

altrelettere

Italian Girlhoods and Other Brilliant Friends

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Introduction to the Special Issue

The concept of 'girlhood' is just as problematic as the word itself. When it comes to finding a proper Italian translation, for instance, it is almost impossible to identify a term to match the English expression. Besides, the very definition of 'girlhood' appears to be subjected to many angles: biological, demographic, cultural and political. As pointed out by Mary Celeste Kearney¹ while discussing the development of girls' studies as a concrete research field, the last centuries have witnessed a marginalisation of girls with consequent difficulties of girls' culture to emerge. The topic started to gain popularity in the 1990's thanks to Angela McRobbie's work, with a specific look on girls' culture as a subculture in the international context (McROBBIE 1991; McROBBIE and GARBER 1993).²

Studies on girls' culture and girlhood's representation related to magazines and new media – such as Susan Driver's *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media* (2007) – paved the way for a more developed analysis on the relationship between female youth, queer and feminist theories.

Paola Bonifazio, Nicoletta Marini-Maio and Ellen Nerenberg published a very relevant study on the topic in the open access journal «Gender/Sexuality/Italy» in 2017,³ shedding a light for the first time on girl cultures in Italy from Early modern to late capitalism. In their analysis of girlhood the authors focus largely on the cultural context, considering girls as consumers, targets and subjects of cultural productions such as television shows and magazines.⁴ From a cultural point of view, the authors observe, girlhood is «not necessarily linked to biological age» (BONIFAZIO AND OTHERS 2017), although the concept becomes relatively more specific when referring to the female coming-of-age process. In this issue, we have agreed to use the term 'girlhood' to refer to a liminal stage in a young woman's life which leads to a final understanding of her identity as a person, although the modes through which this happens may include a wide range of options and modalities.

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While this topic has already been explored as regards Italian cinema in the works of Danielle Hipkins and other scholars,⁵ there is still space for debate in other fields of representation, as well as for reconsidering a literary genre such the female coming-of-age novel (*Bildungsroman*) which nowadays appears obsolete given the emphasis placed on motherhood and marriage as determinants of a final stage in the development of young female characters (LAZZARO-WEISS 1993).⁶

When it comes to put in relation the field of Italian studies with the topic of girlhood, the scarcity of monographs or collected volumes on the topic is evident; this lack contrasts with the attention that Italian writers and screen players have dedicated to this very topic in recent years, in part encouraged by the international success of Ferrante's tetralogy and the HBO series based on her books. The interest around the representation of Lenù and Lila's coming of age in the volumes of *My Brilliant Friend* (2011–2014) inspired us to organise a panel for the conference of the American Association for Italian Studies held in the Spring of 2021. Together with Dr Silvia Ross, we were primarily interested in investigating how the main political and social achievements obtained by women in Italy over the last fifty years have influenced the literary representation of female youth, and – specifically – the *Bildungsroman* as a literary genre. Furthermore, we could not help but notice how the element of female friendship stood out as a *fil rouge* among many coming-of-age stories in contemporary Italian literature. Reading backward through the canon, we found many examples of Italian women writers who introduced female friendship as a crucial element in the characters' coming-of-age process: voices which had been marginalised by a male-dominated canon and rediscovered today thanks to the attention raised by Ferrante on the topic of 'girlhood' and Italian women writers in general. Aiming to give more space to the discussion that took place during the 2021 AAIS Conference, we very much welcomed the invitation of Prof. Tatiana Crivelli to edit this special issue; in doing so, we opened the field of investigation also to other scholars whose expertise included the area of television studies.

This special issue opens with the essay *Dichotomous conceptualisations of female friendship in 20th and 21st century Italian literature – a comparison of Alba de Céspedes, Anna Banti, Elena Ferrante, and Donatella Di*

Pietrantonio, in which Martina Pala drafts an analysis of the female bonds in 20th and 21st century female Italian narrative, considering works by Anna Banti, Alba de Céspedes, Elena Ferrante and Donatella Di Pietrantonio. Aiming to shed light on a theme such as the conceptualization of female bonds, Pala ascertains that in female friendship the dichotomous conceptualization thrives, but it is also the element that connects the four authors.

In the second contribution, «*Non eravamo mica in un romanzo*»: *Women's Stories as Inspiration and Education*, Brigid Maher delivers a study on Bianca Pitzorno's *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* (2018), a novel that, as Maher writes, «is a homage to reading and the power of education, to female friendship, and to the value of work». By considering the figure of the *sartina* in other female writers, such as Carolina Invernizio and Charlotte Brönte, the result is an in-depth study of the condition of girls and women as workers in the early twentieth century.

Moreover, in the third essay, *Spaces of Female Friendship and Sexuality in Silvia Avallone's Acciaio and Un'amicizia*, Silvia Ross recognises the topics shared by both of Avallone's texts, as she begins by examining the areas of «adolescent coming of age, and the separation from parents as a rite of passage, the question of social class, and literary setting» and then focuses her analysis «on the girls' intimate friendship, their corporeal performances of sexuality, and their engagement with their surroundings»; in a second part, Ross argues that, as for the Ferrante's *L'amica geniale*, patriarchal society has a considerable impact on the friendship between the two female protagonists.

For the fourth contribution, *Reading Little Women after the Italian Seventies: the Influence of the Feminist Movement on Lidia Ravera's Reinterpretation of the Classic*, Olga Campofreda conducts a feminist analysis of the *Bildungsroman* in female Contemporary Italian literature through the analysis of two iconic texts: Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Lidia Ravera's rewriting of the classic. Interpreting the main changes applied by Ravera to Alcott's story, Campofreda argues that the individualistic turn of the Italian rewriting anticipates the idea of femininity introduced with postfeminist discourse.

Finally, in the last essay *Beyond bambole: Female Friendship in Italian Transnational Television*, Rebecca Bauman proposes a selection of Italian

television products, such as the adaptation of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels *L'amica geniale*, as well as Netflix's production *Baby*, and *Skam Italia*. In analysing the tv shows, Bauman traces a link between these different series which revolve around the friendship between adolescent girls, and she advises that female subjectivity might represent «a potential strategy for marketing Italian television worldwide».

While encompassing many differences and angles, all the collected articles endeavour to explore the ways in which female youth has been represented in modern and contemporary Italian cultural production before and after Ferrante's novels. The idea that female coming-of-age stories have been subjected to several stages in their representation based on the social context, is another – significant – assumption that links these contributions together. Very much aware of the mutual influence between cultural change and the history of (literary) genres, we are convinced that this issue offers new insights on the voices of girls and young women in Italian culture across the decades, shedding a light on those representations in which they are positioned as subjects of their own narratives.

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Notes

¹ Mary Celeste KEARNEY, *Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies*, in «NWSA Journal», 21 (1), 2009, pp. 1-28.

² Angela MCROBBIE, *Feminism and Youth Culture: from Jackie to Just Seventeen*, Unwin Hyman, Cambridge, MA 1991; Angela MCROBBIE and Jenny GARBET, *Girls and Subcultures*, in Hall S., Jefferson T. (eds.), *Resistance through Rituals. Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, Routledge, London e New York 1993, pp. 177-88.

³ Paola BONIFAZIO, Nicoletta MARINI-MAIO and Ellen NERENBERG, (eds.), *Girl Cultures in Italy from Early Modern to Late Capitalism*, in «Gender/Sexuality/Italy» (Special Issue), 4, 2017, <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/gendersexualityitaly-4-2017-table-of-contents/>.

⁴ For what concerns the analysis of girls' magazines in Italy, also refer to Oscar Ricci's *Ragazze moderne. I magazines femminili per adolescenti in Italia*, in «Quaderni di Sociologia», 2021, DOI:10.4000/qds.744. In this article the author considers for the first time the issue of class in the reception of girls' periodicals.

⁵ As Catherine O'Rawe has pointed out in her study on Italian cinema, Italians are obsessed with the concept of growing up («popular Italian cinema in the comic mode displays an obsession with maturation and maturity, repeatedly returning to the dreaded necessity of settling down and growing up and detaching oneself from one's male peer group», O'RAWE 2014: 18), however, it is also true that this has been investigated mainly as regards the male perspective. We therefore refer to Danielle Hipkins's contributions: *Figlie di Papà? Adolescent Girls Between the 'Incest Motif' and Female Friendship in Contemporary Italian Film Comedy*, in «The Italianist», 35. 2, pp. 248-71, June 2015; *The Showgirl Effect: Adolescent Girls and (Precarious) 'Technologies of Sexiness' in Contemporary Italian Cinema*, in Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (eds.), *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2016, pp. 21-34.

⁶ Carol LAZZARO-WEISS, *From Margins to Mainstream. Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing 1968-1990*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

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Dichotomous conceptualisations of female friendship in 20th and 21st 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 20th 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 20th 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 21st 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 20th 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's¹ 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 20th 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 annaspere 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 CÉSPÉDES 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 CÉSPÉDES 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 notedulcorated 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 diavolello 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 20th and 21st 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 21st 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

¹ 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.

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Brigid Maher

**«Non eravamo mica in un romanzo»: Women's Stories as
Inspiration and Education**

Abstract

This article looks at the role(s) of girls and women as depicted in some early twentieth-century popular texts and in one more recent text set during those years: Bianca Pitzorno's *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* (2018). Pitzorno's coming-of-age novel explores the power of education, literature and work for an orphan girl, a *sartina* whose sewing skills allow her a degree of independence, and whose determination to learn, particularly through reading and conversations with other women, allows her to protect herself in a society in which women of her class and background are highly vulnerable. The novel's engagement with turn-of-the-century popular culture both celebrates and critiques its importance in the lives of women, as the dramatic and melodramatic stories recounted in genre fiction, novels and opera offer the protagonist an escape but also an education. Through the tales – often tragic and cautionary – of *Madama Butterfly*, *Jane Eyre* and, above all, Carolina Invernizio's *Giselda (Storia di una sartina, 1892)*, Pitzorno helps a contemporary audience comprehend the strictures faced by women in earlier times, while also furnishing her young *sartina* with much greater agency than those antecedents. In reading about this girl's reading, and about the lives of her friends and employers, we gain new insights into women's work and leisure in early twentieth-century Italy, and see social expectations and class dynamics brought to life. We also encounter sobering parallels with ongoing issues in today's society.

Introduction

The focus of this article is a 2018 novel about girlhood in the early twentieth century, Bianca Pitzorno's *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* (PITZORNO 2018), and its intertexts. The novel depicts the formative girlhood years of a young seamstress, a *sartina*, who goes to the homes of wealthy and middle-class townspeople to sew and mend clothes, underwear, curtains and sheets. Orphaned at a young age, she is brought up by her grandmother, and when the grandmother dies, the *sartina* – still a child – manages to fend for herself: her trade allows her to earn a simple living, and her friendships with other women – both of her own class and of the upper classes – allow her to survive and grow through difficult times. The novel is narrated by the *sartina*, who remains unnamed.

Pitzorno is famous and beloved among Italian readers for her children's fiction, always populated by spirited girl protagonists (HABRLE 2021, 90; CASO 2014, 136). She is also an accomplished author of historical novels. She brings these two forms of writing into alignment in this story of a young seamstress whose girlhood years are shaped by her consumption of cultural products, particularly novels, as well as by her life experiences and friendships. The period setting – painstakingly depicted – belies the novel's relevance to present-day concerns regarding gender roles and male violence.

In addition to elements of historical fiction, *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* also shares features with the coming-of-age novel, or *Bildungsroman*: it depicts the protagonist's youthful naïveté and her growth into adulthood and independence. Although her existence is shaped by prevailing gender norms and class-based expectations, she finds a place in society without needing to sacrifice personal fulfilment and creativity. Her trajectory does not end in marriage and settling down in the way one might expect of the more conventional examples of this genre (LAZZARO-WEIS 1993, 94). This kind of «conventional ending», Maroula Joannou notes, is often rejected by female writers reworking the *Bildungsroman* genre (JOANNOU 2019, 200), and Pitzorno is no exception. The *sartina* does meet the love of her life, a handsome and wealthy young student, but tragedy strikes, and the protagonist is left alone to raise one adopted and one illegitimate child. Moreover, the young couple's storyline is afforded similar importance to accounts of the lives and struggles of

her working-class neighbours, some of them desperately poor, and her middle-class and wealthy employers who, despite their affluence, are often themselves victims of a misogynistic, closed-minded, provincial society.

Genre mixing is a feature of much of Pitzorno's work. According to Tanja Habrle she is a keen reader of feuilleton and eighteenth-century literature (HABRLE 2012, 90), and these feature prominently in the reading diet of her protagonist in *Il sogno della macchina da cucire*. In the novel's episodic structure – generally speaking, each chapter focuses on a different employer or friend of the narrator – and in the choice of a *sartina* as protagonist, there are overtones of the popular fiction of the turn of the twentieth century, but also a fresh voice for an empowered protagonist.

By drawing both on stories she heard as a child and on those told in popular texts of the period, «recombining, challenging, and exploiting old structures to [her] purposes» (LAZZARO-WEIS 1993, 18), Pitzorno is able to shed new light on women's work and experiences, both in the past and in the present. She is at pains to advise in a short preface that, though fictionalised («frutto di fantasia»), each of the novel's characters and events

prende lo spunto da un fatto realmente accaduto di cui sono venuta a conoscenza dai racconti di mia nonna, coetanea della protagonista, dai giornali di allora, dalle lettere e cartoline che lei aveva conservato in una valigia, dai ricordi e aneddoti del nostro «lessico familiare (7).¹

The work can thus be seen almost as a fictionalised oral history, bearing testament to a period – and a trade – that is now all but forgotten. As the author points out, once department stores began stocking cheap ready-to-wear clothes, «Il tempo delle sartine era finito». She adds, «Lo scopo di questo libro è che non venga dimenticato per sempre».²

In addition to its focus on the girlhood years, Pitzorno's writing also often displays a keen sense of injustice, especially towards the poor, as evidenced, for example, in her children's novel *Ascolta il mio cuore* (PITZORNO 1991). This text which, the author stresses, is a fictional, not a journalistic, account – «romanzo e non cronaca» (quoted in PRUNERI 2015 124) – nevertheless weaves the author's own memories into a new narrative, in much the same way as she does

with the stories of older generations of women in *Il sogno della macchina da cucire*.³

The act of reading

It has been observed that Pitzorno's protagonists are often voracious readers («forti lettrici») who talk about and are influenced by books (HARBLE 2012, 92), and that is true of her *sartina*. Her hard-won ability to read sets her apart from others of her class, and enables her to stay informed, to protect herself from predatory figures in the community, to assist less fortunate women of her own class, and to communicate at a deeper level with women of a different background. In their analysis of the important place of the cinema in the lives of a later generation of Italian girls, those of the 1950s, Treveri Gennari and her colleagues provide examples from oral history interviews of the ways in which cinema-going girls drew inspiration from young female characters in the movies. One interviewee reported «engaging with [Katharine Hepburn's] Jo [from the film adaptation of *Little Women*] as a role model for her existence as a girl»; she and other interviewees also cite the importance of books alongside cinema (TREVERI GENNARI *et al.* 2020, 121, 127). In the early twentieth-century setting of *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* the cinema has yet to arrive; instead, it is popular fiction and the opera, as well as children's and women's magazines, and popular song that shape the protagonist's worldview and «value formations» (ibid. 127) during her girlhood years.

Through her protagonist's readings, Pitzorno's novel comments on and even enters into an intertextual conversation with precursor works of fiction. *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* at once celebrates and critiques the centrality of popular culture in the lives of women at the turn of the twentieth century, as the dramatic and melodramatic stories recounted in genre fiction, romances and opera offer the protagonist an escape but also an education and a challenge. If in 1861 the magazine *Le ore casalinghe* warned that novels «insegnano a vedere e giudicare falsamente la società e la vita» (quoted in GIGLI MARCHETTI 1991, 446),⁴ for Pitzorno's *sartina* a few decades later, such texts instead provide essential life lessons to supplement the advice and exhortations of older and wiser women like her grandmother.

Popular culture was enormously important for early twentieth-century women. In a short essay on Carolina Invernizio, Matilde Serao and Liala, women who write about female characters for a female audience («scrivono su personaggi femminili e per un pubblico femminile»), Umberto Eco states that not just the *romanzo popolare*, but the modern novel more generally, is aimed at female audience and especially attentive to female characters («nasce per un pubblico femminile e si caratterizza per la sua attenzione ai personaggi femminili», ECO 1979, 5, original italics).

Pitzorno's *sartina* is a voracious consumer of genre and serial fiction, including Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842-43), novels, popular song, opera librettos (Puccini is her favourite composer), and the weekly magazine *Cordelia*.⁵ She saves up money for such treats and also borrows from the *biblioteca circolante*, though the city library is still a bridge too far for a woman of her class – she feels too intimidated to enter, struck by the abyss separating her from the fashionably elegant *signorine* she spies out the front:

Come potevo pensare di essere accettata tra di loro, io che venivo da un altro mondo, che ero nata e vivevo tra la povera gente e a essa appartenevo, che dovevo guadagnarmi da vivere giorno per giorno, che se andavo a casa loro dovevo passare dalla porta di servizio, che nei loro salotti sarei potuta entrare solo con il metro in mano o con la divisa da cameriera e il vassoio dei pasticcini? (172).⁶

At times the *sartina*'s hobby is frowned upon, however. During the police investigation into the suspicious death of one of her employers, the girl's testimony is ignored because her reputation for reading novels precedes her and she is deemed to have too active an imagination to be considered reliable: «dissero [...] che avevano preso informazioni su di me. Sapevano che leggevo romanzi. Mi consigliarono di tenere a bada l'immaginazione» (124).⁷ Attitudes such as these were common in the mid to late nineteenth century – as documented in Ada Gigli Marchetti's study of etiquette manuals and women's magazines during that period (GIGLI MARCHETTI 1991) – and would by no means have been entirely superseded in the early years of the following century, when Pitzorno's novel is set.

Books are where the *sartina* learns about love, including rudimentary techniques of seduction like colouring her lips with red geranium petal («Questo espediente lo avevo letto in un romanzo», 171),⁸ though her readings provide as many examples of betrayal as they do of true love, rendering her ever cautious. The fact that Pitzorno chose a *sartina* as her protagonist and narrator is significant. From the late nineteenth and through the twentieth century, *sartine* figure in many novels, songs and films (NO AUTHOR 2011). Our protagonist feels keenly the fate of Mimì from *La Bohème* – «che non era una sartina, ma quasi, una ricamatrice»⁹ – as well as those of Madama Butterfly («sedotta, ingannata, abbandonata, suicida»),¹⁰ Fleur-de-Marie (la Goualeuse) from *The Mysteries of Paris*, and Carolina Invernizio's Giselda from *Storia di una sartina* (1892). She also relates to and identifies with Jane Eyre.

