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OTHER MOTHERS: REPRESENTATIONS OF NON-BIOLOGICAL MOTHERHOOD IN THE WORKS OF ELSA MORANTE AND DACIA MARAINI

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INTRODUCTION

ELSA MORANTE AND DACIA MARAINI WITHIN THE TRADITION OF ITALIAN WOMEN'S WRITING ON MOTHERHOOD IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Italian women's writing in the twentieth century reflects through the recurring theme of motherhood the myriad of changes the role underwent beginning with the budding efforts to redefine female identity following the birth of the Italian state. In her thorough study of motherhood in the Italian literature of the last century, Laura Benedetti traces the rise of the figure of the mother in the previous fifty years, as it expanded to encompass roles previously divided amongst various women who saw to the nursing and education of a child after birth.[1] Strengthened by the influence of the cult of the Virgin Mary, motherhood became an ideal generations of Italian women were forced to confront, and the contemporaneous entrance of women writers into the nation's literary scene in unprecedented numbers toward the close of the nineteenth century provided women with a new forum through which to challenge cultural expectations of their roles and identities. From the outset, however, women writing in Italy at this time found themselves in a precarious position, for they risked public criticism of their

[1] Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy*, 12.

literary vocation as transgressive in a time in which biological distinctions between the sexes were employed to further root women within the institution of the family.[2]

Motherhood was a central theme in the work of the group of women writers that Marina Zancan locates within the first generation of the twentieth century, and although several of them challenged the conditions of women in the period and in relationships within the family, they all tended to perpetuate the maternal ideal.[3] Neera, one of the most prolific and well-known women writers in Italy at this time, advocated through her theoretical writing the perpetuation of a mother's necessary self-sacrifice, and famously concluded the last of the three novels of her 'ciclo della fanciulla' with a tale of a woman who finds a sense of fulfillment and purpose in impending motherhood, shifting her focus from romantic to maternal love.[4] Though some of her most prominent contemporaries, including Marchesa Colombi, Bruno Sperani, Contessa Lara and Matilde Serao, addressed the realities and perspectives of contemporary women both in the private domain of marriage and family as well as in the public sphere, it wasn't until the subsequent generation, with the arrival of Sibilla Aleramo, that women writers truly began problematizing in their fiction the role of the mother as dictated by society.[5] In her 1906 novel *Una donna*, Aleramo critiques the patriarchal tradition of maternal abnegation in fictionalizing her autobiographical experience of leaving her son in order to escape an abusive marriage. Though the self-sacrificing mother appears in several of the works of Aleramo's contemporary, Grazie Deledda, both she and Maria Messina also undermine this figure and complicate the

[2] See Kroha, Lucienne, "The novel, 1870-1920," *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, 164-1975. Many women writers at this time, perhaps most noticeably Neera, tended to avoid drawing attention to their own transgressive status as women writers while reinforcing traditional female roles.
[3] Zancan, Marina. "Le autrici. Questioni di scrittura, questioni di lettura." All references to 'generations' of Italian women writers in my introduction are based on Zancan's classification in this work.
[4] See, respectively, Neera's *Le idée di una donna* (1904), and the novel *L'indomani* (1889).
[5] See Kroha, "The novel, 1870-1920," 168-172 for an overview of the works of these writers.

notion of gender roles as fixed and rooted in biology.[6] Thus, in the years preceding the arrival of Fascism, women in the Italian literary scene were actively questioning motherhood as an inevitable outome of their biological and social identities as women.

Benedetti observes that despite the Fascist regime's advocacy of the 'total, self-annihilating' maternal ideal women writers had begun to challenge in the years leading up to 1922, Italian literature did not follow the regime in its glorification of this ideal.[7] The prolific mother, promoted though policy and propaganda as a political construction for women to emulate, failed to gain prominence in literature of the period. Women writers found themselves once again in a subversive role in transgressing the regime's expectations for women, and portraying mothers in their works exposed the contradictions between their intellectual activity and the social expectations encouraging their maternity. Nevertheless, established writers such as Ada Negri and Annie Vivanti continued to feature mother protagonists centrally in their works, emphasizing the power of motherhood as a regenerative force imbued with the potential to renew the past.[8]

The years following World War II and leading up to the social and political turmoil of the 1970s represent a static period in which traditional ideas regarding women and motherhood continue to dominate in literature.[9] An increasing range of literary mothers' attitudes toward motherhood, however, can be found in the work of Natalia Ginzburg, including her protagonist's struggle with an unwanted pregnancy in the novel *La strada che va in città* and the maternal indifference that characterizes the short story 'La madre'. Benedetti credits Fausta Cialente, a

[6] Ibid., 173-174. Kroha cites the transgressivenes of both male and female gender roles Deledda's novels *Marianna Sirca* (1915) and *La madre* (1920) as well as Messina's depiction of unconvential gender arrangements in *La casa nel vicolo* (1921) and the rejection of traditional roles in *Alla deriva* (1920).
[7] Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 42-45.
[8] See Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 60-64 for in-depth analysis of these authors' depictions of motherhood.
[9] Ibid., 76-78.

member of the new generation of women writers debuting in this period, with one of the most powerful female characters in the nation's literary history, in her portrayal of her protagonist, Camilla's, struggle between the identities of woman and mother in *Un inverno freddissimo*.[10] As will later be discussed in depth, Elsa Morante defies adherence to literary and cultural trends throughout her career, and the contradictory criticism of mothers in her novels from Anna of *Menzogna e sortilegio* to Aracoeli of the eponymous novel reveals the difficulty inherent in classifying her treatment of motherhood.[11] Morante certainly distinguishes herself from the subsequent generation of women writers in which a feminist questioning of motherhood comes to the fore.

As Adalgisa Giorgio has noted, the literature of the 1970s reflects the devaluation of the maternal role as part of the denunciation of the female condition.[12] Works by women writers depicting the oppressiveness of the traditional roles of wife and mother gain prominence on the literary scene, including Dacia Maraini's 1975 *Donna in guerra* and Carla Cerati's *Un matrimonio perfetto* of the same year. Others capture the ambivalence women felt regarding the various implications of motherhood and of the conflicting perspectives surrounding the debate on abortion, which heightened the sense of motherhood as a chosen vocation.[13] Such is the case in Oriana Fallaci's *Lettere a un bambino mai nato*, detailing a woman's difficult choice between a career she loves and an unexpected pregnancy, as well as depictions of women choosing to go against the dominant ideology of their peer groups in order to embrace motherhood, such as Gina Lagorio's *La spiaggia del lupo* and Lidia Ravera's *Bambino mio*.[14] Both Ravera and Lalla

[10] Ibid.
[11] See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for an overview of this criticism.
[12] Giorgio, Adalgisa. "The novel, 1965-2000," in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, 218.
[13] Abortion was legalized in Italy in 1978.
[14] See Giorgio, "The novel, 1965-2000," 221-222 for a discussion of these works.

Romano politicize motherhood in their fictional works, combating traditional views of motherhood and reconceptualizing them.[15]

As the focus in Italian feminism post-1970s shifted from the question of equality toward that of sexual difference, there was a simultaneous movement away from rejection of the mother to the recuperation of the figure in symbolic and physical terms. Italian feminist groups and theorists in the 1980s explored the daughter's struggle to resolve her primary attachment to her mother alternatively through psychoanalytic recovery of the mother and the development of practices such as *affidamento,* which reworked the mother-daughter relationship through a mutually-beneficial, non-biological relationship.[16] These developments in Italian feminist thought are strongly represented in the pervasive theme of the mother-daughter relationship in fiction by women writers at this time. The daughter's struggle with both her relationship to her biological mother and the question of her own potential maternity is explored in a number of works, from Francesca Sanvitale's *Madre e figlia* to Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto* to Dacia Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*.

The prevalence of the daughter's point of view in Italian women's literature during the years surrounding the height of the feminist movement not only complicates critical approaches to motherhood in these works, but also underscores the historical absence of the mother's subjectivity. The overwhelming predominance of the point of the view of daughters in literary depictions of mothers contributes to the perception of the mutual exclusivity of motherhood and subjecthood. Ursula Fanning underscores that the "proliferation of daughterly discourses" in

[15] See, for example, Romano's *Tetto murato* (1957).
[16] See Gabriele, Tommasina, "The Pregnant Nun: Suor Attanasia and the Metaphor of Arrested Maternity in Dacia Maraini," for a concise overview of this evolution in feminist thought, including the fundamental contribution of Luisa Muraro, whose *L'ordine simbolico della madre* encompasses the psychoanalytic recovery of the biological mother as the source of symbolic meaning, the reconsideration of one's own personal relationship with the mother, the promotion of *affidamento* and the establishement of female genealogies. *Affidamento* is discussed more fully in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

twentieth century Italian women's literature follows the neglect of mothers as subjects in the fields of feminist theory, developmental psychology and historical research.[17] Benedetti and others have sought to address this lack of attention to the mother from the mother's point of view in Italian literature, and Benedetti significantly concludes her study on motherhood by turning her attention in her final chapter to mothers without children as a reflection of the reality in the final decades of the last century that biological motherhood has become increasingly less common among Italian women. As dropping birth rates, advances in reproductive technologies and changing family structures have contributed to redefining the contours of traditional familial roles, there has been an increasing reflection in literature by women writers of alternative ways of mothering.[18] As Benedetti provides a few examples of non-biological mothers depicted in works by Italian women authors appearing in the 1990s, she acknowledges that this "new notion of motherhood" is, in fact not new at all, as she turns to Neera's 1904 *Le idee di una donna* as an unlikely source of the idea of separating motherhood from its biological component, as the writer exhorts women who have not physically conceived a child to "concepire moralmente," and defines as a mother "La donna che sa educare, che plasma una intelligenza, che sviluppa un'anima […]."[19]

Neera's early identification of the separable elements of mothering is, in my mind, indicative of the fact that women writers have historically been interested in elaborating alternatives to biological mothering. The focus of this dissertation is on the elaboration of the

[17] Fanning, "Touching on taboos: imagining and reconceptualizing motherhood in some post-'68 Italian women's autobiographical writings," 43-44. Fanning argues, however, that the topics of maternity, motherhood, mothering, the figure of the mother and of the mother-daughter relationship in particular are not only prevalent in the context of nineteenth-century Italian women's literature, these subjects are frequently viewed from the perspective of the mother, as often as that of the daughter. She notes that the existence of a maternal discourse in that period appears to be unique to Italy.

[18] Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 114-122.

[19] "conceive morally"; "the woman who educates, who shapes an intelligence and develops a sole"; Neera, *Le idee di una donna*, 145, quoted with English translation in Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 121-122.

theme of non-biological mothers as subjects in Italian women's literature of the latter half of the twentieth century, from the post-war period through the start of the twenty-first century, thus encompassing the generations of women writers active prior to, during and following the height of the activity of the feminist reconsideration of motherhood in Italy. Though feminist theoretical considerations of mothering as a practice available to individuals who have no biological offspring came to the fore only in the final decades of this period, I aim to identify ways in which women writers in Italy have reflected and anticipated aspects of the discourse on motherhood.

With the exception of Benedetti's concluding chapter, this topic has received little or no critical attention within the context of Italian literature.[20] This is perhaps a result of the complexity inherent in identifying the presence of non-biological mothers in literature due to the persistent lack of unanimity as to how to define motherhood beyond its biological component. Elaine Hansen underscores this obstacle in her introduction to her work on the 'mother without child' rubric, pointing to the multiplicity of meanings of the term 'mother' and noting the "growing sense of impasse" in recent feminist criticism in which "Feminists have demanded and gained new attention for the previously ignored problems of motherhood, but they have not arrived at a consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system."[21] This sense of impasse represents the ongoing final act of what she terms "a drama in three acts," preceded within an international context, as in Italy, by the repudiation of motherhood and mothering and subsequent recuperation of motherhood through attempts to reinterpret and revalorize maternity. Emily Jeremiah has noted the transition in feminist thinking away from essentialism, reflected in the shift in terminology from "motherhood" to "mothering," and argues for the need to move

[20] In a footnote in her study *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*, 35, Adalgisa Giorgio highlights the need for further study in this area.
[21] *Mother Without Child*, 16.

beyond the sense of impasse Hansen describes.[22] Jeremiah draws on Sara Ruddick's work on mothering, which will inform my analyses as well. Ruddick defines mothering as a practice characterized by particular characteristics that is not reducible to gender or the act of giving birth and argues for the adoptive nature of all mothering, which entails commitment to protecting, nurturing, and training particular children.[23] This dissertation aims to begin to address the lack of consideration of non-biological mothers in the criticism of motherhood in Italian literature, in which interpretations have relied almost exclusively on biological definitions of mothers.[24]

I believe that for a number of reasons the fiction of Elsa Morante (1912-1985) and Dacia Maraini (1936-) is uniquely suited to a study of the different ways women writers have investigated ideas regarding mothering as a practice separable from biology long before these issues came to the fore in feminist criticism. Representing two different generations of writers, their careers span sixty-five years in which they and their contemporaries have questioned motherhood and women's identities in their literary production, from Morante's 1948 publication of *Menzogna e sortilegio* in the postwar period to Dacia Maraini's most recent work, *Chiara d'Assisi: Elogio della disobbedienza* in 2013. Both women were living and writing during the height of the feminist movement's activity and maintained very different relationships to it, with Morante remaining in open opposition to the movement while Maraini actively engaged in feminist issues through her writing and activism.[25] Despite their opposing stances, the works of

[22] Jeremiah, "Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond: Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought." She argues for the solution of viewing motherhood as performance, drawing from the work of Sara Ruddick, Jessica Benjamin and Judith Butler, though she acknowledges that this approach is not without its problems in failing to address the relational and ethical aspects of mothering.
[23] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*.
[24] Some noteworthy work has been produced in the American and English context, including Hansen's *Mother Without Child* and Jeremiah's "We need to talk about gender: Mothering and Masculinity in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*," *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Mothering in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, 169-184.
[25] I will discuss Morante's and Maraini's relationships to feminism, respectively, in Chapters 1 and 3 of this dissertation.

both writers exhibit an attention to issues that will eventually be addressed in feminist discourse, concerning the ways women have traditionally mothered. Both authors imagine alternative means through which to participate in the practice of mothering as well as the restructuring of families beyond biological ties.

