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**Of Mothers and Sisters:  
Donatella Di Pietrantonio's *L'Arminuta***

*Abstract*

Set in Abruzzo, an Italian region seldom represented in the work of contemporary Italian women writers, Donatella Di Pietrantonio's *L'Arminuta* (2017) is a compelling novel recounting the narrator-protagonist's difficult journey toward self-realization following two successive abandonments by her birth and adoptive mothers. When her adoptive mother abruptly returns her to her biological family at age thirteen (the second rejection), an empowering bond with her younger sister Adriana, an extraordinarily resourceful and caring ten-year old, allows the protagonist to survive her new, hostile surroundings. Despite having garnered popular acclaim as well as multiple literary prizes, *L'Arminuta* has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. This article brings overdue attention to this neglected novel. Its first two sections analyze how language and modes of communication articulate the development of the protagonist's identity and her evolving relationships with her two mothers. The following section engages with philosopher Adriana Cavarero's theories on motherhood, which she bases on a rereading of the Demeter myth. I argue that the failed mother-daughter relationships portrayed in *L'Arminuta* are the result of patriarchal social structuring that, in different ways, governs the mothers' respective experiences of motherhood and prevents the formation of validating bonds with their daughter. The last section of the article takes up Cavarero's notion of "inclination" to show how Adriana's crucial acts of care toward her older sister enable her both to endure her double abandonment and carve a path toward self-determination. *L'Arminuta* is a powerful and necessary novel that brings to the fore the complexities of maternal experiences in modern Italy, and proposes a non-traditional model of care and nurturing that expands normative definitions of the family.

## Introduction

Deeply rooted in the cultural and physical landscape of Abruzzo, a southern Italian region seldom depicted in the works of contemporary women writers, Donatella Di Pietrantonio's novels provide a unique perspective on the experiences of girls and women of that Italian region from the post-WWII period to the present.<sup>1</sup> Starting with her debut novel *Mia madre è un fiume* (2011) and continuing to her most recent work *L'Arminuta* (2017, *A Girl Returned*, 2019), Di Pietrantonio compellingly highlights the hardships girls and women face in their impoverished, patriarchal communities. Difficult mother-daughter relationships and non-traditional forms of mothering are central themes in her texts. *Mia madre è un fiume* recounts a fraught mother-daughter bond and the daughter's recollection of her mother's life story and their common past, once her mother is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Di Pietrantonio's second novel *Bella mia* (2013) is set in L'Aquila in the aftermath of the 2009 earthquake that devastated the city and its surroundings. This text foregrounds the protagonist Caterina's arduous path toward mothering her teenage nephew after his mother, Caterina's twin sister, dies in the earthquake. In *L'Arminuta*, Di Pietrantonio portrays an adolescent girl's unique journey toward self-actualization when she is rejected by both her biological and adoptive mothers and families. A potent bond with her younger sister eventually enables her to navigate her dire circumstances and make a new life for herself.

The narrator-protagonist in *L'Arminuta* tells her story in the first-person, from a vantage point twenty years after the summer in which she was sent back to her birth family. At the core of her tale, which recounts the events of that summer and the following two years of her life, is the double abandonment. Lacking the means to support their growing family, the protagonist's biological parents had relinquished their six-month-old daughter to a cousin and his well-off wife, unable to have children themselves.<sup>2</sup> When she is thirteen, for reasons unknown to her, her middle-class urban parents send her back to her birth family. Suddenly, she is thrust into the chaotic life of her impoverished original family in a remote village in the Abruzzese heartland. In the process, she becomes "L'Arminuta," the nickname her villagers assign to her upon her

return to their community: «Ero l'Arminuta, la ritornata» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2017, 67).<sup>3</sup>

It is important at this point to understand the novel's convention with respect to the main character's name. Throughout the entire text the protagonist is referred to only by her acquired nickname, "L'Arminuta": readers never learn her real name. In the Abruzzese dialects the verb "*armini*" (and its alternative spelling "*arvini*") stand in for the standard Italian "*ritornare*," meaning (in its prevalent intransitive use) "to return" or "to come back." The past participle form ("*armin-uta*") conveys that the verb's action has taken place, thus the title-character is forever "she who returned/has come back." The novel's translation in English renders the title and nickname as "a girl returned." Use of the past participle as an adjective in "a girl returned" implies something about the girl's condition or quality, suggesting she has been sent or given back ("a returned girl"), perhaps like an unwanted package, to her original family. This meaning is not immediately evident in standard Italian, where a wholly distinct verb is used to express "to return [a direct object]" ("*restituire*", in Abruzzese "*ardà*"), but for English readers the nuance provides additional and pertinent meaning. Up to this point the main character has been referred to exclusively as "the narrator-protagonist," or "the protagonist." From now on the essay will use "narrator," "protagonist," and "L'Arminuta" interchangeably.

*L'Arminuta* has received prestigious literary prizes and continuous media attention. A theatrical adaptation of the novel by the *Teatro Stabile d'Abruzzo* premiered in L'Aquila in 2019, and a film adaptation is currently underway.<sup>4</sup> Yet, *L'Arminuta* has not attracted the critical attention it deserves. This article intends to fill this gap, and foster scholarly conversations on Di Pietrantonio's work. To date, only two studies have been published, both on her first novel *Mia madre è un fiume*.<sup>5</sup> In one of these studies, Patrizia Sambuco investigates the theme of memory, both personal and public. According to Sambuco, the novel's use of a particular type of nostalgia, rooted in the present rather than in a fascination with a lost past, enables the daughter-narrator to renegotiate her troubled relationship with her mother and simultaneously re-appropriate her rural community's past. This nostalgic emotion is ultimately empowering for the daughter insofar as it allows her to reconcile her contradictory feelings toward her mother (SAMBUCO 2018, 167). Similarly, in her comparative study

of Di Pietrantonio's *Mia madre è un fiume*, Laura Pariani's *Il piatto dell'angelo* (2013), and Mary Melfi's *Italy Revisited: Conversations with my Mother* (2009), Laura Rorato highlights the power of the daughter's narration to examine the mother-daughter relationship and in the process, re-valorize the mother figure. For Rorato, by bringing maternal experiences and perspectives to the fore through daughters' eyes these «maternal texts» (RORATO 2018, 76) dismantle the stereotype of the bad mother, and «reconstruct a relationship based on mutual recognition» (ibid. 77). Despite her resentment and frustration with her mother, through her storytelling the daughter-narrator acknowledges the mother's traumatic experience and concedes the mother's positive role in the formation of the daughter's identity (ibid. 77-78).

