indulgenza le legava, a loro stessa insaputa. Lontano dagli sguardi maschili, si mostravano veramente quali erano, senza la necessità di portare avanti una gravosa commedia. [...] tutte, rassegnate, accettavano, col nascere un nuovo giorno, il peso di nuove fatiche [...] (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 21).

One of the main themes of the novel is indeed the friendship between the protagonist, Alessandra, and Fulvia. In *Dalla parte di lei* (1949) there are elements similar to those outlined in Ginzburg: rivalries and jealousies since they are still children and the end of the bond when the two are adult. However, the nature of these elements is different and not caused by the author's distrust in the motif or by a passive acceptance of gender-stereotypes. As for the former, the abovementioned dynamics are useful to shape the representation of their bond which is not edulcorated or idealised. As for the latter, the sudden distance between the two protagonists is suffered and not accepted as inevitable for two adult women. Guilt stems from their relationship to men – the protagonists have been taught to desire love from a man since they were children, a kind of pressure that makes Fulvia ill and accepting claustrophobic situations. In

addition, a sudden and never openly admitted erotic attraction between the two women, when they grow up (which proves Fulvia's heteronormative desires are culturally constructed) forces their separation. Nevertheless, through their bond they expressed their own subjectivity and felt the love they always dreamt of and which they are not able to place within a heteronormative context. Thus, the elements that in Ginzburg confirm her distrust in the political potential of female friendship, in de Céspedes, denounce a society that aims to break that kind of bond. At the end of the novel, when witnessing against Alessandra in her trial, Fulvia is harsh on her friend. However, through Alessandra's commentary of Fulvia's deposition, de Céspedes voices the struggle to find reciprocation in a heteronormative relationship, thus extending the frustration to the whole category of women:

Fulvia, durante la sua testimonianza, non osò mai guardarmi: era la mia sola amica è ciò che ella depose fece molta impressione. Disse che non avevo mai apprezzato la fortuna di essermi sposata con un uomo onesto e leale; e che, anzi, indifferente a tale privilegio, accusavo sovente Francesco di alcune immaginarie, trascurabili manchevolezze. Il mio avvocato smaniava e io pure la ascoltai stupita e addolorata finché compresi che ella non depositava contro di me, ma contro la figlia del droghiere (DE CÉSPÉDES 1949, 546).

When juxtaposing de Céspedes' work to Banti's, their respective representations of female friendships can be seen as dichotomous, with Banti proposing a less optimistic view of these bonds in relation to a women's identity and role in society. Fausta Garavini highlighted how Banti's *opera omnia* is full of female characters «opposti e speculari» (e.g. Ofelia and Giulia, Arabella and Claudia, Marguerite Louise and Violante) (2013, XVI). Indeed, they rarely present similar traits on which they would build a bond of solidarity or empathy. Banti's female protagonists are lonely, and they rarely find personal or social redemption in female bonds. This happens only in environments and settings that Valentini (1996) defined as utopistic: convents and other kinds of gynaecea set outside of time and space as conventionally known, that constitute a part of Banti's *opera* less realistic. Thus, Banti believes in the potential of these bonds, but she is disillusioned and can only set them outside of the traditional conceptualisation of space and time, where they disappear. In an

article on «Illustrazione italiana» in which she writes also about de Céspedes' *Dalla parte di lei* (1949), it is evident that Banti saw the potential of their bond:

In un certo senso ecco un libro di quelli che si augurava Virginia Woolf: di midollo scrupolosamente femminile... E poiché uno scrittore laborioso non resta mai senza premio, noi vorremmo ravvisarlo soprattutto in quelle pagine dove con dignità castissima e con leggerezza sorprendente è detto di Alessandra e Fulvia... un accostamento che rimane angelico e pur tutto intriso della dolcezza della carne... (BANTI 1949, 583).