Despite the many stylistic, linguistic and ideological differences that distinguish them, there is a clear affinity between Morante's and Maraini's bodies of work in their mutual sustained interest in women's relationship to motherhood. Maraini has, in fact, repeatedly professed Morante's great influence on her formation as a writer, naming her as one of her five 'madri' in her efforts to establish her place in a female literary genealogy.[26] Morante and Maraini approached in very different ways the challenges of writing as women in a male-dominated literary tradition. While Morante resisted the gendered label of "scrittrice," Maraini recognized the differences inherent in her writing as a woman and experimented with literary genres in order to discover "forms capable of representing a new female speaking subject which reclaims the body from the domination of biology and sees it as a site of social stratification and resistance."[27]

Despite their different views on women's relationship to writing, both Morante and Maraini very closely tie both oral and written forms of narration to the maternal throughout their novels. Storytelling and writing become means through which women mother and are thus able to create maternal bonds in the absence of biological ties. The lack of critical consensus on motherhood attests to the complexity of their thinking on the subject, and the representation of non-biological mothers in these novels, thus far overlooked by critics, complicates this discourse

[26] Locating one's place within a female genealogy became an important undertaking for many women writers, feminist theorists and literary critics beginning the 1980s. See Luciano, Bernadette, "Dialoguing with Mothers in the Twenty-First Century: Three generations of Italian Women Writers" for an in-depth discussion of literary *maternage* and the ways in which Maraini and other authors have engaged in dialogue with their literary mothers.
[27] Giorgio, "The novel, 1965-2000," 226.

further, as it questions the notion of biological definitions of mothering still under debate today. By no means intended as an exhaustive study, this dissertation provides an examination of the ways in which two of the leading twentieth-century women writers, with very different viewpoints, styles and feminist orientations challenge the institution of motherhood and the dominant cultural maternal ideal.

In Chapter 1 I address the lack of critical attention dedicated to non-biological mothers in Morante's texts, which I argue results in a reductive view of the author's discourse on motherhood in her fiction. I aim to demonstrate the extent to which Morante critiques motherhood as a patriarchal social institution through highlighting the oppressiveness inherent to the way in which women have historically been expected to mother. Through her manipulation of the cultural constructs of the "good" and "bad" mother she demonstrates how both are unrealistic and unsustainable models for women that exclude other aspects of identity. I argue that in the figure of Rosaria Morante creates a portrayal of mothering outside of the constraints of societal expectations that merits further consideration. I then turn my attention to Morante's questioning of the social conditioning and theories of sexual development that have historically been thought to play a role in producing the kind of "vere madri" central to *L'isola di Arturo* and *Aracoeli*, in order to highlight the extent to which the author problematizes rather than endorses this paradigm. I conclude with a discussion of the cooperative mothering that takes place in *La Storia*, as a preface to my claim of a third maternal presence in the novel as part of my examination of the relationship between the maternal and narration in Chapter 2.

I begin Chapter 2 with a focus on Morante's use of the fairy tale genre, investigating the author's depiction of both the power and the limitations of its pedagogical function for children in her earliest two novels, in which child protagonists navigate their relationships to mothers

using fairy tales as guides. I argue that Morante aligns oral storytelling with maternal practice, revealing the value of the interpersonal experience of mothers telling and interpreting stories with their children, which comes across most visibly in *Aracoeli*. I consider the narrative voice of *La Storia* in the final section of the chapter in order to argue that Morante presents it as a maternal voice, and highlight salient aspects of the narrator's relationship to her literary offspring and her ability to transcend the perceived incompatibility of intellectual production and mothering pervasive in Italian society during the time of Morante's formation and career as a writer.

The focus of Chapter 3 is Dacia Maraini's reworking in her fiction of women's roles and subjectivity within the traditional patriarchal family. Undeniably influenced by her participation in Italian feminist discourse and activism, Maraini's view on motherhood has often been oversimplified as a mere reflection of the changing feminist views on motherhood over the course of her career. I argue that a focus on the work of non-biological mothers remains central throughout her work, from her re-elaborations of the maternal potential of nuns, to her attention to figures who mother in non-traditional families in such works as *Memorie di una ladra* and *Il treno per Helsinki*. As part of a larger reflection on the changing configuration of the Italian family, Maraini calls for the necessary rethinking of the role of the mother to accompany the reconceptualization of familial bonds between adults and children with no legal or biological connection.

This expansion of the definition of family is central to Maraini's later novels, in which storytelling plays a key role in both strengthening and reinterpreting familial bonds. In Chapter 4 I begin with an analysis of maternal storytelling in *Donna in guerra* as a fundamental starting point in the author's view of its role in establishing bonds amongst women, with an emphasis on

the potential of narrative to subvert traditional gender roles. In two of Maraini's later works, *Dolce per sé* and *Colomba*, the relational function of storytelling gains greater prominence as a means through which to establish female genealogies and reinforce maternal relationships. I will argue that Vera's relationship with Flavia in *Dolce per sé* represents the culmination of the author's thinking on non-biological means through which to engage in maternal work, as well as the use of family storytelling to redefine family boundaries. I conclude this dissertation with Maraini's reflection on the maternal nature of both oral and written narrative, as she reveals the maternal origin of her own gift for storytelling and embeds within her fiction her theoretical reflections on the maternal nature of writing.

CHAPTER 1

ELSA MORANTE: BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF TRADITIONAL MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood is a central focus in the majority of Elsa Morante's novels and short stories, and the critical debate surrounding the author's representation of motherhood is a testament to the complexity of her thinking about mothers.[1] Arguments attempting to reduce Morante's view of women as portrayed in her novels to labels such as misogynist or essentialist have proven untenable, as several critics have compellingly challenged the assumption that her portrayals of traditional motherhood are a sign of her poor opinion of the members of her sex.[2] As Adalgisa Giorgio rightly argues in her examination of Morante's final novel, *Aracoeli*, while the author's discourse on women in the novel may be "contradictory and ambiguous" it must also be considered for its subversiveness and its reflection of the "complexity of current discourse on femininity and motherhood, providing a critique of certain notions and stereotypes of our culture, but at the same time exposing the traps of facile idealizations and the delusion of

[1] See, for example, the two conflicting interpretations by Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud and Robin Pickering-Iazzi in *Annali di Italianistica: Women's Voices in Italian Literature*, 7, 300-24 and 325-40.
[2] In addition to Pickering-Iazzi, see the work of Adalgisa Giorgio, Anna Nozzoli, Gruppo La Luna.

oversimplifications."[3] I would argue that in all of her works Morante maintains a critical stance toward the societally-determined and idealized role of the mother, and that her inclusion of non-biological mothers in her texts is one the primary means through which she both questions the assumptions underlying how motherhood is viewed in contemporary Italian society and explores the potential for alternatives to this prescriptive and restrictive role for women.

In her novels, Morante challenges the archetype of the "good" mother dominant in the cultural context in which she lived and wrote. Adalgisa Giorgio has shed light on the persistent influence of the Marian model of sacrificial motherhood in Italian society, noting that following one hundred and fifty years of development of the cult of the Madonna, from the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception through to the twenty-first century, "Womanhood has been erased by motherhood, and motherhood has primarily meant generating and nurturing the male child."[4] Giorgio argues that all Italian women must inevitably face this powerful maternal model, this "ambivalent figure who simultaneously encompasses authority and subordination, chastity and sexuality, the sacred and the profane."[5] Morante navigates precisely these contradictions in her texts, as she presents female characters who are almost exclusively mothers and many of whom are in some way linked to the Virgin Mary, whether through their mother-son relationships or association with sexuality and the sacred. In measuring her more traditional mother characters against the model of motherhood *par excellence*, which reflects the expectations of society, the author reveals the impossibility of living up to such an impossible ideal. She then further challenges this ideal through characters who transgress cultural expectations of mothers, whether through their sexuality, gender or even species, and it is

[3] Giorgio, "Nature Vs Culture: Repression, Rebellion and Madness in Elsa Morante's Aracoeli", 93-116.
[4] Giorgio, *Writing Mothers and Daughters*, 120.
[5] Ibid.

through these figures that Morante imagines alternative family structures that have been critically undervalued up to now.

As is most commonly the case in the Italian and other literary traditions, Morante favors the narrative perspective of the child in her work, reinforcing the sense of the mother's absence as subject in addition to the absence experienced by her child, a two-fold sense of loss described by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly in the introduction to their volume on maternal texts within contemporary literature:

> Not only has the mother been lost both to the broader traditions of literary history that have privileged narratives by and about male figures and within daughter-centric literatures that do depict the mother; she is absent to her children (almost always daughters) and herself in that her own voice is silent, her subjectivity lacking or erased.[6]

Morantian mothers demonstrate this lack of subjectivity, as they are described through the voices of their children from whom they are separated by death or a distant emotional connection, and their experiences of motherhood can thus only be inferred from the texts.

This child-centric focus is reflected in and reinforced by the many psychoanalytical analyses of Morante's works, which take into account the author's self-professed interest in Freudian psychoanalysis.[7] Jessica Benjamin has identified this trap of reducing the mother to object rather than seeing her as a subject in the field of psychoanalysis as well as in the broader context of our culture:

> It must be acknowledged that we have only just begun to think about the mother as a subject in her own right, principally because of contemporary feminism, which made us aware of the disastrous results for women of being reduced to the mere extension of a two-month-old. Psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular too often partake of this distorted view of the mother, which is so deeply embedded in the culture as a

[6] Podnieks and O'Reilly, "Introduction," *Textual Mothers Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* 13.

[7] See, for example, Sharon Wood's and Hanna Serkowska's chapters on *Menzogna e sortilegio* and *Aracoeli*, respectively, in *Under Arturo's Star*, as well as Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud's "Le identificazioni della donna nella narrative di Elsa Morante," and Alba Amoia in "Elsa Morante: Absent Fathers, Missing Mothers, and Family Myths," in *20th-Century Women Writers: the Feminine Experience.*

> whole. No psychological theory has adequately articulated the mother's independent existence.[8]

Morante's choice of first person narration from the child's point of view is thus not an unusual one for the period in which she wrote her first novels, but it poses a challenge to a focus on her literary mothers and their experiences of raising children rather than on the outcomes of this childrearing as expressed by the children themselves. It may come as no surprise, then, that thus far the non-biological mothers have not been adequately considered, for they are not the central players in the Oedipal/Electra complexes in which the youthful narrators of the novels are caught.

These figures are mothers in their own right, and the fact that Morante attentively presents them as such reveals an interest in the maternal as separable from biological relationships and questions the extent to which it is 'natural' for women to mother the way they do in patriarchal society. On the surface, it may appear that Morante endorses rather than critiques that which Adrienne Rich put forth as the first of her "unexamined assumptions" regarding mothers:

> […] that a "natural" mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless;[9]

Endorsed by literary and visual imagery of "motherhood as a single-minded identity," Rich describes having to face the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional,' and it is precisely this type of 'natural', unconditional and all-consuming mothering that is depicted, and according to many critics, glorified, in many of Morante's mother figures, from Alessandra and

[8] Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, 23.
[9] Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 22.

Concetta to Nunziatella and, finally, Aracoeli.[10] Rather than endorsing the view of motherhood as the destiny of all women or celebrating the simple, ignorant, natural mother, I would argue that in her writing Morante is critical of this stereotype and challenges many of the underlying assumptions that favor its perpetuation. One of the primary means through which she accomplishes this critique is through a focus on non-biological mothers who are to a certain degree exempt from the societal pressures on their biological counterparts and represent alternative ways of mothering free from the selflessness and isolation of all-consuming motherhood as a woman's sole source of identity.

In my close reading of Morante's novels, I will begin with an analysis of the character Rosaria in *Menzogna e sortilegio* as a transgressive character that complicates the categorization of mothers according to the good/bad dichotomy and demonstrates resistance to the societal imperative to be a 'good' mother that entails complete self-sacrifice. I will consider *L'isola di Arturo* and *Aracoeli* side by side, for the similar ways in which these texts represent the maternal ideal of the 'vere madri," the mother-son relationship and the potential of the male maternal. Finally, I will examine in *La Storia* Morante's creation of a unique family structure in which the responsibilities of motherhood are divided between multiple cooperating figures.

[10] Ibid., 23.

Menzogna e sortilegio: mothering at the margins of patriarchal society

Motherhood and the search for maternal love are central themes in Morante's earliest novel, as *Menzogna e sortilegio* traces the family history of the orphaned narrator, Elisa, who begins writing in order to free herself of her family ghosts after the death of her adoptive mother, Rosaria. Much critical attention on this novel has been focused on evaluating and categorizing Morante's typologies of mothers as represented in the text or analyzing Elisa's relationship with her biological mother, Anna.[11] I would argue that critics have thus far undervalued the extent to which this novel offers a critique of motherhood as a social institution and questions cultural assumptions regarding *how* women mother and *why* they mother the way they do. In choosing to portray two diametrically opposed 'types' of mothers, Morante manipulates the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" to reveal the profound influence of society's expectations on women's mothering. Because of her marginalized social position as a prostitute, Rosaria is the sole female character in the novel that is free from the expectation or obligation of motherhood, and in her experience of elective mothering she is shown to have the freedom to balance childrearing with a life beyond devotion to her adopted daughter. Through juxtaposition of Rosaria with the biological mothers in the text, Morante imagines an alternative to traditional motherhood, one that transcends biology and defines motherhood as a practice, anticipating questions central in feminist discourse on motherhood regarding what is natural or instinctive about the work that mothers perform.

[11] For the former, see, for example, Jeuland-Meynaud or Anna Petrucco Becchi, "Stabat Mater: Le madri di Elsa Morante" *Belfagor*, *48*, 436-451. Studies on the mother-daughter relationship in the novel include, but are not limited to, Adalgisa Giorgio's, *Writing Mothers and Daughters* and Valeria Finucci's "The Textualization of a Female 'I': Elsa Morante's Menzogna e Sortilegio." *Italica* 65, 308-328.