My reading of the mother-daughter relationship in *L'Arminuta* differs significantly from Sambuco's and Rorato's respective analyses of the bond in *Mia madre è un fiume*. Whereas these critics identify the «renegotiation of the mother-daughter relationship» (SAMBUCO 2018, 164), and «mutual recognition» (RORATO 2018, 77) as the goals of the daughter's narration in Di Pietrantonio's first novel, I propose that in *L'Arminuta* the daughter does not endeavor in her telling to valorize her mothers' positions, nor to reconcile her relationship with them. Yet, counter to the daughter's master narrative—her persistent suspect and condemnation of her mothers—the novel also sheds light on the mothers' difficult situations. This counter narrative emerges from the narrator's account of her mothers' oppressive family lives, and in her rare sincere exchanges with them. Through this double-layered narrative Di Pietrantonio portrays two highly imperfect mothers who neither permanently abandon their daughter, nor assume full responsibility for her. In the process, *L'Arminuta* denaturalizes normative constructs such as maternal inclination and the good vs. bad mother dichotomy.

The complex mother-daughter dynamics articulated in *L'Arminuta* can be productively explored using Adriana Cavarero's theory of the disruption of «the exchange of gazes» between mother and daughter, effected by patriarchy (CAVARERO 1995, 63). Cavarero develops her concept rereading the Demeter myth, where she argues that the rupture in reciprocal gazing between mothers and daughters at the hands of patriarchy (in the Demeter myth, Hades kidnaps

Demeter's daughter Kore and takes her to the underworld) prevents the women from establishing mutually empowering bonds. Cavarero explains:

There is a way in which women inhabit the patriarchal symbolic order that separates them from one another, leaves them on their own, having snatched them away from a place of common belonging and of mutual signification. This order relocates women in a place that assigns them roles and functions at the service of the father's realm (ibid. 66).

Healing their relationship, Cavarero states, requires reinstating the continuous «exchange of gazes» between mothers and daughters, and among women in general, as it is the condition for shared recognition and validation (ibid. 63).

The interruption in the exchange of gazes between mothers and daughters identified by Cavarero lies precisely at the root of the fractured mother-daughter bonds depicted in *L'Arminuta*. Moreover, this interruption stems from the maternal figures' fraught experiences of motherhood, as dictated by patriarchal society. The realities of the mothers' lives, as revealed by the novel's counter-narrative, prevent them from establishing stable, loving bonds with their daughter. Whereas the biological mother bears a number of unwanted children, insofar as she is uneducated, indigent, and lacks access to reproductive choices, the well-to-do adoptive mother pursues motherhood as the only path to self-realization, and eventually surrenders control of her life to an emotionally abusive partner. However, the daughter's (master) narrative evaluates the mothers' actions as deliberate acts of abandonment, and blames both women for her unhappy fate. Mutual acceptance and understanding between the protagonist and her two mothers are never sought, nor achieved in this story.

The narrator's vital relationship with her sister Adriana acquires crucial meaning when seen through the lens of Cavarero's recent theorization of «inclination» (CAVARERO 2016, 10). With this notion, Cavarero reimagines human relationships—including, but not limited to that of mother and child—as affiliations constituted by non-reciprocal acts of «inclination» on the part of subjects who choose to care for vulnerable others (ibid. 13). Although the love between the two sisters in *L'Arminuta* is mutual, and *L'Arminuta* occasionally

supports Adriana, their relationship is primarily marked by dependency, rather than interdependency. Adriana unambiguously assumes the role of protector and guide for her vulnerable older sister in the defining stage of the protagonist's life. Inclining toward *L'Arminuta* through a series of caring gestures, Adriana enables her to accept her new circumstances and seek self-determination.

### 1. *Language and Labeling in L'Arminuta*

The language used by the narrator both in her descriptive accounts and in her citations of interpersonal exchanges (direct speech) is central to the unraveling and reinventing of her identity, and her evolving relationships with her mothers. It is important to note that the language of the novel is a unique hybrid that combines the standard Italian of the protagonist's narrative voice, and of her communication with her adoptive parents and friends from the city, with the dialect-inflected direct speech of her sister Adriana, her biological mother, and most members of their small village community. The language of the latter group blends, in turn, a low-register regional Italian with distinctive lexical and syntactical elements of the Abruzzo dialects. Words such as “*ecco*” (*qui*: here), “*mo*” (*ora*: now), “*coccia*” (*testa*: head), “*essa/esso*” (*lei*: she or her; *lui*: he or him) abound in their speech, along with anacolutha typical of the local vernaculars.<sup>6</sup> In only one case—the speech of a centenarian matriarch and healer the family visits in a rare communal outing—a few sentences are expressed entirely in dialect (DI PIETRANTONIO 2017, 113-114). Here, the use of dialect not only accurately reproduces the speech of uneducated elders from Abruzzo in the novel's time period (1970s), but also conveys the magical aura and uncanny, ancestral powers the narrator attributes to the healer.

The protagonist's use of standard Italian, signaling her urban, middle-class upbringing and former identity, signifies her difference and alienation from her biological family and new community. However, the novel also shows the process through which she, as the addressee of the vernacular of her new community, gradually comprehends the ethos and realities of her new world and becomes part of it. Initially a resentful, passive recipient of what she perceives as their coarse language and manners, *L'Arminuta* eventually

develops a feeling of belonging with them precisely by comprehending the spirit embodied in their vernacular. For example, remembering when a man from the village awkwardly offered her «auguri» (“best wishes”) instead of «condoglianze» (“my condolences”) at her brother Vincenzo’s funeral, she reflects: «Uno sconosciuto non sapeva dirle, mi ha bisbigliato auguri baciandomi sulle guance. Deve essere stato allora che mi sono sentita di appartenere alla famiglia di Vincenzo» (ibid. 85).<sup>7</sup> In this episode, the protagonist identifies the moment in which, by opening herself to properly interpret their language and customs, she first felt part of her new family and community.

In addition to language, labeling—or the protagonist’s referring to another character by his or her nickname or family role or profession—also signals important aspects of her active process of self-construction in the face of her new circumstances. Her use of native forms shows that she is progressively integrating herself within her new social framework. For example, the narrator adopts the indigenous custom of secretly referring to a man by «*Mezzosigaro*», a nickname that infuriates him (ibid. 112), and uses the local expression «*carriamorti*» (ibid. 94) to designate the village’s undertaker.<sup>8</sup> Labeling also demonstrates the degree of familiarity, or closeness in *L'Arminuta*’s relationships. Only four of the central characters—her sister Adriana, her older brother Vincenzo, her infant brother Giuseppe, and her adoptive mother Adalgisa—are designated by their real names. The choice to use proper nouns signals the strength of the bonds between the protagonist and these figures. Other characters are generally referred to either by their family roles and/or profession—«l'altra mia madre» (ibid. 3); «il padre» (ibid. 5); «mio padre carabiniere» (ibid. 85)—or, as mentioned, by their local nicknames.<sup>9</sup>

Most notably, throughout the novel the narrator-protagonist goes only by *L'Arminuta*, the label assigned to her by the townspeople upon her return. At a foundational level, the narrator’s refusal to claim her own name signifies her enduring confusion and unsettled emotions, awakened as she recounts the twofold rejection by her mothers. From another perspective, by existing in her own narrative only as *L'Arminuta*, the narrator appropriates the complicated and conflictual identity the nickname implies. The moniker simultaneously sharpens and blunts the alienation she experienced after returning to her family

and community of origin. On the one hand, the elision of her given name reproduces her lost sense of self following the rejection of her adoptive family. On the other, in accepting the appellation *L'Arminuta*, the narrator appears willing to also accept a new identity, potentially attenuating her sense of loss and laying the groundwork for a process of self-reconstruction. Similarly, in designating others by means of their familial or social roles, the narrator both induces and dispels the estrangement felt toward them and her new surroundings. Representing most of her family and community members as stock-characters of a drama that she has authored, the protagonist acquires greater control of her life narrative.