In Banti's universe, the protagonists refuse friendship from a very tender age. For instance, Paolina from *Itinerario di Paolina* (1937) lives playful moments and games with her friends with pain and intolerance. Paolina rejects the patriarchal component of these games (1937, 24-27). She despises other girls and their games because they are too similar to their mothers and the role they cover within families (28). The presence of a chorus of children is a reminder of the patriarchal structure of the family, with the protagonist struggling between the pressure to accept it and the tendency to rebel against it and, in turn, against the people accepting it. Paolina is interested in observing and studying the universe of women, to understand whether she belongs to it:

Sono gli adulti, naturalmente, che la interessano; e, in modo speciale, le donne. Poco importa quel che dicono e come son vestite: contano le inflessioni delle voci, tagliate sullo stesso modello di contegno, contano i gesti comuni a tutte: aprir la borsetta, accomodarsi i capelli sulle orecchie, infilare il guanto lasciando il pollice per ultimo, far scattare la cerniera del portamonete. Queste e simili prerogative hanno, agli occhi di Paola, l'importanza di un suggello, di un salvacondotto, non tanto per l'individuo quanto per la parola che lo classifica genericamente: "una donna, una ragazza"; alla quale poi l'individuo può ancorarsi con sicurezza, come a un palo di sostegno (10).

There is also a polemic hint to the strict rules a woman must respect to belong to a category that seems to be socially constructed, rather than being perceived as natural. Thus, for Paolina the absence of female friendship is a tool to denounce an unfair system in which other women and girls are oblivious victims. However, this does not cause empathy or pity to Paolina. She uses hate and resentment to take a distance and preserve her own loneliness: «quel che



succede domani è, invece, la malaugurata salita su un altro gradino di quella scala di isolamento in cui la bambina si rifugia per vendetta» (26). Her loneliness is also the result of the exclusion from the category of men, which she tries to enter:

Da principio la novità dei modi, nei ragazzi, la convince, la entusiasma e le fa creder di aver trovato finalmente a chi parlare: ma è una impressione che dura poco. Se con le sue pari le riesce così duro comunicare, livellarsi, coi ragazzi non c'è neppure da pensarci. Quando meno te l'aspetti ecco che saltan fuori a rinfacciarti che tu sei una bambina; una bambina e nient'altro; mentre ancora tu non ti sei figurata che cosa una bambina, precisamente sia (29).

Not only female friendships are denied to Paolina, but so are male friendships. This concept will also return for other characters, who will try to overcome their loneliness sacrificing their own identities in the name of a romantic relationship with a man. When Paolina becomes a teenager, the rebellious nature of the absence of friendships and female solidarity weakens and her rejection of them becomes more and more the result of a patriarchal code that pushes women to distrust other women through jealousy:

Giocano a esser gelose. Diciamo: Giovanna gioca. Quanto a Paola essa soffre a ondate altissime una gelosia verde e folgorante come un ramarro, che la lascia poi indolorita, ma tranquillissima e come immunizzata da un tempo così lungo (109).

The presence of a chapter within *Itinerario di Paolina* titled *Amicizia* is significant. Here, if firstly Paolina seems the most involved one in the feeling of affection that links her to Giovanna, soon she seems unable to keep such a feeling – envy and jealousy appear as if inevitable between two women – «Non ci vuol altro che svegliare nel cuore di Paola un pessimo diavoleto che s'irrita, respinge e quasi odia per un momento quella voce sempre così cara» (107). In other novels, Banti seems to conceive the importance and the potential the bonds between women have, however she never denies their impossibility, even if sometimes she seems aware that this is due to cultural and social constructions – female guilt is a by-product of the patriarchy in a male dominated world, and as such it is determined by society, rather than by nature:

Nessuno le può far male quanto una donna [...] “Vedete queste femmine” avrebbe dovuto dire, “Le migliori, le più forti, quelle che più somigliano ai valentuomini: come son ridotte finte e sleali tra loro, nel mondo che voi avete creato, per vostro uso e comodità. Siamo così poche e insidiate che non sappiamo più riconoscerci e intenderci o almeno rispettarci come voi vi rispettate. Per gioco ci lasciate libere, in un arsenale di armi velenose. Così noi soffriamo...” (BANTI 1947, 341-42).