Representing the "bad" end of the spectrum of mothers, Anna is presented throughout the novel as cold and negligent, and it is perhaps Sharon Wood who puts it best when she writes: "The perennial myth of delighted motherhood, peddled by male and female novelists alike, is demolished in the person of Anna, whose attitude toward Elisa […] is at best one of indifference and at worst one of unfeeling cruelty."[12] Elisa is shown to be acutely aware of her mother's apathy when she writes "io non contavo per mia madre" and realizes that her mother sees her, as all children, as "una sorta di animali fastidiosi, i quali, incapaci di provvedere a se stessi, costringono gli altri a tale ingrata cura."[13] This description reveals the constrictive nature of motherhood, the obligation placed on mothers 'forcing' them to meet the needs of their children and the expectation that they will commit to such care willingly, rather than begrudgingly. Anna demonstrates no natural, instinctive care toward her daughter, just as Anna felt none from her own mother, Cesira. The fact that she is criticized in the text as not having "viscere di madre" reinforces the idea that she transgresses that which is generally assumed to be part of the nature or constitution of women.[14]

Anna is similarly shown to have been a resented presence in Cesira's life: "Cesira pareva considerar la figlia null'altro che un peso di più nella sua vita già troppo gravosa."[15] Like Anna, she ends up in an unsatisfactory marriage from which a child is an expected but unwelcome consequence. Critics such as Marco Bardini, Anna Nozzoli and Annette Evans have recognized in this novel a criticism on Morante's part of the societally-determined roles available to women at the time of the novel and the challenges a woman had to face in order to attain personal

[12] Wood, "Models of Narrative in Menzogna e sortilegio," in *Under Arturo's Star*, 97.
[13] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 440; "I did not count for my mother"; "a breed of tiresome animals unable to care for themselves who force others to take grudging care of them." Unless otherwise noted, English translations of *Menzogna e sortilegio* are from *House of Liars*, Trans. Adrienne Foulke (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).
[14] Ibid., 670; "mother's tenderness". This translation does not do justice to the original meaning of "viscera," in English "innards" or "organs," which locates the maternal in the inner physical makeup of a woman.
[15] Ibid., 61; "Cesira seemed to consider her daughter simply one burden more in an already overburdened life."

fulfillment.[16] For both generations of women, marriage is the only socially acceptable solution to financial constraints, and ultimately even figures shown to want to "mantenere intatte le proprie prerogative individuali senza necessariamente farsi strumentalizzare, o comunque identificarsi solo attraverso la maternità" end up burdened with husbands and children.[17]

Neither Cesira nor Anna is able to construct the identity they desire for themselves outside of their roles as mothers. Cesira's ambitions of improving her social standing through an aristocratic marriage are short-lived, and her brief experience of the life she desired is presented in theatrical terms as a part in a play that must eventually give way to real life.[18] Cesira's inability to derive satisfaction from her roles as wife and mother is presented as inevitable in the novel, as her becoming a mother leads to the disappearance of her independent identity, which reaches its lowest point after her granddaughter Elisa is born. To Elisa, her grandmother has become a sort of non-person, nothing more than a "parassita" and an "intrusa" in her daughter's family life.[19]

Anna is similarly shown to be destined to enter into these traditional roles, presented as the only possible outcome of her obsessive, self-destructive love for her aristocratic cousin, Edoardo.[20] Anna's desire for romantic fulfillment is met by Edoardo with the reality of the imbalance inherent in traditional gender roles as well as his intention take advantage of his

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[16] Michael Bardini, "Dei «fantastici doppi» ovvero la mimesi narrativa dello spostamento psicico," in *Per Elisa. Studi su "Menzogna e sortilegio,"* 228-9; Nozzoli, "Elsa Morante: la fuga nell'utopia," 137-142; Annette Evans, "The Fiction of Family: Ideology and Narrative in Elsa Morante, " in *Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism,* 131-3.

[17] Bardini, "Dei «fantastici doppi»," 228. "keep intact their own prerogatives as individuals without being used as a tool or finding self-identification through motherhood." Translation mine.

[18] *Menzogna e sortilegio,* 57; "La sua vita di ricca gentildonna era durata poco più di un mese; dopo questo tempo, ella aveva dovuto spogliarsi dei begli abiti e dei gioielli, come una comparsa che abbia rappresentato in una commedia la parte di una regina".

[19] Ibid., 37; "parasite"; "intruder."

[20] Her repeated wish to have a son by him is the only instance of expressed desire for motherhood, but it not so much mothering that Anna yearns for as a replacement for Edoardo. See Adalisa Giorgio *Writing Mothers and Daughters,* 123 for a similar reading.

authority as her husband to subjugate and confine her while continuing to enjoy unbridled freedom himself:

> […] non illuderti, sposando me, d'esser felice. Dopo che saremo sposati […] tu dovrai stare ad aspettarmi, chiusa in casa. Prima di uscire, incollerò delle strisce di carta alle finestre e alle porte e ci scriverò sopra la mia firma, per accertarmi, al mio ritorno, che tu sei rimasta rinchiusa, e non ti sei neppure affacciata alla finestra. […] Fino alla tua vecchiaia, tu sarai sempre o incinta, o con un bambino in fasce da nutrire. Così, in pochi anni, sarai grassa, deforme, sfatta, e non potrai destare la tentazione di nessun uomo; mentre che io sarò sempre magro, leggero come adesso […] e volerò e scorrazzerò per il mondo, sicuro che tu m'aspetti a casa.[21]

Though this is of course an extreme description of the isolation, physical toll and subordination the women in the text can be expected to endure within the institutions of marriage and motherhood, this passage serves to underscore the inevitability of Anna's entering into them, and the element of threat they pose to her freedom, body and sexuality. She eventually agrees to what she thinks will be a marriage of convenience to Francesco, and as his friends observe of his wife following their marriage, Anna is "poco adatta a diventare madre di famiglia," suggesting that rather than a result of the nature of all women this destiny is culturally prescribed.[22]

This question of naturalness of motherhood in *Menzogna e sortilegio* has sparked great critical debate, and much of it surrounds the figure of Alessandra, Elisa's paternal grandmother. She is in many ways the prototype of Morante's category of 'vere madri', the kind of uneducated, 'natural' mother who immerses herself fully in the care of her only son. Critics have frequently identified Alessandra as the sole positive maternal figure in the novel, but I would argue that a woman's overinvestment in childrearing is shown ultimately to have negative and

[21] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 192; "don't have any illusion that by marrying me, you will be happy. After we are married […] you will have to stay behind shut up in the house and wait for me. Before I leave, I will pastes strips of paper around the windows and doors and sign them all to make sure, when I come back, that you have stayed inside and not looked out a window. […] Until you are too old, you will always be pregnant or nursing a child. So, in a few years you will be fat, shapeless, finished, and you will never be able to awaken desire in any man; while I will always be thin lean as I am today […] and I will travel swiftly about the world, sure that you are waiting for me at home."

[22] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 426; "little adapted to becoming the mother of a family."

even disastrous consequences for her.[23] In response to Evans' assertion that "The only relationship that seems promising in the novel is that between mother and son, because the son is the over-determined sign of the unfulfillable ambitions of the mother,"[24] I would argue that the key word is "seems".[25] While mother-son relationships may appear initially and superficially full of possibility, they are not lasting sources of fulfillment, and Morante depicts the negative consequences for female characters who base their identities solely on their maternity.[26]

Both mothers of sons in the text, Alessandra and Concetta, are shown to be fully absorbed in an apparently idyllic relationship with their infant sons, and they represent the opposite end of the spectrum of maternal investment and sacrifice, which places them in stark contrast to Anna and Cesira. We see in this description of Alessandra as a new mother the kind of language that has led to a positive critique of her as a mother and of the idyll of motherhood:

> Lei, che non aveva mai dato baci d'amore, copriva di baci folli e innocenti quelle piccole membra; […] E con una sorpresa da bambina, s'inorgogliva osservando come l'infante che lei stessa aveva fatto e nutrito, fosse perfetto e intero nella sua minuzia, e che nulla era stato in lui trascurato e dimenticato, dalle piccole unghie fino ai cigli spuntati appena, dai capelli ancora molli come piume ai vivaci piedini.[27]

Concetta shows a similar extent of investment in her description of her idyllic past with her son while alone in his room, looking through his tokens from love interests:

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[23] Nozzoli, for example, sees her as the "unica valenza positiva" among the female figures, as a "modello femminile privilegiato" whose "dedizione ai dettami del ruolo materno" is viewed as a strength, 143. Bardini likewise characterizes her as "un modello positivo, l'unico per la «Povera Elisa»," "Dei «fantastici doppi»," 236.

[24] Annette Evans, "The Fiction of Family", 133.

[25] Adalgisa Giorgio likewise contends that Concetta and Alessandra are "mothers who gain social and personal value through having brought a son into the world." *Writing Mothers and Daughters*, 123. I would question the extent to which this is true, as I see any noticeable gain as temporary and the loss of which as a threat to their identities.

[26] Jeuland-Meynaud similarly concludes that Morante's female characters "trovano sfoghi e compensi provvisori nella maternità, un certo tipo di maternità che non poteva aiutarle a lungo a trascendersi e a giustificare il proprio esistere.".

[27] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 334; "She who had never given a kiss of love covered his little body with innocent, joyous kisses; […] A with a girlish surprise, she took pride in observing how the infant that she herself had borne and nourished, was perfect and whole in every particular, and that nothing in him had been neglected or forgotten, from his tiny nails to his tiny lashes, from his soft hair to his tiny feet." Translation mine.

> No, no, nessuna lo ama come me. Credimi, figlio mio, nessuno ti ama come me. […] E ti ricordi le belle cose che ti dicevo, non quando eravamo soli, ma davanti a tutti, perché non c'era da vergognarsi tra te e me, il nostro era un amore santo, e tutti lo sapevano che eri mio! ti ricordi i miei complimenti, e i baci? Io non volli mai, come fanno altre madri, cederti a una balia. E quando eravamo soli, in camera, e ti attaccavo al mio petto, ci guardavamo tutto il tempo.[28]

We see the centrality in her life of Concetta's dedication to her son after the death of her husband, as she devotes herself not to 'questioni terrene", but rather "alle pratiche religiose, divenutele quasi una manìa, e all'amor materno, che s'accentrava per altro in lei solo sul Edoardo (giacché, simile a molte madri della sua razza, ella prediligeva i figli maschi e disprezzava le femmine)."[29] She is thus linked to religion and, through her sacrificial devotion to her son, Morante alludes to the religious paragon of motherhood, the Virgin Mary. Thus in Alessandra and Concetta, respectively, are represented two of the dominant stereotypes of what motherhood should look like: the myth of natural, instinctive motherhood and the concept of motherhood as an extension of religious practice, in line with the dominant cultural model of the Madonna.

Though the above scenes do portray the mother-infant experience in a positive light, critics have failed to acknowledge the fact that Morante poses a clear end to the idyll for these mothers, demonstrating the negative consequences for these two women once their sons are grown. As Laura Benedetti has observed, "Mothers are trapped in an irrational and instinctive role […]. They are trapped in a universe that is essentially prehistoric, and their influence stops

[28] Ibid., 162; "No, no, no one loves you as I do. […] Do you remember all of the lovely things I used to say to you, not just when we were alone, but in front of everyone, because there was nothing to be ashamed of in the love between us? It was a sacred love and the whole world knew you belonged to me! Do you remember the sweet things we said, and the kisses? I never consented to give you to a wet nurse as some mothers do. And when we were alone in my bedroom and I gave you my breast, we looked at each other, we watched each other's faces all the time."

[29] Ibid., 82-3; "she gave herself entirely to the religious observances which had almost become a mania with her and to an obsessive maternal love which was centered only on Edoardo (for like many mothers of her race, she loved male children and despised the females)."

with adulthood, when history begins."[30] The relationships of Alessandra and Concetta with their adult sons clearly demonstrate this loss of identity as the primacy of mothering subsides along with the growth of their children; Alessandra is repudiated by Francesco, and he practically erases her existence in his life by refusing to speak of her: "I conoscenti di mio padre ignoravano l'esistenza [di Alessandra], preferendo egli, per solito, di essere creduto orfano, che figlio d'una povera contadina." [31] He also gradually sells off all of the family's landholdings, depriving her of her only property and means of financial autonomy and at the same time chipping away at her sense of identity as a landowner, and he never fulfills his promise to honor her one wish, a visit from his family and an opportunity to meet her daughter-in-law and granddaughter.[32] Though she is repeatedly described as strong and able to provide for herself by working in the fields well into her old age, it is clear that Alessandra's complete maternal sacrifice continues as long as her son is alive, though in return she receives nothing from him, not even an invitation to his wedding, and her maternal sacrifice is exploited. The lack of explanation in the text regarding Francesco's motivations for such harsh rejection of his mother encourages the interpretation that it is unjustified. Morante is subtly questioning women's motivations for entering into such a sustained relationship of self-abnegation by demonstrating how poorly Alessandra and other mothers of sons are compensated for their sacrifice.

Edoardo similarly mistreats and ignores his mother, Concetta, once he is grown, and his death results in her madness and inability to accept that he is dead, as she "non era più cosciente

[30] Laura Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 81.
[31] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 699; "none of my father's acquaintance even knew [Alessandra] existed, since he usually preferred to be thought of as an orphan rather than as the son of a poor peasant woman."
[32] Regarding Alessandra's emotional attachment to the land she is forced to sell: "[Francesco] si fermò soltanto quando, sparita l'ultima vigna e l'ultimo capo di bestiame, ad Alessandra non rimase che la casa e un pezzetto d'orto: il quale ultimo, assai minuscolo territorio in verità, fu lasciato fuori dalle vendite, «perché», scriveva a tal proposito il notaio a Francesco, «la povera vedova intristerebbe senza neppure l'idea d'orto di sua padronale appartenenza». It is Elisa, after her biological parents' and Rosaria's deaths, who ultimately provides her grandmother with a monthly sum to support her.

della realtà" and "se lo figurava ancor vivo."[33] She has lost the primary focus of her life and is shown to have no sense of identity beyond her role as Edoardo's mother. The fates of Alessandra and Concetta reveal the precariousness of self-realization through mothering sons, and I would argue that in these stories of women in the novel, sustained maternal sacrifice is shown to result in no returns for the sacrificing mothers, not even in terms of affection. Edoardo "non amava, in realtà, nessuno e sua madre veniva male ripagata per la propria idolatria per il figlio," and he even takes pleasure in hurting her: "si divertiva ad offendere sua madre nella fede religiosa."[34] Thus, in *Menzogna e sortilegio* both women who seek self-fulfillment in motherhood and those who resist it are shown to be ultimately unsuccessful, either by physical or emotional loss of the son that was the center of their lives or by having motherhood thrust upon them by the lack of alternatives to marriage as a role sanctioned by society. Traditional motherhood is thus shown to be in some way detrimental to all of the women in the text, and yet there is one other mother who has been often been overlooked because she is not defined as such biologically: Rosaria. I would argue that Morante presents this scenario of adoptive mothering as an alternative to the extremes of maternal sacrifice or negligence which affords the mother a greater sense of agency. It is only through Rosaria that she shows the possibility for women to mother and at the same time maintain an independent identity outside of their maternal role, something that none of the biological mother figures are shown to be capable of doing. It is important to note, alongside Bardini, that the role of "*mala femmina*," or prostitute, is another possible role for women, but one that is "un modello negativo" in which women are socially exploited."[35] I believe Rosaria's status as a prostitute is what liberates her from imposed

[33] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 550; "no longer had and sense of reality"; "she imagined he was still alive".
[34] Ibid., 88; "he did not actually care for anyone and his mother was poorly repaid for her idolatry of her son."; "it amused him to outrage his mother's religious feelings."
[35] Bardini, "Dei «fantastici doppi»," 228-9.

motherhood and provides her with a freedom not shared by any of the other female characters in the novel.