## 2. “*La parola mamma*”: (Un-)Naming the Mother

In *L'Arminuta*, language, naming, and address play an especially significant role with respect to the narrator's changing relationships with her two mothers. The processes through which she addresses, names, and un-names and re-names both mothers also mark crucial stages of her growing self-awareness. How to think about, and refer and talk to her two mothers is a vital concern in her tale. Regarding her biological mother, not only is she unable to call her “*mamma*,” but she also struggles to address her directly, and to communicate with her in any way, verbally and non-verbally. Significantly, after being returned to her biological family, *L'Arminuta* loses her ability to utter the very word “*mamma*”: «Non riuscivo a chiamarla *mamma*. [...] Non l'ho mai chiamata, per anni. Da quando le sono stata restituita, la parola *mamma* si è annidata nella mia gola come un rospo che non è più saltato fuori» (ibid. 15).<sup>10</sup> In the first two thirds of the novel the narrator refers to her biological mother with phrases such as «l'altra mia madre» (ibid. 3), «la donna che mi aveva concepita» and «la prima madre» (ibid. 4), or simply «la madre del paese» (ibid. 43).<sup>11</sup> Her use of these phrases signals her will to keep her distance from someone she perceives as an untrustworthy stranger. Forsaken by her adoptive mother Adalgisa, *L'Arminuta* is unwilling to acknowledge her inadequate replacement—the author of the original abandonment.

In this respect, it is important to note that with reference to her biological mother, *L'Arminuta*'s impersonal phrase «la madre» becomes «mia madre»

(ibid. 115)<sup>12</sup> only near the end of her narrative when, in a rare moment of closeness, her birth mother shares the circumstances of the child's transfer to her adoptive parents: a new, unwanted pregnancy (the mother's fifth), the family's inability to support another child, and Adalgisa's unrelenting pressure to relinquish the infant to her. The birth mother's arduous family life compellingly emerges in this scene. Tellingly, this revelation takes place during a family visit to the farm of close friends, after the mother, grieving the loss of her oldest son Vincenzo, meets with her godmother Carmela, a centenarian matriarch and healer. As observed earlier, Carmela is the novel's only character who speaks in dialect, evoking her uncanny, ancestral powers. Although unable to help her goddaughter overcome her grief, the healer shows empathy toward her, and blesses her offspring L'Arminuta, predicting a brilliant future for her. Interestingly, L'Arminuta's sense of the matriarch, who spends her days seated on a throne-like wooden chair under a century-old oak, performing healing rituals for the ailing, recalls the mythological Demeter's association with the natural world and the cycles of life, death, and rebirth. L'Arminuta recounts her encounter with her as follows:

Sono rimasta lì a guardarla, incantata dalla sua fiabesca impotenza. La pelle del viso riarsa dal sole di cento estati si mimetizzava con la corteccia dell'albero retrostante, avevano la stessa immobilità [...]. Ai miei occhi entrambe apparivano eterne, la vecchia e la quercia. Mi hanno poi detto che una volta era stata nella morte e ci era rimasta parecchi giorni, ma non aveva potuto sopportare la solitudine ed era tornata (ibid. 112-113).<sup>13</sup>

When the matriarch eventually dies at age one hundred and nine, her oak dies with her, as legend has it: «Dal suo respiro finale è salita come una vampa che ha seccato all'istante la chioma dell'albero [...] A tre giorni dal funerale [...] il tronco monumentale si è abbattuto a terra» (ibid. 116).<sup>14</sup>

The episode at the godmother's farm suggests that intimacy between mother and daughter is much more possible in a matriarchal "space" as opposed to an oppressive, violent "place"—the family's cramped apartment where most of the exchanges between mother and daughter occur. In the apartment mother and daughter are unable to communicate, but the godmother's farm occasions an empathetic exchange between them. Once the older woman has

compassionately advised and encouraged her grieving goddaughter, the latter, in turn, engages for the first time in sincere dialog with her long-estranged daughter. The kind tenor of the two conversations alludes to the possibility of a matrilineal continuum of understanding and support. Yet, this episode constitutes only a brief respite in the mutual disaffection between mother and daughter. Upon returning to their home in the village, their communication once again breaks down. There, motherhood is the disempowering, loveless locus where mother and daughter revert to being invisible to and estranged from one another.

The narrator's growing alienation from her adoptive mother Adalgisa is also expressed through naming and address. Although she calls Adalgisa "*mia madre*" (my mother) throughout most of the narrative, once she realizes the irrevocability of their separation, "*mia madre*" is replaced by Adalgisa: «Ho subito deciso di non vederla più, e basta mamma, anche dentro di me l'avrei chiamata Adalgisa, con tutto il gelo che il nome nascondeva. L'ho perduta davvero, e per un paio d'ore *ho creduto di poterla dimenticare*» (ibid. 120; emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup> As observed, the narrator's use of proper nouns signals the strength of her bonds with some of the main characters. In this case, addressing and referring to her adoptive mother as Adalgisa conveys the narrator's unsuccessful attempt to rid herself of her love for her. Albeit fraught with unending resentment, her attachment to Adalgisa lives on.

Both the narrator's unwillingness to address her biological mother as "*mamma*" and acknowledge their blood bond, and her decision to stop using "*mia madre*" to refer to Adalgisa signify her unending struggle with the notion of what exactly a mother is, or ought to be. This passage neatly expresses her grappling, as it also identifies "mother" with the notion of "place":

Dall'angolo più nascosto del piazzale vedevo le finestre illuminarsi e, dietro, l'andirivieni delle sagome femminili affaccendate. Erano ai miei occhi le mamme normali, quelle che avevano partorito i figli e li avevano tenuti con sé. [...] Nel tempo ho perso anche quell'idea confusa di normalità e oggi davvero ignoro che *luogo* sia una madre. Mi manca come può mancare la salute, un riparo, una certezza. È un vuoto persistente, che conosco ma non supero (ibid. 100; emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup>

Although here the narrator describes her lack as that of a stable place called “madre,” central to the overarching emptiness she feels is the absence of a dynamic space of mutual recognition and certainty. As we shall see in the next section, according to Cavarero this space of reciprocal acknowledgment between mother and daughter is crucial to women’s self-realization. Moreover, Cavarero states that it is vital to re-conceptualize maternity as a space of potential as opposed to “a place,” that is, a prescribed, natural role (CAVARERO 1995, 89). In *L'Arminuta*, the daughter’s conceiving of “mother” as a place confines both maternal figures within an idealized, prescriptive construct of the good, normal mother, hindering her full understanding of their untenable situations and the possibility of eventual reconciliation.