Songs relating the downfall of humble working-class women like *sartine* were widespread and popular in the period when the novel is set. One example is a lyric sheet for a «canzone appassionata» recounting one girl's sad tale, «Triste istoria d'una sartina», distributed in Turin around 1914 (with sheet music for mandolin or for piano available separately for purchase). The song is related by a man, who is in love with a *sartina* but holds back, not wishing to «deflower» her («mi seppi frenar, non volli sciupar / Il vergine candido fiore»). She then ends up the kept woman of a «gran signor», and further down the track the singer-storyteller comes across her – now discarded, one presumes – in a brothel, «in mezzo a tante disgraziate» («among so many unfortunate women») (ARTALE c. 1914).

Salutary tales such as these are an important part of the *sartina*'s instruction in the ways of the world, particularly after the death of her grandmother (her only relative, the rest of the family having perished in a cholera epidemic). Family stories, passed on orally, are also afforded considerable importance in the narrative. One example is the story of the grandmother's cousin, Ofelia, who worked as a live-in maid. When she refused her master's sexual advances and threatened to reveal his behaviour to his wife, he accused the girl of theft and fired her. From then,

nessuna famiglia perbene aveva più voluto assumere la «ladra». L'unico lavoro che Ofelia aveva trovato era quello di sguattera in un'osteria. Ma anche là gli

avventori ubriachi [...] le facevano richieste sconvenienti [...]. Una sera venne arrestata, e fu l'inizio della fine. [...] Ofelia era stata costretta a registrarsi come prostituta e a entrare in una casa di tolleranza, dove si era ammalata, e pochi anni dopo era morta di mal francese in Ospedale.¹¹

This story is recounted to the protagonist at a young age, and she returns to it often. She is grateful to have a trade because that enables her to avoid domestic service, thus retaining a modicum of independence and avoiding this kind of predatory master.

A tragic story and its modern-day revision

One of the main intertexts for *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* is Carolina Invernizio's dark, gothic *Storia di una sartina* ([1892] 2015). It is not surprising that Pitzorno's fictional protagonist is familiar with this tragic, cautionary tale, because Invernizio was extremely prolific and over many decades her *romanzi d'appendice*, novels with «torrid and often morbid plots» (PEZZOTTI 2014, 192) had «an enormous popular following» (WOOD 1995, 20) among women of all classes. Gramsci famously described her as «l'onesta gallina della letteratura popolare»,¹² while in rather more complimentary – though only slightly less sexist – tones Luigi Mascheroni, in an article for *Il giornale*, refers to her as «sacra icona della letteratura sartinesca e portinaia»¹³ (MASCHERONI 2008). Fulvio Paloscia describes Invernizio's novels as bearing witness to the ramifications for all of Italy's social classes of the «crucial passage» from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century (PALOSCIA 2012; see also ANGELONE 2011).

According to Anna Laura Lepschy, the *romanzo d'appendice*, which often «appeared as an “appendix” or “supplement” to daily newspapers», was characterized by «suspense, frequent twists, black and white characters and social content» (LEPSCHY 2003, 321). All this is true of *Storia di una sartina*, which appeared in 1892, though a few years earlier (1889-90) Invernizio had published – in serial form – a version of much the same story (*Ij delit d'na bela fia*) in Piedmontese dialect (LEPSCHY 1984, 55-75). *Storia di una sartina*, set in Florence, has an horrific opening: Giselda, a *sartina* who lives with her blind mother and abusive, drunken father, comes home one dark night, secretly gives

birth in her bedroom, and immediately strangles her baby, before throwing the child's body in the Arno. She is found out, tried and imprisoned, but repeatedly refuses to reveal the name of the child's father, who her lawyer declares, in an impassioned but ultimately futile defence, «è il solo colpevole [...] che si nasconde nell'ombra»¹⁴ (INVERNIZIO 1892, 30). Upon her release from prison Giselda seeks out her former lover, a count, on the eve of his wedding and stabs him. She wishes to die by his side, but he begs her to leave so that his name will not be dishonoured. Accordingly, she flees the scene of the crime, and he drags himself over to his desk to write a suicide note before dying with his fiancée's name on his lips. Giselda takes her secret to the grave: once the newspapers have duly announced that the count committed suicide and that his fiancée has left for France, she drowns herself in the Arno.

There are a number of apparent parallels between Giselda's ghastly story and that of Pitzorno's *sartina*, but the latter's is ultimately uplifting, and she lives a long and fulfilled life. The stock character types and situations of genre fiction like Invernizio's (see FEDERZONI 1979) do not provide much scope for empowerment or self-determination. Her Giselda is doomed from the start and serves to reinforce the message of *romanzi d'appendice*, in which «[s]ome social conventions are [...] inescapable, such as the one which enforces the power of the upper-class male over the working-class girl: victims of seduction and betrayal are generally the poor» (LEPSCHY 2003, 323). Eco observes that the women in Invernizio's work are not necessarily unhappy or submissive, «ma donne che accettano le regole del gioco».¹⁵ For Eco, proof of this lies in the fact that «uno degli strumenti di vittoria [...] è il segreto, la reticenza»:¹⁶ her protagonists lie or remain silent in interest of preserving decorum (ECO 1979, 26-27, original emphasis). One blogger, Rossella Kohler, neatly encapsulates the experience of a twenty-first-century woman reading Invernizio: «stavo leggendo di un mondo senza scampo, profondamente ingiusto, ma privo di rabbia (quella veniva a me) e di volontà di reazione. Un mondo dato per scontato, così era e così sempre sarebbe stato. Che fastidio» (KOHLER 2018).¹⁷

By contrast, Pitzorno's *sartina*, despite her tender age and vulnerable situation, makes careful, considered decisions and is empowered by her own determination and knowledge. When she is courted by the grandson of one wealthy employer, she is on her guard from the beginning, having read many

novels – and here she specifically cites *Storia di una sartina* (PITZORNO 2018, 102) – and been told stories by female friends and older women about well-to-do young men seducing poor, humble, working-class women. Her suitor is one Guido Suriani, but their love story is not an admonitory tale. Guido Suriani is a clear antithesis to Invernizio's cruel and irresponsible «Don Giovanni», Gerardo Soriani (note the similarity in their names). Guido gives up family and inheritance for love and allows the *sartina* her identity – her work, her personal interests – respecting her as an independent woman with ambitions and desires. Although their relationship ends tragically – which then serves to demonstrate women's legal vulnerability during that historical period – both she and her child (because she, too, has a child out of wedlock) have a happy and fulfilling future ahead of them.

Il sogno della macchina da cucire is no *romanzo rosa*, however. Its «happily ever after» is one of gentle contentment, rather than the fairytale variety, and Pitzorno does not shy away from relating stories of exploitation, violence and disenfranchisement. For example, the *sartina* must fend off violent advances by a wealthy baron and, later on, experiences first-hand women's lack of legal rights. And then there are the stories of women and girls she works for or with: a young servant girl kept as a lover by her master; instances of attempted rape by employers and other powerful men; women forced into prostitution after being fired on spurious grounds, as in the case of Ofelia discussed above; others who suffer financial abuse by male family members; an independently wealthy and apparently liberated woman murdered by her lover when she dares to try to leave him. Through her frequent elucidations of class restrictions, social expectations and gender roles, the novel's narrator aids the twenty-first-century reader in comprehending the strictures faced by women in earlier times, while also embodying an approach to life that allows her a degree of freedom and independence. As I explore towards the end of this article, we can also find parallels to these stories in present-day social problems.

The reader as rewriter

In *Il sogno della macchina da cucire*, most of the *sartina*'s protectors are women wealthier or more fortunate than her. One of her dearest and most loyal friends is Ester, a brilliant, independent and loyal young woman with a wealthy and enlightened father. The two women often bond over their reading. As well as passing on novels and recommendations, Ester fosters in the *sartina* an active, critical way of reading. When the *sartina* is moved by the sad fate of the prostitute Fleur-de-Marie in *Mysteries of Paris* – she gives up love to die alone in a convent – Ester exhorts her, «Non devi piangere, devi arrabbiarti. Non l'aveva mica scelto lei di fare quel mestiere. Perché non poteva sposarsi e vivere una vita normale?» (82-3).¹⁸ Under Ester's influence, the young *sartina* begins to question accepted class and gender roles and to reject some of the common conventions in the novels she so loves.

Another of the families the *sartina* works for are the Proveras. Avvocato Provera is almost pathologically avaricious, subjecting his wife and their two daughters to a kind of extreme financial abuse. These skilled and resourceful women are publicly shamed within their upper-class community, and beyond, by a ruinous fashion debacle; after death of the man of the house their total lack of experience in money matters means they end up squandering the fortune they have inherited. Together, Ester and the *sartina* get some consolation from inventing, just for their own satisfaction, a story about what became of the Provera women, thus «rewriting» the story of their fellow townspeople. Ester initiates this:

“Sai adesso cosa dovrebbe succedere se il mondo andasse per il verso giusto?”
E si era messa a inventare come se stesse scrivendolo lei un romanzo, ma secondo i suoi principi (83).¹⁹

But of course, the ways of the world are not those of the enlightened Ester and in the «real world» (of the novel), the women they are discussing meet a much sorrier end. This is a further reminder of the vast gap between many gifted women's potential and what their condition actually allows them to achieve.

Later, during a short undeserved stay in a lock-up, the *sartina* is given an English novel by one of her cellmates, a former schoolteacher who, having been

seduced and abandoned, now works in a brothel to support her young child. The *sartina* goes through many emotional highs and lows as she follows the vicissitudes related in the novel which, though never named, is clearly *Jane Eyre*. She identifies with the protagonist, but when things take a turn for the worse in Jane's love life, she wonders if it's a sign, a warning to be on her guard: «Che fosse un avviso per me? Per mettermi in guardia?» (PITZORNO 2018, 216). When her impoverished neighbour Zita falls ill, the *sartina* takes in the woman's daughter, Assuntina. She briefly sends the girl to an orphanage after Zita dies of consumption but, guilt-stricken, she soon relents and takes the child back. This is not an easy decision, but in giving Assuntina a home, teaching her the value of independence and work, and passing on her trade, she furnishes her with the chance of a secure future. So she is appalled («rimasi malissimo») when in the «English novel» Jane packs the orphan Adèle (possibly Rochester's illegitimate daughter) off to boarding school. Jane explains, «I meant to become her governess once more, but I soon found this impracticable; my time and cares were now required by another – my husband needed them all» (BRONTË [1847] 2001, 640).

One detects a tongue-in-cheek overtone from Pitzorno herself when she has her own narrator wonder, «Non so perché, mi arrabbiai. In fondo era solo un romanzo, una storia inventata» (217).²⁰ This apparent dismissal – «just a novel» – belies literature's potential to depict alternative, more positive outcomes for disenfranchised groups, and also the emotional investment readers can put into the characters they encounter in their reading. *Jane Eyre* is, of course, a ground-breaking female Bildungsroman. Joannou observes that it «[sets] a precedent of assertive female development in Bildungsromane that many later women writers were to follow» (JOANNOU 2019, 205). Pitzorno's protagonist finds much to admire in Brontë's novel, but also draws our attention to the fate of a minor figure who is far more disenfranchised than the eponymous narrator and is denied such a happy ending. The *sartina*'s strong sense of justice and solidarity with Assuntina obliges her to find a way to share around her «time and cares». By this point she has matured enough to «rewrite» by example: seeing parallels between her reading and her life, she makes different – and perhaps braver – choices than the literary characters who people her few hours of leisure time.

Twenty-first-century resonances

Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaption of Louisa May Alcott's collective Bildungsroman *Little Women* (1868-69) enacts an analogous rewriting, not just of its source text but of literary convention, through an apparently small, yet significant change to the ending. In a review of the film, Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett observes that by having the character Jo succeed in publishing her book «Gerwig blended [Alcott's and Jo's] narratives to create a sort of metafiction, gifting Alcott's heroine the ending that she – and perhaps Alcott – were both prevented from writing». While Jo (inexplicably for some readers) ends up by marrying Professor Bhaer, Alcott herself never married, and only married off her most spirited and independent-minded protagonist under pressure from her publisher (GRADY 2019). Cosslett notes that in Gerwig's film version «Jo is told by her publisher, in a guise that could equally be that of a Hollywood mogul, that “if the main character's a girl make sure she is married by the end”» (COSSLETT 2019). This parallel between Hollywood producers and nineteenth-century publishers is a salutary reminder that even today, when women have so many more opportunities, storytelling conventions can be quite limiting.

In subtle ways Pitzorno, too, reminds her readers that historical limitations on women have not all been superseded in the present day. Perhaps one of the key messages of *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* is that we can learn from the past, and from the voices and stories of earlier generations of women. Danielle Hipkins has noted that «Oral history offers just one particular route into understanding that intergenerational connection, and it is one in which the processes of memory provide the key to unlocking that enigmatic relationship between past and present experiences of girlhood» (HIPKINS 2017, 101). Though this novel is certainly not an oral history in the sociological sense of the term, its choral nature, interweaving so many stories from the author's own «family vocabulary», means that it provides valuable insights into how lower working-class girls grew into womanhood at the turn of the twentieth century. The «intergenerational connection» to our present times might in some ways help us to appreciate how lucky we are – with easy access to electricity, running water and an education – but it should also remind us not to be too smug about how far we have come.

One important element in the *sartina's Bildung* is the mentoring she receives from certain older and/or freer women in her acquaintance. One key figure is the American painter and art critic Miss Lily Rose Briscoe (whose name must surely be a tribute to Virginia Woolf's Lily Briscoe; WOOLF [1927] 2000). «La Miss» collects and writes about the region's ecclesiastical art, sending her articles off for publication in a Philadelphia newspaper. Unconventional and open-minded, she has a very different set of values from the locals, and gives the *sartina* some valuable advice:

«Ascoltami,» disse la Miss gravemente. «Sei giovane, e ti può capitare di innamorarti. Ma non permettere mai che un uomo ti manchi di rispetto, che ti impedisca di fare quello che ti sembra giusto e necessario, quello che ti piace. La vita è tua, tua, ricordalo. Non hai alcun dovere se non verso te stessa.»
Parole difficili, parole da americana (113).²¹

While it is true that Miss Briscoe's words betray a cultural background and worldview far removed from the provincial Italian setting, the *sartina* succeeds in living by this exhortation. Her recollection of these wise words is all the more poignant, though, when we learn the fate of la Miss: despite her modern outlook and her resolve in attempting to escape an abusive relationship, she ends up a victim of male violence, while the nobleman who perpetrated the crime goes free.

The tragic story of la Miss should also remind present-day readers that gender- and class-based inequalities are by no means a thing of the past. Though the very strict class divisions depicted in the novel – dictating who may wear a hat or stroll down the city's most elegant avenues – are certainly a thing of the past, the rich, famous and powerful still enjoy an alarming degree of impunity, and domestic violence and femicide are huge problems the world over. At the time of writing, newspapers are peppered with stories echoing those of Pitzorno's women, whether it is female pop stars struggling to regain control over their own wealth, the years of public shaming and mockery endured by Monica Lewinsky, Hollywood producers committing acts of sexual predation, or ordinary women subjected to violence at the hands of their partners.

One member of the service class in the *sartina's* acquaintance is Quirica, a devoted maid for more than half a century for a wealthy nobleman and his

mother. Only after his death does it dawn on the young girl that Quirica had been brought in decades earlier to «service» this man's sexual desires and keep him home and unmarried:

Ne avevo sentite di storie come quella. Di servette giovani assunte dalla padrona di casa perché servissero da sfogo ai signorini. Ragazze di campagna scelte con cura tra le più ingenuie e inesperte. Vergini, per essere sicuri che non avessero quel tipo di malattie. [...] Povera Quirica! Non doveva avere più di quindici anni quando se l'erano andata a prendere in campagna. E lei si era innamorata del padroncino. Come piangeva ancora per lui, mezzo secolo dopo! Cinquant'anni da schiava, [...] sopportando il disprezzo e le prepotenze della padrona.²²

In much more recent times, in Italy and beyond, there have been high-profile allegations of vulnerable, often under-age, girls being brought in to «service» the «needs» of older and very powerful men – billionaires, politicians, royalty. All these parallels suggest Pitzorno's novel has as much to say about the present day as it does about the time of its historical setting. It also has the potential to find an «afterlife» in translation, since its small-town setting and characters have both appeal and relevance. The huge success, particularly in Anglophone countries, of Elena Ferrante's tetralogy of *Neapolitan Novels* (2011-2014) has already shown that very local stories of girlhood can speak to readers across generations, cultures and languages.

Conclusion

At one point in *Il sogno della macchina da cucire*, in response to the rather bizarre behaviour of the apparently eccentric Proveras, the protagonist thinks to herself, «Non eravamo mica in un romanzo» (49), «this was not a novel, after all», but of course her life is – for us – a novel. And a very deliberately crafted one at that. The popular fiction Pitzorno interweaves with her own serves to remind us of the values most frequently inculcated in women during the early twentieth century, while also subtly reminding us of the fact that our Pitzorno-penned protagonist might be considered something of an outlier whose gifts and opportunities are probably «too good to be typical».

The clear parallel between the stories of Invernizio's and Pitzorno's *sartine* neatly encapsulates the revisionism this twenty-first-century novel undertakes, as do the differing attitudes of Jane Eyre and the young seamstress reading her tale. While Invernizio's protagonist is in every way a victim, both suffering and behaving unspeakably, but never openly rebelling or articulating much outrage, Pitzorno's novel does something very different, more suited to our present day. It realistically depicts an earlier time, even as the parallels with our own time remind us that many battles are yet to be won, whether in our own backyard or in the developing world, where today's *sartine* work on a production line. The ongoing, global struggle for women's rights is not lost on Pitzorno, whose novel is dedicated to the memory of (among others)

tutte le sartine odierne del Terzo Mondo che cuciono per noi gli stracci alla moda che paghiamo pochi euro nei grandi magazzini di abbigliamento a basso costo – ciascuna lo stesso pezzo tagliato da altri, come alla catena di montaggio –, per quattordici ore, con i pannoloni per non perdere tempo ad andare in bagno, e che dopo aver ricevuto una paga da fame muoiono bruciate nelle loro enormi fabbriche-carcere (6).²³

This acknowledgement of the intersectional – and international – nature of gender- and class-based marginalisation lends a real urgency to the novel, so that it becomes much more than a charming escapist story of days gone by.