In the debate surrounding Morante's portrayal of female characters in this novel, nearly all of whom are mothers, critics' appraisals of Rosaria have been remarkably limited, with many affording her only passing mention and with scarcely any indication of her maternal role. For Carlo Sgorlon, she is simply "una cocotte simpatica e generosa" barely worthy of note, though he does include her amongst the few characters who do not suffer from 'existential falseness' and argues that though she shares many of the same defects as other female characters, "Forse ciò che la salva è il fatto di appartenere al popolo, e di vivere liberamente secondo il suo istinto."[36] Gianni Venturi identifies her as the most 'real' character in the novel, and the one who to the greatest degree is associated with life rather than death, and she is a 'natural element' who represents simplicity and naivety.[37] For Anna Nozzoli, she is a "prostituta dai teneri sentimenti materni" and one of the female characters "che uniscono la discriminante di classe alla inferiorità di sesso."[38] Cesare Garboli, in assessing the portrayal of women in its totality in the novel concludes that "Le donne sono pazze e malvagie, o sono delle povere di spirito. Una puttana di buon cuore non basta a redimere la categoria."[39] In agreement with Garboli, I would not go as far as to say that the character of Rosaria suffices to redeem the category of women as portrayed in the novel, and I agree with his and other critics' identification of her as one of the few positive figures in the text. I would, however, argue that she is a character that merits further analysis going beyond considerations of her class and profession in order to address her

[36] Sgorlon, *Invito Alla Lettura Di Elsa Morante*, 42-47. "a nice and generous prostitute"; "Perhaps that which saves her is the fact that she belongs to the lower classes and lives freely in accordance with her instinct." Translation mine.
[37] Venturi, *Morante*, 42-45.
[38] Nozzoli, "Elsa Morante: la fuga nell'utopia," *Tabù e coscienza*, 137-8; "a prostitute with tender maternal feelings"; "unites the discriminant of class with the inferiority of gender." Translation mine.
[39] Garboli, *Il Gioco Segreto: Nove Immagini Di Elsa Morante*, 64; "Women are crazy and wicked or poor in spirit. A good-hearted whore is not sufficient to redeem the category." Translation mine.

choice to adopt the orphaned daughter of her lover and her sustained investment in the care of this child.

Against those who would argue that Rosaria is hardly worthy of critical attention stands the clear textual evidence of the centrality of Rosaria that Morante provides from the onset, introducing her in the first sentence of the novel by the narrator Elisa as "la mia madre adottiva, la mia sola amica e protettrice," and later listing her as the second of the four principal characters in the story.[40] From the first pages of the novel, through the first-person perspective of the narrator Elisa, Morante not only establishes her identity as a mother, but also provides significant indications of what kind of mother Rosaria is. Throughout the text, there is a comparison of Elisa's two mothers that is variably implicit and explicit, which suggests that Morante presents Rosaria as a positive alternative of the mothering model that Anna represents.

Rosaria demonstrates the separation of biology and practice in terms of motherhood and through her Morante raises the theoretical question of what precisely constitutes mothering. In arguing that "all mothers are 'adoptive,'" Sara Ruddick provides a useful framework for evaluating mothering as a practice characterized by particular characteristics that is not tied to the act of giving birth, and her elaboration of this practice can help to differentiate between Anna and Rosaria in terms of who does the mothering in this text: [41]

> According to [this idea of mothering as a practice or work], mothers are not identified by fixed biological or legal relationships to children but by the work they set out to do. In my more particularized conception, mothers are people who see children as "demanding" protection, nurturance, and training; they attempt to respond to children's demands with care and respect, rather than indifference and assault.
>
> This conception of mothering as a kind of caring labor undermines the myth that mothers are "naturally" loving. There is nothing foreordained about maternal response. Birthgivers or legal guardians may respond to children with indifference, assault or active neglect. Nor is there a single emotion- love- that children inspire in mothers. A mother's emotions can vary within the course of a day, and certainly over time, depending on the

[40] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 11. "my second mother, the only friend and protectress I ever had."
[41] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 51.

> behavior of her children, the space, time and services available to her, and a myriad of other desires and frustrations.[42]

This passage highlights many of the key aspects of Rosaria's behavior which would define her as a mother in terms of her commitment to the work of raising Elisa, while at the same time it enables us to relegate Anna to the role of indifferent 'birthgiver' rather than true 'mother'. Though Anna would certainly be capable of engaging in this work herself, Morante underscores the elective aspect of mothering by contrasting a biological mother who chooses not to engage in maternal practice with an adoptive mother who willing chooses to do so. Rosaria exhibits all three elements that Ruddick identifies as essential to maternal work, as she is engaged in ensuring Elisa's preservation, growth and social acceptability, objectives Ruddick argues are met through a mother's commitment to preservative love, nurturance and training.[43]

As previously discussed, Morante initially introduces Rosaria through Elisa's eyes as "la mia madre adottiva, la mia sola amica e protettrice,"[44] and Elisa subsequently repeats these epithets to describe Rosaria and adds "seconda madre," contrasting her with Anna as her "madre vera."[45] The descriptor that is repeated the most is that of "protettrice," which in addition to meaning 'guardian' or 'patroness' also underscores the extent to which protection is one of the central attributes of Rosaria as a mother, an idea that is reinforced by Elisa's recounting an instance in which her 'protectress' defended her against the laughter and negative comments of

[42] Ibid., xi.
[43] Ibid., 17.
[44] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 11; "my second mother, the only friend and protectress I ever had". NB: "Adoptive mother" would be a more precise translation of "madre addottiva".
[45] Ibid., 14; "second mother"; "real mother". Donatella Ravanello has argued that this concept of a "doppia madre" is linked to Jung's archetype of the fantasy of double birth in *Scrittura e Follia Nei Romanzi di Elsa Morante*. Bardini convincingly argues against the validity of arguments based on the influence of Jungian theories, "Dei «fantastici doppi»," 176.

some guests who restrained their critiques because "sapevano bene con quale violenza, e addirittura ferocia, la mia protettrice sapeva difendere ciò che le apparteneva."[46]

Rosaria is equally dedicated to Ruddick's second requisite of maternal practice, that of fostering growth through nurturance. While admittedly at times harder to define, to foster growth means "to nurture a child's developing spirit, - whatever in a child is lively, purposeful and responsive".[47] Rosaria is shown to be attentive to Elisa and her needs as no one before her was, for she is according to Elisa, "la sola cui piace lodarmi, e giudicarmi bella" and she is attentive to Elisa's social needs and "rispettò le mie consuetudini e non permise a nessuno di disturbarle".[48] Elisa's adoptive mother is, however, temperamentally very different from her, and their relationship is not without negative moments such as Elisa's hurt resulting from Rosaria's teasing.[49] In order to console Elisa after one such incident, Rosaria offers her any gift she can imagine, and though disappointed that the girl's lifelong wish is to have something as simple as a cat, she nevertheless honors Elisa's wishes and provides her with the animal that ends up being Elisa's only stable form of companionship into her adult life.[50]

Another episode in Morante's depiction of Rosaria's mothering illustrates not only this figure's attention to training her adoptive daughter with the aim of social acceptability, the last of Ruddick's principles of maternal practice, but also demonstrates a sense of adaptability necessary in negotiating adoptive parenting. Ruddick notes that "Many mothers find the central challenge of mothering lies in training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and

[46] Ibid., 13; "they well knew with what violence my guardian could defend what was hers." The term "seconda madre" is repeated twice on the same page, while the term "protettrice" appears no less than eleven times in the introduction of the novel, while "madre adottiva" appears seven times.
[47] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 82. Ruddick notes that "Many mothers who engage in preservative love and training do not recognize a distinctive task of fostering growth, although outsiders watching them may interpret their behavior as doing so.", Ibid., 83.
[48] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 12; "the only person who ever praised me, or thought me beautiful"; "respected my habits and permitted no one to disturb them".
[49] See, for example, *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 12 or 703.
[50] See *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 703-4 for this episode.

whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate," and this is a possible driving force behind Rosaria's unsuccessful attempt to assimilate Elisa into the colorful company she keeps:[51]

> Veramente, sui primi tempi della nostra vita comune, ella aveva cercato di guarirmi della mia selvatichezza e modestia. Quasi subito, non sopportando di vedersi intorno colori cupi e smorti, m'aveva tolto gli abiti a lutto, e giudicandomi troppo pallida, usava talora di ravvivarmi con un poco di belletto le guance. Mutò inoltre la mia pettinatura […] dopo avermi pettinata, agghindata, e un pochino dipinta, ella mi chiamava nel salotto, se c'eran visite, per mostrarmi alle signore sue amiche. […] I presenti, ricordo, commentavano con risa e motteggi ma mia scontrosità; […] Nonostante la loro moderazione, però, ai loro scherzi io mi facevo di fuoco; e i miei sguardi sperduti e timidi cercavan quelli della mia protettrice, fra le cui vesti mi rifugiavo tremando tutta, come avessi la febbre.
>
> Simili scene, ripeto, potevan darsi nei primi tempi; ma poi la mia protettrice finì con l'abbandonarmi ai miei umori meditativi e solitari, e rinunciò a contrastare le mie inclinazioni […].[52]

Barbara Waterman underscores the challenge adoptive parents face in "attuning to a non-biological child," and observes that "Just like biological mothers, a foster, step or adoptive mother makes an educated guess as to what will meet the needs of her child and then waits to see whether the child's response confirms or refutes her attempt at nurturing (or disciplining)."[53] We can read Rosaria's adaptation to Elisa's disposition as a case of trial and error in her determining how best to nurture an adopted daughter who is very different from herself.

Thus, Morante shows Rosaria to be invested in her maternal work to a great extent, while at the same time she is unlike any of the other mothers in the text in her ability to commit to her

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[51] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 104.

[52] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 13; "Early in our life together, it is true, she thought to cure me of my shyness and unsociability. Almost immediately upon my arrival she took away my mourning dresses, disliking to see dull, dark colors about her; and finding me too pale for her taste, she sometimes rouged my cheeks a little; she also cut my thick hair […] Having combed and painted and dressed me up, she would call me into the parlor, when there were guests, to exhibit me to her women friends. […] The guests, I remember, commented on my contrariness with much laughter and amusement […] Notwithstanding their restraint, my cheeks flamed at their jokes; my timid glance would seek out my protectress and I would flee to take shelter in her skirts, trembling as if I had a fever.

Such scenes took place in our early days together, but my guardian gradually left me to my solitary, fanciful moods and no longer opposed my natural inclinations."

[53] Waterman, *The Birth of an Adoptive, Foster or Stepmother*, 22.

responsibilities as a mother without allowing them to consume her. Avoiding either extreme of sacrifice or negligence, Elisa notes that:

> […] malgrado il suo affetto, ella, per i suoi passatempi molteplici e intricati, poteva concedermi soltanto una piccolissima parte delle sue giornate e delle sue attenzioni.
>
> Ciò fu causa, durante la fanciullezza, d'amaro dispetto e tormento. Onde non posso dire, in tutta sincerità, di non aver detestato nella giusta misura le dissipazioni della mia diletta; soltanto, quel che odiavo in esse non era la rovina della sua anima, ma la mia gelosia.[54]

We must keep in mind the narrative point of view of the novel, which, as previously discussed, focuses on the point of view of the child, as well as her needs and desires. Words such as "piccolissima", "giusta misura" and "gelosia" serve as red flags to the reader indicating the narrator's subjectivity, as Elsa admits to her jealousy that most certainly clouds her assessment of how much time her adoptive mother dedicates or should dedicate to her. That Rosaria has placed limits on her investment in Elisa can be viewed in a positive light, given the detrimental effects of total maternal sacrifice Morante has described elsewhere in the text.

It is a strategic choice on Morante's part to endow with the most freedom to choose the terms of her mothering a prostitute, for it has been argued that "female prostitutes as a class constitute a serious challenge to the patriarchal control over women's bodies," as they represent "the possibility of a woman controlling her own sexuality, her own body."[55] Morante both opens and closes the novel with detailed descriptions of Rosaria's life with her adopted daughter, emphasizing her dual identity as mother and prostitute, providing the only glimpse of what mothering might look like from a subversive position outside of the constraints of patriarchy. The question of the way in which woman have historically been expected to mother continues to

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[54] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 15; "In spite of her affection for me, however, she could give me only a very small part of her time and attention, what with her many and involved affairs. This was a source of bitter resentment and torment to me. I cannot sincerely say that I did not hate my loved one's wantonness with intensity; however I hated it not because it destroyed her soul, but because it made me jealous."

[55] Danna N Farewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story*, 170. Quoted in Elaine Hansen, *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*, 244-5 n.51.

figure prominently in Morante's later novels, as she further undermines the dominant cultural archetype of the natural, self-sacrificing mother in her fictional representations of women.

L'isola di Arturo and *Aracoeli*: from *la matrigna* and *il balio* to the male maternal

Aracoeli is perhaps Morante's most elusive text, as in it the author continues to defy categorization while returning to her earlier themes in dark and at times disturbing ways. Some critics have gone so far as to characterize the work a tragic parody of her earlier novels, in particular of *L'isola di Arturo*, for its devastation of the mother-son relationship.[56] I agree instead with the editors of a recent volume of essays dedicated to this novel in rejecting the label of parody and interpreting the novel as a complicated reworking on Morante's part of many of the topics central to her work: "If it is indeed true that *Aracoeli* returns to topics fundamental to all of Morante's texts and questions them in an often disturbing manner […] the novel cannot be reduced to a deep expression of despair, but, rather, succeeds in confronting crucial philosophical and epistemological questions in an original and profound way".[57] This work challenges, among other categories, traditional definitions of identity, gender and sexuality, and this is nowhere more apparent than in its depiction of motherhood. Non-biological mothers in *L'isola di Arturo* and *Aracoeli* play a pivotal role in Morante's continued questioning of why it is women who mother and why they mother the way they do, as she turns her attention to the influence of social

[56] See Sgorlon, *Invito Alla Lettura Di Elsa Morante*, 112 or Garboli, *Il Gioco Segreto: Nove Immagini Di Elsa Morante*, 199.
[57] Gragnolati, Manuele and Sara Fortuna, "Introduction" *The Power of Disturbance: Elsa Morante's Aracoeli*, 1.

conditioning in determining women's roles and crosses gender boundaries in considering the maternal potential of men.