Nevertheless, Banti believes only in the utopistic potential of friendship between women, refusing the possibility for her protagonists, and for women, to find concrete support and a way of expression in these bonds. In her most autobiographic novel, *Un grido lacerante* (1981), Agnese desires a friend as a child – «Nella scuola nuova la aspettava una sorpresa, il compimento di un suo desiderio: un’amica» (BANTI 1981, 1535) –; on the other hand, she runs into a group of women inexplicably, but unavoidably, hostile: «[...] il timore di non essere gradita e troppo diversa dalle donne del suo ambiente, [...]» (BANTI 1981, 1607). Agnese openly admits that friendship between women has political weight and emancipatory potential, but this potential is now utopistic:

Era amicizia? Adesso davanti ai suoi cataloghi e alle sue cifre, ripensando a come essa era nata e a poco a poco illanguidita, si chiedeva se altrove nel misterioso Universo in cui credeva l’amicizia non fosse, come il respiro, condizione di vita. Questa utopia della cui irrealtà si doleva, le era necessaria, non sopportava che fosse un concetto astratto (BANTI 1981, 1536).

At the end of the novel, indeed, Agnese is alone, with circumstantial friends unable to stand by her side: «Le amiche che si erano vantate di amarla e lei aveva creduto di amare, recentemente le erano parse costrette da un dovere spiacevole; [...]» (BANTI 1981, 1587).

De Céspedes and Banti present a dichotomous way to conceptualise female friendship: conflicting and contrasted in Banti, who shows to see its redeeming potential for women, but, disillusioned, who can project it only in circumscribed contexts (a convent) or in utopistic situations (between author and character, of in science fiction short stories); neither during childhood it manages to be lived genuinely; more optimistic in de Céspedes, who, despite aware of certain limits, traces them back to male guilt, and synecdochally to patriarchal society,

that obstacles these bonds because they could make the difference in women's condition. The difference in the representation of female friendship is mirrored also by author's respective attitude towards Feminism – more skeptical in Banti, who took the distance from official movements and labels in different occasions. However, this does not diminish the value of Banti's representation of female bonds, made impossible mainly for patriarchal structures which are openly denounced in her narrative.

*Female friendship in Donatella Di Pietrantonio and Elena Ferrante's novels – the shaping power of female friendship for women's identities*

*Arminuta's* (2017) protagonist is a girl who is forced by her adoptive parents to return to her biological family. Here she finds her brothers, and her younger sister. The bond between the protagonist and her sister Adriana is peculiar because merging sisterhood and friendship, since they meet each other for the first time in this occasion. Friendship is a bond that defines the protagonist identity and for whom it has a salvific role, even before she meets her friend Adriana. Indeed, in her childhood as a wealthy girl, she is surrounded by female figures who become fundamental every time she tries to evade. Her childhood's best friend is Patrizia – whilst their bond is platonic, it is mirrored by their physicality as their bodies synchronise in their teenage changes, making it unique:

le tenevi le amiche alla città? – Mi ha chiesto Adriana. [...] – Sì, le avevo. Patrizia soprattutto. Proprio con lei avevo scelto il costume da bagno a due pezzi, a primavera. [...] Volevamo prendere costumi uguali, io e Pat, per presentarci in spiaggia con le nuove forme. Avevamo avuto il menarca a una settimana l'una dall'altra e anche l'eruzione dei brufoli sembrava sincronizzata. I nostri corpi crescevano per suggerimenti reciproci (23).

Another important figure in the protagonist's life is her aunt Lidia. Actually, her adoptive father's sister is much younger than him, thus creates with her niece a relationship more similar to a friendship. The two spend time together confiding in each other:

Troppo giovane per chiamarla zia, la sorella minore di mio padre carabiniere. Per alcuni anni eravamo state insieme nella casa dei miei genitori, lei compariva nei primi ricordi di quelle stanze. [...] Di pomeriggio mi sbrigavo con i compiti e poi ascoltavamo canzoni alla radio. [...] Quando restavamo sole Lidia indossava minigonna e zatteroni che teneva nascosti nell'armadio e accendeva il mangiadischi al massimo del volume. [...] La volevo accanto a me ogni sera, proprio al momento di cedere al sonno mi coglievano certi pruriti in punti inaccessibili della schiena. Lidia veniva a grattarmi e poi rimaneva seduta sul letto. Mi contava le vertebre, magra com'ero, e ognuna costruiva una storia (36-37).