Il sogno della macchina da cucire is a homage to reading and the power of education, to female friendship, and to the value of work. What saves the *sartina* is her trade, along with her determination, and the solidarity and generosity of several other women. The intertexts mentioned in the novel serve to fill out a realistic background of the protagonist and her interests, while also resonating with her story. At the turn of the twentieth century, fictional tales such as the tragic story of Invernizio's Giselda were as much a warning as a source of vicarious thrills and drama, horror and tragedy. Such stories provided an insight into the dangers a man's world held for vulnerable, uneducated, unprotected women. Near the start of Pitzorno's novel, whenever the grandmother sees the young *sartina*, already a voracious reader, sighing over a novel, she warns her, «Non va bene montarsi troppo la testa e desiderare cose che non potrai mai avere» (22-23).²⁴ But actually, it is these very novels,

alongside warnings from trusted family and friends, that teach the soon-to-be-orphaned protagonist how to protect herself from the «advances» – which could all too quickly turn into rape – of her wealthy employers and other hangers-on. It is perhaps a sign of how far we *haven't* come as a society that still today we hear, from Hollywood to the Australian Parliament (CRABB 2021), of women warning each other of known predators and being forced to choose between personal safety and professional advancement. In other words, while Invernizio's melodramatic *romanzo d'appendice* has certainly dated, present-day analogues of the stories of domestic violence, femicide, and abuse of power that appear in Pitzorno's novel can unfortunately still be found.

Notes

¹ «has its origin in a real-life event that I learnt about from stories told by my grandmother, who was of the same generation as the protagonist, from letters and postcards she kept in a suitcase, from newspapers of the time, and from the recollections and anecdotes that make up our family vocabulary». Page numbers for quotes from the novel appear in parentheses in the text. All translations from Italian are my own, including from my forthcoming translation of *Il sogno della macchina da cucire* (PITZORNO 2022).

² «The era of the sartina was over. The aim of this book is to ensure they are not forgotten».

³ Restrictions of space do not permit me to explore this here, but the interplay between the work of sewing and that of writing probably warrants further investigation. In her preface to *Ascolta il mio cuore*, another novel that is the fruit of «realtà e fantasia» («reality and imagination»), Pitzorno likens the work of piecing together a narrative based on history and memories to the act of sewing: she observes that all the events related in the novel are true but might have occurred in a different order or in different years, and she was the one to «sew the pieces together» («tutte le cose che vi sono state raccontate sono avvenute per davvero [...] sono stata io a ricucirle insieme») (PITZORNO 1991, my emphasis).

⁴ «teach [women] to see and judge society and life falsely».

⁵ The *sartina*'s reading diet is also influenced by her wealthy friend and occasional employer Ester Artonesi, whose active, *critical* reading practice is discussed in a subsequent section of this article.

⁶ «How could I expect to be accepted by them, when I came from another world – I was born and lived among poor people, and that's where I belonged. I needed to earn a living day by day, and if I visited their homes I would need to come through the service entrance, and I would only ever be welcome in their salons with a tape measure in hand or wearing a maid's uniform and carrying a tray of pastries».

⁷ «They told me [...] that they had received information about me: they knew I read novels. They advised me to keep my imagination in check».

⁸ «I had read about this trick in a novel».

⁹ «not quite a seamstress but almost, an embroider».

¹⁰ «Seduced, betrayed, abandoned, she took her own life».

¹¹ «After that no respectable family wanted to employ the “thief”. The only job Ofelia was able to find was as a scullery maid in a tavern. But there too the drunk patrons made unseemly demands [...]. One evening she was arrested, and that was the beginning of the end. [...] Ofelia was forced to register as a prostitute and go to work in a bordello. There she fell ill and a few years later she died in hospital of the French disease».

¹² «the honest hen of popular literature».

¹³ «a sacred icon of the literature of seamstresses and *portinaie* [female doorkeepers / caretakers, often associated with gossip and meddling]».

¹⁴ «is the sole guilty party [...] hiding in the shadows».

¹⁵ «but women who accept the rules of the game».

¹⁶ «one of the tools of victory [...] is secrecy, reticence».

¹⁷ «I was reading about a world with no escape, profoundly unjust, yet lacking in rage (I was the one getting angry) or any desire to react. A world where everything was just taken for granted – that was how things were and had always been. What a drag».

¹⁸ «Don't cry for her: get angry. She didn't choose that trade for herself. Why couldn't she get married and lead a normal life?».

¹⁹ «“You know what would happen now, if the world worked the way it ought to?” And with that, she began to make up an ending to the women's story, as though she were writing a novel, but one that followed her own principles».

²⁰ «I don't know why this made me so angry. In the end it was just a novel, a made-up story».

²¹ «“Listen to me,” La Miss said in a serious tone. “You're young, and you might happen to fall in love. But don't ever let any man be disrespectful to you, or stop you doing what you think is right and necessary, or what you like doing. It's your life, yours: remember that. Your only duty is to yourself”.

«Strong words, the words of *un'americana*...».

²² «I'd heard stories like this. Stories of young servant girls employed by the family matriarch to provide an outlet for the urges of the young signorini of the house. Country girls chosen carefully from among the most naïve and inexpert. Virgins, to be sure they did not have any of

those sorts of diseases. [...] Poor Quirica! She couldn't have been more than fifteen when they went to the country to collect her. And then she'd fallen in love with her little lord. She was still crying over him half a century later! She had spent fifty years as a slave, [...] enduring contempt and arrogance from her mistress.

²³ «all the modern-day seamstresses of the Third World, who sew for us the fashionable rags we buy for a few euros in cheap department stores – each working over and over on the same piece cut by somebody else, in an assembly line, for fourteen hours straight, wearing nappies so as not to waste time going to the bathroom, and who, after receiving a pittance in wages, are burnt to death in giant prison-factories».

²⁴ «It's no good getting grand ideas and wanting things you can never have».

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Silvia Ross

**Spaces of Female Friendship and Sexuality
in Silvia Avallone's *Acciaio* and *Un'amicizia***

Abstract

This article examines the representation of friendship between adolescent girls in two novels by Silvia Avallone: *Acciaio*, published in 2010, and *Un'amicizia* of 2020. After identifying thematic points of contact between the two texts, which include adolescent coming of age, and the separation from parents as a rite of passage, the question of social class, and literary setting, the article focuses on the girls' intimate friendship, their corporeal performances of sexuality, and their engagement with their surroundings. The adolescent girls adopt spaces of seclusion, or closet spaces (BROWN 2000), as a means of playing out the domestic sphere, exploring their sexuality and, ultimately, solidifying their friendship. I contend that in both of Avallone's novels, the centrality of the adolescent girls' friendship forms an original and highly engaging narrative strategy, as seen in the writer's exploration of the intensity of the bond between two best friends, including an acknowledgement of same-sex desire. I posit that the writer's depiction of female friendship is in part influenced by patriarchal norms, not only in her adoption of the male gaze, but also in that the relationship between the two girls is marked by rivalry, jealousy and conflict, thus undermining what might otherwise be deemed a feminist strategy and the potential for female solidarity (RAYMOND 1986).

A year before Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale* appeared on the scene, Silvia Avallone debuted with *Acciaio*, a novel which revolves around the intense and labile friendship between two adolescent girls. Published in 2010, when the author was only twenty-six years old, translated into over twenty languages, and winner of various awards, *Acciaio* centres on the characters Anna Sorrentino and Francesca Morganti, and their lives in the arc of a year from age thirteen to fourteen.¹ Three novels and ten years later, Avallone is clearly still preoccupied with female friendship, as indicated by the title and content of her most recent work, *Un'amicizia*, also published by Rizzoli, which features the bond between two adolescent girls Elisa Cerruti and Beatrice Rossetti, while revisiting the relationship when they have become adults in their early thirties. The two novels have many points of contact, to such an extent that *Un'amicizia* can be considered a re-elaboration of a number of *Acciaio*'s core elements and themes, while bringing them somewhat more up to date, in its tackling the issue of stardom in the age of social media.

There is no doubt that Avallone is invested in the foregrounding of gender, corporeality and sexuality in her fiction, as well as in her public life, a commitment illustrated by her speech for the Italian President at the *Quirinale* on the occasion of International Woman's Day on 8 March 2021, in which—in a personalized discourse—she denounces patriarchal society's suppression of female freedom and its foregrounding of women's bodies rather than their personhood (REDAZIONE BOOKTOBOOK). It is clear, too, that she, as a (young) woman writer, notwithstanding her considerable success, has been subjected to discrimination by a male-dominated press and literary system.² This discrimination may be in part attributable to the centrality of adolescent girls in the texts in question, a subjectivity which is often trivialized by a male-dominated canon and literary criticism in the Italian tradition, as well as in others. It is only in recent years, thanks to the work of committed scholars, that girlhood and adolescence have begun to receive the attention they rightly deserve in Italian Studies.³

Avallone has recognised the complexities involved in the developmental period of adolescence, as seen in an interview provided at the time of publication of *Acciaio*. When asked about the redemptive potential of two young women protagonists, the writer replies:

Sono adolescenti, vivono il momento delle infinite possibilità. Non sono ancora segnate, disilluse, sfiancate dalla vita. Ma la loro è un'età anche molto complicata, lontana anni luce dalla visione edulcorata. Sono inquiete ed impaurite. L'adolescenza è spesso un periodo terribile anche se molto intenso (Varì 2010).

Avallone's literary production in its foregrounding of adolescent girls' lives, with all their intricacies, illustrates the writer's preoccupation with female autonomy, the Body and sexuality, aspects which play a major part in both *Acciaio* and *Un'amicizia*, with coming of age associated with sexual experience and a breaking away from dysfunctional parents.⁴ In my analysis, after tracing thematic points of contact between the two texts and touching briefly on such notions as daughter-centric versus mother-centric narratives, the question of social class, and the separation from parents as a rite of passage, I will focus on the girls' intimate friendship, their corporeal performances of sexuality, and their engagement with their surroundings, namely, their adoption of spaces of seclusion as a means of playing out the domestic sphere, exploring their sexuality and, ultimately, solidifying their friendship. I contend that in both of Avallone's texts, the centrality of the adolescent girls' friendship forms an original and highly engaging narrative strategy, as seen in the writer's exploration of the intensity of the bond between two best friends, including an acknowledgement of same-sex desire. And yet, Avallone's portrayal of female friendship as invariably tumultuous and characterized by unmitigated rivalry would also indicate the undermining of what might otherwise be deemed a feminist strategy. This erosion of a potentially feminist message can be discerned, furthermore, in the author's insistence on the girls' sexualized bodies, viewed frequently via a male gaze.

Avallone's first novel *Acciaio* is a vibrant narrative about two thirteen-year-old girls living in the steel town of Piombino on the Tuscan coast in the year 2001-2002. This privileging of the two girls as central characters, the novel's less common setting, and its engagement with questions of class, environmental degradation and familial conflict, render *Acciaio* a refreshing and powerful text. Anna and Francesca live in a working-class neighbourhood,

in proximity to the sea. Francesca's father, Enrico, works at the local steel plant, the Lucchini, and physically abuses both his wife and daughter. Anna's family, while not plagued by the same kind of gender-based violence, lacks a reliable paternal figure, as her father has abandoned the home and is engaged in black-market activities. Instead, it is her mother, Sandra, and her brother, Alessio (who also works in the Lucchini), who provide stability. The earlier sections of *Acciaio* are dedicated to outlining Anna and Francesca's intense friendship and tracing how the girls engage with their surroundings as an embodied experience. Their bond, however, unravels, when Anna starts a relationship with Mattia, her brother's friend, leading to Francesca's sense of betrayal. The girls take different paths in terms of their education and livelihoods: Anna, who is more academically inclined, goes to a *liceo classico*, while Francesca starts playing truant and begins working at a strip club. It is only at the end of the novel, when Alessio is killed in an industrial accident in the Lucchini plant, that the two girls overcome their earlier falling-out, and rekindle their friendship.

Avallone's *Un'amicizia*, published in 2020, also highlights a female teenage dyad: the friendship between the protagonist Elisa Cerruti, originally from Biella but who moves to an unspecified seaside town on the Tuscan coast and remains there with her father—a Computer Science professor at a local (unnamed) university—at the age of thirteen, and Beatrice Rossetti, her classmate and a local beauty. Both girls, for different reasons, consider themselves outcasts from their *liceo classico*, and bond through these feelings of marginalization, their dedication to their studies, and the somewhat daring escapade of stealing a pair of designer jeans worth 400,000 Lire from an upscale boutique. Elisa finds adjusting to her new surroundings a difficult task and pines for her mother, Annabella, who has moved back to Biella with Elisa's brother. She meets a schoolmate, Lorenzo, also enamoured of literature, and after a tortuous courtship they eventually become a couple. Beatrice loses her mother to cancer when she is 17 and lives with Elisa and her father for a period of several months. Already in love with the working-class adult Gabriele, Beatrice eventually moves in with him when she turns 18. Unlike *Acciaio*, *Un'amicizia* delineates the girls' friendship beyond the age of thirteen and into young adulthood, up to the first year of university in Bologna, when an irreparable split takes place when Beatrice and Lorenzo—Elisa's boyfriend—

kiss and are witnessed by Elisa. In a complicated structure of flashbacks and reminiscences, the narrator-protagonist, now a thirty-three-year-old mother and *ricercatrice* at the University of Bologna, revisits their friendship, while reflecting on her friend's meteoric rise to stardom on social media.⁵ Elisa's re-examination of the friendship as an adult forms the self-reflexive expedient for the therapeutic writing of the novel, which centres on the absent Beatrice, who at long last manifests herself in the novel's concluding sequences when the two friends meet up after their rift of thirteen years.

Shared Themes across a Decade

Many similar themes can be identified across the two narratives and in their treatment of female adolescent friendship, family, the female body, sexuality and storyworld. A prominent shared aspect is both texts' emphasis on the bond between two adolescent girls and the ensuing rupture of their friendship due to jealousy over a boyfriend. Both books' friendships concern, at least initially, exactly the same period, namely, the turn of the Millennium, during the Berlusconi era and the rise of the *velina* figure. The two novels also comprise an analogous geographical location. Clearly Avallone's depiction in *Acciaio* of the industrial town of Piombino as a deprived and polluted urban zone made an impact, so much so that the author bore much criticism by *piombinesi* who were dissatisfied with her portrayal of the townspeople as predominantly downtrodden and the Lucchini steelworks as dangerous. In *Un'amicizia*, while the town of T is not actually named, it is clearly located on the Tuscan coast, too, with Elba visible on the horizon. Even though T is sanitized to be more of a *destinazione balneare* than Piombino, it nevertheless bears common geographical aspects with the setting of *Acciaio*, including unfrequented beaches. Both novels, furthermore, incorporate clear autobiographical elements, in that they feature a period and setting which Avallone herself experienced first-hand during her adolescence spent in Piombino with her father (AVALLONE 2017). *Un'amicizia*, however, contains even more elements which match with Avallone's biography. Elisa, the first-person narrator-protagonist is from Biella (like the author herself) and moves to live with her father on the Tuscan coast in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Elisa's dedication to

literature and writing—the self-reflexive *Un'amicizia* constituting her attempt as an aspiring author—is distinctly reminiscent of Avallone's own background in that the writer, like the fictional character, studied at the University of Bologna.

Both pairs of friends are depicted as excluded and exclusive, marginalized from their peers. In *Acciaio*, the girls are deemed different because of their good looks and perceived attitude of superiority; in *Un'amicizia*, Elisa considers herself an alternative misfit, and Beatrice is portrayed as a haughty glamour girl, with neither belonging to a wider group of friends. The question of class consciousness comes to the fore in *Acciaio*, where the girls' struggle to improve their circumstances emerges from a context of economic and social disadvantage. In *Un'amicizia*, on the other hand, the girls' provenance is from a more bourgeois context. In Elisa's case, while her working-class single mother Annabella is considered vulgar and has raised her children on a low income, Elisa's feelings of marginalization due to class are less convincing, given her father's position as an academic. That said, all families, whether bourgeois or impoverished, can be labelled dysfunctional in both novels, with at least one missing or abusive parent per family in *Acciaio*, and a largely absent or deceased mother in Elisa and Beatrice's cases in *Un'amicizia*.

The vilification of parents in both novels indicates a kind of distancing from the family unit, a breaking away which is traditionally considered a rite of passage for adolescent coming of age in the patriarchal narrative tradition, not least of all for young girls. North American feminists such as Debold, Wilson, and Malavé, as well as O'Reilly, among others, have problematised this accepted patriarchal narrative, one which relies on what they call the «lies of separation» (DEBOLD *et al.* 1993, 20). Such feminist scholars propose instead a model of mother-daughter connectedness that can help young women transition into adulthood without the conventionally mandated mother-blame and rupture from the maternal figure. Interestingly, an evolution along these lines can be traced from *Acciaio* to *Un'amicizia*, as the latter novel signals a move from a «daughter-centric» text which focuses primarily (but not solely) on the relationship between the two young girls, to a more intergenerational outlook, whereby the protagonist, Elisa, in becoming a mother herself, reflects on her own mother's role and her frustrated ambitions. Late in the novel it

emerges that Annabella's brief career as a bassist in an all-female rock band in her early twenties was cut short, something she has never mentioned to her children. Annabella's humanization helps to explain her deficiencies as a mother, something Elisa grows to understand by the later stage of the work, thus transcending, at least somewhat, her earlier, often matrophobic perception of her mother (RICH 1976, 235-36).⁶ In this later work of Avallone's, therefore, maturity is reached, eventually, through the recognition of the mother's own humanity and individual identity.

The Body and Sexuality

Over and above the thematic similarities just outlined, a core point of contact between Avallone's first and fourth novels is an insistence on the girls' physical appearance, especially the beauty of both Anna and Francesca in *Acciaio*, and of the unreachable Beatrice in *Un'amicizia*. When asked in an interview what she thinks of women's role in contemporary society and what beauty can give or take away from women, Avallone responds as follows:

Per troppi decenni abbiamo visto come modello proposto e pubblicizzato un esempio di bellezza femminile muta, che spesso non si accompagnava ad altre doti, ad altri meriti, ad altre competenze. E questa mercificazione della bellezza è l'ennesima implicazione di una cultura profondamente maschilista, vecchia, violenta. La bellezza non deve per forza essere connessa con la futilità, né svenduta, né svilita. D'altra parte, occorre dare finalmente il giusto risalto ai meriti e alle competenze delle donne, a quello che ogni giorno costruiscono con il loro lavoro, le loro voci, e le loro ricerche. Accendere i riflettori su esempi duraturi e forti, su tutte quelle donne che hanno molto da dire e da insegnare e che troppo spesso vengono marginalizzate. Saremo un paese veramente civile quando queste domande non avranno più ragione di essere poste (D'ONOFRIO 2014).