The two central maternal figures in these novels represent a further elaboration of the kind of natural, idealized, self-sacrificing mothers for which the relatively minor characters of Alessandra and Concetta served as prototypes. In the final interview she gave before her death in 1985 Morante, in fact, refers to these figures as paragons of a certain female ideal:

> Adoro le madri, le vere madri […] ho un grande amore per la donna semplice. Non amo molto le femministe perché ritengo che la donna sia una creatura necessaria all'umanità, agli uomini. Amo molto le donne come Nunziatella dell' "Isola di Arturo", come Aracoeli. Mica tanto le signore borghesi e le intellettuali.[58]

Morante's words point to the ambivalence shared by many of her contemporaries in the face of society's view of the incompatibility of intellectual activity, including writing, and maternal vocation. She places intellectual women like herself in direct opposition to the *idea* of simple, uneducated, instinctual women who perfectly fit the ideal patriarchy promotes as fundamental to society. In these two novels, she turns her attention to the social conditioning responsible for producing generations of 'real' mothers, questioning through the representative figures of Nunziatella and Aracoeli the very category of women she purports to adore, and ultimately destroying it in her final novel.

As in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Morante introduces from the first page of *L'isola di Arturo* the child protagonist's need for surrogate mothering, enabling her to explore the ways in which a variety of figures can engage in maternal work as a central focus in the novel. In this case, Arturo's birth mother is deceased, having died during childbirth. The author depicts Nunziatella,

[58] Interview with Jean Noël Shifano, *L'espresso*, December 2, 1984, 125; "I adore mothers, real mothers […] I have great love for simple women. I do not have much love for feminists because I believe women are creatures necessary to humanity, to men. I very much love women like Nunziatella from *L'isola di Arturo*, like Aracoeli. Not so much bourgeois ladies and female intellectuals." (Translation mine). Earlier in the same interview, Morante claims that she would have liked to have had children but was unable to do so, raising the questions of whether a woman like herself could be both mother and intellectual, as she establishes the two roles as mutually exclusive.

Arturo's father's young bride who becomes the boy's stepmother, more as the embodiment of the ''real mother' ideal than a realistic, complex female character. While I would not go as far as to argue, with Anna Nozzoli, that she represents, in terms of the "questione femminile," "un modello volutamente depauperato dei connotati reali,"[59] she is, as Sgorlon notes, a figure that embodies two sides, "quello realistico e quello fiabesco" that coexist without being in contradiction with one another.[60] Nunziatella's exaggerated naturalness, as well as her instinct to mother as the driving force of her being, indeed has the ring of fairy-tale. By establishing that she is only two years older than her fifteen-year-old stepson, it is likely to strike the reader as odd that she immediately professes her "sentimento di fargli da madre" and desire for him to call her "mà."[61] Unsurprisingly, to these and subsequent expressions of maternal affection Arturo demonstrates resistance, and at one point calls attention to the "inverosimiglianza" of her idea that she could have raised him from birth had she known he was orphaned, an observation that anticipates the reader's likely reaction to the absurdity of a toddler taking care of a newborn, through which Morante introduces the question of the source of Nunziatella's urge to mother an adolescent who is barely younger than herself. [62] Though not in expressly sociological or psychological terms, Morante is exploring here the central question that Nancy Chodorow would pose over twenty years later in her seminal work: "How do women today come to mother?"[63] The answer can be found in the moments of Nunziatella's direct speech in the novel, in which she is able to express herself as a subject in the novel rather than an object in the male child-

[59] Nozzoli, "Elsa Morante: la fuga nell'utopia" *Tabù e coscienza*, 135; "a model intentionally deprived of real distinguishing characteristics".
[60] Sgorlon, *Invito Alla Lettura Di Elsa Morante*, 82; "the realistic one and the fairy-tale one".
[61] *L'isola di Arturo*, 79; "I'd like to be a mother to him." Unless otherwise noted, English translations of *L'isola di Arturo* are from *Arturo's Island*, Trans. Isabel Quigly (London: Collins, 1959). It is surprising how many critics do not take into account this slight age difference, or even the fact that she is a stepmother, when analyzing her role in Arturo's development, particularly from a psychoanalytic perspective.
[62] Ibid., 108.
[63] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Motherhood*: *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, 4.

narrator's perspective, which ground the development of her maternal disposition in details of her upbringing.

Following the initial expression of her 'sentimento' to mother Arturo discussed above, each of Nunziatella's subsequent expressions of maternal drive toward her stepson are framed within descriptions of her childhood experiences in a Neapolitan family of the lower class, suggesting that social conditioning has influenced Nunziatella's identification with the maternal. For example, Nunziatella recounts the young age at which she began participating in childcare in her large family:

> - Se tu abitavi là, assieme a noi, - disse, - per te sarebbe stata tutta un'altra vita! Io t'avrei badato, e t'avrei tenuto in braccio. Che credi, tu? pure da piccerilla, io, già sapevo tenere in braccio le creature. Per forza! ché a casa nostra, c'era la fabbrica! e tutti sono stati in braccio a me. Che ci sapevo saltare anche la corda, con la creatura in braccio![64]

It is precisely into this 'baby factory' that Nunziatella professes she would have brought the orphaned Arturo, with this term not only highlighting element of women's labor in the history of childrearing practices, but also hinting at the mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of mothering from one generation to another. Through associating Nunziatella's professions of maternal impulses with details concerning the character's upbringing Morante suggests that Nunziatella's maternal behaviors are learned through a Chodorowian process of social conditioning occurring within the community of women that includes the girl's mother and godmother. Through Nunziata's upbringing Morante points to the possibility of a multiplicity of maternal figures, a community of mothers collaborating in the care of children, which contributes to the character's expanded notion of the family in which she would like to unite all

[64] *L'isola di Arturo*, 79; "'If you'd lived with us,' she said, 'you'd have had a completely different life. I'd have looked after you, and held you in my arms. D'you know, even when I was tiny I knew how to hold babies. I had to! Our home was a baby factory. And I carried them all. I could even skip, carrying a baby!'"

of her loved ones under one roof and in a single familial bed.[65] This concept of family transcends biological ties, as Nunziata expresses to Arturo "E tu pure, [in paradiso], ritroverai tua madre, e potremo stare tutti quanti insieme, fare tutta una famiglia!"[66] Morante shows the potential for mothering to cross not only biological but also gender boundaries through the language she employs to describe the work of another of Arturo's surrogate mothers, the soldier Silvestro.

From the moment Silvestro is first introduced in the text, Silvestro is first introduced by Arturo as "colui che potrei chiamare, in un certo modo, la mia balia," with the use of this feminine descriptor emphasizing the difficulty in both contemporary Italian language and culture of a giving a name to a male who undertakes care-taking responsibilities typically associated with women.[67] Following this single use of the feminine noun to describe Silvestro, he is subsequently referred to throughout the rest of the text as "il mio balio," a masculine variation of the term which suggests transgression of the biologically-determined capacities of a wet-nurse.[68] The question of milk and nursing becomes even more explicit in connection with substitution of the biological mother in a conversation between Nunziatella and Arturo in which the latter explains who Silvestro is by saying, "È lui, che mi ha dato il latte."[69] Nunziatella, who in this exchange represents the traditional view of women as exclusive caretakers of children, expresses confusion at the idea of a male 'giving milk' to an infant, and once she realizes that Arturo was fed goat's milk she expresses her scorn in terms that conform to the patriarchal views of the

[65] Ibid., 109.
[66] Ibid., 99; "And you'll meet your mother [in Heaven] again, and we'll be all together in one big family."
[67] *L'isola di Arturo*, 21; "[he] whom you could call my nurse, in a way".
[68] Ibid., 27, 29, 32, 105, 108, 194, 365, 367, 375, 377, 379. In the fifth edition of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, "balia" is defined as "Colei che alatta gli altrui figliuoli", while "balio" is "Il marito della balia." All previous editions of this dictionary also list as a definition of "balio", "Da balia. Quegli, che allieva i fanciulli, e insegna loro i costumi", citing a textual example in Dante's *Commedia*. It is worthy of note that in translating this novel, Isabel Quigly makes no distinction in the gender of this term, simply translating it in all cases as "nurse".
[69] *L'isola di Arturo*, 105; "It was he who gave me milk."

division of labor between the sexes, claiming that such milk "non ha nemmeno un sapore cristiano" and elaborating:

> «Eh, a casa nostra si che t'avremmo tenuto bene! Là siamo in tante femmine! Ci vogliono le femmine, per custodire una creatura! Però! quel Silvestro là! va bene che era un maschio; ma per quanto sia che uno è maschio, potrebbe essere pure meno ignorante! a darti latte di capra!!![70]

The ability to breastfeed is one of the factors that have historically been used across cultures to link women to primary parenting, and yet Arturo's having grown up healthy and strong on the goat's milk fed to him by his male 'wet-nurse' attests to the potential to disrupt such arguments.[71]

Silvestro's parenting of Arturo consists of teaching him to speak, read, write and sing, as well as seeing to the child's baptism, remembering his birthday, and ensuring that he is fed until the cook Costante takes over, all actions typically associated with mothering, though never explicitly described as such. At no point in the novel is Silvestro endowed with any particular maternal qualities that would identify him as a particularly suitable candidate to engage in maternal work, and the fact that it is he who takes over the parenting of Arturo rather than Arturo's father Wilhelm raises the question of whether and how the work of fathering can be differentiated from that of mothering. Morante clearly aligns Wilhelm with the authority that has long been associated with the figure of the Italian *pater familias*, and highlights through her critique of this figure many of the core issues in the ongoing debate on fatherhood.

In his exhaustive study of the history of fatherhood in Italy, Maurizio Quilici emphasizes the persistence of the patriarchal, mononuclear family well into the first half of the twentieth century, and he describes the dominant father stereotype as represented in the literature of the

[70] Ibid.; "That's not got a human, Christian taste at all."; "Oh, we'd have looked after you well at home. We were so many women, you see. And a baby needs women. But as for that Silvestro of yours—of course he was a boy, but even so! Even a boy could have known better than that! Goat's milk indeed."
[71] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Motherhood*: *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, 28.

time as silent, often authoritarian and rarely affectionate or involved in his children's lives.[72] Following the Second World War, there is a strong division between the roles of mother and father, the former of which boasts centrality, and the salient characteristic of the latter is authority, to the point that the father's role was summed up in a 1957 pedagogical text as "il padre è l'autorità costituita."[73] This paternal authority is encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church in this period, which views the father as the rightful *capofamiglia,* and the notion of the father as representing 'the law' within the family is legally supported by the concept of "patria potestà", the legal authority granted to fathers of minor children, which will remain in force until the reforms to family law in 1975 extend this authority to both parents.[74] Morante's undermining of this paternal authority in both *L'isola di Arturo* and *Aracoeli* is integral to her critique of the family and both women's and men's historical roles within it.

In all of her works Morante chooses to exclude the father from the typical triangle of father-mother-child and in doing so disrupts the structure of the patriarchal family. Stefania Lucamante highlights this tendency and its effects on Morante's female characters:

> […] the traditional role of the father as played in Morante['s] […] fiction determines a forced yet superficial submission of women and children to the laws of politics and statehood, Arturo's "CERTEZZE ASSOLUTE," that the power of literature manages (at least on a theoretical basis) to elicit and combat. But authority is a concept that cannot be peacefully accepted by the narrators, as not even the mother escapes from this act of moral rebellion from authority at large in [Morante's] work.[75]

Alba Amoia similarly observes that Morante, "lashes out against parents in society's legitimized father-mother-child triangular relationship and seeks to exclude the father and paternal

[72] Quilici *Storia Della Paternità: Dal Pater Familias Al Mammo,* 470-3.
[73] "the father is legitimate authority"; Manara, Margherita *Discorriamo dei nostri figli,* cited by Quilici, pp. 473.
[74] Quilici, 496-7.
[75] Lucamante, "Teatro di guerra: Of History and Fathers" *Under Arturo's Star: The Cultural Legacies of Elsa Morante,* 225.

authority."[76] Morante demonstrates in this text through the death of Arturo's mother that mothers do not fare well in the presence of paternal authority. Fathers are shown to be inadequate substitutes for mothers, as Wilhelm's contribution to parenting Arturo barely goes beyond his role in the boy's conception, and his significance to Arturo is diminished when the boy discovers his father is a bisexual and the myth of the father is finally demystified for him. As the novel ends the family is left fragmented, the void created by maternal absence never having been truly filled.[77] In her final novel Morante will further deconstruct the maternal ideal and explore the male maternal within a continued critique of the dominant cultural notions regarding the development of gender identities.

Much like Nunziatella, Aracoeli is presented as a simple, uneducated young woman of the lower classes, who appears to naturally and instinctively embrace motherhood. Her relationship with the infant Manuele in the isolation of their early home in 'Totetaco' before being brought to the Quartieri Alti once her marriage to Eugenio is legitimized, reflects the idyllic symbiosis already seen in the mother-infant bonds between Alessandra/Francesco and Concetta/Edoardo in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, as well as in Nunziatella/Carmine. Manuele describes being awaken every morning by Aracoeli's "voce ridente," sleeping "annidato fra le sue braccia, godendo le sue morbidezze e i suoi tepori come un pulcino gode le piume della cova," and concludes of his memories of their time alone together, "Nella casa clandestina di Totetaco non ci siamo che noi due soli: Aracoeli e io. Congiunzione inseparabile per natura e di

[76] Amoia, *20th-Century Italian Women Writers: The Feminine Experience*, 56. Donatella Ravanello also highlights this tendency in *Scrittura e follia nei romanzi di Elsa Morante* (Venice: Marsilio, 1980), 83-4.
[77] For the time being the biological bond between the mother, Nunziatella, and son, Carmine, is the only relationship that remains intact, but as we have already seen in the relationships of Concetta-Edoardo, Alessandra-Francesco of *Menzogna e sortilegio*, as well as in Arturo's own experience with his birth mother, these mother-son relationships in Morante are never shown to be lasting.

cui pareva a me naturale anche l'eternità."[78] Thus we see once again the 'naturalness' Adrienne Rich described as one of her "unexamined assumptions" on motherhood, as well as the isolation of mother and child and the mother's dependence on her relationship with the child as the sole source of personal gratification.[79] As with Nunziatella, however, Morante questions the mechanisms through which Aracoeli embraces motherhood and exposes the consequences of conflating maternity with female identity. She critiques Freudian theories of gender development in order to complicate the question of the origin of maternal drive and its exclusive association with the feminine.