However, the age gap between Lidia and her niece soon becomes an obstacle for their relationship. Her entrance in the adulthood (she finds a job and moves) divides them:

“Mi prendono”, aveva detto un giorno rientrando. L'ho perduta così, ai Grandi Magazzini, qualche anno prima della mia restituzione. [...] da commessa è diventata subito cassiera e dopo un anno caporeparto. Rientrava sempre più tardi. Poi si è trasferita nella sede centrale, parecchie centinaia di chilometri (37).

The distance between them grows gradually, their conversations become empty and conventional: «Mi scriveva, a volte, e non sapevo che risponderle» (ivi). This abrupt absence has a negative impact on the protagonist and on her mood:

Sui quaderni coloravo il sole di nero come il mio umore e la maestra ha telefonato a casa per chiedere se c'era morto qualcuno. La media della mia pagella era dieci, nella cura minuziosa dei compiti assegnati occupavo il tempo svuotato da Lidia (ivi).

Even when Lidia visits her, their lives are too different to overlap, now, and Lidia becomes a stranger:

È tornata in agosto per le ferie, ma avevo paura di essere ancora felice con lei. [...] Ai bagnanti abituali che la salutavano parlava già con il falso accento settentrionale degli emigranti. Mi sono vergognata al suo posto e ho cominciato a uccidere la nostalgia. Solo un'altra volta l'ho vista prima che decidessero di darmi indietro. Ha premuto il campanello e ho aperto a una sconosciuta dai capelli tinti e stirati. Portava accanto alle gambe una bambina che non ero io.

In Di Pietrantonio (2017), we can see the impossibility to cultivate such a bond in adulthood. Nevertheless, in a flashforward, the protagonist informs the reader that she is still close to Patrizia in their adult present (60). These female figures (including Lidia) also appear to be the only ones able to help her. When she apprehends that her adoptive family is going to abandon her, she looks for Patrizia and they plan her hiding together. During her most nostalgic moments in her new house, she cannot help but think of Lidia as her only possible saviour. The same kind of symbiotic bond is created with Adriana. She is the only member of the new family being kind to her and helping her. Again, their bodies are protagonist of this union, like it happens with Patrizia. Their resemblance seems to unite them from the very beginning of their encounter: «Era mia sorella, ma non l’avevo mai vista. Ha scostato l’anta per farmi entrare, tenendomi addosso gli occhi pungenti. Ci somigliavamo allora, più che da adulte» (3). They are forced to sleep together, but this is never lived as an annoyance by the two girls, whose bodies interlock perfectly, and even when they have the possibility to sleep in different beds, their bodies search for each other:

Nel letto che l’aveva tanto entusiasmata Adriana non riusciva a dormire né sopra né sotto, ci scambiavamo il posto di continuo. A un’ora variabile veniva a rannicchiarsi accanto a me, ovunque fossi [...]. Più tardi sono scesa io da Adriana, per una volta. Non si è svegliata, ha spostato i piedi per accogliermi nella consueta posizione reciproca, ma ho voluto appoggiare la testa accanto alla sua, sul cuscino. L’ho abbracciata, per consolarmi. Era così piccola e ossuta, odorava di capelli grassi (34-36).

Adriana is younger, but her experience in living in poor condition and in violent environments is a support for the struggling protagonist:

Lei mi ha raggiunta dopo un po’, con una fetta di pane e olio. Si era ripulita e cambiata, indossava una gonna troppo piccola. – Svelta, appena finisci ti vesti e corriamo alla festa, – mi ha messo il piatto sotto il naso (16).