*L'Arminuta*’s emptiness effected by the dual renunciation is also denoted by her increasing feelings of exclusion and estrangement on her returns to Adalgisa’s house—her former home. The familial dwelling from which she has been exiled is represented as an increasingly alien, inhospitable site, echoing her perceptions of her biological family’s apartment. On her first return to her former home, for example, she notes the house’s evident state of physical disrepair: «Una sedia capovolta dal vento, [...] Uno straccio impigliato nelle spine della rosa, la pianta preferita di mia madre [...] L'erba alta e i fiori morti di sete [...] Il vialetto invaso dalla sabbia delle libecciate, le tapparelle tutte giù [...] Ho suonato nel vuoto delle stanze e dopo un'attesa inutile ho ripetuto più volte e a lungo» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2017, 46).<sup>17</sup> At the end of the novel, she portrays the home as inimical territory ruled by Adalgisa’s tyrannical new partner. The narrator’s descriptions of what used to be a nurturing, safe space convey her growing sense of homelessness and motherlessness.

### *3. Normative Motherhood and Mother-Daughter Invisibility*

Women in Di Pietrantonio’s texts are often trapped and isolated within traditional family structures, and lack a space in which to develop mutual empathy. In her rereading of the Demeter myth, Cavarero posits that this space is generated by the exchange of gazes between mother and daughter, and among women in general. In other words, a woman’s self-actualization crucially

depends on continuous reciprocal visibility and recognition with both a maternal figure and with other women. According to Cavarero, patriarchal domination has fractured this essential mirroring, and chief among its resultant damage is that women have been deprived of the inherent authority of maternity, namely, «the full power both to generate and not to generate» (CAVARERO 1995, 64). Importantly, Cavarero's thesis does not present women's capacity to generate as a compulsory choice. Rather, the Demeter myth «forbids the identification of the “substance” of being woman with the act of generating *alone* (that is, with the reductive identification of the feminine with the maternal, which patriarchal codes inscribe as a role)» (ibid. 64, italics in the original). If detached from the self-determining subjectivity in which it should be rooted, the power of maternity becomes «mere reproductive function; a corporeal production of bodies» (ibid. 67). Ordered to procreate by the patriarchal order, women are turned into receptacles, «reproductive shells, organs of nourishment and providers of care» (ibid. 70). Patriarchy's «totalizing coincidence of feminine identity with its maternal role» (ibid. 89) limits women in diverse ways. Where some suffer under the mandate to reproduce, others feel the need to become mothers at all cost.<sup>18</sup> Some women view and obsessively pursue motherhood as their only path to self-realization. Cavarero maintains that it is possible and necessary to re-conceptualize maternity as a space of choice and possibility, «not a “place”», that is, the natural and obligatory role prescribed by patriarchy (ibid. 89).

In *L'Arminuta* the repeated interruption of reciprocal looking between mother(s) and daughter precludes the possibility of mutual recognition and validation between them. However, while Cavarero sees the patriarchal separation of mother and daughter as perpetrated against the mother's will, the daughter's tale (what I call the master narrative) in *L'Arminuta* lays the blame squarely on both of the mothers, figuring them as having deliberately chosen to abandon her. Her account communicates the content and details of their actions, but does not attribute them to flawed societal tradition. Given that the daughter tells her story as an adult, the novel effectively conveys her longstanding failure to sympathetically comprehend the mothers' challenging situations, and how they might have prompted their actions. Her narrative contains no reconciliation with the past. *L'Arminuta* thus diverges from many

mother-daughter narratives by contemporary Italian women writers, where the daughter-narrator revisits her mother's story and reconciles with it and her, often after her death.<sup>19</sup> In Di Pietrantonio's *Mia madre è un fiume*, in fact, as Rorato and Sambuco have observed, the troubling knots of the past mother-daughter bond may occupy center stage, but eventually their relationship eases, and the mother's perspectives and experiences are taken into considerate account.

Yet, alongside the daughter's master narrative, which plainly accuses the mothers for the painful separations she has had to endure, *L'Arminuta* the novel provides a parallel story that figures this suffering as the result of prescriptive configurations of motherhood. This counter narrative exposes the oppressive realities of the mothers' lives. It surfaces in the narrator's descriptions of their experiences and some of her exchanges with them. The narrator's account of her family's living conditions at the village reveals the birth mother's daily struggle to fulfill her children's basic needs. Their conversation at the godmother's farm sheds light on the circumstances of her transfer to her adoptive family. Poor, isolated, and uneducated, the biological mother has had to submit to repeated childbearing. Expecting yet another child, and faced with growing economic insecurity, giving up her infant daughter likely seemed it would lessen her burdens. The move may even have been easier than expected because the birth mother did not relinquish a daughter she was attached to—the novel offers no firm evidence of her affection toward her daughter, nor toward most of her other children. The novel suggests that the daughter's birth occurred primarily because her mother had no access to reproductive choices, and, in light of that contingency, giving up the infant to a well-off couple seemed a sensible decision.

Likewise, albeit in a different sense, the protagonist's educated, middle-class adoptive mother Adalgisa lacked the full extent of maternal power, as described by Cavarero. In her case, she internalized the patriarchal reduction of a woman's identity to motherhood, evidenced by her obsession with becoming a mother, coupled with an apparent lack of other life-goals. Unable to conceive a child with her *carabiniere* husband, Adalgisa—a devout Catholic and decidedly conventional wife—first took in someone else's child as her own. Her preoccupation with mothering a child clearly surfaces from the birth mother's

account of Adalgisa's insistence that she relinquish her infant daughter to her: «Adalgisa si presentava tutte le settimane, ti si voleva sempre riporta' alla casa sua. [...] Erano anni che provava a fa' i figli e non le venivano» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2017, 115).<sup>20</sup> Then, finding herself pregnant as a result of an extramarital affair, Adalgisa moved in with the domineering father, who selfishly demanded that she discard her adoptive daughter so as to devote herself exclusively to their more appropriate (because biological) son. Becoming a legitimate (biological) mother appears to be Adalgisa's ultimate ambition in life, one she pursues with unscrupulous tenacity. Again, Adalgisa in this respect replicates the behaviors of some women in contemporary Western societies who go to extraordinary lengths to become mothers.<sup>21</sup> The novel also reveals Adalgisa's limited agency within her new family. When *L'Arminuta* aggressively confronts her about the abandonment, Adalgisa thus justifies her actions: «Il bambino doveva avere un padre accanto [. . .] non ero sola nelle decisioni [...] Non volevo allontanarti da me, ma è andata così» (ibid. 148).<sup>22</sup> Her unhappy domestic life and suffering at the hands of her tyrannical new partner unambiguously emerge in a scene near the end of the novel, as we shall see in the final section of the article.