While Avallone publicly advocates for the valorisation of women's accomplishments rather than their appearance, her novels nevertheless display an insistence on female attractiveness. This conforming to what has been argued by scholars such as Stephen Gundle as a particularly Italian cultural obsession with women's beauty, results in excessive textual attention being dedicated to the girls' physique.⁷ The opening page of *Acciaio* illustrates this

obsessive quality, as Francesca's father watches her via the lenses of his binoculars while she is at the beach with her friends:

Nel cerchio sfocato della lente la figura si muoveva appena, senza testa. Uno spicchio di pelle zoomata in controluce. Quel corpo da un anno all'altro era cambiato, piano, sotto i vestiti. E adesso nel binocolo, nell'estate, esplodeva. L'occhio da lontano bruciava i particolari: il laccio del costume, del pezzo di sotto, un filamento di alghe sul fianco. I muscoli tesi sopra il ginocchio, la curva del polpaccio, la caviglia sporca di sabbia. L'occhio ingrandiva e arrossiva a forza di scavare nella lente. Il corpo adolescente balzò fuori dal campo e si gettò in acqua (AVALLONE 2010, 9).

While undoubtedly Avallone is critiquing Enrico's attempts to control his daughter's behaviour and sexuality, in *Acciaio* there is nevertheless a problematic tendency to align the gaze with that of the scopophilic male, reducing the girls' corporeality to object status.

Furthermore, Avallone stresses the girls' performances of sexuality, as seen in the episode where Francesca and Anna dance in front of a window, aware that their gyrations are titillating the men who watch from their apartments.

Restano seminude al centro della stanza. [...] Si sono truccate il viso, esagerando. Il rossetto sbava fuori dai contorni, il rimmel cola per il caldo e impiastra le ciglia, ma a loro non importa. Questo è il loro piccolo carnevale privato, la provocazione da lanciare fuori dalla finestra. In fondo sanno che qualcuno potrebbe anche spiarle e sbottonarsi i pantaloni (AVALLONE 2010, 27).

These and other scenes underscore the girls' nascent awareness of their bodies' changes and their potential for exerting sexual power over the male subject, essentially a kind of experimentation with corporeal agency. And yet, such instances of confluence with the patriarchal objectification of the girls' sensuality, I argue, undermine what might be deemed an aspirational feminist project in *Acciaio*.

Moreover, for many of Avallone's female characters, coming of age is equated with the penetrative sexual act with a man as a rite-of-passage: Anna, for example, loses her virginity on her fourteenth birthday with the adult Mattia, ten years her senior, in a scene that remains problematic in terms of his appropriation of her body.⁸ In *Un'amicizia*, too, coming of age is seen as directly

related to sexual intercourse, with both girls deciding to lose their virginity at fourteen. In this case, however, the girls are depicted as deliberately seeking out this sexual experience more or less at the same time, which can be read, perhaps, as their exerting a kind of sexual agency, in spite of their young age, in itself an (arguably) problematic interpretation given their status as minors. Elisa and Beatrice's sexual symbiosis being construed as a seal on their friendship recurs in another instance some three years later, when they are at Gabriele's apartment one evening:

A metà cena lei [Beatrice] e Gabriele si alzarono. Senza cercare scuse, si chiusero in camera. Io guardai Lorenzo alzandomi a mia volta e lui mi seguì in bagno. Perché un'amicizia assoluta pretende anche questo: che si faccia l'amore nello stesso istante con una parete di mezzo (AVALLONE 2020, 227).

The disproportionate objectifying attention paid to the female body which characterizes *Acciaio* reaches its apex in the figure of Beatrice in *Un'amicizia*, who in various instances incarnates the role of a mannequin. Beatrice's body is deployed as something to be clothed, moulded, and marketed. Elisa is distinguished instead as resistant to make-up and fashionable clothes, more at ease in the role of the alternative intellectual or proverbial *secchiona*. While on the one hand the author seems to critique—via Elisa's rejection of fashion—a superficial attention to clothes, much of the text is taken up with the details of couture and Beatrice's efforts to perfect and display her body. Beatrice's astute self-fashioning and her mastery of the digital tools at her disposal result, years later, in a vacuous, indecipherable image which is disseminated across the internet: «Intanto il volto di Beatrice si è calcificato nella maschera che tutti sanno. La sua immagine si è separata da lei, definitivamente, e congelata in quell'entità magica che il mondo invoca o insulta» (AVALLONE 2020, 373).

Operating on the assumption that the reader's point of view is closely aligned with the first-person narrator-character Elisa (many of whose traits resemble those of the biographical author), we are meant to interpret Beatrice's global media success as hollow, both on this occasion and on many others. And yet, following Avallone's train of thought, it would seem easier to inculcate Beatrice the media darling herself, than the patriarchal star system at play in contemporary Italian society (and beyond), one which rewards *veline* and

influencers while capitalizing on their corporeal performances. This common compulsion in the press and elsewhere to criticize the women who engage with the mediasphere has been analyzed persuasively by Danielle Hipkins, where she illustrates how the media tend to vilify women who experience success in such roles, rather than point the finger at, and attempt to change, the insidious mechanisms of television and other media that reiterate patriarchal norms in their exploitation of the female body (HIPKINS 2011).

Space, the Body and Sexuality

So how is the friendship between these two pairings of protagonists experienced within their surroundings? Italian anthropologist Franco La Cecla, in his book *Essere amici*, explains the importance of the spatial dimension of friendship: «C'è un aspetto «spaziale» dell'amicizia, la sua componente geografica. Essa ci amplia la mappa del mondo percorribile, ci rende familiari delle parti che non conoscevamo, ci consente di sentirci a casa in territori lontani e inesplorati. La nostra geografia segue le oscillazioni dell'amicizia, le sue ampiezze e le sue contrazioni» (LA CECLA 2019, 16). Avallone has in various instances recognized the enormous importance of place in her fiction, and space and the environment are clearly key to the girls' experiences in both novels under scrutiny.⁹ In *Acciaio*, abandoned beaches and semi-industrial zones constitute the stomping grounds for Anna and Francesca: such neglected areas in Piombino's periphery afford the girls secluded meeting places where they explore their corporeal relationship to the natural world around them, and to each other, as is witnessed in a beach scene where they kiss each other on the mouth (114).¹⁰ Also relevant in *Acciaio* are the more intimate spaces, such as an abandoned hut in a small children's playground, where the girls used to go as children to avoid their domineering, and at times abusive, fathers. For Anna and Francesca, the *capanna* functioned as a space in which to «play house» as children, a safe nook in which to recreate a happier, female-centric domestic sphere (145). When they revisit the location as adolescents, the small, abandoned park and the *capanna* become a place for corporeal proximity, as they lie down on the grass, face to face, and verbally express their affection for each other.

In contrast to the toponymical specificity of *Acciaio*, *Un'amicizia* employs fewer named and mapped locations, designating the Tuscan seaside town simply as T and going into greater topographical detail in the sequences set in Bologna. Yet without the backdrop of the industrial town, *Un'amicizia* does not engage as profoundly in environmentally evocative landscapes, which results therefore in a diminished engagement with the ecological implications of place. That said, the two girls frequent an out-of-the-way beach, and an analogous space to that of the *capanna* also plays a central function in *Un'amicizia*. An abandoned house that the girls break into, dubbed the *covo* by Beatrice and Elisa, becomes the surrogate home where they, too, «play house», away from their oppressive families:

Lo avevamo scoperto per caso, il covo, passeggiando su e giù di nascosto rasenti le siepi di via dei Lecci, un pomeriggio che Bea non aveva il permesso di uscire in motorino - una strategia della madre per evitare che venisse da me. [...] Poi l'avevamo vista: seminascosta dal cantiere, una vecchia casa isolata, collegata a via dei Lecci tramite un esile sterrato. Lo avevamo percorso d'istinto, senza metterci d'accordo. Una volta arrivate, ci eravamo sollevate in punta di piedi oltre la recinzione per ammirare il giardino ridotto a una giungla e la porta sbarrata dai sigilli. Che dovessimo entrarci lo pensammo subito. La nostra amicizia all'epoca - primavera inoltrata del 2002 - era in piena espansione, smaniosa di colonizzare. Solo che poi Bea aveva proposto di chiamare Gabriele e aveva rovinato tutto. [...] Ma io non potevo ammettere che qualcun altro condividesse un nascondiglio con la *mia* amica e le avevo fatto una scenata. «Lascialo fuori» le avevo intimato. «Sarà il nostro segreto, pena la fine irrevocabile della nostra amicizia». Lei, lo ricordo bene, aveva sorriso con sadica soddisfazione. «E tu cosa mi dai in cambio?» (AVALLONE 2020, 422).

In exchange for reserving the abandoned house as a domain exclusively for the two girls, Elisa volunteers to be the first to break into it and to clean it up. Years later, Elisa reflects on her gesture:

Solo adesso [...] mi rendo conto che addentrarmi in quell'abitazione, sbattere la testa contro le ragnatele, farmi schizzare il cuore in gola a ogni cigolio, è stato l'atto d'amore più spudorato che abbia mai compiuto (423).

Thus, already in adolescence, the *covo* assumes a powerfully symbolic role for their friendship, leading Elisa to guard it jealously. Elisa's equating her

breaking into the house as a daring act of love is also telling, as it alludes to the young women's powerful bond, about which more will be said shortly.

In the novel's concluding section, when the two protagonists are now adults, Beatrice insists on meeting Elisa on New Year's Eve in 2019 precisely in the *covo*, which has remained uninhabited all these years, but which Beatrice has modified for greater comfort. And while the kind of same-sex desire between Francesca and Anna is expressed less overtly in *Un'amicizia*, the two grown women take refuge in the *covo* and finally make peace in a tender embrace, inadvertently kissing each other on the mouth:

Bea e io ci guardiamo. Siamo solo noi due chiuse dentro una stanza, in silenzio, in quello che sembra un rifugio antiatomico, un nascondiglio per partigiani. Il mondo intero festeggia là fuori e forse, in questo momento, nessuno si chiede più che fine abbia fatto la Rossetti, dove sia. Compiamo un passo l'una verso l'altra, rischiando di perdere l'equilibrio. Non so bene cosa fare, forse non lo sai nemmeno tu. Mi sento goffa, indecisa. So solo che non ne posso più di questa guerra. Crolliamo l'una sull'altra e ci abbracciamo. Ci scambiamo un bacio che non sappiamo su quale guancia, ci confondiamo, finiamo per darcelo sulle labbra. Ed è strano, imbarazzante e tenero insieme, perché ragazzine non lo siamo più (AVALLONE 2020, 436).

In the seclusion of the *covo*, a word which denotes both an animal's den but also a hidden space where clandestine, or even illegal activity takes place, the two women acknowledge that their bond is both affective and visceral and, by naming it thus, on another level, unconsciously alluding perhaps to an unacknowledged mutual attraction.

It is significant that both novels employ such isolated, private spaces for the pairs of best friends to meet and communicate the intensity of their same-sex affection. The secluded nature of these sheltered places evokes the metaphor of the closet, so cogently articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her groundbreaking monograph, *Epistemology of the Closet*, which examines the repression and expression of homosexuality in the nineteenth century. While the phrase to «come out of the closet» is an English idiom, the spatial association between an enclosed, secluded area and the hiddenness of same-sex desire transcends languages and national contexts. Geographer Michael P.

Brown has insisted on the spatiality of the closet metaphor, in his study of marginalized spaces of queerness:

A closet is obviously a space: typically small and dark and bounded. [...] It is a space where things—not people—belong. Yet it is a belonging of a certain kind, for spaces, like closets, contain secrets. Its *location* and *distance* suggests [*sic*] proximity to some wider (more important, more immediate, more central) room, but it's a certain kind of proximity: one that limits *accessibility* and *interaction*. The ubiquity of gays and lesbians 'everywhere' means that on the one hand they are indeed close at hand, but enclosure of the closet means that they are separate, hived off, invisible and unheard. [...] The closet is not far away from the room, and it is certainly accessible, but one must look for it. [...] [B]y definition closet has a certain kind of spatial interaction with its room. It is separate and distinct, too. It segregates, it hides and it confines. Closets are spatial strategies that help one arrange and manage an increasingly complicated life (BROWN 2000, 7).

While the confined and segregated spaces of the *capanna* and the *covo* in *Acciaio* and *Un'amicizia* respectively are not closets *per se*, the defining characteristics of the spatial metaphor of the closet as laid out by Brown resonate with the girls' manifestations of reciprocal attraction in the space chosen by Avallone within which to enclose their desire. While Francesca's lesbianism is rendered patent in various instances in *Acciaio* (as is seen when she rejects Nino's request that she be his girlfriend, saying to him outright «a me non mi piacciono i maschi» [280]), Anna does not fully acknowledge her attraction to her best friend, experiencing shame about their intimacy. Nevertheless, when they make peace at the novel's conclusion, the nature of Anna and Francesca's relationship remains undefined, leaving its potential development open ended. In the case of Elisa and Beatrice, while the intensity of the relationship is made manifest throughout the text, and by the fact that the metafictional character of Elisa has devoted a 400-page manuscript to Beatrice, the women's same sex desire is not recognized as openly, despite the author's not shying away from the physicality of female friendship. In both novels, however, enclosed spaces serve as a means for the girls, and later women, to solidify their bond, away from the rest of the world.

Female Friendship at the Turn of the Millennium

Ultimately, the pivotal role of adolescent female friendship in Avallone's writings is in itself a literary achievement. The author's probing and nuanced investigation of the two best-friend dyads in her first and latest novels delves into the intimate and at times dramatic vicissitudes the young women undergo. Psychologist Elisabeth Morgan Thompson, in her article *Girl Friend or Girlfriend?: Same Sex Friendship and Bisexual Images as a Context for Flexible Sexual Identity Among Young Women*, published in the «Journal of Bisexuality» in 2006, indicates some key elements which define girls' friendships in the new Millennium: «Recent literature has characterized young women's friendships as not much different from (heterosexual) romantic relationships. Specifically, young women's friendships are characterized by companionship, preoccupation, jealousy, exclusivity, inseparability and physical affection» (49). Morgan Thompson proceeds to posit that greater acknowledgement of same-sex attraction between adolescent girls as seen in recent studies would seem to indicate increased flexibility in young women's sexual orientation, influenced in part, she maintains, by current media acceptability of female/female desire. The desire between women depicted in Avallone's two novels, much like the nature of friendship itself, eludes rigid classification. Indeed, it is not my intention here to label the attraction between the two young women in both texts, nor would it be productive to attempt to do so. Charlotte Ross, in her monograph *Eccentricity and Sameness. Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy*, has discussed queer and poststructural theories' emphasis on the fluidity of experience and states: «I am critical of the use of sexual categories and wary of imposing them myself. Numerous scholars have pointed to the lack of agreement about what is signified by the term 'lesbian' and emphasized the importance of moving beyond rigid definitions that risk ascribing an apparently monolithic sexual orientation» (2015, 13).

The female friendships represented by Avallone in both novels would in any case seem to resonate with the characteristics identified by Morgan Thompson and other researchers. As Celano points out in his review of *Acciaio*, «*Acciaio* è la storia di un'amicizia tanto forte da escludere il mondo circostante, di una complicità così vissuta da sfiorare l'innamoramento». In the novel itself, Anna

and Francesca's friendship is regularly characterized as analogous to a romantic relationship: «La mora e la bionda. Loro due, sempre e solo loro due. Quando uscivano dall'acqua si tenevano per mano come i fidanzati» (AVALLONE 2010, 20) (where, interestingly, the author has chosen to use the masculine plural form of the noun *fidanzati*). In a similar vein, the two friends in *Un'amicizia* promise each other that when Beatrice becomes famous, Elisa will be her manager, prompting Elisa to reflect on the importance of their bond: «Io volevo solo rimanere nella sua vita per sempre. Più di una sorella, di un marito, più di sua madre. Diventare la fonte segreta della sua luce, il suo specchio magico» (AVALLONE 2020, 299). Both friendship dyads profess their undying affection for each other and react jealously when their friend's attention is focused on others, especially male figures.

This blurring of the categories of friendship and love is, after all, not particularly surprising, as Marilyn Yalom notes in the preface to *The Social Sex*, co-authored with Theresa Donovan Brown:

The subject of friendship is less glamorous than the subject of love, which still commands centre stage in life and literature, not to mention the publishing world. I, too, have been guilty of contributing to the plethora of books focusing on love [...] without considering its near relative. During the many months of our collaboration, Theresa Donovan Brown and I have explored the overlap between love and friendship and have often found that it is difficult for us to make clear-cut distinctions. What is friendship? Is it so different from love? (YALOM 2015, x).

The passionate female friendships in Avallone's texts constitute a provocative reflection on this blurring between friendship and love. Avallone herself has commented on the love between the two girls in *Acciaio*, in an interview for WUZ.it. In response to the interviewer's question «Il lettore è spinto a tifare per l'amore saffico delle due ragazze. Anche se etero. Questa versione universale dell'amore è la salvezza?» she states:

Qualunque interpretazione di un testo è lecita. Qui posso solo dire la mia intenzione mentre seguivo, scrivendolo, l'evolversi del legame tra Anna e Francesca. Non si tratta tanto di un rapporto omosessuale, quanto di un'amicizia che per via dell'età (l'adolescenza: uno spazio di tempo potenziale, di trasformazione e di curiosità), e per via della particolare durezza della realtà

con cui le due protagoniste devono fare i conti, è paragonabile a un amore. AMORE IN SENSO AMPIO, CHE SFUGGE ALLE ETICHETTE. Ho tentato di rappresentare un legame, un'alleanza, una complicità che rifiutano una definizione definitiva. Spesso, descrivendo alcune loro tenerezze, ho pensato più a un senso materno dell'una verso l'altra, che ad altro (MARCHETTI 2010).

In her response, Avallone emphasizes the loving nature of friendship between two young women, choosing to describe their affection as maternal and, essentially, downplaying the potential for an actual lesbian relationship between the girls, while at the same time stressing the need to leave the friendship undefined. Silvia Antosa and Charlotte Ross have persuasively argued, in fact, that not only the authorial reluctance to define the girls' relationship as lesbian, but also her fictional characters' internalisation of the stigma against women's same-sex relations, renders *Acciaio* a lesbophobic text.¹¹

Paradoxically, while the loving nature of female friendship is central in terms of thematic importance in both books, such friendships are nevertheless characterized by rivalry and jealous conflict, to the extent that the relationship breaks down entirely for a lengthy period. In an interview for Sky TG24, Avallone reiterates the significance of adolescent friendship for identity formation and considers its demise as a kind of traumatic break that signals the passage into maturity:

In quegli anni [...] l'amicizia gioca un ruolo fondamentale nella costruzione delle nostre identità, diventando un enorme laboratorio etico di chi potresti essere e di chi vorresti diventare. E ciò cementa delle relazioni che per me, da narratrice, sono molto più interessanti dell'amore, specie se analizzate da una prospettiva adulta. Spesso infatti queste amicizie, così forti al liceo e all'università, si spezzano, quasi che ci voglia un altro tradimento per diventare adulti (BATTAGLIA 2020).