“No, no a essa no!” Era l’urlo di Adriana appena rientrata con Giuseppe, non avevo potuto sentire la porta. “Mo pulisco io, non devi mena’ pure a essa”, hai insistito fermando un braccio della madre, nel tentativo di difendere la mia unicità, la differenza tra me e gli altri figli, lei compresa. Non mi sono mai

spiegata il gesto di una bambina di dieci anni che le buscava ogni giorno, ma voleva salvare il privilegio di cui godevo io, io sorella intoccabile tornata da poco (78-79).

The dynamics of female friendship in this passage are similar to those of Ferrante's *L'amica geniale* (2011). The intellectual privilege of *Arminuta's* protagonist allows her to study and avoid the hard work her sibling must carry out in their poor family, but this can only be so thanks to Adriana's sacrifice. These girls are brilliant only because of the existence of their counterparts, who sacrifice their wit, their ability to get out of life's obstacles, in order to make their companion succeed.

The representation of friendship underpinning *L'amica geniale* (2011) by Ferrante is peculiar and unstable. On the one side the two girls build their identities on each other, their taste and their experiences shape each other, their subjectivities find validation in their relationship; on the other side this bond does not avoid jealousies, rivalries, unfairness. This relationship has already been brilliantly examined by de Rogatis (2016), who highlights its difficult uniqueness:

A Ferrante non interessa l'incontro tra due soggettività che si rappresentano come disincarnate e sovrane, e racconta invece l'amalgama terribile di invidia e riconoscimento elettivo da cui l'amicizia tra due donne, due dominate in cerca della loro emancipazione, inevitabilmente è costituita. Pur arrogandosi lo stesso statuto di libertà dei legami maschili, l'amicizia di Elena e Lila emerge, nel corso del tempo, come una fusione di trascendenza e immanenza: amore e astio, slanci ed egoismi, confessioni e segreti, convivenze e distacchi si succedono e si intrecciano durante la loro relazione tempestosa. [...] L'invidia, il sentimento generativo di questa amicizia, e un'emozione originata dal riconoscimento elettivo dell'amica, un valore che include entrambe in un progetto iniziale ma poi esclude immancabilmente una delle due nella fase successiva (123- 25).

De Rogatis (2016) claims that envy is inevitable in this bond – just like Banti recognised that there is an underlying suspicion in women's relationship. But if for Banti this is natural and inevitable in female friendships, it does not prevent symbiosis between the two protagonists in Ferrante's *L'amica geniale* (2011). It is a symbiosis whereby the two girls do not mirror themselves (DE ROGATIS,

2016, 126) but which is fuelled by an «agonismo simbiotico – a volte euforico, a volte angoscioso – nel quale però vive e impone il suo diritto sia chi racconta sia chi si fa raccontare» (129). Indeed, the act of narrativising themselves, to voice their subjectivities, but also to tell each other stories are the main product of this bond – a female polyphony (DE ROGATIS, 2016, 130) which contrasts the more traditional «monologismo maschile» (130). Whilst the envious opposition between Elena and Lila may resemble the envy theorised by Banti, the final result is, actually, more similar to the bond described by de Céspedes - it has the same vital impulse and the same shaping power. Moreover, as argued by de Rogatis, «egoismi, distacchi, astio, invidia» are rather a result of the attempt to forge a bond which nourishes the «pratica della differenza» (2016, 123) contrasted by society itself. The moments in which the reader is put in the position to question the bond that links these two young protagonists are many. Envy seems to be the real engine of their friendship: «[...] io, che ero risultata la prima a scuola, tendevo a essere quasi sempre terza» (FERRANTE 2011, 77); «Smettere di essere seconda, superarla, per la prima volta mi sembrò un successo» (137-38). Moreover, while the protagonists of *L'arminuta* synchronise and even their bodies seem to mature a symbiosis, Elena and Lila are constantly in different phases of their life and of their growth:

Pur seguitando sia io che lei ad abitare nello stesso rione, pur avendo avuto la stessa infanzia, pur vivendo entrambe il nostro quindicesimo anno, eravamo finite all'improvviso in due mondi diversi. Io mi stavo mutando, mentre i mesi correavano via, in una ragazza sciatta, arruffata, occhialuta, china su libri sbrindellati che emanavano il malodore dei volumi presi con grandi sacrifici al mercato dell'usato o procurati dalla maestra Oliviero. Lei passava al braccio di Stefano pettinata come una diva, vestita con abiti che la facevano sembrare un'attrice o una principessa (2011, 261).