Hanna Serkowska has observed that Morante, "one of the few non-ironic readers of Freud in Italy," assumes for the first time in this novel an openly derisive tone in portraying psychoanalytic paradigms.[80] In support of her claim she points in particular to the oft-cited passage in the text in which Morante stages a parody of a psychoanalytic session in which Manuele as narrator simultaneously occupies the roles of the Accused, the Prosecution and the Defense, representing the clinical case, the patient and psychoanalyst.[81] Morante prefaces this passage with Manuele's conclusion that "La favola mammarola è stantia, ovvio reperto da seduta psicanalitica, o tema da canzonetta edificante," thus explicitly demonstrating skepticism of Freud's theory for the development of homosexuality in men as firmly rooted in the Oedipus

[78] Morante, Elsa. *Aracoeli.*, 118-120; "laughing voice"; "nesting in her arms, enjoying her softness and her warmth as a chick enjoys the feathers of the nest"; "In the clandestine house of Totetaco there are only the two of us: Aracoeli and me. Inseparable, natural conjunction, whose eternity seemed to me equally natural." Unless otherwise noted, English translations of *Aracoeli* are from *Aracoeli*, Trans. Willliam Weaver (New York: Random House, 1984).
[79] As cited at the start of this chapter.
[80] Serkowska, "The Maternal Boy: Manuele" *Under Arturo's Star: The Cultural Legacies of Elsa Morante*, 176-179. As also noted by Rocco Capozzi (52) it is in this novel that Morante shows her narrator to speak most directly in Freudian terms, particularly in revealing the "favola mammarola", or tale of the mama's boy, is "stantia, ovvio reperto da seduta psicanalitica" (*Aracoeli*, 107; "stagnant, typical retrieval of a psychoanalytic session") and by staging a mock psychoanalytic session framed as a 'trial' in which Manuele is split between roles of prosecution, defense, audience and accused (*Aracoeli*, 113-8).
[81] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 113-118.

complex.[82] Following the Freudian paradigm, Manuele directly accuses his mother of making him imitate her, as he says "Mi condannavi a mimare la tua parte di madre, gettandomi alla rincorsa dei narcisi imberbi."[83] In deconstructing this theory of sexual development Morante draws attention to mothering as learned behavior.

Morante's skepticism of Freudian theories of gender development extends to the female as well, as she investigates the origins of Aracoeli's desire for motherhood and its association with doll-play. This drive is initially shown to have begun at a very early age, as soon as she learned to say "mama."[84] Much emphasis is placed on Aracoeli's strong desire for a doll, as her early efforts to construct dolls of rags and brooms are described, and then this desire is shown to turn toward a real baby of flesh and blood.[85] This transition is an allusion to Freud's view of the changing meaning of doll-play in a girl's development, as pre-Oedipal doll-play serves as an identification with her mother, while in the post-Oedipal stage the doll-baby becomes a baby from the girl's father, "the most powerful feminine wish."[86] Chodorow famously criticized this theory as "downplaying anything associated with motherhood and refusing to recognize that desires to be a mother can develop other than as a conversion of penis envy and a girl's desire to be masculine."[87] Morante is also clearly advocating a rethinking of the origins of maternal drive, for she clearly separates it from exclusivity to the female gender, as she both shows women who do not exhibit a propensity toward maternity and men who do.

Zia Monda, Manuele's paternal aunt, and Zaira, the devoted family housekeeper, might seem likely candidates as surrogate mothers when Aracoeli is taken away from the family home

[82] Ibid., 107; "The mama's-boy-fairy tale is stagnant, typical retrieval of a psychoanalytic session, or subject of an edifying pop song."
[83] Ibid.; "You condemned me to mime your motherly role, flinging me into the pursuit of one beardless Narcissus after another".
[84] Ibid, 102.
[85] Ibid., 102-4.
[86] Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, 128-9.
[87] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Motherhood*: *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*,147.

to recover following the death of Carina, and yet in opposition to the assumption that "Ci vogliono le femmine, per custodire una creatura!" that Nunziatella had vehemently asserted in Morante's second novel, in this text none of the female characters express any urge to take care of Manuele during his parents' absence.[88] Only once in the text is Zaira identified as the mother of a grown son of her own, and very little detail is given about her experience of motherhood, while Zia Monda is at this point in the novel considered an old maid who expresses no desire whatsoever for maternity. The maternal in this novel is thus not portrayed as an innate or defining female quality and through the character of Daniele, who acts as a surrogate mother to Manuele during Aracoeli's absence, Morante's further frees the maternal from gender distinctions.[89]

Daniele embodies this freedom from gender stereotypes, as he exhibits both maternal characteristics and the virility associated with the paternal in Manuele's description of his role as "bambinaio stimato":

> Mi aiutava perfino a lavarmi gli orecchi; e una tale operazione, in se stessa fastidiosa, sotto le sue dita mi diventava un piacere esilarante, e una lusinga. Era, difatti, un caso inaspettato, per me, che un marinaio mi facesse da madre. Lui possedeva, invero, delle qualità materne: con in più certe rudezze involontarie che mi attestavano la sua grandezza virile, e la fortuna di averlo amico, io piccolo come un ragno.[90]

Unlike Arturo's 'balio' Silvestro, Daniele here is directly endowed with maternal qualities that coexist with his masculine attributes, and the fact that his behavior changes with Manuele's father's presence in the house supports the idea that the maternal is influenced and to a great degree suppressed by the presence of traditional paternal authority.

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[88] *L'isola di Arturo*, 105.
[89] Giorgio, "Nature Vs Culture," 100-101.
[90] *Aracoeli*, 225; "reliable babysitter"; "He even helped me wash my ears; and this operation, tiresome in itself, became for me, under his hands, an exciting and flattering pleasure. It was, in fact, an unexpected event for me: a sailor acting as my mother. He really did possess maternal qualities, plus a certain involuntary roughness that for me testified to his manly greatness, and my good luck in having him for a friend, me, tiny as a spider."

Following a visit to his parents during Aracoeli's recovery outside the home, Manuele reflects on his father, Eugenio, in relation to his relationship with his orderly Daniele. Manuele identifies his father's world as "un reame virile e paterno, negato alle madri" in which, "lui disciplinava e puniva."[91] Eugenio represents the typical historical role of the authoritarian father, as previously discussed in reference to Wilhelm of *Isola di Arturo*. The introduction in the text of a maternal male caretaker in Daniele raises issues central to the changing role of the father occurring from the late sixties on in Italian society, within the twenty-five year span between the 1957 publication of *Isola di Arturo* and that of *Aracoeli* in 1982. According to Maurizio Quilici, the trend in the last five decades is toward increased paternal involvement, and it is no longer the case that the role of the father "[si reduce] a incarnare il principio di autorità o contribuire economicamente al sostenamento della famiglia."[92] In Italy, as elsewhere, the lines that previously distinguished mothers from fathers are increasingly blurred, resulting in what Quilici views as an 'ugly neologism coined by journalists' in the new term 'mammo', a sort of male mother/father hybrid that is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the "padre-padrone" archetype that persisted from the nineteenth century well into the twentieth.[93] The fact that fathers in Italy have been increasingly assuming responsibilities and practices previously reserved to the realm of mothers raises yet unresolved questions about what differentiates mothering from fathering and whether the former can be practiced by members of both sexes.

Criticism on the family in recent decades has confronted the assumption that mothers and fathers have two distinct roles in raising children, and even among those who advocate this distinction there are various interpretations as to what these roles entail. In introducing the

[91] *Aracoeli*, 228-229; "a manly, paternal realm, denied to mothers"; "he disciplined and punished".
[92] "is reduced to embodying the principle of authority or contributing financially to supporting the family"; Quilici, *Storia Della Paternità,*, 491.
[93] Ibid., 492 (translation mine).

volume *The Importance of Fathers*, psychoanalyst Judith Trowell clearly differentiates the father's role from that of the mother, both in terms of "practical tasks" (educating, stimulating, protecting and providing for the young child) and in terms of the child's internal development as a central figure to the Oedipus complex.[94] The psychologist Barbara Waterman agrees that mothering and fathering behaviors are distinctly different, and that both are essential for the child, but she emphasizes that all can be undertaken by both sexes, allowing for the possibility of male mothers and female fathers.[95] Waterman refers to the work of Winnicott and Chodorow to illustrate how the notion that women participate in parenting by *being* and men by *doing* has been linked to the sexual division of labor in which women are the primary parents, but argues that *being* and *doing* have become less gendered as parents of both sexes have taken on both roles.[96] In her reflection on the topic of fatherhood, Sara Ruddick questions whether sexual difference between parents and the idea of "distinctive Fatherhood" should be recognized.[97] In her view, in addition to being defined biologically as the progenitor of his children, a father is defined by the functions he fulfills, two of which (provision and protection) are straightforward, whereas the third involves a complex exercise of paternal authority, paternal legitimation, discipline and the right to punish.[98] The idea of paternal authority is concerned less with what a father does than what he represents, and though Ruddick concludes that naming and accepting sexual difference is important, it does not require identifying distinct parental functions. Elisabeth Badinter has expressed concern regarding what becomes of the "essential differences" between men and women once both are considered able to "take on the same roles and carry out

[94] Trowell, "Setting the scene" *The Importance of Fathers*, 16-7.
[95] Waterman, *The Birth of an Adoptive, Foster or Stepmother*, 24.
[96] Ibid., 25-6. Waterman notes that "The traditional role of the father was to support and contain the mother's being with the child, until the child was ready to face the existence of Other-as-a-separate-agent […]. At that point, fathering-by-doing augmented mothering-by-being as a good match for the child's growth."
[97] Ruddick, "The Idea of Fatherhood," *Feminism and Families*.
[98] Ibid.

the same responsibilities,"[99] while both Waterman and Ruddick find unproblematic the idea that fathers can mother and others see this increasingly widespread argument as potentially "troublesome."[100] Morante's depiction of male mothering through the figure of Daniele underscores the complexities of this debate, for though he possesses typically maternal qualities and participates in maternal work, his identity as a surrogate mother to Manuele is shown to be unstable in the presence of the traditional mother and father roles assumed by his biological parents.

Once Eugenio returns to the family home with Aracoeli following their long absence, Daniele abruptly abandons his maternal practices:

> Del resto, com'era da aspettarsi, dopo il ritorno della famiglia Daniele ebbe meno tempo per me. La sua reverente soggezione a mio padre lo obbligava, inoltre, a un contegno serio e responsabile, tale che a volte il suo viso bambinesco assumeva (con effetto quasi buffo) un'aria ufficiosa e regolamentare. Mio padre stesso ci aveva fatto osservare (pure con la sua discrezione solita) che io m'ero fatto, oramai, grande abbastanza da lavarmi e vestirmi da solo, e affrontare virilmente la minaccia delle ombre notturne (dormire con l'uscio chiuso!) E Daniele, doverosamente, evitava di assecondare le mie naturali fanciullaggini, lui stesso trattenendosi dalle proprie esibizioni acrobatiche, dal pazziare ecc. Dalla nostra lista dei cibi era stata eliminata la pasta coi broccoli e le acciughe, insieme alle altre delizie congeneri; e durante il servizio di tavola, la rigidezza e la nobile compunzione del nostro attendente erano degne di un maggiordomo di rango.[101]

Thus, Daniele's maternal roles of nurturing and comforting Manuele are now restricted under paternal authority, and it is precisely the conflict between these two components in Daniele that leads to the end of his care of Manuele and his removal from the household. Daniele is shown to break down after having sexual intercourse with Aracoeli at her urging, begging first Zia Monda

[99] Badinter, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*, 6.
[100] Hansen, Elaine *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*, 3.
[101] Ibid., 232; "For that matter, as was to be expected, after my parents' return, Daniele had less time for me. His reverential awe of my father, moreover, compelled him to maintain a grave and responsible mien, so that at times his boyish face assumed (with an almost comical effect) an official, disciplined air. My father himself had pointed out to us (though with his usual tact) that I was now big enough to wash and dress on my own, and to confront with manliness the threat of nighttime shadows (sleeping with the door closed!). And Daniele dutifully refrained from encouraging my natural childishness, also curbing his acrobatic demonstrations, his jokes, and so forth. Pasta with turnip greens had been eliminated from our menu, as well as sardines and other such delicacies; and as he served at table, our orderly's stiffness and noble compunction were worthy of a majordomo of high degree."

and later Eugenio to be released from the service of the household, with the latter ordering the young sailor: "Comporatevi da uomo. E da soldato."[102] It is only after Daniele's attempted suicide later that night that he is finally relieved of his duties and allowed to escape the paternal realm of Eugenio that does not allow for deviations from cultural expectations of male behavior.[103]

It is equally significant that Manuele's own experience with maternity occurs outside of the confines of the paternal space of his father's household. At the age of twelve, Manuele is sent to a boarding school by his paternal grandparents, who took over his care once Aracoeli left her husband's home, and early in the novel he recalls a night in which he serves as a surrogate mother to a younger boy in the school, allowing him to share his bed:

> Qua mi usurpò, lentamente, una suggestione inverosimile: come se davvero io fossi sua madre. […] Io da quel corpo pigmeo che cercava riparo nel mio corpo più grosso, e dal tepore del suo fiato, e dal freddo dei suoi piedini, ricevevo un senso d'ilarità quieta, e insieme di superba responsabilità. *Maternità,* non c'era altro nome per quella mia stranezza. Io ero una madre col proprio figlio piccolo.[104]

These two episodes of Daniele's and Manuele's surrogate motherhood represent a continuation and expansion of Morante's exploration of the expression of the maternal outside of boundaries of traditional gender categories, which she began with Arturo's 'balio' Silvestro. None of these instances is sustained for long in the masculine spaces in which the characters find themselves- Arturo's residence, the *casa dei guaglioni*, Manuele's paternal home, and a boys' boarding

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[102] *Aracoeli*, 263; "Act like a man. And a soldier." Adalgisa Giorgio has interpreted this act as a further sign of Daniele's virility, but the details surrounding the episode suggest instead a weakening of his virility, for sexual desire is here located in a nymphomaniac female rather than in the virile male. Giorgio, "Nature Vs Culture: Repression, Rebellion and Madness in Elsa Morante's *Aracoeli*", 101.

[103] Hanna Serkowska interprets the presence of Daniele in the "kingdom of the father reigned over by Eugenio" as a sign of the way in which Morante juxtaposes characteristics of opposing genders on one another in both characters and spaces, as part of her larger project of reading the novel as being centered on the myth of androgyny. Serkowska, "The Maternal Boy: Manuele", 160-161.