La Cecla reminds us that true friendship is in fact defined by its potential for rupture: «L'amicizia è sostenuta dalla sua potenziale rottura. [...] In ogni amicizia è sospesa la possibilità del tradimento. La revocabilità ne sostanzia l'esistenza» (26). Avallone's female characters' friendships would seem to validate La Cecla's claims: for example, Francesca angrily reflects on what she perceives to be Anna's lack of attention towards her, after their falling out when

Anna and Mattia become a couple: «Provava una rabbia acuta adesso. Quella stronza non si era neanche ricordata del suo compleanno, non le aveva fatto gli auguri di Natale, non le aveva infilato neppure un bigliettino sotto la porta in tutto questo tempo» (272). Feelings of hostility and jealousy often come to the fore in *Un'amicizia* as well. When, shortly after her mother's death, Beatrice is staying with Elisa and her father Paolo, Elisa becomes resentful of her friend's relationship with her parent, imagining it to be sexual:

Mi convinsi che avessero una storia, che si stessero baciando in quel momento, o peggio. Chi non avrebbe voluto una fidanzata come Beatrice, un'amante come Beatrice, una figlia come Beatrice? [...] la immaginai avvinghiata a mio padre e fantastica che morissero entrambi; oppure di morire io, far correre una corda intorno al tubo d'acciaio per la tenda della vasca, e soffocarmi. Gelosia è una parola che non voglio usare in questo libro: sarebbe troppo comoda per lei. Però è vero che un sentimento infernale, il peggiore di tutti, mi montò nell'addome come uno tsunami, travolse tutti gli organi e mi sfinì (234).

Similar sentiments of rage, envy, or outright hatred recur frequently between the two pairings of friends in both novels. While *La Cecla* may see the potential for disintegration as part and parcel of friendship, my misgivings around Avallone's portrayal of specifically *female* friendship stem from my sense that the emphasis placed on such conflictual aspects of adolescent girls' relationships risks their degenerating into the misogynistic trope of young women as inevitably catty and destined to tear each other apart, often in jealousy over a man's attention.

While I am not advocating a saccharine or idealized version of adolescent female friendship, and while I welcome the recent success of Avallone's works which position the girls' bond at their core, I find disappointing that the author has not (yet?) produced novels which fully avoid representing women's corporeality via the male gaze and which in fact shine light on the potential for female friendships to empower young women. Such a female-centred conceptualization of friendship may risk seeming utopian, but feminist theorists, among whom Judith Raymond, have advocated for what the philosopher terms *Gyn-affection*, that is, a bond between women which is not predicated on *hetero-relations*, but rather, a relationship in which women care

for, recognize and *affect* each other.¹² Raymond states that her book *A Passion for Friends* (1986)

aims to restore power and depth to the word and reality of friendship. The word *Gyn/affection* was created with this end in mind. The best feminist politics proceeds from a shared friendship. This book is also concerned with returning friendship to a primary place as a basis of feminist purpose, passion, and politics. *Gyn/affection* is not only a loving relationship between two or more women; it is also a freely chosen bond which, when chosen, involves certain reciprocal assurances based on honor, loyalty, and affection. In this sense, one could say that friendship is a social trust. It is an understanding that is continually renewed, revitalised, and entered into not only by two or more individual women but by two or more political beings who claim social and political status for their Selves and others like their Selves.

While Silvia Avallone's pairs of girl friends incarnate literary examples of the power and significance of female friendship for young women, the paradigm adopted is one of rupture, rivalry, and discord. Ultimately, it would be refreshing if her work were to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of a female friendship which breaks free from such tropes and facilitates (young) women's resistance to patriarchal hegemony through solidarity.

Notes

¹ For an analysis of Avallone's first novel as global literature, see PENNACCHIO 2020.

² Avallone's work has received much acclaim as well as several distinguished literary awards. Nevertheless, *Acciaio*, which features adolescents and explores the industrial setting of Piombino, has been dismissed by major critics such as Marco Belpoliti or, indirectly, by the writer Valerio Evangelisti (who, in his preface to Prunetti's *Amianto*, alludes to «romanzetti di successo in cui la fabbrica è solo sfiorata, richiamata nel titolo e poi ignorata» [EVANGELISTI 2012, 7]), among others. Her treatment by Bruno Vespa at the award ceremony for the Premio Campiello 2010, where Avallone received the Opera Prima award, during which the veteran presenter instructed the camera crew to focus on her cleavage, constitutes a blatant example of the misogynistic objectification of a woman writer, one which was denounced by fellow author and presenter Michela Murgia, also an award recipient at the same event.

³ As can be seen in the 2017 issue of «gender/sexuality/Italy» and in the work of scholars such as Hipkins.

⁴ Mongiat Farina persuasively inserts Avallone's first novel within the relatively recent current of Italian fiction concerned with childhood, adolescence and coming of age, presenting it as a female *Bildungsroman*.

⁵ Avallone has explored similar topics in terms of female beauty and celebrity in her second novel, *Marina Bellezza* (2013), named after one of its protagonists, the ambitious *ragazza di provincia* who seeks fame as a performer. For a cogent analysis of the thematic and structural interconnections in Avallone's first three novels, see DAINO 2019.

⁶ This emerges in a scene in which Elisa, her brother and her mother watch an old video of her mother performing in her rock band: «Devo prenderne atto: Annabella Dafne Cioni non è stata solo mia madre, la donna impulsiva, inconcludente, disordinata, sempre troppo triste o troppo su di giri, che ci ha amati e abbandonati un'infinita di volte. [...] Mamma è stata prima di tutto, e forse sarà sempre, la formidabile ragazzina che guardo dimenarsi sul palco con energia, libera sotto il fascio di luce bianca, che scuote la testa a ritmo selvaggio, ride e possiede un innegabile talento» (AVALLONE 2020, 406).

⁷ «In all media and in much of the collective discourse about the country that takes place in Italy, the issue of female beauty and the women who over time have been deemed to embody it are recurrent reference points. Today, the annual Miss Italia pageant, that was founded in 1946, is still a national event that mobilises the energies of tens of thousands of people and engages many millions of magazine readers and television viewers. It is a central ritual in the perpetuation of the national community. Yet, at the same time, the question of female beauty is so primordial an aspect of Italian culture, so diffuse and embedded in the national psyche, that it scarcely occurs to many Italians that it is a distinctive feature of their culture, with a specific and highly controversial history» (GUNDLE 2007, xxvi).

⁸ «Non era pronta. Doveva tenerla ferma mentre le montava sopra con il corpo bruno e pesante» (AVALLONE 2010, 191). It remains unclear if, in this scene, the author is problematizing the adult male's appropriation of the fourteen-year-old girl's body, or if his «mastery» of a minor's corporeality is considered simply a matter of course.

⁹ In an interview of 2014, Avallone observes «I luoghi non sono mai solo «ambientazioni», né nei miei romanzi né nella vita. I luoghi agiscono su di noi, ostacolandoci, nutrendoci, orientando il nostro sguardo, concorrendo a forgiare la nostra identità e i nostri sogni» (D'ONOFRIO 2014).

¹⁰ For an analysis of the importance of space and the environment in this same text, see my article of 2019, Mongiat Farina's of 2014, and Cesaretti's monograph *Elemental Narratives*, in particular the chapter *Steel and Asbestos: Stories of Toxic Lands and Bodies in Tuscany and Beyond*, which considers the relationship between the Body and nonhuman materiality in *Acciaio* and other texts.

¹¹ «Sia le vicende delle due protagoniste che le affermazioni dell'autrice parlano di una persistente negazione del desiderio erotico tra donne, che viene discorsivamente trasformato in desiderio «materno» o in incertezza preadolescenziale. Il romanzo sembra chiaramente riferire di una reale e tangibile lesbofobia che riguarda sia l'auto-percezione delle protagoniste (che incarnano il destino eteronormativo delle giovani adolescenti della provincia italiana) sia le affermazioni della scrittrice, che nega a priori persino la possibilità che tra le due protagoniste possa esserci una attrazione/relazione sessuale valida e duratura o quanto meno plausibile» (ANTOSA, ROSS 2014, 65-66).

¹² «Gyn/affection is a synonym for female friendship. [...] Dictionary definitions of *affection* and *affect* shed further light on the meaning of Gyn/affection. The more commonly understood meaning of affection is a feeling, emotion, fondness, attachment, and love for another. In this sense, Gyn/affection connotes the passion that women feel for women, that is, the experience of profound attraction for the original vital Self and the movement toward other vital women. There is another meaning to affection, however, which conveys more than the personal movement of one woman toward another. Affection in this sense means the state of influencing, acting upon, moving, and impressing, and of being influenced, acted upon, moved, and impressed by other women. [...] Women who affect women stimulate response and action; bring about a change in living; stir and arouse emotions, ideas, and activities that defy dichotomies between the personal and political aspects of affection. Thus Gyn/affection means personal and political movement of women toward each other» (RAYMOND 2001, 7-8).

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Reading *Little Women* after the Italian 1970s: The Influence of Postfeminism on Lidia Ravera's Reinterpretation of the Classic

Abstract

Published in two volumes between 1868 and 1869, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott follows the classic coming-of-age structure for female characters as developed in nineteenth-century literature. Although the story is first introduced as that of a family, it instead follows each protagonist on their individual journey towards social recognition, which, for the young March sisters, is gained with marriage. From this perspective, girlhood is a transient stage of life, routed towards the achievement of economic (and emotional) stability.

Since its first publication, Alcott's classic has been widely discussed and subjected to many reinterpretations in literary form, as well as in film and theatrical dramatisation. In this article I focus on the novel *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* (1986), a rewriting by the Italian author Lidia Ravera composed in the aftermath of the feminist struggles of the seventies. The novel, set in Italy during the eighties, offers the opportunity for the author to integrate the representation of girlhood with the language and images of mass culture. As Carol Lazzaro-Weiss points out in her study on the female *Bildungsroman* (1993), «women writers are creating new themes and plots and [...] they do so by recombining, challenging, and exploiting old structures to their purposes» (18). *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* offers a good example for studying such literary manipulation. This essay shows how Ravera's main character anticipates a new idea of femininity which – leaving behind political instances and reflections on gender essentialism – embraces a more individualistic and certainly more problematic approach to female agency influenced by postfeminist discourse (GREER 1999; HOOKS 2000; GAMBLE 2001).

Toward a Postfeminist Aesthetics

An internationally-known classic, *Little Women* (1868–69) by Louisa May Alcott is a female coming-of-age story whose success has been sustained to the present day by a series of reinterpretations in literature, theatre and film.¹ While for male writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Alcott's novel used to stand as a representation of female piety and sentimentality, for many female writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Gertrude Stein or Joyce Carol Oates, who read the story in the twentieth century, the book inspired ideas about the relationship between patriarchal culture and women's culture, as well as about female authority (SHOWALTER 1989, VII-VIII).

As Monique Wittig wrote, «any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions» (WITTIG 1992, 68-69). In this regard, Lidia Ravera's novel *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* (1986) is a good example of how rewriting a classic is not just a postmodern exercise, but can be used as a tool to register relevant cultural changes and political statements. Coming after the experiences of the Italian feminist movement, Ravera's rewriting re-elaborates some elements present in Alcott's novel (the matriarchal family, the four sisters, and Jo's character) and sets them in 1980s Italy. This decade represents a crucial moment of reflection for those feminist activists who experienced the struggles for abortion and divorce, and who, despite their political achievements, found themselves living in a society still very much subjected to a patriarchal system of values. In this article I will explore the influence of Ravera's own feminist experience on the rewriting of Alcott's classic, with special attention to some of the elements (references to mass culture, a new idea of female agency) that contribute to making *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* a novel in transition toward a new postfeminist aesthetics (GENZ and BRABON 2018; GAMBLE 2001). I will refer to postfeminism as an aesthetics more than a theory or a group of theories. I draw on Gamble's (GAMBLE 2001, 43-44) useful distinction between postfeminism and third wave feminism, the latter of which includes a consistent variety of thinkers - from bell hooks to Judith Butler, from Camille Paglia to Naomi Wolf - none of whom used the label 'postfeminist' to describe their work (although often it has been referred to by others as such). Postfeminist aesthetics have been widely promoted through mainstream media since the mid-eighties,

introducing a new, trendier image to represent empowered women in the popular culture: female personalities «dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitude» (36). Mainstream postfeminist discourse coheres around three main topics: the refusal of victimisation, focusing on the aspect of female responsibility and control; related to this, a general tolerance toward pornography in the name of self-determination and a woman's personal choice; and an individualistic attitude which leaves space for a very flexible ideology inspired by liberal humanism.

Rewriting a classic such *Little Women* from a feminist angle implies first of all a challenge to the structure of the coming-of-age genre with female protagonists. Despite the many differences among feminist critics, it is today widely agreed that the classic structure of the coming-of-age novel rests on a conservative and gendered representation of society. Strongly rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Bildungsroman* operates on a double standard for male and female characters, offering the image of a woman whose agency is possible mainly within home interiors and whose social affirmation occurs through the institution of marriage (LAZZARO-WEISS 1993, 95-117). According to this structure, there is little room left to female development besides the standard representation of a coming of age that is never fully autonomous from the modes of the romance.

As noted by Rita Felski in her study on feminist aesthetics, in contemporary literature the *Bildungsroman* «has acquired a new function in charting the changing self-consciousness of women accompanying their gradual entry in the public domain» (FELSKI 1989, 133). In what Felski describes as 'novel of self-discovery', the journey of the woman from the world within to the world outside is often mediated by the female community, considering the dominant role of gender in the definition of identity. Although inner growth is a relevant aspect of feminist coming-of-age stories, interaction with a social environment is the most significant detail that distinguishes the feminist *Bildungsroman* from the classic model of the genre. By drawing a comparison between *Little Women* and Ravera's rewriting, I will consider girlhood from a structural angle, as a transient status that leads toward womanhood. How this passage occurs in both novels is a key aspect worthy of examination, in order to understand to what

extent the social changes which occurred in twentieth-century women's history had the power to affect their literary representation.

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott – published in two parts between 1868 and 1869 – is a novel whose structure perfectly represents that of the classic female *Bildungsroman*. Set in the years of the American Civil War, the novel focuses on the story of the March family, specifically the four sisters and their mother, the father being involved directly in the war. The young protagonists – Jo, Beth, Amy and Meg – are described in the privacy of their domestic games and their social experiences outside of the home, in particular with the rich neighbour Laurie. From being just 'little women', the reader will follow the March Sisters until their transformation into 'good wives', with marriage represented as a stage that will allow them to reach a respectable social position and economic stability.

Far from being a story set within the home interior, Ravera's *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* follows the rhythm and themes of a Hollywood action movie. Almost twenty years after he left the family, Giò's father sends a letter to her mother inviting her to meet him for the last time in Barcelona, since he has only a short time left to live. The mother ignores the letter, but Giò secretly steals it and leaves with the desire of finally getting to know her own father. While waiting for her parent in Barcelona in front of the Sagrada Família, the girl meets Mike, who, she will later find out, is her father's partner in crime. The two men are in fact criminals who pretend to be artists involved in the selling of traditional African statues, although in reality, they use the statues to hide diamonds that they illegally trade. When Giò and Mike are kidnapped by a group of rival gangsters interested in taking possession of the diamonds, the story moves across three continents, Europe, America, and finally Africa. The novel culminates with a spectacular happy ending in which Giò reunites with her father and defeats the gangsters.

The plots of the two novels are clearly very different, although their points of connection are quite significant. In order to explore these it is first of all useful to consider why, among all the classics, Ravera specifically selected Alcott's work. Introducing the new edition of *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* in 2012, Lidia Ravera explained why *Little Women* was still relevant in 1986, when she decided to bring it again to the attention of readers:

La Alcott ha dato una spallata all'indistinto del femminile, ha fatto vedere quattro caratteri e noi tutte bambine ci siamo appassionate alla possibilità di scegliere perché una poteva essere saggia, poteva essere maschile e intellettuale, poteva essere buona (e infatti morire giovane), e poteva essere civetta e seduttiva e infatti sposare il vicino di casa, quello lì ricco (LIDIA RAVERA – BAGNA I FIORI E ASPETTAMI).²

The writer recognised in the classic novel the merit of providing diverse female models for girls to identify with. The first interesting aspect of Ravera's statement concerns the «possibilità di scegliere», the chance for each girls to choose her personal role model based on their preferred attitude and style; beneath this apparently simple choice we can read an elementary form of agency, which is an act of self-definition following the process of identification. The second crucial aspect in Ravera's comment is directly connected to the act of choosing and regards the diversity of the proposed role models. In a book like *Little Women*, female characters are not just introduced in opposition to the male protagonists (in the form of «indistinto femminile»); on the contrary, they stand out as complex individuals. In this sense, Alcott's book anticipates an attention to diversity that will constitute a central point in postfeminist aesthetics (GAMBLE 2001, 41). When it comes to postfeminism, the term 'diversity' is quite problematic and has been often criticised by feminist scholars. For those who have pointed out how postfeminism is nothing more than a privilege for western women (GREER 1999; HOOKS 2000) the word is not synonymous with 'inclusivity', but addresses instead a commercial diversification of targets and consumers. While discussing the decision to re-write *Little Women*, Lidia Ravera does not take into consideration the problematic aspects of postfeminism, preferring to focus on the act of self-determination and self-identification implied in Alcott's novel; as little girls, young readers become passionate («ci siamo appassionate») about the possibility of choosing their own character (and thereby their own future), which, as already mentioned, stands as a basic introduction to the concepts of agency and responsibility (MANN 1994).