The passages that witness how friendship shapes their identities and subjectivities, as happens in de Céspedes but not so much in Banti, are numerous. Elena and Lila make an agreement when they are children, stipulating the symbiosis mentioned by de Rogatis – «quello che fai tu faccio io» (FERRANTE 2011, 51) –, preventing them from being able to do without each other: «volevo che si rendesse conto che [...] non avrebbe potuto fare a meno mai di me come io non potevo fare a meno di lei» (129). By this moment on,

their lives mirror each other. However, this does not let them mirror in each other – they alternate in the same phases without being able (or willing) to encounter – «era come se, per una cattiva magia, la gioia e il dolore dell’una presupponessero il dolore o la gioia dell’altra» (252). Their bond is not only a tool through which knowing their selves, but also a cognitive tool through which reading their reality:

Nessuno ci capiva, solo noi due – pensavo – ci capivamo. Noi, insieme, soltanto noi, sapevamo come la cappa che gravava sul rione da sempre, cioè fin da quando avevamo memoria, cedeva almeno un poco se Peluso, l’ex falegname, non aveva affondato il coltello nel collo di don Achille, se a farlo era stato l’abitante delle fogne, se la figlia dell’assassino sposava il figlio della vittima. C’era qualcosa di insostenibile nelle cose, nelle persone, nelle palazzine, nelle strade, che solo reinventando tutto come in un gioco diventava accettabile (2011, 103).

Despite the envy and the impossibility to be synchronic, the power of their relationship which makes them one thing is palpable to everyone. Indeed, Nino confesses to Elena:

da ragazzino aveva invidiato molto il rapporto che c’era tra me e Lila. Ci vedeva da lontano, sempre insieme, sempre a chiacchierare, e avrebbe voluto fare amicizia con noi, ma gli era sempre mancato il coraggio. Poi sorrise e disse: “Ti ricordi la dichiarazione che ti feci?”. “Sì”. “Mi piacevi moltissimo”. Diventai di fuoco, sussurrai stupidamente: “Grazie”. “Pensavo che ci saremmo fidanzati e saremmo stati sempre tutti e tre insieme, io, tu e la tua amica”. “Insieme?”. Sorrise di se stesso bambino. “Non capivo niente di fidanzamenti” (2011, 214-15).

The core of the novel is the ambiguity of who the brilliant friend is. And it remains unsolved. Lila’s is Elena’s brilliant friend and vice versa. What is sure is that one can be the brilliant friend only with and in opposition to the other:

Certe volte avevo persino l’impressione che fosse Lila a dipendere da me e non io da lei (159).

Fidanzata con Stefano, Lila perde l’interesse per gli studi. Elena si accorge presto quanto le manchi lo stimolo della concorrenza: «Ma doveti constatare presto che, da quando Lila aveva smesso di incalzarmi, di anticiparmi nello



studio e nelle letture, la scuola, o anche la biblioteca del maestro Ferraro, aveva smesso di essere una specie di avventura...» (182-83).

Ricevuto un dieci per il compito di italiano, Elena si rende conto dell'influsso benefico di Lila: «Testimoniava soprattutto quanto fosse stato fruttuoso studiare e conversare con Lila, averla per stimolo e sostegno nella sortita dentro quel mondo fuori del rione, tra le cose e le persone e i paesaggi e le idee dei libri» (184).