The distorted maternal power elaborated in *L'Arminuta*—women must either have children against their will, or compliant women fall prey to compulsive maternal fanaticism—impedes recognition between mothers and daughter, and instead engenders reciprocal opacity. The many instances in which they are unable to gaze at one another, eschew physical contact, or struggle to communicate verbally bespeak this invisibility. For example, the protagonist methodically avoids addressing her biological mother directly, and when she needs to speak to her, resorts to pinching her infant brother's flesh so that he will cry and attract her mother's attention. Her birth mother rarely touches her daughter affectionately. Similarly, after sending her adopted daughter back, Adalgisa carefully steers clear of any encounter with her for almost two years. Owing to her forced separations from the maternal figures, *L'Arminuta* perceives herself as an orphan, utterly alone in the world, «Restavo orfana di due madri viventi [...] Ero figlia di separazioni, parentele false o taciute, distanze»<sup>23</sup> (ibid. 108). She never recovers her origins: «Non sapevo più da chi provenivo. In fondo non lo so neanche adesso»<sup>24</sup> (ibid. 108). At the same

time, *L'Arminuta* never ceases her search to learn the reasons behind her adoptive mother's rejection. In addition, she manages to survive in her new, hostile environment. She does so by developing an empowering bond with her younger sister Adriana. An extraordinarily wise, willful, and practically-minded ten-year-old at the time of the narrator's return, Adriana plays a crucial role in *L'Arminuta*'s journey toward self-realization.

#### 4. *Sister Power: Adriana's Inclination*

In a study on the theme of sisterhood in literature and mythology, *Variazioni sulle sorelle* (2018; 2020), Marina Giovannelli analyzes a diverse set of works including fictional and autobiographical texts, interviews, and letters by prominent women writers and their sisters.<sup>25</sup> Sisterly bonds upheld by mutual understanding, love, and support, but also marred by disparity, jealousy, and rivalry emerge in these disparate works (GIOVANNELLI 2020, 1135). Among the different examples of sisterly dynamics identified in Giovannelli's study, that of *L'Arminuta* and Adriana represents a unique type. It reprises some of the customary elements—mutual love, and also disparity, and possessiveness (on Adriana's part, for example)—but it also contains a potent life-giving dimension. Their connection is clearly presented as salvific for the narrator-protagonist, and instrumental to the development of her identity.<sup>26</sup>

Analyzing a group of texts on familial memory by Simone De Beauvoir, Antonia Byatt, and Byatt's sister Margaret Drabble, Giovannelli stresses the significant extent to which personal identity is constructed by early childhood events and emotions that may not be clearly remembered.<sup>27</sup> Family history transmitted by parents, for example, is often elusive and contradictory, and at the same time individuals feel an urgent and universal drive to establish a coherent story. As Giovannelli explains, «Costruire, dare forma al passato significa anche collocare i momenti della vita nel loro "giusto" posto, dar loro il valore che hanno (o non hanno), cercare le ragioni dei comportamenti, in altre parole rendere l'origine meno oscura»<sup>28</sup> (ibid. 108). In the same way, the narrator-protagonist in *L'Arminuta* undertakes a journey into the past to better understand her origins. However, because she deems her mothers' narrations of her story unreliable and ultimately rejects them, her quest does not lead her

to understand their perspectives, nor to mend her relationships with them. Instead, she bases her reconstruction of the past on her own memories, which leads her to recognize her bond with her sister Adriana as the source of her resilience and gradual rebirth.

Cavarero's notion of "inclination" proves instructive in analyzing the protagonist's vital attachment to and reliance on her sister Adriana. The concept builds on the theorizations of motherhood and relational subjectivity Cavarero developed in her earlier works (CAVARERO 1995; 2000), and on her recent analysis of vulnerability and violence in the contemporary world (CAVARERO 2000).<sup>29</sup> According to the theorist, we must re-envision «relation [...] as an essential dimension of the human [...] which calls into question our being creatures who are materially vulnerable and, often in greatly unbalanced circumstances, consigned to one another» (CAVARERO 2016, 13). Vulnerability is what defines all humans, and in each relation with a vulnerable other every person has a choice between care (inclining) and wound (not-caring) (CAVARERO 2009, 30). Moreover, Cavarero maintains that «as a creature totally consigned to relationships», the infant incarnates human vulnerability par excellence, specifically, «helplessness» (ibid. 30). Hence, the behavior of mothers highlights volition, that is, the decision to care or not care particularly well. However, the mother-child relationship is not the only realm that invites this kind of caretaking. For Cavarero, «Mother [...] is thus above all the *name* of an inclination over the other; or [...] the function that evokes the figure of responsibility engendered on the inaugural scene of a human condition in which helplessness is the mark of the beginner» (CAVARERO 2011, 201, emphasis in the original). Her notion of inclination re-envision subjectivity and interpersonal relations beyond the mother-child bond to include all human interactions. Importantly, Cavarero's inclined self is neither self-sufficient (vertical), like the metaphysical, solipsistic subject of modernity, nor does it «resolve in the paradigm of a flat horizontality thought in terms of interdependency and ideal reciprocity» (ibid. 195). Rather, the inclined self is rooted in non-reciprocal relationships between humans wherein a subject inclines toward a vulnerable other. Cavarero's notion of inclination introduces the ideas of non-mutuality and dependency to both her concept of the exchange

of gazes between mother and daughter (CAVARERO 1995), and her conceptualization of relational subjectivity (CAVARERO 2000).

Exemplifying the vulnerable subject described by Cavarero, *L'Arminuta* is put in positions of utter dependency—first when she is relinquished by her biological parents as an infant, and again when she is returned to them as a young teen. In a sense, when she is handed back to her birth family she regresses to the same condition of helplessness associated with infancy. After she is abruptly sent back to her biological family, *L'Arminuta* experiences acute anguish over the forced separation from her adoptive mother. She then becomes the helpless target of emotional and physical violence: she is ignored by her birth parents, constantly tormented by two older brothers, and scorned by her schoolmates. Moreover, she witnesses her parents' neglect and occasional physical abuse of her siblings—especially her older brother Vincenzo and younger sister Adriana. She experiences violence first-hand when her mother strikes her as well. Problematically Vincenzo, one of only two familial allies she has, acts on an inappropriate if somewhat mutual sexual attraction toward her.