[104] *Aracoeli*, 91-92; "Here, slowly, I was invaded by an improbable sensation: it was as if I really were his mother. […] From the pygmy body that sought refuge in my larger body, and from the warmth of his breath, and from the cold of his little feet, I received a sensation of calm cheer, and at the same time of superb responsibility. *Maternity*, there is no other name for that odd feeling of mine."

school- but they challenge the notion that only women can and should mother and that there is something in their biological make-up that predisposes them to do so. Manuele's transfer to the home of his paternal grandparents after the disappearance of Aracoeli reinforces this challenge, as Manuele remarks that, "Non capitavano Danieli, in quella casa", for there is no trace of the maternal to be found in either of his grandparents, whom he repeatedly refers to as "Statue Parlanti," or other members of the household.[105]

Morante concludes her final novel by deconstructing the cultural norms that define the roles of both mother and father. Following the death of her infant daughter, Aracoeli experiences a crisis of identity, following which she ceases to exhibit any maternal feelings or behavior toward Manuele. Aracoeli transforms from the personification of the cultural ideal of the 'good' mother, chaste and wholly invested in the care of her child, into a transgressive nymphomaniac who ultimately abandons her family.[106] The novel ends with Manuele's memory of feeling love towards his father, whom he finds stripped of any form of authority he previously possessed, drunk, disheveled and living in a dreadful apartment in a poor neighborhood of Rome. Laura Benedetti has interpreted this conclusion as "the discovery of the father, at the end of the journey," in which "lay the possibility of breaking the enchanted spell that bound together the woman and her child, perhaps freeing them both."[107] I rather agree with Adalgisa Giorgio in doubting the authenticity of the adult Manuele's newly discovered love for his father, given his unreliability as a narrator, and would argue that Morante places no hope in the redemptive power of the father at the end of the novel.[108] Morante instead ends her final novel with a complete

[105] Ibid., 286; No Danieles turned up in that house."
[106] Adalgisa Giorgio offers a very compelling interpretation of Aracoeli's disease and its relation to both her maternity and the expression of her sexuality in opposition to patriarchal oppression. "Nature Vs Culture: Repression, Rebellion and Madness in Elsa Morante's Aracoeli", 111-116.
[107] Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy*, 84.
[108] Giorgio, "Nature Vs Culture: Repression, Rebellion and Madness in Elsa Morante's Aracoeli," 110-111.

breakdown of the traditional family, as neither Aracoeli nor Eugenio conform any longer to their maternal and paternal roles, which serves as a sign of the continued need to rethink this model based on antiquated notions of gender divisions.

La Storia: le due madri di Useppe

In recounting the humble story of a mother struggling to raise her young son in the midst of the ravages of History, Morante creates in *La Storia* her most widely debated maternal character, Ida Ramundo. The narrative perspective undoubtedly plays a role in the diversity of critical readings of Ida, as the shift from the first-person perspective of the child narrating his or her mother to a complex homodiegetic narrator allows for greater insight into Ida's history, as well as her inner world of thoughts and emotions.[109] It is precisely this textual evidence surrounding Ida's upbringing and interiority, which is not filtered through the bias of the child's point of view, which allows for conflicting interpretations of Ida's maternity. Critics have alternately argued that the author either endorses as natural or essential the qualities associated with traditional patriarchal motherhood- in particular, instinct and self-sacrifice- or exposes the social conditioning through which women conform to that stereotype.[110] I would argue that the inclusion of Bella as Useppe's canine 'seconda madre' complicates any claim that Ida

[109] This complex perspective of this narrator who predominately demonstrates omniscience, or non-focalization, to use Genette's model, but at times calls attention to her limits of internal focalization, and whose relation to the characters and facts of narration is never clarified will be examined further in the following chapter of this dissertation, along with the maternal potential it holds.

[110] In the same volume of articles, Marise Jeuland-Meynaud argues that Morante upholds an essentialist view of women, while Robin Pickering-Iazzi points to evidence of Ida's interiority as expressed in her dreams in order to argue against an essentialist point of view of women on Morante's part. See *Annali di Italianistica: Women's Voices in Italian Literature*, 7, ed. Rebecca West and Dino S. Cervigni, 300-24 and 325-40.

personifies a Morantian ideal of maternity, as the author rather exposes the limits of Ida's capacities as a mother through juxtaposition of her and Bella's contributions to the care and education of Useppe. Rather than glorified, the model of the 'vere madri' is critiqued in the text, in which the most successful mothering is shown to be accomplished not in the fusion of the mother and son, but rather in the communal efforts of a variety of mothers offering their unique contributions.

The arguments that depict Ida as a positive representation of Morante's ideal woman tend to hinge to some degree on the relationship between the human and animal worlds in the novel, and there is much debate as to the meaning behind the author's use of animal imagery to represent maternal characters. As Laura Benedetti and others have observed, the frequent use of animal metaphors to describe Ida reinforces the sense that she, like other 'vere madri' in Morante's novels, is "trapped in an irrational and instinctive role" and in her view Ida in particular "represents the most coherent expression of the ideal woman" in the author's works.[111] Anna Nozzoli views Morante's tendency to portray women as an "innocente e quasi animalizzata figurazione" in a favorable light as a sign of her "simpatia […] per il proprio sesso."[112] There is evidence, however, that Morante also problematizes this instinctive aspect of Ida and other mothers. Robin Pickering-Iazzi has convincingly observed that "Morante's adoption of animal imagery plays upon the myth of maternal instinct, the a priori notion of maternity that presupposes universal maternal feeling and behavior."[113] She cites Elisabeth Badinter's work on the history of the myth of motherhood, in which Badinter examines how within the historical ideology of female nature has been equated with maternal instinct as "a means to regulate

[111] Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 81.
[112] Nozzoli, "Elsa Morante: la fuga nell'utopia," *Tabù e coscienza*, 142.
[113] Pickering-Iazzi, "Designing Mothers," 332.

women's behavior and benefit the interests of society."[114] Badinter similarly discusses the use of animals as models for women's maternal behavior in another work, and refers explicitly to use of wild animals such as tigresses and lionesses as models who "subdue their natural ferocity to take care of their young" and exhibit self-sacrificial behavior in order to protect their offspring.[115] The cultural influence of such a model endows additional meaning to the oft-cited image of Ida's maternal instinct and total devotion to Useppe that is found in Morante's description of her as a tigress who in desperate conditions feeds her young pieces of her own flesh that she strips from her body with her teeth.[116] The argument that Morante complicates the myth of maternal instinct through comparison between women and animals is further confirmed in an instance of the maternity of one of the animal characters described in the text.

It is important to note that in this novel animals are elevated to the status of thinking, and at times speaking, characters endowed with a level of psychological complexity comparable to that of their human counterparts.[117] This is especially true in the case of Bella, but it is also true of the cat, Rossella, who inhabits the refuge that Ida and Useppe share with *i Mille* following the destruction of their home during a bombing. Rossella gives birth to only one meager kitten, to whom she immediately exhibits typical maternal behavior "come tutte le madri gatte",[118] cleaning him until he emits his first faint cry. Once her first attempts at nursing him fail, she promptly abandons him to his crying, and he dies the following day and is tossed into the latrine by one of the women of the refuge, who curses the kitten's "madre snaturata."[119] Morante

[114] Ibid. Pickering-Iazzi is referring to Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*. Trans. Roger DeGaris (London: Souvenir Press Ltd., 1981).
[115] Badinter, *Mother Love: Myth and Reality*, 156.
[116] *La Storia*, 330.
[117] See Concetta D'Angeli's "Soltanto l'animale è veramente innocente: gli animali ne *La Storia*" in *Letture di Elsa Morante* for an examination of this phenomenon.
[118] *La Storia*, 256; "like all mother cats". Unless otherwise noted, English translations of *La Storia* are from *History: a novel*, Trans. Willliam Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1977).
[119] Ibid., 257; "unnatural mother".

debunks through this 'unnatural' cat mother the myth of maternal instinct both in animals, and by extension, the women she frequently compares to them. The fact that a human woman intervened only after the kitten had died, to dispose of his remains, highlights another important element of Morante's discourse on motherhood in the novel, as she show mothering to be more successful when it occurs within a community of cooperating women, rather than in the isolation of the mother and child, as in the case of Rossella.

Cooperative mothering is present in the novel as early as the time of Ida's and Useppe's stay in the refuge with *i Mille*, during which Ida receives a degree of relief from her maternal responsibilities from the other women, Carulina in particular, who contribute to Useppe's physical care and help distract him from the harsh realities of life there.[120] The figure that most strikingly represents the notion of cooperative mothering, however, is to be found in the dog Bella. It seems no coincidence that Bella reappears in Ida's life following the death of Ida's older son, Nino, at a time in which Ida's identity is shown to be in crisis and she and Useppe are once again living in isolation.[121] Robin Pickering-Iazzi emphasizes the element of confinement to domestic spaces as influential in Ida's social conditioning during her childhood which contributed to her development into an "eternal child-mother,"[122] and Ida retreats back into the home at this point in the novel, leaving only to perform her duties as a school teacher and leaving Useppe alone inside under lock and key during her absence. As Ida reverts further into a child-like state Bella is directly presented as a supplemental mother to Useppe:

[120] Ida is clearly shown to miss this help after the members of *i Mille* move out and a new batch of refugees arrive, at which point she laments, "Passò il tempo dei Mille! La sola che ogni tanto desse retta a Useppe era la madre del fucili lato; quand'era buio, essa, all'occorenza, lo accompagnava giù al cesso, tenendolo per la mano, come una volta facesse la Carulì." *La Storia*, 289. Fabrizia Raimondo observes that it is no coincidence that it is a group od Neopolitans that help create this sense of a large, extended family, as this group is considered to have a greater sense of community rather than society.

[121] Ida is described as having a sort of breakdown following Nino's death, in which she loses a sense of her identity: "A questo modo procedeva fino a estasiarsi di stanchezza, e a smarrire il senso dei fatti, i nomi, e anche la sua stessa identità." *La Storia*, 470.

[122] Pickering-Iazzi, "Designing Women," 330-333.

> Così, da oggi furono in tre in quella casa di Via Bodoni; e, da questo medesimo giorno, Useppe ebbe due madri. […] Ora l'arrivo della nuova madre Bella fu una fortuna per Useppe: giacché attualmente la sua madre Iduzza non solo era vecchia […] ma nella condotta, strana e rimbambita.[123]

For the first time in all of her novels, rather than portraying the substitution of a biological mother who is physically absent, Morante creates here a new family structure, in which a human and an animal mother collaborate to raise Useppe. The evolutionary history of dogs as domesticated descendents of wolf ancestors adds significance to Morante's choice to locate an instance of inter-species cooperative mothering within the realm of human and canine relations.

As Sarah Blaffer Hrdy and Donna Haraway have emphasized in their work, there is a long history of co-evolution between humans and dogs, culminating in the present reality that dogs are "a species in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship with human beings."[124] Through this process of co-evolution, humans have come to take on the responsibility of provisioning for the offspring of canine companions, acting as "alloparents," to borrow terms from Hrdy. Haraway cites research indicating that unlike their canine ancestors and relatives, such as wolves, dogs no longer have the ability to reproduce independently of humans and the "tremendous success" of the species is due to its "ability to get people to raise its pups."[125] Through reversing these typical roles and making a dog parent provision for a human child she draws attention to the seemingly impossible challenge women face in assuming the entire responsibility of raising a child.

In arguing in *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* that humans have an evolutionary history of cooperative breeding, Hrdy emphasizes the fact that

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[123] *La Storia*, 474-475; "So, starting today, there were three of them in the house in Via Bodoni; and starting that same day Useppe had two mothers. […] Now the arrival of his new mother Bella was a stroke of luck for Useppe; since at present his mother Iduzza not only was old […] but also strange in her behavior, and childish."
[124] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, 11-12.
[125] Haraway cites the work of Raymond Coppinger and Richard Schneider on the evolution of working dogs in *The Haraway Reader*, 306.

compared with other creatures, human offspring take longer than almost all others to mature to self-sufficiency, meaning that "historically someone had to have helped mothers make up for the difference between what children need and what a mother herself could provide."[126] Hrdy invites us to challenge the notion that it is necessarily a woman's mate who provides the needed additional help and to consider in unprecedented ways the possibility of multiple caretakers who are not biological parents. She concludes that in regards to the question of the potential for non-biological caretakers to contribute to the well-being of a child we have very few answers because such questions are rarely asked.[127] It is precisely this question that Morante is posing through the relationship of Bella to Ida and Useppe, and she does so in such a way as to push and exceed the limits of what might be real or possible for a dog to contribute in terms of mothering a human child. Morante provides an example of the kind of "fictive kin group in training" of which Haraway writes in her *Companion Species Manifesto*, in which human and canine family members mutually develop their different roles in relationship with each other.[128] By depicting a canine mother figure who transcends the typical or expected behavior of her species Morante forces her reader to question assumptions about who is best suited to mother and how such work must be done.

Within the fictive aspect of this depiction of inter-species cooperative mothering Morante frees herself to be able to endow Useppe's human and canine mothers with qualities and capacities that might typically be associated with the other species. Though a variety of hardships have exhausted Ida and depleted her maternal energies, it is also clear that there is something lacking in the kind of mothering that Ida is capable of, similar to that of the other 'vere madri,' which further undermines the notion that the author endorses a traditional,

[126] *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*, 146.
[127] Ibid.,
[128] Haraway, 40.

patriarchal model of motherhood.[129] Bella is able to provide for Useppe that which Ida cannot, nurturing his growing imagination along with meeting his physical needs, with the seemingly inevitable conclusion: "Per forza, Ida finì con l'affidare del tutto Useppe a Bella."[130]

Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud has aptly identified Bella as "l'unica femmina attiva" in Morante's novels, as well as the only "madre svolgente funzioni educative," but she delves no further into the significance of the author's assigning this role to Useppe's canine "madre suppletiva."[131] Referring to Sara Ruddick's framework of mothering practice, with its three key elements of preservative love, nurturance and training, Ida is shown to contribute the first, providing for Useppe's emotional needs and ensuring his protection.[132] Bella is likewise a protective presence toward Useppe, and she also takes responsibility for nurturing and training Useppe to a greater degree than Ida.[133] It is Bella who takes Useppe out for walks to explore their Roman neighborhood, which provides "il solo svago del ragazzino."[134] Bella also engages Useppe in conversations "in forma di uggiolio canino" through which they understand each other perfectly and at one point debate how best to extend to their friend Davide an invitation to dinner and politely entreat him to accept.[135] This harmonious communication stands out in sharp contrast to Ida's concurrent conversations with Useppe, which for the most part are conducted over the phone, a device Useppe finds perplexing, while Ida is at work, and which are

[129] Though Ida's outlook on life remained consistent throughout the majority of her adult life, "sopravvivendo alla perdita di Alfio suo marito, e di sue padre e di sua madre, e a razzismi, rovine di guerra, fami e stragi." It is after Nino's death and Useppe's self-exile from school that things deteriorate for her internally. *La Storia*, 475-476.
[130] *La Storia*, 495; "Perforce, Ida finally entraste Useppe entirely to Bella."
[131] Jeuland-Meynaud, "Le identificazioni della donna," 310-313; "only active female"; "mother carrying out an educational function"; "supplementary mother".
[132] Ruddick *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*.
[133] Several critics have noted that though she is a teacher, Ida is rather limited as an educator, for she does not teach her students to reason or think critically and she passes on very limited knowledge. Her teaching is often considered an extension of her maternal role, which lacks this element of intellectual stimulation. See, for example, Robin Pickering-Iazzi, 331 or Elena Mezzetti, "Storia di una madre," in *Letture di Elsa Morante*, 23.
[134] *La Storia*, 495; "the little boy's only recreation."
[135] Ibid., 600; "in the form of canine whining".

characterized by incomprehension.[136] The extent to which Useppe becomes a part of Bella's community is comically dramatized in a description of other dogs sniffing Useppe, who "amici o compagni della sua specie, lui non ne aveva nessuno," and who has absorbed Bella's odor, to discern whether "lui pure fosse una specie di ciccolo canino."[137]

In addition to her attention to socializing Useppe with a community that seems more fitting to him than the world of humans, Bella also engages Useppe in the kind of maternal storytelling Ruddick describes, focused on creating a sense of the child's life in relation to others.[138] Bella recounts to Useppe her experience with her own biological offspring, describing how each time she looked at one of her puppies he seemed to her the most beautiful, and she extends this phenomenon to all of her figurative offspring:

> «E tu», essa qua riprese, mirandolo convinta, «sei sempre il più bello di tutti al mondo. È positivo».
> «E mamma mia?» s'informò Useppe.
> «Lei! s'è mai vista un'altra ragazza più bella?! Eh a Roma lo sanno tutti! È una bellezza infinita. Infinita!»
> Useppe rise. Su questo, senz'altro era d'accordo.[139]

Thus Useppe is included in Bella's expanded sense of maternity, which also encompasses all of their mutual friends, acquaintances and biological family members.