### *Dichotomous representations of female friendships across centuries and a shared purpose*

A parallel can be drawn across the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century – on the one hand de Céspedes and Di Pietrantonio who fully embrace the importance of female bonds, on the other hand Banti and Ferrante who also depict trivialised and controversial aspects.

de Céspedes' representations of bonds between her female characters are a clear reflection of her own activism – this is in line with the ideology outlined in her non-fiction work where she explicitly sets out the fundamental role of building bonds between women to forge their identities and addresses how this is present in her novels. In *Dalla parte di lei* the protagonist's friendship to Fulvia shapes her own identity. Understanding that the struggle her friend is going through is, albeit different, of the same patriarchal nature as her own helps her in the arduous process of emancipation and as she builds her own subjectivity. Friendship in de Céspedes is thus, albeit problematic, a fundamental tool for women.

In contrast, Banti's representations of female friendships showed the subordinate condition of women in society whilst the author distanced herself from feminist activism. Contrary to de Céspedes' representation, in Banti female friendships become another obstacle to women's emancipation. These relationships thus appear aligned to the stereotype of bonds between women as necessarily temporary and unfaithful – yet there is still value in Banti's representation from a feminist perspective as through her account she recognises and positions the patriarchal structures of society as the cause for such negative female behaviours. Banti's protagonist Paolina tries to bond with her female friends and to use friendship to escape the loneliness which has

characterised her since her childhood. Yet at her age she feels like it is impossible to forge truthful bonds with other young girls, either because they already live up to patriarchal behaviours which they are taught by their mothers or because she feels like women are disloyal between each other. Banti's other novels also contribute to show the author's conceptualisation of female friendships.

Drawing a parallel with 21<sup>st</sup> century authors, Di Pietrantonio represents friendship as salvific in her protagonist's life. All the discrimination she is bound to face on the grounds of sexism and classism are balanced by strong bonds with other women. *Arminuta's* protagonist seeks help from the women who surround her and will succeed only because of sacrifices by other women. In Di Pietrantonio too, a young girl's freedom and her identity are built upon their friendships with other women.

In contrast, Ferrante offers the most problematic representation of female friendship. Elena and Lila are enemies more than they are friends: they fight and live off each other's envy. Yet their bond and the affection they feel for each other legitimises and defines their identity. Elena would not be brilliant without Lila's sacrifices and support and vice versa. Even the most inevitable fights become necessary to the conceptualisation of friendship as a weapon against a patriarchal society and as an exercise of female empowerment.

Whilst the juxtaposition of de Céspedes and Banti and of Di Pietrantonio and Ferrante suggest a similar dichotomous dynamic between the first two authors and the second, contrarily to de Céspedes and Banti, Di Pietrantonio and Ferrante actually share the same ideal regarding the forging power of female friendships, despite representing them in opposite ways. I argued that the purpose of the dichotomy in novels by women writers like Di Pietrantonio and Ferrante is different than that of de Céspedes and Banti. Banti's pessimism has evolved in a political tool through which averting the risk for women to stay isolated. The difference, and thus the change that a century has brought, consists in the pessimistic conclusion of the former – Banti, despite recognising the cultural and patriarchal engine behind this impossibility, stays in her conclusion according to which women cannot be friends – against the contrasted but manifest importance of friendship in the latter, who does not spare her representation of patriarchal heritage, but who does not deprive it of

the political potential it offers. The new awareness represented, and sponsored, by Ferrante has entailed the new interest in these themes within the contemporary (female) narrative.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Chodorow argues that the relationship mother-daughter is stronger or at least more long lasting than the mother-son one. Due to this bond, which is difficult to emancipate from, women will find their way of identification in other women before than in men.

## Bibliography

ABEL 1981:

Elizabeth ABEL, *(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women*, in «Signs», vol. 6, n. 3 (1981), pp. 413-35, JSTOR, <[www.jstor.org/stable/3173754](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173754)> (28. 07. 2021).

ANDERSON 2010:

Penelope ANDERSON, *The Absent Female Friend: Recent Studies in Early Modern Women's Friendship*, in «Literature Compass», 7 (2010), pp. 243-53, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2009.00693.x>>.