If *L'Arminuta* incarnates the vulnerable subject described by Cavarero, the attitudes and actions of the two mothers complicate the model of inclination, in that neither makes a definite choice between caring and not caring for her. Rather, both mothers delegate care of their daughter to others. The biological mother cedes her to Adalgisa as an infant, and, when she returns, hands her over once more to her youngest daughter Adriana. Adalgisa, for her part, sends her adopted daughter back to her birth mother as soon as she learns she is expecting her own child. Ultimately, both mothers agree to entrust the care of their daughter to a stranger—the woman with whom *L'Arminuta* boards while attending high school in the city.<sup>30</sup> In sum, despite *L'Arminuta's* depiction of them as bad mothers, they actually fall somewhere between the extremes. Neither mother accepts lasting responsibility for her care, nor does she relinquish it irrevocably. They assume care of their daughter, but only temporarily and conditionally. In this respect, both maternal figures problematize the «good mother, evil mother [...] stereotype of maternity narrated by the Western encyclopedia» (CAVARERO 2011, 202). Neither

stereotypical Madonnas nor Medeas, the two mothers oscillate between some degree of caring, and not caring for their daughter.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, their daughter's narrative empathically relates only the "bad mother" traits. The biological mother shows no attachment to her daughter. Moreover, her protestations of having been wronged, and forcibly prevented by Adalgisa from seeing her daughter after relinquishing her, seem insincere to the protagonist: «Ero attenta, tesa al suo racconto, ma non volevo fidarmi. L'aveva detto anche Adriana, proprio il giorno del mio arrivo lì, che non c'era tanto da crederle» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2017, 41).<sup>32</sup> Yet, the same mother is not incapable of feeling deeply. *L'Arminuta* perceives her mother's lack of affection for her even more vividly when she reflects on the deep depression she fell into, following the death of her eldest son Vincenzo: «Da morto era l'unico figlio che contava per lei [...] Eccola lì, la madre dolorosa [...] Non aveva niente per me, che sopravvivevo. Di certo quando mi aveva data, creatura di pochi mesi, non si era ridotta così» (ibid. 88).<sup>33</sup> Adalgisa too is flawed and unreliable in her daughter's view. She feigns an illness and lies to her daughter, saying that her biological family wants her back, when in reality she wants to ready herself for the arrival of her biological son and obey the wishes of her tyrannical new partner. Their daughter sees them only as deficient, uncaring mothers, and condemns them as such. If, as Rorato argues, Di Pietrantonio's first novel *Mia madre è un fiume* is a «maternal text» insofar as it dismantles the bad mother stereotype and valorizes maternal experiences (RORATO 2018, 76-78), *L'Arminuta* could be viewed as an "unmaternal" text, since the narrator's perspective is entirely unsympathetic to the mothers' stories.

However, there is more at work in Di Pietrantonio's novel. In problematizing the good vs. bad mother dichotomy, *L'Arminuta* puts other aspects of the patriarchal paradigm into question. If the two mothers do not fail absolutely in their mothering roles, then perhaps their daughter's perceptions should not be trusted absolutely. Indeed, discerning readers can critically assess the reliability of the narrator's account. For example, the ways in which the mothers privilege their attachment to male family members can be read within a larger context, beyond *L'Arminuta*'s personal interpretation. Their centering of men constitutes a manifestation of their entrapment within the traditional family structures the novel portrays, where men always take precedence and mother-

daughter bonds enjoy only secondary status. In *L'Arminuta*, it is ultimately left to an unlikely figure, the protagonist's younger sister Adriana, to take on the responsibility of caring for her when she is returned to their home. The alternative space of care created by Adriana's loving treatment of her older sister serves to again disrupt patriarchal standard with regard to mothering. The narrator's two mothers never commit to inclining permanently toward their daughter, but her sister firmly leans in—unmasking traditional notions of maternal inclination, like the good vs. bad mother opposition, as patriarchal myths.

Upon her return, Adriana immediately offers *L'Arminuta* love and support. In the first in a long series of essential acts of care, Adriana shares her twin bed with her sister in the small bedroom where all five children sleep, comforting her with her bodily presence: «Ogni sera mi prestava una pianta del piede da tenere sulla guancia. Non avevo altro, in quel buio popolato di fiati» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2017, 10).<sup>34</sup> For the protagonist, even the urine with which Adriana occasionally wets the bed is a reassuring sign of her sister's consoling presence next to her. Adriana's physical closeness and emotional support in the first months of the protagonist's new life also function as an antidote for the nightmares that pervade her restless nights: «Dopo brevi cedimenti al sonno i risvegli erano sussulti improvvisi, e la certezza di una disgrazia imminente [...] Più tardi sono scesa da Adriana [...] 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» (ibid. 36).<sup>35</sup> In an especially poignant scene of the novel, Adriana bravely tries to stop their mother from hitting her older sister, receiving in return a violent shove that causes her to fall to her knees on broken glass.

Throughout the novel, Adriana's aptitude for care is demonstrated by her nurturing stance not only toward her older sister, but also toward their infant brother Giuseppe, and the entire family. For example, when their mother falls into a depression, Adriana takes charge of preparing meals and procuring groceries, on credit, for the cash-strapped family: «Lei era abile anche nelle spese [...] – Segna, che alla fine del mese passa papà – prometteva Adriana a ogni negoziante. Così pronta e svelta [...] li disarmava. Dietro di lei, ero solo una muta presenza di rinforzo» (ibid. 88-89).<sup>36</sup> The last line of this passage sheds

light on the nature of the sisters' relationship. Their bond is certainly based on mutual loyalty and love, but Adriana largely assumes responsibility for caring for her older sister.<sup>37</sup> However, Adriana's unconditional love and admiration for her older sister are not exempt from jealousy and vindictiveness. In particular, Adriana's protective stance seems to falter when, upset by L'Arminuta's recent move to the city to attend high school, she spitefully reveals the real reason Adalgisa returned her to her biological family. Shocked by the revelation, L'Arminuta insults her sister, and violently digs her nails into a fresh wound on one of Adriana's hands. Adriana's disclosure hurts L'Arminuta, but it also frees her from doubt and enables her to confront Adalgisa. L'Arminuta thus absolves Adriana: «- Non hai colpa se dici la verità. È la verità che è sbagliata » (ibid. 139).<sup>38</sup>

Another notable exception to the protagonist's dependency on Adriana as guide and mentor are the sisters' interactions in two related episodes set at the beach, near L'Arminuta's former home in the city. In the first of these scenes Adriana, afraid of the water and confounded by the unfamiliar setting, refuses to swim, and appears helpless when a group of local children bully her. When the sisters return to the beach at the end of the novel, however, L'Arminuta manages to persuade Adriana to follow her into the water: «Si è affidata alla mia mano e siamo entrate [...] Camminava guardinga, io le nuotavo un po' intorno. [...] Ci siamo fermate una di fronte all'altra, così sole e vicine, io immersa fino al petto e lei al collo» (ibid. 163).<sup>39</sup> It may have been Adriana's final act of inclination, however, immediately preceding this scene, that enables L'Arminuta to help her sister overcome her fear of water.

Importantly, the second scene at the beach follows the sisters' visit to Adalgisa's home. After repeatedly refusing Adalgisa's entreaties, the protagonist has finally accepted a dinner invitation to meet her former mother's new family. In the course of this tense gathering, Adalgisa's infant son is heard crying desperately from another room. Adalgisa's new partner orders her to ignore the child lest he be spoiled by too much attention. Undeterred by the man's stern command, Adriana takes action. The tableau in which we see Adriana holding and soothing the neglected child is one of the most compelling scenes of the novel:

Adriana teneva il bambino in braccio, già si stava calmando. Lo cullava con movimenti leggeri [...]

– Come ti sei permessa tu di toccare mio figlio? Ha detto il padre alzandosi di colpo [...]

Adriana non lo ha neppure considerato. Ha restituito con delicatezza il bimbo a sua madre.