Jo March and Giò Lazzarini: from the story of a family to the story of the individual

In *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* Giò works as an operator answering phonecalls for the commercial television station *Canale 5*; she introduces herself as «postmoderna»³ (RAVERA 1986, 7) and a person difficult to label. The reference to postmodernism made in relation to the protagonist in the very opening of the novel confirms the interpretation of this re-writing as a postfeminist version of the classic. The notions of 'postmodernism' and 'postfeminism' have been often discussed together by feminist critics (GAMBLE 2001, 48; BROOKS 1997, 36), and not only because of their similar etymologies (the idea of coming *post*, after other systems of thought). According to Gamble, the difficulties concerning their definition come with the shared aim of disrupting universalising patterns of thought and consequently generating a pluralistic epistemology (53). In this regard, the idea of gender as a performance, rather than a biological feature, can be addressed in the postfeminist deconstructive approach (GAMBLE 2001, 42). Gender and certain gender-related stereotypes are elements that both Alcott and Ravera play with in their description of Jo (Giò in the Italian version), although they never question the protagonists' heterosexuality. In *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* her physical posture as well as her attitude cannot be described as stereotypically feminine:

Muovo troppo le braccia e non ho simpatia per le borsette. Esigo scarpe che non si alzino a terra più di due centimetri e, siccome sono alta, tendo a incurvare leggermente le spalle [...].

Non ho simpatia per i profumi che vadano al di là della cara vecchia saponetta inglese e considero la depilazione mediante ceretta calda una pratica nettamente precivile (13).⁴

In the original novel by Alcott, we find a similar paragraph where Jo March also describes herself in the first person:

I hate to think I have got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns [...]. It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boys' games, and work,

and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy [...]
(ALCOTT 1989, 3).

When introducing the readers to her job, the Italian Giò makes another significant statement about herself as a woman:

Il fatto che io sia bella, per esempio, le attrae e le urta [le colleghe], ma soprattutto le sconcerta: le belle, qui, in genere, sono addette a compiti più prestigiosi.

[...] Nessuna bella ragazza risponde al telefono. [...] Non voglio essere promossa da soldato semplice a pupa del sergente. Aspiro direttamente a un posto da generale. E in attesa della nomina preferisco fare la guardia a un telefono, piuttosto che ricorrere ai miei attributi femminili (RAVERA 1986, 92-93).⁵

Giò assumes a critical position toward the new feminine ideal promoted by Italian television, more specifically by *Canale 5*, a broadcasting channel owned by Silvio Berlusconi and populated by hypersexualised adolescent girls (HIPKINS 2015; CUTER 2017; MARINI-MAIO 2017); by criticising women who adhered to the model proposed by the Italian capitalistic culture, Giò is caught into a mechanism that has been defined by Angela McRobbie as «double entanglement», because she feels empowered by taking a distance from those girls that she intellectually and politically dislikes (McROBBIE 2009, 12). This attitude will also distinguish the comedians hosting the television show *La tv delle ragazze*, broadcasted on Rai Tre between 1988 and 1989; Serena Dandini and her co-hosts will openly criticise «the commodified girls of the society of the spectacle», an approach that can be regarded as postfeminist, as much as the one shown by Giò in Ravera's novel (MARINI-MAIO 2017). Furthermore – for the personal development of the main character – it is relevant to consider how, at the beginning of the story, Ravera's protagonist explicitly refuses to adhere to that mainstream feminine model by using her attractive body to her own advantage («i miei attributi femminili»), a position that she will reconsider later in the novel.

In *Bagna i fiori e aspettami*, the other Lazzarini sisters are also briefly introduced in the first pages by adapting the original idiosyncrasies of the

classic characters into a modern version transposed into the Italian eighties. Margherita is a secretary in a school with quite modest dreams of love; Amelia, the youngest, is ambitious, and dreams of a husband with «una casa in Sardegna e una barca per arrivarci» (RAVERA 1986, 3).⁶ Finally, Elisabetta is «una tosse continua» (ibid. 3),⁷ superficially connecting this character to the weak Beth, destined to die in the original novel. Further on in the book, another description of the sisters portrays them as consumers, their differences and individualities represented through the objects bought by their mother for each daughter: «golfini di alpaca, scarpe inglesi, mutandine di pizzo e romanzi di Adelphi» (ibid. 10).⁸

The ways in which the objects are described in the novel is often in relation to women's identities, another aspect that reveals Ravera's postfeminist approach in the rewriting of Alcott's classic. Within postfeminist theory, objects – and consumption in general – represent a source of power and choice (GENZ and BRABON 2018), although this very entanglement with mass culture and consumerism has been the most criticised aspect of the theory. Germaine Greer aptly summarises the criticism levelled against postfeminism by other feminist scholars when she defines it as «nothing more than a market-led phenomenon» (in GAMBLE 2001, 42). Greer explained how postfeminist's «assurance to women that they can 'have it all' – a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life – actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion and convenience food» (42). In 1986, when Ravera attended to her rewriting of *Little Women*, the influence of brands and advertising was slowly entering literary territory. This phenomenon would increase towards the end of the decade and reach its highest point in the nineties, with the anthology of short stories *Gioventù cannibale*, published by Einaudi in 1996 (MONDELLO 2017).

Besides a few shared aspects, Jo and her Italian literary twin also present several differences that are worth mentioning. Firstly, Giò Lazzarini is not part of a choral system like the March sisters could be; she is mainly on the run on her own, although her thoughts sometimes return home to her mother and the other girls, waiting in Rome. It is significant to consider how in Ferrante's novel *L'amica geniale* (2011), the reference to *Little Women* is introduced to symbolically reflect the story of Lila and Elena and their mutual support, a

representation of solidarity among women which also recalls the practice of *entrustment* theorised in the seventies (COLLINA 2018).

In Ravera's rewriting, the description of the Lazzarini family, with its matriarchal dynamics, is introduced by the writer just like a detail taken from the classic, a more-than-symbolic element with the potential of a statement. The individualism of Ravera's Giò compared to Alcott's original is evident also from a quick comparison between the paratextual elements of the classic and its rewriting. In almost every edition ever published of Alcott's *Little Women*, the family is represented as a unity and the four sisters are always presented together on the book cover. In Ravera's *Bagna i Fiori e Aspettami*, Giò stands alone (see Image 1); she is represented with a short haircut, as a reference to the classic version of the novel, and a fashionable masculine outfit that recalls certain women's magazines of the eighties or the girls' board game *Gira la Moda* (*Fashion wheel*), produced by MB and distributed in Italy since 1984. The protagonist's silhouette stands as an icon for neofeminist statements of 'empowerment' and 'self-fulfillment', consistent with the rhetoric of neo-liberalism that unites consumerist culture and individualist values (GENZ and BRABON 2018, 105-118; CUTER 2017).



Image 1

Another substantial difference between the original Jo and her Italian version is in the element of writing. While occupying a key role in Jo March's life, in Ravera's version it disappears almost completely. Giò Lazzarini is less complex than the original character created by Alcott. Her agency is all turned toward the outside world, while Jo March uses writing as a tool for self-reflection and interior growth. Writing is an activity that often recurs in female coming-of-age stories, in particular in what Fortini and Bono described as *the novel of becoming*⁹ (FORTINI AND BONO 2007). In these kinds of stories, writing is used by the female protagonist as a tool for self-reflection and self-discovery, compared to the male coming-of-age novel which «typically substitutes inner concentration and withdrawal for active accommodation and rebellion»

(LAZZARO-WEISS 1993, 97). Furthermore, for the original Jo March the act of writing is an emancipation tool through which she aims to gain the status of a genius, an attribute mainly reserved for men during the Romantic era.

Rewriting, reconsidering: making feminist fiction in the backlash of the seventies

Bagna i fiori e aspettami follows ten years after Ravera's debut novel. *Porci con le ali* – subtitled «diario sesso-politico di due adolescenti»¹⁰ (RAVERA 1976) – came out at a core moment for feminist activism in Italy and the success of the book allowed the writer to take part in the social and political discourse of the time. Following to the letter the feminist slogan 'the personal is political', the book aimed to challenge all the taboos around the subject of sex, sexual practice, sex education and sexual orientation within Italian society. The female protagonist of this novel, Antonia, is described in her sexual and political coming of age, culminating in the final recognition of the priority of the struggle against patriarchy over any other form of engagement (cfr. RAMPONI 1973). During the rewriting of *Little Women* in 1986, Ravera had the opportunity to reflect upon her political experience; in particular, the family element, which occupies a central position in the original novel, allows the Italian writer to establish a fictional dialogue between two generations of women through the characters of Giò (who is nineteen when the story takes place) and her mother (who is in her forties).

The two women seem to agree on the idea that beauty for women constitutes a burden rather than a privilege, although they react differently to it in the way they decide to hide it or use it to their own advantage. Talking about her childhood, Giò says:

Avevo cinque anni quando si parlava di liberazione dall'obbligo di essere graziose. Mia mamma regalava a tutte noi trenini e mitra spaziali. [...]. Portavamo capelli lunghi, sciolti sulle spalle, ma nessuno ce li spazzolava. Erano tempi diversi» (RAVERA 1986, 93).¹¹

The statement «erano tempi diversi» is introduced by the narrator as a way to distance herself from her mother's attitude toward beauty and femininity. In this regard, if on the one hand Giò introduced herself as not stereotypically feminine at the very beginning of the novel, on the other she will learn by the end of the story how femininity can be a source of empowerment. Contrary to those interpretations of the classic which underlined the queer aspects of Jo as a character (DOYLE 2005; PATRAKA 1993), Ravera saw in Alcott's protagonist a peculiar kind of femininity based on a strong and determined attitude, a model that matched the new idea of empowered woman promoted within the postfeminist aesthetics (MARASCO 2016, 117-118).

Giò steps into womanhood by learning the threat represented by the opposite sex. A woman's body can neither escape the male gaze nor men's unwanted physical approaches, like that of the stranger sitting beside her on the plane to Barcelona: «Mi tocca il gomito e mi annuncia che ho bisogno di mangiare» (ibid. 29);¹² or the man she meets on the bus while travelling to see her father: «mi tocca il vestito [...]. No, non voglio un passaggio né un caffè, né una guida per i caffè della Rambla. Voglio essere lasciata alle mie elucubrazioni» (ibid. 32).¹³ When she meets Mike, he is «il terzo uomo che si occupa di me oggi» (ibid. 35) and «odiosamente protettivo» (ibid. 38).¹⁴ Walking in the evening down the Spanish *Avenida*, Giò lets the reader know the discomfort caused by her own body: «cammino rigida, muovendo solo le pupille, la testa incassata in posizione di difesa dall'imprevisto maschio, nella lumachina portatile del colletto rialzato a nascondere bocca e curve» (ibid. 61).¹⁵ The novel is full of moments similar to these; in this story the protagonist is always introduced on the scene as a female body before being perceived as a person by the other characters. In one of the central scenes of the novel, Giò and Mike have been kidnapped by a rival group of gangsters and during the night one of them rapes Giò. This tragic episode is followed by a scene on the plane in which the use of irony, typical of the narrator, seems no less sharp: «Gegè [lo stupratore] riesce a palparmi un gomito strisciando rasente al finestrino. Ha un tocco inconfondibile: come se cercasse la clitoride nella piegatura del braccio» (ibid. 139).¹⁶ Commenting on this part of the novel years later for the launch of the second edition, Ravera herself admitted how in this book there is a desperate

attempt to laugh while recognising the horror (LIDIA RAVERA – BAGNA I FIORI E ASPETTAMI).

Through the dangers and the obstacles that Giò has to face in *Bagna i fiori e aspettami*, Ravera highlights the persistence of gender-based violence and abuse in a society that continues to objectify women's bodies despite all their political achievements. Ravera's reconsideration of past political experiences has already been observed by Hanna Serkowska; analysing the short story *Per funghi*, published in the same year as *Bagna i fiori e aspettami*, she observed how «nell'ottica della Ravera il femminismo politicizzato non sia valso a nulla, scontratosi con le vecchie, solide e evidentemente insuperabili barriere biologiche» (SERKOWSKA 2008, 149-158).¹⁷ In this regard, Susan Faludi's observation that postfeminism constitutes the backlash itself seems quite appropriate, especially considering that its main characteristic lies in the ability to define itself as an ironic critique of the feminist movement rather than a hostile response to it (in GAMBLE 2001, 38).

Aware of the dangers as well as the effects of her beauty on men, by the end of the novel Giò learns how to use her attractiveness to help herself out of difficult situations, as in the episode with the taxi driver in Barcelona («Ho cercato di convincere quello che mi ha poi accompagnata all'albergo che 50 dollari interi erano troppi per lui [...]. Mi sono lasciata palpare il seno»¹⁸) (RAVERA 1986, 69). Transitioning toward a postfeminist aesthetic, Ravera plays with the structure of the coming-of-age novel and bends it into a new shape which does not involve a change in social status for the main character, nor her recognition as part of a wider community of women. The individualistic attitude accompanies Giò from the opening until the end of the novel; what really changes in her is the understanding of her personal agency as a woman. At this point it is relevant to observe how the development of Ravera's protagonist appears as problematic as postfeminism itself. In her study of female agency, Patricia Mann argued that «women had long been aware of a male "sexual gaze" always ready to eroticize their presence» (MANN 1994, 9); the patriarchal system of values helped to develop gendered forms of social and sexual agency, and while male sexual agency has always been identified with desire, within this system of values women were given responsibility for recognizing this desire and consequently encouraging or avoiding it. Although the knowing use of this

‘power’ might help the individual in overcoming specific situations (such as that with the taxi driver for Giò), it still remains within the patriarchal hierarchies and structures without moving toward any form of liberation for women as an oppressed group.

In nineteenth-century fiction the options for female characters were only negative ones; either having to inhabit a repressive marriage or closing themselves into inwardness, a decision that often coincided with self-destruction, as for Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina (FELSKI 1989, 128-129). Itself a nineteenth-century story, *Little Women* ends with a series of marriages, even for the reluctant Jo. Feminist readers agree in their consideration of Jo’s marriage as a form of censorship for a character whose identity appears to be queer from the very beginning. While approaching Alcott’s classic, is relevant to keep in mind «how what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in a culture is constructed in terms of hegemony, of a cultural consensus about dominant values which produces overt restrictions» (PATRAKA 1993, 7). The disappointing ending of Alcott’s novel becomes, at this point, the only possible ending, probably the most convenient compromise for young women living at that specific time. This interpretation is supported by Alcott’s own revelation of her plan to portray Jo at the end of the novel as a «literary spinster» (SHOWALTER 1989, XIX), a destiny that she had to change for a more traditional marital ending owing to reader pressure on the publisher. Jo, nonetheless, does not marry for love: she marries out of intellectual affinity and for economic interest, which constitutes a «realistic feminist framework» for Alcott’s time (ibid. XXIII).

As already mentioned, Ravera’s *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* does not end with a marriage nor with a suicide: the spectacular closing of the book, with the sudden appearance of Giò’s mother and sisters armed with guns and ready to defeat the gangsters in order to reunite the family, overthrows the classical epilogue in which the female characters are mainly waiting for events to happen to them. The very same figure of the absent father in Alcott’s novel is in Ravera’s version someone to go to, rather than someone to be waiting for. The structure of the female coming-of-age story is replaced in this rewriting with a postfeminist version, projecting women’s agency toward the outside world and enriching the narrator’s voice with mass-cultural references. In this, as stated

by Felski, literature is used as an instrument of criticism and opposition against patriarchal representation of gender and social roles (FELSKI 1989, 128-129).

Bagna i fiori e aspettami occupies a transitional position in the evolution of feminist fiction in Italy. While on the one hand it represents the prevailing mood of disillusionment and backlash following the experiences of the seventies, it also stands as a link to the new feminist approaches of the nineties which only a few years later would blend mainstream and individualised forms of feminism into a «power feminism» (or Girl Power) that is «unapologetically sexual», «free-thinking», «pleasure-loving» and «self-assertive» (WOLF 1994, 149 -180; see also CUTER 2017). Ravera's protagonist, coherently with the whole novel, is halfway between openly engaged feminism (which refuses stereotyped femininity) and an individualistic, assertive attitude typical of the new economic environment (RICCI 2021, 76). In this, in *Bagna i fiori e aspettami* Giò appears to be moving toward a new model of femininity, that which will be advertised in girls' magazines after the seventies (MCROBBIE 1991, 55).

Conclusions

Ravera's reinterpretation of *Little Women* reflects upon the experiences of Italian feminist groups, recognising their importance and, at the same time, considering their limits. Giò Lazzarini, the Italian version of the classic's Jo March, is only nineteen years old at the beginning of the story. Until events related to the search for her own father involve her in a series of adventures across three continents, she has led a quiet life with her mother and her sisters in Rome and working as a secretary for a television station. The coming-of-age process accelerates as soon as the protagonist leaves home and faces the dangers and challenges awaiting her in the outside world as a woman. What can certainly be read as a novel of self-discovery (FELSKI 1989, 128-133) turns into something more complex when Giò understands herself not only as an individual but as a woman with specific agency. The succession of events will expose the protagonist to different forms of violence and sexual abuse at the hands of men, culminating in the rape scene that will take her virginity. Giò's reaction at this point is very significant: conscious of her attractiveness, she

starts using it to her own advantage by strategically turning the male gaze against the men who lay obstacles in her path.

Having left behind the political struggles of the seventies and the theoretical experiences of the early eighties, Ravera moves towards a postfeminist approach, which implies women's control of that very objectification criticised by the Italian writer, with the showbiz and porn industries becoming the main context of this new form of agency. Finally, Ravera's novel is also a recognition of the power of popular culture, where the reappropriation of female space starts with the language of the new media, with the aim of reaching a wider audience through the instruments of entertainment. Ten years later this attitude would be the core of third-wave feminism, internationally spreading the statements of 'Girl Power' (RICCI 2021, 76) through mainstream music, cinema and fashion.

Notes

¹ Among the many, see the theatre play *Little Women – the Tragedy* (1983) by the Lesbian Britches; the novel “Volevamo essere Jo” by Emilia Marasco (2016); and the Oscar-nominated film *Little Women* (2020) written and directed by Greta Gerwig.

² Translation into English: “Alcott criticised that feminine indistinctness, she showed four characters and we, as little girls, loved the idea of picking one of them, since one could be wise, one could be masculine and intellectual, one could be good (and therefore die young), and one could be flirtatious and seductive, and end up marrying the rich neighbour” (LIDIA RAVERA – BAGNA I FIORI E ASPETTAMI).

³ Translation into English: “postmodern” (RAVERA 1986, 7).

⁴ Translation into English: “I move my arms too much and I don’t like bags. I demand shoes that are no higher than two centimetres from the ground and, since I am tall, I tend to slightly curve my shoulders [...]. I don’t like perfumes apart from the good old English soap and I regard waxing epilation as a pre-civil practice” (RAVERA 1986, 13).

⁵ Translation into English: “The fact that I am good-looking, for instance, attracts and annoys them [the colleagues], but mainly it confuses them: good-looking girls, here, generally, are given more prestigious roles.[...] Good-looking girls don’t answer the phone. [...] I don’t want to be upgraded from being a simple soldier to being the sergeant’s babe. I aim to be a general. And while I wait for this role to be offered to me, I prefer to guard the phone, rather than using my feminine attributes.” (RAVERA 1986, 92-93).