BANTI 1937:

Anna BANTI, *Itinerario di Paolina*, in *Romanzi e Racconti*, Fausta Garavini (ed.), Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

BANTI 1947:

Anna BANTI, *Artemisia*, in *Romanzi e Racconti*, Fausta Garavini (ed.), Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

BANTI 1949:

Anna BANTI, *Romanticismo polemico*, in «Illustrazione italiana», LXXVI, 46 (1949), p. 583.

BANTI 1981:

Anna BANTI, *Un grido lacerante*, in *Romanzi e Racconti*, Fausta Garavini (ed.), Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

CHODOROW 1978:

Nancy J. CHODOROW, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.

CLARK 2016:

Alex CLARK, *Sister act: female friendship in fiction from Woolf to Ferrante and Zadie Smith*, in «The Guardian», 6 August 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/06/women-friendship-wold-ferrante-zadie-smith-fiction-alex-clark>>.

DE CÉSPEDES 1949:

Alba DE CÉSPEDES, *Dalla parte di lei*, Milano, Mondadori, 1986.

DE CÉSPEDES 1948:

Alba DE CÉSPEDES, *Lettera a Natalia Ginzburg*, in «Mercurio», n. 36-39 (1948), pp. 110-12.

DE ROGATIS 2016:

Tiziana DE ROGATIS, *Metamorfosi del tempo. Il ciclo dell'Amica geniale*, in «allegoria», vol. 73, (2016), pp. 123-37.

DI PIETRANTONIO 2017:

Donatella DI PIETRANTONIO, *L'arminuta*, Tourin, Einaudi, 2017.

ESCHNER 2018:

Kat ESCHNER, *Women Were Better Represented in Victorian Novels Than Modern Ones*, in «Smithsonian Magazine», 14 February 2018, <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/what-big-data-can-tell-us-about-women-and-novels-180968153/>>.

FERRANTE 2011:

Elena FERRANTE, *L'amica geniale*, Rome, E/O edizioni, 2011.

FRIEDMAN 2015:

Ann FRIEDMAN, *The Social Sex: A History of Female Friendship*, in «The New York Times», 18 September 2015, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/books/review/the-social-sex-a-history-of-female-friendship.html>>.

GARAVINI 2013:

Fausta GARAVINI, *Di che lacrime*, in *Banti. Romanzi e racconti*, Fausta Garavini (ed.), Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

GARDINER 1981:

Judith Kegan GARDINER, *On Female Identity and Writing by Women*, in «Critical Inquiry», vol. 8, n. 2 (1981), pp. 347-61, JSTOR, <[www.jstor.org/stable/1343167](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343167)> (28.07.2021).

GINZBURG 1948:

Natalia GINZBURG, *Discorso sulla donna*, in «Mercurio», n. 36-39 (1948), pp. 105-10.

LIPPERINI 2020:

Loredana LIPPERINI, *La notte si avvicina*, Milano, Bompiani, 2020.

MINNICH 1985:

Elizabeth MINNICH, *Friendship between Women: The Act of Feminist Biography*, in «Feminist Studies», vol. 11, n. 2 (1985), pp. 287-305, JSTOR, <[www.jstor.org/stable/3177924](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177924)> (28.07.2021).

MURARO 1990:

VV.AA., *Diotima. Mettere al mondo il mondo: oggetto e oggettività alla luce della differenza sessuale*, La Tartaruga, Milano, 1990.

O'CONNOR 1992:

Pat O'CONNOR, *Friendships between women: a critical review*, New York, Guilford Press, 1992.

OLIVA 2021:

Marilù OLIVA, *Biancaneve nel Novecento*, Milano, Solferino, 2021.

ROONEY 2017:

Sally ROONEY, *Conversation with Friends*, London, Faber & Faber, 2017.

SEIDEN – BART 1975:

Anne M. SEIDEN and Pauline BART, *Woman to woman: Is sisterhood powerful?*, New York, D. Van Nostrand, 1975.

SMITH 2016:

Zadie SMITH, *Swing Time*, London, Penguin Books, 2016.

VALENTINI 1996:

Daria VALENTINI, *A portrait of the woman artist: Themes and motifs in Anna Banti's fiction*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1996.