-Gli si era incastrata la mano tra le sbarre del letto, – e ha indicato i segni rossi sul piccolo polso, il gonfiore già visibile della pelle. Gli ha ravviato i capelli all'indietro e gli ha asciugato le lacrime con un tovagliolo, prima di tornare a sedersi accanto a me [...]

Era stata così forte, ma tremava tutta (ibid. 161).<sup>40</sup>

Adriana's resolute, defying gesture to rescue and comfort the child confirms the crucially nurturing role the narrative assigns to her, with respect to her sister as well as to others. As they leave Adalgisa's house, the protagonist praises Adriana's intervention: «Sei stata grande» (ibid. 162).<sup>41</sup> At the end of the novel as the sisters swim together for the first time, *L'Arminuta* acknowledges her debt toward Adriana: «Mia sorella. Come un fiore improbabile cresciuto su un piccolo grumo di terra attaccato alla roccia. Da lei ho appreso la resistenza» (ibid. 163).<sup>42</sup> In the same instant, pulling her sister into her gaze, the narrator firmly seals their common destiny: «Ci guardavamo sopra il tremolio leggero della superficie, riflessi accecanti del sole. [...] Stringendo un poco le palpebre l'ho presa prigioniera tra le ciglia» (ibid. 163).<sup>43</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This article examines the narrator-protagonist's difficult journey toward self-determination in the face of double-rejections on the part of her two mothers. Its first two sections analyze how language and modes of communication signify the development of the protagonist's identity and her changing relationships with the maternal figures. The third section deploys Cavarero's theoretical rereading of the Demeter myth, to propose that the failed mother-daughter relationships represented in *L'Arminuta* are the result of normative constructions of motherhood rooted in patriarchy. These traditional limitations on women's identity prevent the mothers in the story from forming lasting, empowering bonds with their daughter. The article's final section explains how

the process through which the protagonist mourns the loss of her adoptive maternal figure is paralleled, and countered, by her participation in an alternative space of care and affect offered by her younger sister Adriana. In this space, as outlined in Cavarero's theory of inclination, Adriana inclines toward the narrator, assuming the roles of nurturer, protector, and mentor. Di Pietrantonio's *L'Arminuta* is a compelling and necessary tale about motherhood, sisterhood, and the necessity of women's self-determination. By foregrounding the experiences, and failures of two disinclined mothers, and highlighting the successful agency of a non-mother figure, the novel denaturalizes canonical conception of motherhood as women's innate destiny, and proposes a non-traditional model of care and nurturing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In her novel *Un paese di carta*, Laura Benedetti also offers a compelling portrait of three generations of Abruzzese-American women: Alice, who migrated to the United States in the 1950s, her American-born daughter Jane, and granddaughter Sara. After Alice's death, Sara travels to L'Aquila to scatter her grandmother's ashes in her native land (BENEDETTI 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In an interview Di Pietrantonio stated that the novel's inspiration came from stories heard as a child about poor Abruzzese families relinquishing one of their children to well-off childless couples (FAMOSI 2017). Michela Murgia's novel *Accabadora*, set in mid-twentieth-century Sardinia, portrays a similar traditional practice (MURGIA 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Translation in English: «I was L'Arminuta, the one who was returned» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 75).

<sup>4</sup> Soon after its publication in 2017 *L'Arminuta* was awarded the *Premio Campiello*, the *Premio Napoli*, and the *Premio Alassio Centolibri*. It has recently been translated into English by Ann Goldstein (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019), as well as several other major languages. For its theatrical adaptation, directed by Lucrezia Guidone, see TEATRO STABILE. Its film adaptation, directed by Giuseppe Bonito, is currently in pre-production (FILMITALIA).

<sup>5</sup> A few essays on the theme of motherhood in Italian women's writing briefly mention *L'Arminuta*. See, for example, SERKOWSKA 2018, 69, and ROSA 2019, 27. For reviews of the novel, see CAZALÉ BÉRARD 2017 and FACCINI 2018.

<sup>6</sup> In a recent interview Di Pietrantonio explained that the language the protagonist's family and community members speak in the novel is an adaptation and mix of various dialects spoken in the Abruzzo region (COEN 2019). My translations here stem from my personal knowledge of these dialects. Although I was born and raised in Rome, these dialects were transmitted to me by my parents and grandparents, who hail from the province of Teramo, and by an army of uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends over the course of many happy summers I spent there.

<sup>7</sup> Translation in English: «A stranger who didn't know *what to say* [how to give them], whispered *good luck* [best wishes], kissing me on the cheeks. It must have been then that I felt I belonged to Vincenzo's family». (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 93; emphasis and translations in square brackets mine).

<sup>8</sup> Translation in English: «Half-Cigar» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 117); «corpse carrier» (ibid. 102).

<sup>9</sup> Translation in English: «my other mother» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 13); «the father» (ibid. 15); «my father the carabinieri» (ibid. 93). Minor characters designated by their real names include the narrator's brother Sergio; her adoptive father's sister Lidia; her friend from the city Patrizia; her teacher Perilli; *Nonna* Carmela, the centenarian healer; and Guido, Adalgisa's new partner.

<sup>10</sup> Translation in English: «I couldn't call her mamma. [...] I never called to her, not for years. From the moment I was given back to her, the word "mamma" had stuck in my throat like a frog that wouldn't jump out» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 24).

<sup>11</sup> Translation in English: «my other mother» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 13); «the woman who had conceived me» and «my first mother» (ibid. 14); «the mother in the town» (ibid. 51).

<sup>12</sup> Translation in English: «the mother»; «my mother» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 122).

<sup>13</sup> Translation in English: «I stood there staring at her, enthralled by her fairy-tale grandeur. The skin of her face, burned by the sun of a hundred summers, blended into the bark of the tree behind her: it had the same immobility [...]. To my eyes, both appeared timeless, the old woman and the oak. They told me later that she had died once and remained dead for several days, but she couldn't bear the solitude and had returned» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 119-120).

<sup>14</sup> Translation in English: «A sort of flame rose from her last breath that instantly dried the foliage of the tree, leaf by leaf. [...] Three days after the funeral, the monumental trunk fell to the ground» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 123).

<sup>15</sup> Translation in English: «I immediately decided not to see her any longer, and no more "mamma," even inside I would call her Adalgisa, with all the ice that the name concealed. I truly lost her, and for a few hours *I thought I could forget her*» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 128; emphasis mine). This realization occurs when the protagonist finally manages to talk to Adalgisa on the phone, several months after returning to her biological family.

<sup>16</sup> Translation in English: «From the most secluded corner of the big square I saw the windows light up and, behind them, the coming and going of busy female silhouettes. In my eyes they were normal mammas, those who had borne children and kept them. [...] In time, I

lost that confused idea of normality, too, and today I really don't know what *place* a mother is. It's absent from my life the way health, shelter, certainty can be absent. It's an enduring emptiness, which I know but can't get past» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 107; emphasis mine).