⁶ Translation into English: “A house in Sardinia and a boat to get there” (RAVERA 1986, 3).

⁷ Translation into English: “A continuous coughing” (Ivi).

⁸ Translation into English: “alpaca pullover, English shoes, lace lingerie, novels published by Adelphi” (ibid., 10).

⁹ Translation into English: “Novel of becoming” (FORTINI AND BONO 2007).

¹⁰ Translation into English: “The sexual-political diary of two adolescents” (RAVERA 1976).

¹¹ Translation into English: “I was five years old when they used to talk about liberation from the obligation of being cute. My mother used to give us little trains and space-guns as presents. They were different times” (ibid., 93).

¹² Translation into English: “He touches my elbow and he lets me know I need to eat” (ibid., 29).

¹³ Translation into English: “He touches my dress [...]. No, I don’t want a ride nor a coffee, nor a guide through the Ramblas cafes. I want to be left alone to my thoughts” (ibid., 32).

¹⁴ Translation into English: “the third man who looks after me today” (ibid., 35); “annoyingly protective” (ibid., 38).

¹⁵ Translation into English: “I walk stiff, moving only the eyes’ pupils, my head retired in a defensive position from the unpredictable male, the snail-like collar lifted up to hide lips and curves” (ibid., 61).

¹⁶ Translation into English: “Gegè [the rapist] manages to touch my elbow by moving his hand along the window. He has an unmistakable touch: as if he was looking for the clitoris in the arm’s bend” (ibid., 139).

¹⁷ Translation into English: “while for Irigaray and Diotima thinkers the female body was the source of writing, for Ravera body and physiology are a source of torment” (SERKOWSKA 2008, 149-158).

¹⁸ Translation into English: “I have been trying to persuade the man who drove me back to the hotel that 50 dollars was too much for him [...]. I let him touch my breast” (RAVERA 1986, 69).

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Rebecca Bauman

Beyond *bambole*: Female Friendship in Italian Transnational Television

Abstract

Recent television programming in Italy has begun to focus on the themes of female friendship and girlhood, moving from a long history of traditionally male-centered narratives towards stories that privilege female subjectivity. This article analyzes this recent trend by looking at three different programs: the HBO/Rai adaptation of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels *L'amica geniale*; the Netflix production *Baby*, based on the 2013 Rome teen prostitution scandal; and the web series *SKAM Italia*, based on the international series that originated in Norway. Despite their apparent distinctions in terms of target audiences, genre, and style, all three shows place the friendship between adolescent girls as their primary narrative concern. Through analyses of each series, we can see how these representations employ similar tropes in their depictions of girlhood and friendship, such as the mirroring and doubling of the female protagonists; the presence of the love triangle; the configuration of female friendship in relation to gay male characters; and the suggestion of potential lesbian desire. This article meditates on the possible motivations for this newfound focus on female subjectivity as a potential strategy for marketing Italian television worldwide.

The opening episode of *L'amica geniale* (HBO/RAI FICTION, 2018-present) depicts the initiation of a complex and intimate friendship between two child protagonists, Lila and Lenù, as they are growing up on the outskirts of Naples. Based on Elena Ferrante's bestselling tetralogy popularly known as the Neapolitan Novels, *L'amica geniale* places Lila and Lenù's friendship at the nucleus of the emotional thrust of the drama and configures their relationship as the primary vehicle for self-articulation of the two characters. This first episode of the series, entitled *Bambole*, dramatizes the initial attraction of the two young girls as they are drawn to each other by a shared recognition of their superior intelligence and scholastic abilities, qualities that separate them from the other children of their dreary, working-class milieu. Lila and Lenù's reciprocal admiration, however, does not preclude each girl's quest to establish their superior will: in the culminating event of the episode, as the girls are engaged in a typical form of feminine play exchanging their treasured dolls, Lila (the «geniale»¹ of the pair) throws Lenù's beloved doll into a basement window, a provocative act to which Lenù responds in kind. This aggressive challenge becomes a template for their future friendship, which will last long into adulthood and will be characterized by periods of profound interdependence, competitiveness, and affection.

The jettisoning of the dolls also holds a symbolic function: as the two protagonists confront the realities of female adolescence and adulthood, their disposal of one of girlhood's most stereotypically-gendered toys symbolizes their mutual desire to seek autonomy in a deeply patriarchal environment. Readers of Ferrante's novels, to which the television adaptation is generally faithful, will not be surprised at the placement of the *bambole* event at the center of the opening episode. The discarding of the dolls, however, also becomes an appealing metaphor with which to approach the topic of this essay, that is, the evermore-prominent narrative focus the theme of girlhood has gained in recent Italian transnational television. After decades of Italian television production that focused primarily upon variety and quiz shows, *sceneggiati*, and narratives of great men in history, the recent addition of original programming featuring female protagonists and their relationships with other girls is a unique development on Italian screens. Danielle Hipkins has already observed this phenomenon in contemporary Italian film comedy,

noting «a growing sense of teen female agency» (HIPKINS 2015, 252) in such productions. The transition of the theme of girlhood friendships to the small screen is a trend that has appeared more recently, but significantly it is a motif that appears to transcend traditional demographic limitations, forming the basis of programming aimed at elite and broadly popular audiences alike and spanning the range of high-to-low-brow productions. This article looks closely at the portrayal of adolescent female friendship in three otherwise-unrelated Italian series: the much-acclaimed *L'amica geniale*; the Netflix production *Baby* (2018-2020); and the web series *SKAM Italia* (TIMVISION, 2018-present). Despite their apparent distinctions in terms of target audiences, genre, and style, the plots of these series are all center upon friendship between adolescent girls and the vicissitudes and rewards of female intimacy. The new visibility of female narratives suggests Italian television's self-conscious effort to respond to the #MeToo movement and ally itself with the public investigation of female experience, particularly in regards to sexuality and gendered identity formation, themes that play out prominently in these depictions of adolescent girls. Yet in the analysis of how these programs elaborate this theme of girlhood and friendship, the question arises as to what extent viewers can be heartened by this increased focus on female subjectivities. Just as Lenù and Lila make a grand gesture by discarding their dolls, is Italian television programming indicating a willingness to go beyond *bambole* and embrace more nuanced visions of female adolescence?

L'amica geniale

Perhaps most distinct amongst of the three series is *L'amica geniale*, an international co-production between Rai Fiction and HBO that in many ways is further evidence of quality television production in Italy that reaffirms the Italian television industry's transnational turn towards series intended to resonate with both domestic and global audiences (BARRA AND SCAGLIONI 2016; DUNLEAVY 2020). This collaboration constitutes a significant step forward for the Rai network, signaling its determination to move beyond its history of producing predictable middle-brow fiction that speak primarily to Italian audiences and instead propelling the network to the pantheon of artistically-

nuanced series typically associated with the internationally-oriented productions of pay networks. HBO's shared investment in the project reflects the network's recent interest in the production and distribution of European content in the original language as well as prestige television's new emphasis on literary adaptation. Yet the portfolio of HBO originals does not suggest that a series focusing primarily upon the friendship between two girls would be anything other than a commercial risk. While there are precedents, particularly in American television, for series in which two female friends occupy the center of the narrative, television shows that foreground female friendship either belong to popular genres, such as comedy, science fiction, or police procedural, or else they must rely upon recognizable female stars, a phenomenon that has remained consistent since first observed by Lynn Spangler in one of the earliest studies on female friendship on television (SPANGLER 1989, 2003). *L'amica geniale* does not fit such precedents: as a drama that critics often situate within the tradition of Italian Neorealism, the series specifically seeks authenticity through the casting of unknown actors, and unlike other Italian productions that appeal to international audiences through picturesque visions of Italy, *L'amica geniale* avoids a focus on recognizable landmarks and opts for a rigorous use of Neapolitan dialect. Certainly the show's literary pedigree was the most significant factor contributing to the production of *L'amica geniale* and HBO's investment in collaborating with Rai Fiction. The series' reception was primed by the success of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels before the show's premiere in 2018, so much so that its marketing campaign was launched in the US with a monumental billboard in the middle of New York City's Times Square that featured silhouettes of the two girls holding hands while running through an indistinct Neapolitan cityscape.

As this billboard suggests, *L'amica geniale* consistently affirms the relationship between the two female protagonists as the most compelling element of the drama. The series establishes the bond between the two girls when it begins with a flash-forward to the moment when the sexagenarian Lenù discovers that Lila, with whom she has been out of touch for years, has disappeared, apparently abandoning her family and destroying evidence of her past. As the older Lenù sits down and begins to write her memories, we hear her voiceover narration that will accompany the rest of the series, echoing the

first-person voice of the original novels and affirming that the female perspective will be dominant. This will not just be Lenù's story, however, for in this opening monologue she adopts the second person to address the absent Lila and proclaim that she will write both hers and Lila's memories of their past, using all of the confidences that Lila has shared over the years. In this way the series assures a dual female subjectivity in which the girlhood friendship is the essential link between the two women's sometimes diverging narratives.

The first two seasons of *L'amica geniale* cover the first two novels of Ferrante's tetralogy, which follow Lila and Lenù's childhood up through their adolescence, when Lila becomes courted by many young men in the neighborhood and Lenù harbors a long crush on her classmate, the disinterested intellectual Nino Sarratore. Throughout the years the girls sustain each other through the respective abuse of their families and encourage each other in their intellectual pursuits, even attempting to write a novel together as an affirmation of their shared literary ambitions. In the second season Lenù continues her secondary education and pursues a potential romance with Nino, while Lila is unhappily married to the abusive Stefano, the brutish son of a Camorra loan shark. The young women's relationship is strained to the breaking point however when Lila suddenly embarks on a dangerous but passionate adulterous affair with Nino. This breach of the girls' friendship serves as a particularly painful form of betrayal for Lenù, yet the impasse it creates is inextricably related to the continuous push-and-pull of the girls' ongoing intellectual as well as sexual rivalry.

The love triangle between Lila-Nino-Lenù references a long literary tradition of complicated female friendships, particularly in Victorian literature, in which heterosexual romance threatens the homosocial bond shared by women. Yet in many respects their shared fascination with the cerebral Nino configures him as a surrogate for the two girl's quest for intellectual status in a culture where female erudition is generally disdained. The mutual object of their sexual desire becomes an example of the doubling of the two female characters and their continued efforts to become more like each other. For Lenù in particular her own sexual activity is inspired by Lila, whose lack of inhibition to act upon her desires inspires the timorous Lenù to model herself after her friend. This is already apparent in the series' first episode when Lenù throws Lila's doll into

the basement window, asserting «Quello che fai tu faccio io»². This becomes the mantra of their adolescent development, and in fact it is on Lila's wedding night that Lenù attempts to have sex with her boyfriend Antonio, a quest inspired not by romantic passion but by her effort to be more like Lila, as the voiceover explains, «Volevo essere penetrata, volevo dire a Lila al suo ritorno, “anch'io non sono più vergine, *quello che fai tu faccio io*, non riuscirai a lasciarmi indietro”»³ (emphasis mine). The confusion between Lenù's own sexual activity and her desire to be like Lila, or to not be abandoned by her, becomes further entangled in a series of episodes that takes place while the young women are vacationing on Ischia. Here Lenù finds happiness not only through the presence of Nino but by the creation of an intimate triad with him and Lila, a temporary state of bliss that inevitably becomes ruptured once Lila decides to consummate her romantic interest in Nino. At that moment Lenù too decides to lose her virginity with Nino's lecherous father Donato, and it is unclear the degree to which Donato serves as a substitute for Nino or if Lenù is attempting to emulate Lila's own physical experiences.

That Lenù and Lila wish to become absorbed within one another is rendered visually through the series, not just in the way the girls are frequently shown in close-ups facing each other in profile, but also in shots in which one scene will fade-out from the face of one only to overlap with a fade-in to the face of the other. More noticeably, one scene features a shot with Lila's profile overlapped with a head-on framing of Lenù, a replica of the famous still from the Ingmar Bergman film *Persona* (1966). Such framings are reminiscent of how Lila and Lenù's intimacy channels the way the protagonists of Bergman's film seek to reinvent their personalities within each other, both returning to and negating their past memories. Like the protagonists of *Persona*, both Lila and Lenù explore and are challenged by their experiences of sexuality and motherhood, and they use each other to filter and reflect on their experiences. What results is a depiction of female friendship as a volatile admixture of rejection and desire.

Baby

Female friendship and the vicissitudes of girlhood may be a unique recipe for success in a big-budget dramatic series like *L'amica geniale*, but it is a staple element of teen drama and is frequently the subject of series that focus upon adolescence and coming-of-age. This is the modality of *Baby*, which premiered in 2018 and became the second Netflix original produced in Italy following the success of the crime show *Suburra* (2017-2020). Just as *L'amica geniale* shares a gritty Neapolitan setting with *Gomorra la serie*, *Baby* mimics *Suburra* by capitalizing on a portrayal of the decadent and secret transgressions that take place below the glitzy image of contemporary Rome. Unlike *L'amica geniale*, which is indebted to its literary patrimony, *Baby* originates in a *fatto di cronaca*: the infamous «baby squillo» scandal of 2013 involving two girls from the Parioli district of Rome who became involved in an underage sex ring. While the subject matter lends itself to prurient representations, the series steers its focus toward the psychological preconditions that lead the two female protagonists, Chiara and Ludovica, to prostitution as they simultaneously forge an intimate, intensely allied emotional bond with each other.

At first glance *Baby* seems to emulate other popular series that focus upon the misdeeds of wealthy teenagers behaving badly, including *Gossip Girl* (US, 2007-2012), *13 Reasons Why* (US, 2017-2020) and *Elite* (Spain, 2018-present). The series' up-to-the-minute electronic soundtrack, fashionable costumes, and reliance on familiar narrative tropes of teen drama, including romantic infatuation, drug use, parental neglect, bullying, gossip, and rivalry, have made it a must-see show for teenage girls in particular. Yet *Baby*'s slowly developed character portraits and in-depth exploration of the inner worlds of two troubled young women also promises a greater crossover appeal that could intrigue older viewers, effectively combining the aesthetics of stylish, sexy teen romance with finely wrought drama in order to overcome the limitations of the teen series and reach a wider audience.

In its opening scene, which features a series of establishing shots of the Roman skyline, *Baby* announces it is rooted in a female point of view as we hear the voiceover of Chiara, a wealthy, attractive, and bright private school student, warning that the privileged lives she and her peers lead mask a desperate internal malaise: «Se hai sedici anni e vivi nel quartiere più bello di Roma, sei

fortunato. Il nostro è il migliore dei mondi possibili. Siamo immersi in questo acquario bellissimo, ma sogniamo il mare. Ecco perché per sopravvivere abbiamo bisogno di una vita segreta».⁴ The scene cuts to Chiara waking up in bed with a teenage boy, Nico, whom she quickly ushers out of her apartment before her parents can see. The shame in the relationship, we soon learn, is not only that Nico has a steady girlfriend but that he is also the brother of Chiara's best friend Camilla, who is unaware of the affair. This secrecy as betrayal of the two girls' friendship establishes a significant theme of the series, as Chiara and Camilla's eventual falling out will be supplanted by a deeper and more emotionally dependent bond between Chiara and Ludovica, which develops precisely as they become drawn into their own secret world of prostitution.

Similar to the dyadic construction of the female friends in *L'amica geniale*, the first season of *Baby* focuses upon the parallels between best friends Camilla and Chiara as intellectual, social, and athletic equals. In the first episode they are seen running together head-to-head during their track team practice, and we soon learn they are both applying for an opportunity to study in the United States in the upcoming year. Unlike Lila and Lenù, the two girls appear comfortable with their mutual success, but when Chiara's affair with Nico becomes public knowledge, their friendship becomes strained. The emergence of a love triangle causes a further rift in their closeness as Camilla begins to pursue a relationship with Damiano, a new student and a stereotypical «bad boy» on whom Chiara harbors a crush. The misfit Damiano however is more drawn to the emotionally fragile Chiara, and he will soon leave Camilla to form a relationship with Chiara. Ultimately though it is not the rivalry over Damiano that challenges the girls' friendship, but because Chiara's compulsion towards sexual transgression contrasts to Camilla's confidently feminist ethos. In fact Chiara's newfound friendship with Ludovica is cemented when the latter is humiliated by the public viewing of a sex video in which she is participant, an incident that inspires Chiara's pity yet also draws her closer to Ludovica. By contrast, Camilla perceives the incident as a betrayal to female progress: «Ecco come buttare secoli di lotta femminista con un video».⁵ The series thus establishes two potential friendship paths for Chiara: the rational, progressive one embodied by Camilla, and the sexualized, retrograde one that is symbolized by Ludovica. As it soon becomes clear, it will be the latter alliance that will

prevail and form the most consistent emotional connection throughout the series.

SKAM Italia

Another teen-oriented program that is centered upon female friendship is the web series *SKAM Italia*, the Italian remake of the popular Norwegian program. The series was one of the first productions of the streaming platform TIMVision, and it adopts a uniquely agile form of distribution that is clearly oriented towards a teenage demographic. Rather than being streamed in full-length episodes, the series originally premiered by dropping individual scenes at random moments throughout the months of the first season, each scene bearing a time and date stamp that reflected both the moment in which the scene was supposed to be occurring as well as the time that the viewer was given access. A prime example of transmedia storytelling, characters on the show have profiles on Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp that mirror and embellish scenes from the series so that fans can follow the characters beyond the temporal restrictions of the show.

Whereas *L'amica geniale* and *Baby* focus primarily on the interrelationships of two female leads, *SKAM Italia* takes a choral approach, looking at the extended friendships of a group of students at the Liceo Kennedy in Rome and alternating the perspective and focus on a different character each season. However, the thread that underlines the series is the enduring friendship amongst a group of five girls, a crew that becomes known as «Le matte»,⁶ and as each girl engages with her own personal struggles the female chorus is used as a means of support and affirmation. Just like in *L'amica geniale* and *Baby*, the first episode of the show is inaugurated by a female voice, who tells us: «Ore...centinaia, migliaia di ore, a non fare niente, a cercare di piacere agli altri».⁷ While the unidentified girl continues to speak about the futility and frustrations of teen existence, we see a montage of handheld footage showing various characters from the program clowning around and laughing. Like in *Baby*, we are given a sense of contrast between the outward appearance of carefree teen life that masks a more profound angst. The amateur quality of the imagery also gives a sense of immediacy and familiarity, encouraging audiences

to imagine that they themselves could be the ones filming these friends with their own mobile phones.

This sense of immediacy and connection between viewers and characters, reiterated through the social media engagement that occurs simultaneous to the unfolding of the series, also explains the democratic narrative strategy of the *SKAM* enterprise. Yet the transition from character to character retains friendship as one of the key themes, and in season 1 it is female friendship in particular that is the primary source of drama for the protagonist, Eva. The opening episode begins with Eva sitting outside the high school with her boyfriend Giovanni as they discuss their respective coursework, until they are soon joined by a mutual friend Martino who ruptures the intimacy. Having established the couple as the central feature of the show and hinted at Eva's insecurity about Giovanni's attentions, we see a slow-motion shot of Eva watching two girls pass nearby. Eva attempts to wave timidly to the girls, in response to which one of them, her former best friend Laura, just smirks, while the other girl gives Eva the middle finger. The use of slow-motion of this shot, which then cuts to a close-up of Eva's crestfallen face, emphasizes this moment as emblematic of Eva's primary conflict: she is jealous of Giovanni's spending time with his friends because she herself does not have a strong female network, and she instead suffers overt hostility from Laura and other girls for reasons that will only be explained toward the end of the season.

As the program progresses it will continue to center upon the integration of Eva into a new circle of girlfriends, who will become the sounding board for her relationship issues but also her primary source of social interaction. Similar to how *L'amica geniale* includes as a primary narrative thread Lenù's decades-long attraction to Nino Sarratore, season 1 of *SKAM Italia* also places the love affair between Giovanni and Eva as the central narrative feature, and the season will culminate in Eva's decision to definitively terminate their relationship. Yet as viewers soon learn, Eva's preoccupation with Giovanni's suspected inconstancy is really masking a much more tortured internal struggle, which is her guilt over having started a sexual affair with Giovanni while he was dating her best friend, Laura. The most dramatic scene in the series occurs not in the final episode when Eva and Giovanni break up, but two episodes prior with Eva's long-awaited confrontation with Laura. Here a tearful Eva corners a

reticent Laura in a bathroom and breaks down as she recounts her initial loneliness at having been the new girl at school, and her joy that Laura, «la ragazza più figa della classe»⁸, had befriended her. As she confesses to Laura: «Io ti ho sempre ammirata...sei stata la migliore amica che io abbia mai avuto. E ancora adesso il pensiero di aver distrutto tutto mi fa stare malissimo».⁹ The reconciliation between the two girls allows Eva a space in which she can make peace with her past rivalries and even to form new female friendships. In fact immediately following this conversation Eva befriends Alice, another classmate unhappy with the state of her relationship who invites Eva to a «superfemminista» party to celebrate female singlehood. The reparation of female bonds is thus simultaneous with an increased independence from heterosexual romance, and the final scene of the season shows Eva, who has recently broken up with Giovanni, happily dancing and singing with her girlfriends while Giovanni and his friends look on. In this way *SKAM Italia* manages to eventually sublimate the heterosexual love plot in favor of a more sustained affirmation of the value of female friendship.

Mirroring Bodies and Female Intimacy

As we can see, female friendship becomes the dominant narrative feature in all three programs, and despite their many stylistic differences all three of these series employ similar tropes in their depictions of girlhood intimacies. First is the thematic use of mirrors, reflecting, and doubling amongst the female protagonists, both literally and figuratively. Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson observe that the mirror metaphor is used to portray how young women formulate their ideals of femininity through the gaze of the female friend, which in a psychoanalytic framework suggests that girls are not just incomplete in relation to men, but are in fact incomplete without their female friendships (APTER and JOSSELSOON 1999). This doubling also suggests that the girlfriends can exchange places, or are Janus-faced sides of the same coin. This kind of doubling is also achieved in the way these series juxtapose the female characters as light and dark. *Baby* capitalizes on the visual contrast between the blonde Chiara (whose name is hardly accidental) and the raven-haired Ludovica, oppositions that become played out as well in the categorization of

the girls' personalities. Chiara is initially presented as the personification of adolescent success: she is from a well-to-do family, popular at school, an exemplary student and a member of the track team. Ludovica, on the other hand, is academically challenged and lives in financially precarious circumstances with her single mother who receives little support from Ludovica's absent father. These types of contrasts appear as well in the personalities of Lila and Lenù in *L'amica geniale*, again with the casting of a dark-haired, olive-skinned Lila who is a visual contrast to the light-haired, blue-eyed Lenù. While both girls have similar economic and familial backgrounds, Lenù receives parental support to continue in her studies, whereas Lila must educate herself in secret despite the exigencies of her work obligations and her early marriage and motherhood. The *SKAM Italia* girls are also depicted through physical and emotional contrasts as well: of the three protagonists who each have a season dedicated to their narratives, the red-headed Eva also struggles with school, in contrast to the slim, dark-haired Eleonora who lives a regimented, well-ordered existence, and the strident Sana, who is a deeply religious Muslim and appears almost exclusively in dark clothing and a hijab. The other friends who complete the quintet include the ditzy, sexually available blonde Silvia and the heavy-set, playful Fede, two secondary characters whose main functions are to complement the triad and provide comic relief.

Danielle Hipkins observes the dialectical representation of female teens in categories of good girls or bad girls is omnipresent in Italian narratives onscreen, but also notes that combining or reversing these attributes via the trope of friendship may in fact enable a potential destabilizing of traditionally Manichean depictions of female adolescents on screen: «[I]n the wake of a postfeminist proliferation of depictions of female friendship, we witness much more attention to the potentially risky, or powerful possibilities of female bonds. One reason why we should consider carefully depictions of female friendship is for their potential to counteract the privileging of the lone, 'smart' girl» (HIPKINS 2015, 253). Hipkins goes on to wonder «whether depictions of female friendship can trouble that splitting», suggesting that binary categories of female comportment, which she observes is reaffirmed in some Italian feminist thought, are inherently limiting (IBID). If this is the case, the breakdown of oppositional depictions of female identity could be one of the

merits of the recent depictions of female adolescents in these television series. Indeed as we see in *Baby*, such inversions occur quite easily, as «good girl» Chiara is the friend who becomes most deeply attached to sex work whereas «bad girl» Ludovica begins to extricate herself much earlier, and in fact at the end of the series she is shown happily continuing her post-secondary studies in Paris (notably, in the company of another female friend), while Chiara is serving out a sentence in a youth detention center. While Lila may be configured as the more transgressive figure in *L'amica geniale*, Lenù's at times duplicitous nature comes forth in her dishonesty both with her boyfriend Antonio and with Lila herself; the girls' respective affairs with Nino Sarratore (which will be explored in future iterations of the series) also indicate that their positions can be more easily inverted than their personalities suggest. In *SKAM Italia* the alternation of narratives amongst the female protagonists allows space for them to attain the qualities of their friends. This becomes most evident in season 3 in which the «good girl» Eleonora begins to date Edoardo, Silvia's one-time lover, in another apparent rupture of the bonds of female friendship. In that series Eleonora's sense of self control is challenged after she is drugged at a party and awakens naked in bed with Edoardo's predatory brother. Terrified at the implications of the event, she goes with her girlfriends to seek medical advice at a clinic, and what follows is a wordless scene played out in slow-motion in which the viewer sees close-ups of a distraught Eleonora as she sits surrounded by the other girls who physically comfort her as they stand behind her. This scene mirrors a similar one in season 1 in which Silvia, afraid that she is pregnant, is taken to a woman's clinic by the same group of friends, who also stand behind her in solidarity and stroke her hair throughout her doctor's interview. Both scenes create parallels between previously disparate female personalities while also emphasizing a vision of female unity and friendship.

In all three programs simplistic oppositional portrayals of adolescent girls are shown to be unstable, with friendship being the one constant that prevails despite twists and inversions in character and storyline. Seen at another angle, the dialectical (or at times multiple) portrayals of girls in Italian television may have the possibility of working through more simplistic dichotomies to add complexity and texture to previously static engagement with female subjectivities. While these contrasts can be played out at a narrative level in

conflict and rivalry, they are also accompanied by equally if not more ubiquitous representations of female affection and love. In *L'amica geniale*, Lenù's voiceover narrates how often she not only attempts to emulate Lila, but the ways in which she wants to share her life's experiences with her. In *Baby* Ludovica and Chiara declare their affection frequently and with increasing intensity, as in the final season when Ludovica declares to Chiara: «Non sai quanto ti voglio bene».¹⁰ In *SKAM Italia* the girls at various turns are given opportunities to confirm their loyalty and dependence upon the female group, as in season 4 when a tearful Sana apologizes to the rest of the girlfriends for having alienated them: «Avevo paura di perdere la cosa più bella che mi era capitata...voi».¹¹ Such declarations give voice to the value of friendship as both a sustaining element in the lives of girls as well as a source of joy and passion.

In addition to the reinforcement of the emotional investment in female friendship, these series also display a consistent vision of female physical intimacy, an element that at times carries homoerotic undertones. In *L'amica geniale* and *Baby* in particular the intensity of the bonds between the female protagonists is expressed physically as well as verbally. In *L'amica geniale* we often see close-ups of the girls' hands or faces whenever they touch each other and embrace, and there is a moment of implied physical intimacy in one scene in which Lila encourages Lenù to take a bubble bath in her new apartment, and as Lenù lies in the tub enjoying this novel experience we see Lila languorously trailing her hands in the water as she sits nearby. *Baby* features numerous scenes in which Ludovica and Chiara embrace, strike sexy poses for each other to photograph, and lie together in bed in their undergarments while cuddling. In *SKAM Italia* lesbianism is not as overtly suggested in the relationships between the main group of friends, but the girls are extremely at ease with each other physically, often sharing a bed, undressing in front of each other, wearing each other's clothing, and cuddling together. The notion of female-female love as an alternative to heterosexual romance is raised, albeit sardonically, in season 1 when Alice invites Eva and her friends to a party for single girls who are «incazzate con il genere maschile»¹² and Eva comments: «Detto così sembra un po' serata da lelle!»,¹³ to which Alice responds: «Chi te l'ha detto che non sia la soluzione?».¹⁴ While the girls laugh jokingly, the comment gives voice to a

possibility that the series otherwise excludes from its depiction of female relationships.

While the girls in these shows all engage in a physicality that invokes lesbian intimacy, either as an affirmation of their emotional closeness or an open-ended suggestion of a potential homosexual attraction, these programs do not promote an overtly queer reading of female attachment. In fact all three shows resolutely affirm the heterosexual status of their female characters by focusing upon their female subjects' continued preoccupation with romantic relationships with males, even if ultimately those relationships are destined to terminate. All three shows also employ a strategy wherein a queer reading is rerouted by the presence of a gay male character who befriends the female protagonists and often acts as a confidant and go-between for the female friends: Alfonso in *L'amica geniale*; Martino and Filippo in *SKAM Italia*; and Fabio in *Baby*. All of these gay male characters act as a counterpoint to the more noxious forms of masculine domination that the female characters experience, offering the possibility of a female-male bond that is an alternative to the disappointments and, at times, abuses that the girls experience in their relationships with heterosexual men. These figures also reiterate the trend of cinematic and televisual depictions of straight female-gay male friendships, a phenomenon that Kathryn Hummel observes began in the 1980s and increased in the 21st century (HUMMEL 2011). Hummel interprets such depictions as threatening heteronormative constructions and opening possibilities for female transgression. However, while the dyadic construction of these friendships may be commonplace in contemporary film and television, it is not clear what these friendships indicate when they are configured as part of a triad that includes two straight female friends. What is also noticeably absent in all three series is the «safe eroticism», to use Baz Dreisinger's term, that characterizes the physical intimacy between the straight woman and her gay best friend (DREISINGER 2000). Indeed, in these three series the gay male friend almost appears as a decoy for the more intense friendship between the female characters. In this way, the triadic appearance of the gay male character in these series may constitute an inversion of Eve Sedgwick's observations of the literary trope of the erotic triangle in which the straight woman becomes a medium through which is channeled male-male homosexual desire (SEDGWICK 1985).

Here instead the non-heterosexual male appears to serve a similar function in mediating the female-female homosocial bond and providing an outlet for homosexuality that would relieve pressure from the lesbian subtext that may be implicit in these friendships. The resulting effect leaves open to varying interpretations of these series' use of the gay man: in one scenario, the simultaneous suggestion and negation of lesbian attraction affirms the presence of a lesbian continuum, to adopt Adrienne Rich's term, of female intimacy and love; in the second case, it signals a more regressive tendency in Italian popular television to stifle the possibility of female-female sexual desire.¹⁵

Conclusions

As such tropes and thematic overlaps demonstrate, these recent televisual meditations on girlhood and friendship provoke questions about why female subjectivity is becoming more prominent on Italian screens. One explanation could be found in the chronology of these three shows, all of which premiered in 2018. Just one year prior to their release the #MeToo movement had reached peak visibility not only in mainstream news platforms but also throughout social media, gaining currency with adult women and girls around the world (REMICK 2018). The focus on girlfriends at this particular moment suggests a deliberately female-centered response to #MeToo on Italian television, and an attempt to correct the movement's tepid or at times even hostile reception in Italy (GIOMI 2018). In the case of *L'amica geniale*, then-head of Rai Fiction Eleonora Andreatta affirmed that female subjectivity was vital to the series and that state television networks had an ethical impetus to address these issues, when she noted that Ferrante's work constituted «one of the most powerful and universal stories of female friendship» and that by adapting Ferrante's books to television Rai was affirming that this series «belongs to the realm of what European public service television does» (VIVARELLI 2017).

The didactic imperative of directly addressing issues pertaining to girls also lies at the heart of *SKAM Italia* and is expressed in the publicized objective of the Norwegian original, which is «to help 16-year-old girls strengthen their self-esteem through dismantling taboos, making them aware of interpersonal

mechanisms and showing them the benefits of confronting their fears» (quoted in SHANKE 2021, 60). This affirmation of the series' intention to relate specifically to female viewers in particular is notable, considering that at least one season is devoted to male protagonists. The stated intention of *SKAM* to speak to issues confronting young women is felt throughout its international iterations, and *SKAM Italia* recycles the narratives of the Norwegian original to mirror the complex issues teens face while also offering positive resolutions, all of which are found in the affirmation of friendship and peer solidarity.

There is no such salutary objective apparent with the series *Baby*, a series that is intended to appeal a broad range of Netflix subscribers. Indeed the program takes a nihilistic approach in its negative vision of the corrupt and hypocritical adult world for which the teens are preparing, even though the series' more optimistic conclusion suggests a path towards self-acceptance and self-determination for the female protagonists. The show's depiction of sex work also received sharp criticism from organizations such as the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, which argued that *Baby* glorified teen sex trafficking (NCSE 2018). Certainly the glamorization of the female stars, along with the emphasis on their fashionable clothing and makeup, does provide a more seductive depiction of the high-class milieu in which their sexual exploitation takes place. However, *Baby* takes pains to elaborate the psychological motivations that would lead the protagonists to sex work, placing emphasis on parental neglect, social ostracism, and masculine exploitation as factors that contribute to Chiara and Ludovica's slow but inexorable fall into prostitution. Indeed the only scenes that depict the girls as joyful, carefree, and emotionally gratified are the ones in which they are alone together. In this way, *Baby* could be providing a similarly didactic approach by privileging Chiara and Ludovica's friendship as proof of the show's validation of female perspectives. As one of the show's writer's affirmed, the series is «a story about love, not prostitution» (TANNENBAUM 2018).

The success of these three series both domestically and with international audiences reflects growing representation of female subjectivities not just on Italian screens but in television production worldwide. While television narratives that emphasize female solidarity and intimacy may form a welcome response to the otherwise hegemonic presence of male narratives on television,

there is the danger that girlhood and female friendship in Italian television may be further examples of the marketing and consumption of postfeminist sensibilities in a global televisual marketplace. Alison Winch has astutely observed the way advertisers across digital media exploit the trope of female friendship to «promote the intimacy of female networks and the pleasures of belonging to a ‘we’» (WINCH 2015, 230). As she warns, these images are harnessed to affirm a white, heteronormative vision of female identity, one that rests upon the visual exploitation of the female image and whose end result is to stimulate in women and girls a desire to consume: «Emotions and relationalities such as identification, jealousy and rivalry are encouraged in the context of promotional cultures as desirable and strategic forms of relating» (234). Although these female-centered productions are not overtly complicit in marketing tie-ins, they can reflect the troublesome connection between girlhood intimacies as a new form of branding strategy. As Martinussen, Wetherell and Braun warn, «the radical potential of friendships between women can be lost when female togetherness is performed through tropes of postfeminist empowerment and risks instead becoming a significant part of the machinery of contemporary patriarchal capitalism» (MARTINUSSEN, WETHERELL, BRAUN 2020, 5). Therefore, even as *L'amica geniale*, *Baby* and *SKAM Italia* rely on images of female self-determination, and at times even invoke terms such as «femminismo» within their narratives, it is difficult to be completely heartened by the preponderance of female friendships on Italian screens and to accept it as proof of a more genuine interest in female-centered narratives, especially as the calculated repositioning of Italian televisual narratives came at a moment when the Italian film industry was itself coming under attack for its treatment of women both onscreen and off (O'RAWE 2018). So even if we have progressed beyond *bambole*, one question that remains is how committed Italian television is to exploring female friendship in a neoliberal, postfeminist age.

Notes

¹ The published English translation of the book is *My Brilliant Friend*.

² «Whatever you do, I do too». This and all subsequent translations from the Italian are mine.

³ «I wanted to be penetrated, I wanted to say to Lila when she came back: «I'm not a virgin anymore either; *whatever you do, I do too*, you won't manage to leave me behind».

⁴ «If you're sixteen and you live in the most beautiful neighborhood in Rome, you're lucky. Ours is the best of all possible words. We're swimming in this beautiful aquarium, but we dream of the sea. That's why in order to survive we need a secret life».

⁵ «And that's how to throw away centuries of feminist struggle with one video».

⁶ «The Crazy Girls».

⁷ «Hours...hundreds, thousands of hours, of doing nothing, of trying to please others».

⁸ «The coolest girl in class»

⁹ «I've always admired you...you were the best friend I'd ever had. And even now the thought of having ruined everything makes me feel awful».

¹⁰ «You have no idea how much I care about you».

¹¹ «I was afraid of losing the greatest thing that had happened to me—you».

¹² «Pissed off with the male sex».

¹³ «Said that way it sounds like a dyke party!».

¹⁴ «Whoever said that might not be the answer?».

¹⁵ A unique exception, and one worthy of further analysis, is the representation of Sofia, the lesbian best friend of the female protagonist Summer, in *Summertime* (NETFLIX, 2020-present). However, even in that case the series makes it clear that any romantic attraction between the two girls is strictly one-sided.

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