<sup>17</sup> Translation in English: «A chair overturned by the wind, [...] A rag stuck on the thorns of the rose, my mother's favorite flower [...] The grass was tall and the flowers, unwatered, were dead and dry [...] The path was invaded by sand the *libeccio* blew in, the shutters were all pulled down. [...] I rang the bell into the emptiness of the rooms and after a vain wait rang it over and over again, for a long time» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 54-55).

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the return of traditional discourses on motherhood and of intensive mothering practices (e.g. breastfeeding on demand) in the West and in Italy since the 1980s, see BADINTER 2011, 33-95 and BASSANO and TIRALONGO 2018. For a discussion of the intersection of fears about demographic decline and the postfeminist glorification of motherhood in contemporary Italy, see Nicoletta Marini-Maio and Giovanna Faleschini Lerner's *Reproduction, Fertility, and Parenthood: The Italian Case. Journal Editorial* (MARINI-MAIO and FALESCHINI LERNER 2018). See also Marina Bettaglio's analysis of maternal memoirs (BETTAGLIO 2016).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto* (FERRANTE 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Translation in English: «Adalgisa returned every week, she always wanted to take you back to her house [...] For years she'd been trying to have children and couldn't» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 122).

<sup>21</sup> In the novel *Le difettose*, Eleonora Mazzoni provides a somewhat humorous, yet compelling representation of the experiences of contemporary women who subject themselves to years of painful and expensive fertility treatments, often unsuccessfully (MAZZONI 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Translation in English: «The child had to have his father nearby [. . .] I wasn't alone in the decisions [...] I didn't want to be separated from you, but that's what happened» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 155).

<sup>23</sup> Translation in English: «I was an orphan with two living mothers [...] I was a child of separations, false or unspoken kinships, distances» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 115).

<sup>24</sup> Translation in English: «I no longer knew who I came from. In my heart, I don't know even now» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 115).

<sup>25</sup> For a broader discussion of the theme of sisterhood, in both its biological and metaphorical senses (i.e. female friendships, the notion of sisterhood in second-wave feminism, etc.) in Western literature and the arts, see the collection of essays titled *Sorelle e sorellanza nella letteratura e nelle arti*. In the Introduction, editors Claudia Cao and Marina Guglielmi offer valuable overviews of key psychoanalytical and sociological studies on sisterhood, and map the development of the theme from ancient Greek theater to contemporary media studies (CAO and GUGLIELMI 2017, 11-26).

<sup>26</sup> Other variations on the theme of sisterhood in the novel include *L'Arminuta's* relationships with her father's younger sister Lidia, who lived in her adoptive parents' home when the narrator was a child, and with her best friend from the city Patrizia. While based on mutual love and support (especially in the case of her friendship with Patrizia), these relationships are not as vital to the protagonist as is her bond with Adriana.

<sup>27</sup> Giovannelli, following Paul Ricoeur's notion of the oblivion of the immemorial, explains: «quel tempo è esistito, e le emozioni e i sentimenti dimenticati sono stati vissuti. L'oblio dell'immemorabile, come lo chiama Paul Ricoeur, li ha resi inaccessibili alla coscienza ma attivi nella costruzione della personalità, a insaputa del soggetto». My translation in English: «that time existed, and the forgotten emotions and feelings were experienced. The oblivion of the immemorial, as Paul Ricoeur calls it, has made those feelings inaccessible to consciousness, yet active in the construction of one's identity, unbeknownst to the subject» (GIOVANNELLI 2020, 38).

<sup>28</sup> My translation in English: «Building, shaping the past also means to put the moments of one's life in the "right" place, to give them the value they do or don't hold, to look for the reasons behind behaviors, in other words to make one's origin less unknown» (GIOVANNELLI 2020, 108).

<sup>29</sup> For Cavarero's theorization of relational subjectivity as grounded in reciprocal gazing and narration, see *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (CAVARERO 2000). For her analysis of violence and vulnerability, see *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (CAVARERO 2009).

<sup>30</sup> In an interview, Di Pietrantonio stated that all her works depict absent or inadequate mothers replaced by alternative, more suitable caregivers (COEN 2019).

<sup>31</sup> As the narrative progresses, the protagonist's birth parents take a degree of interest in their daughter's education, and prove capable of sporadic gestures of care toward her. Their neglect of their children appears to stem more from the acute strain caused by poverty than by innate turpitude. In an interview, Di Pietrantonio noted that the protagonist's biological parents eventually demonstrate some rudimentary parenting skills, and that the affection they occasionally show toward their oldest daughter appears more authentic than that exhibited by her well-off adoptive parents (FAMOSI 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Translation in English: «I listened carefully, intent on her story, but I didn't want to trust her. Adriana had said so, the day I arrived, not to believe too much of what she said» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 49).

<sup>33</sup> Translation in English: «Dead, he was the only child who counted for her [...] There she was, the grieving mother of that reckless youth [...] She had nothing for me, who survived. Certainly when she gave me up, an infant of a few months, she hadn't been reduced to this» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 96).

<sup>34</sup> Translation in English: «Every night she lent me the sole of her foot to hold against my cheek. I had nothing else, in that darkness inhabited by breath» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 19).

<sup>35</sup> Translation in English: «After brief periods of giving into sleep, I would awaken with a jolt, convinced that some disaster was imminent [...] Later I went down to Adriana [...] She didn't wake up, she moved her feet to welcome me into our usual position, but I wanted to rest my head next to hers, on the pillow. I hugged her, to comfort myself» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 44).

<sup>36</sup> Translation in English: «She was a skillful shopper too [...] "Keep track. At the end of the month Papa will come by," Adriana promised every shop owner. So quick and alert [...] she disarmed them. Behind her, I was merely a mute reinforcement» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 97).

<sup>37</sup> Hanna Serkowska stresses instead the narrator's protective stance toward Adriana (SERKOWSKA 2018, 69).

<sup>38</sup> Translation in English: «There's nothing wrong with that if you tell the truth. It's the truth that's wrong» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 146).

<sup>39</sup> Translation in English: «She trusted my hand and we went in [...] She walked warily, I swam around her a little. We stopped, facing each other, so alone and close, the water up to my chest and to her neck» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 169-170).

<sup>40</sup> Translation in English: «Adriana was holding the child, he had already calmed down. She was rocking him with light movements [...] "How dare you touch my son?" the father said, getting up suddenly [...] Adriana didn't even consider him. She gave the baby gently to his mother. "He had his hand caught in the bars of the crib," and she pointed to the red marks on his tiny wrist, the swelling already visible on the skin. She pushed his hair back and dried the tears with a napkin before she sat down again next to me [...] She had been so strong, but she was trembling» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 168).

<sup>41</sup> Translation in English: «You were great» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 169).

<sup>42</sup> Translation in English: «My sister. Like an improbable flower, growing in a clump of earth stuck in the rock. From her I learned resistance» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 170).

<sup>43</sup> Translation in English: «We looked at each other over the lightly tremulous surface, the dazzling reflections of the sun [...] Squeezing my eyelids just a little I imprisoned her between the lashes» (DI PIETRANTONIO 2019, 170).

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