In this revelation of Bella's biological maternity Morante further differentiates her as a mother from Ida. Many critics have identified the parallels between the story of Useppe and Ida and the life of Chirst and the Virgin, and Elena Mezzetti emphasizes in her reading of the novel

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[136] See *La Storia*, 491, 498 for examples of these phone conversations.
[137] *La Storia*, 494; "he had no friends or playmates of his own species any more"; "if he too wasn't some kind of puppy."
[138] His refusal to participate in school is one of the most evident signs of his refusal to participate in human society.
[139] *La Storia*, 556-557; "'And you,' she resumed with conviction, looking at him, 'you are always the most beautiful in the whole world. That's certain.'
'And my mamma?' Useppe inquired.
'Her! Did you ever see a more beautiful girl? Ah, everybody in Rome knows that! She's an infinite beauty. Infinite!
Useppe laughed. He was absolutely in agreement on this point."

the serene acceptance on Ida's part of this second child conceived through rape, whereas her first child is considered a product of social conditioning, of accepting the values of the traditional family structure which prescribes children as a natural result of marriage.[140] In neither case is Ida shown to have made a conscious choice to mother. Bella, on the other hand, had biological offspring of her own, who were taken away to be killed by her previous master, and a second pregnancy leaves her infertile. The narrative voice underscores the active choice on Bella's part to seek out Useppe after Nino's death, as the narrator observes, "né mai sarà dato sapere quali e quante traversie passò prima di tornare all'unica, estrema sua famiglia."[141] Thus Morante shows the formation of an unconventional family unit that allows Bella to invest her maternal energies in helping to raise a child together with another mother, as biological motherhood is no longer an option for her, and Bella makes no distinction between the children she birthed and those she adopts, seeing them all as equally and infinitely beautiful.

Such an inclusive vision of motherhood provides clear evidence against any arguments that portray Morante as interested only in stories of 'vere madri' absorbed in fused relationships between mother and son. The author continually questions traditional maternity and the cultural assumptions surrounding it as an institution, and in choosing figures such as Rosaria, Daniele, Manuele and Bella, she reveals how non-traditional mothers such as prostitutes and male and animal mothers can subvert the dominant ideology of what mothering can and should look like in the landscape of Italian literature.

[140] Mezzetti, 'Storia di una madre," 19-23.
[141] *La Storia*, 475; "nor will we ever learn what and how many trials she underwent before returning to her one, last family."

CHAPTER 2

CANARIE D'ORO AND *CANTASTORIE ECCELSE*: FAIRY TALES, STORYTELLING, NARRATION AND THE MATERNAL IN ELSA MORANTE'S NOVELS

The role of the storyteller is one that Elsa Morante knew well, for as the eldest child in her family she would tell stories to her younger siblings, particularly to her sister Maria, and she began her literary career writing stories for children's magazines.[1] Rather than renouncing this juvenile literary production later in her career, she recognized sufficient value in one of her earliest stories, the fable *Le bellissime avventure di Caterì dalla trecciolina*, to have it published in book form in 1942 and later rereleased in a "nuova edizione riveduta e arricchita con l'aggiunta di altre bellissime storie."[2] Her genre of choice as a young writer was fairy tale, for as she explains "Nello scrivere mi rivolgevo, naturalmente, alle persone mie simili; e perciò, fino

[1] Mariola, who became the protagonist of "La storia dei bimbi e delle stelle," published in 1933 in the "Corriere dei piccoli."
[2] In Morante's letter to her readers, *Le straordinarie avventure di Caterina*, 5; "a new edition, revised and enriched with the addition of other wonderful stories".

all'età di quindici anni circa, scrissi esclusivamente favole e poesie per i bambini."[3] Though she claims her material and audience matured at that age to "poesie e racconti per adulti" she never truly abandoned the genre of her youth, for her adult works possess a fairy tale quality that has been widely recognized and discussed by critics.[4]

Fairy tales have long held great appeal for both child and adult audiences. While the latter group has often been entertained by some of the more subversive and at times bawdy content characteristic of oral tales, the preservation of fairy tales in written form for children has historically eliminated this in favor of a moral focus useful for pedagogical purposes.[5] As Maria Tatar has underscored, parents have for generations held an important role in selecting the stories they read to their children based on their potential therapeutic or didactic value.[6] The sharing of fairy tales is an interpersonal experience, and parents often guide their children to learn certain lessons not only through the tales they select but also through verbal and non-verbal cues that accompany the performance of storytelling.[7] Fairy tales thus serve as instruments of socialization and acculturation aided by parental guidance in interpreting tales based primarily on patterns of transgression and punishment. As texts that encourage multiple interpretations, children may come to very different conclusions or learn different lessons when left to their own devices in reading fairy tales alone.

In the complex relationship she establishes between the maternal and fairy tales, Morante taps into the cultural significance of the genre as a pedagogical tool and clearly demonstrates the importance of the interpersonal aspect of joint participation in these tales either through the

[3] Elsa Morante, Carlo Cecchi, and Cesare Garboli, *Opere*, 1. ed.
[4] Ibid., xxvii.
[5] See Armando Maggi, "Dancing Backward: An Introduction", *Preserving the Spell: Basile's "The Tale of Tales" and Its Afterlife in the Fairy-Tale Tradition* and Maria Tatar, "Preface", *Off With Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood.*
[6] Tatar, "Preface," *Off With Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood.*
[7] Ibid., xxi.

shared reading of them or, to greater effect, the mother's oral storytelling. In her earliest two novels she sheds light on the psychological value the genre can have for children, as it provides a model through which her child protagonists Elisa and Arturo explore their relationships to absent mothers and imaginatively rework their family stories. While highlighting the consolatory power of the written word, Morante also exposes the dangers and limits of using fairy tales read in isolation as an interpretive tool for maternal relationships.

The mothers, both biological and non-biological, who are most actively engaged in the work of mothering in Morante's fiction often possess a fairy tale quality and they all tell stories to their children. Intricately connected to the maternal, storytelling represents a form of nurturance and an indicator of characters' investment in mothering, particularly in *Aracoeli*. Storytelling is also a means through which mothers help children navigate familial relationships and their relational identity within the family in this novel, as well as in *L'isola di Arturo*. As I will argue, in Morante's third novel, *La Storia*, mothering through storytelling permeates the text at the narrative level, as Morante explores the concept of mothering through attentiveness to and the telling of a child's unique life story. The maternal narrator of this novel represents a very different means of participation in non-biological mothering which, significantly, overcomes the obstacle of cultural perceptions of the incompatibility of motherhood and women's intellectual production.

Navigating the Maternal through Fairy Tales in *Menzogna e sortilegio* and *L'isola di Arturo*

As Sharon Wood has aptly observed, in both *Menzogna e sortilegio* and *L'isola di Arturo*, "Morante is concerned to explore the ways in which her narrators, Elisa and Arturo, approach the business of writing—what they read, what they write, how they position themselves in relation to the text, the models on which they draw."[8] The genre that most significantly influences both of the child-narrators' writing, as well as their thinking throughout the texts, is undoubtedly that of the fairy tale. Fairy tales are explicitly or implicitly referred to as elements of Elisa's and Arturo's childhood readings, readings which in both cases provide consolation for the isolated child protagonists who grow up with physically or emotionally absent biological mothers.[9] Central to Morante's work is the question of how relationships to the maternal can be formed through stories, both written and oral, and her earliest two novels serve to underscore the limits of the genre when the interpersonal element of maternal involvement is absent.

Evidence abounds of fairy tales as models both within the texts of *Menzogna e sortilegio* and *L'isola di Arturo* and for these novels as a whole, which has led several critics to characterize one or both of the novels themselves as 'favole' or 'fiabe', a criticism that Morante herself vehemently opposed. In his *Invito alla lettura di Elsa Morante*, Carlo Sgorlon lists as the first of two principal critical interpretations of *Menzogna e sortilegio* the characterization of the novel as a "singolare fiaba, una rappresentazione compiaciuta e magica di un mondo privo di ganci con il reale."[10] The publication of Morante's second novel drew increased critical attention to the fabulous vein of her works, particularly with Giacomo Debenedetti's emphasis in

[8] Wood, "Models of Narrative in *Menzogna e sortilegio*," *Under Arturo's Star*, 96.
[9] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 22; *Isola*, 67, 367.
[10] Sgorlon, *Invito Alla Lettura Di Elsa Morante*, 43; "a singular fable, a complacent and magical representation of a world devoid of connection to the real"; translation mine. Sgorlon lists as among the critics contributing to this interpretive vein Pietro Pancrazi, who was the first to highlight the presence in the novel of "la mescolanza di realtà e di favola, l'impressione di realtà trasognata" and Emilio Cecchi. (Sgorlon, 140).

his essay on *L'isola di Arturo* on a potential mythical-fantastical interpretation of the novel alongside the alternative possibility of a realistic reading.[11] Morante directly refuted characterizations of her novels as fables or fairy tales while discussing her second novel in an interview and concluding, "qualcuno ha parlato di una fiaba, ma per me il mio libro è uno dei più reali che siano stati scritti in questi ultimi tempi."[12] It is in her representation of the psychology of her characters that Morante locates her realism, and yet fairy tales play a key role in this psychology, as Morante's child protagonists rely on these tales for both companionship and as a tools through which to work out conflicting feelings sparked by their relationships to mothers.

In her study on the power of childhood reading, Maria Tatar discusses at length what it is that children need and take away from stories, and she describes precisely the type of young reader that Morante shows both Elisa and Arturo to be in asserting that, "Children escape into reading not only in search of something beyond the place and time to which they are confined, but also for comfort."[13] Tatar elaborates on this escapist reading by noting that it is a common strategy for children attempting to combat loneliness, as they discover in their literary wanderings a "sense of adventure, excitement and energy missing from real life" and she notes that such child readers are often depicted as being isolated and cut off from the social world.[14] Both Elisa and Arturo, essentially left to their own devices in the absence of maternal guidance and companionship of any sort for the bulk of their childhoods, are shown to not only use reading as a means to combat loneliness, but what they learn from literature informs to a great degree their thinking about the world and the people around them. In the case of Elisa in

[11] Debenedetti, *Intermezzo*, 101-125.
[12] "some have spoken of a fable/fairy tale, but in my opinion my book is one of the most real that has been written in recent years"; translation mine. This interview is included in Francesca Comencini's 1997 documentary *Elsa Morante* and is cited by Bernabò, Graziella, *La Fiaba Estrema: Elsa Morante Tra Vita e Scrittura*, 120.
[13] Tatar, *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*, 15.
[14] Ibid., 17.

particular, escape into reading is shown to be potentially detrimental when used to an excessive degree as a substitute for human relationships, and it is the need to free herself from her self-imposed prison of 'favole' that serves as the impetus for writing her family story in the form of the novel itself.

As the first-person author/narrator of the text, Elisa explicitly dedicates the novel "Alla Favola" before beginning the introduction to her family, and in this dedication as throughout the text, the term 'favola' denotes not only the genre of fairy tale, but encompasses in a larger sense all fiction, often with emphasis on the negative connotations associated with the kinds of inventions and untruths that have plagued Elisa and her entire family. Inspired by her readings belonging almost exclusively to the "genere fantastic," Elisa invents tales modeled on her "favole predilette" in which she transforms her relatives into protagonists of high rank and valor who accomplish great feats.[15] As Sharon Wood observes, "Storytelling becomes a consolatory, redeeming fiction, escapist theater, a way of bringing her characters to an obligatory happy ending."[16] Elisa's fictional creations provide her only companionship during her time spent shut in her small room following the death of her adoptive mother, and in addition to their functions of consolation and distraction from reality, Morante demonstrates the extent of the role these stories play in Elisa's psychological processing of her family story and her ambivalent feelings toward her mother.

There is an undoubtedly an intentional allusion to Freudian family romance in the typology of story that Elisa creates surrounding her family members. Elisa's imagining her

[15] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 21; "genre of the fantastic"; Ibid., 22; "favorite [fairy] tales".
[16] Wood, "Models of Narrative in *Menzogna e sortilegio*," 103.

family members in the vests of "re, condottieri, profeti, e gente, insomma, di altissimo rango"[17] reveals the common impulse of children to envision more elevated origins for themselves:

> Most children of early school age (6 to 10) possess a secret daydream (the "family romance") which deals with their descent from royal or lordly parents who have only entrusted them to their real more humble families. […] On the part of the child these fantasies are attempts to deal with the whole range of conflicting emotions toward the parents.[18]

Morante explicitly underscores the mechanics of the family romance in attributing to the orphaned Elisa the realization that "i miei genitori, morendo, m'avevan lasciato un enigma; e […] grazie a tale insoluto enigma, io potevo costruire mille fole al posto del loro dramma borghese."[19] Elisa as narrator recognizes that her stories are fantasies, but describes her past self as believing them as truth, and she recognizes the psychological purpose behind these stories: "Grazie alla mia menzogna, io potevo vendicarmi, adesso, dei miei amori non ricambiati, potevo saziare i miei segreti orgogli, neri e sotterranei come inferni."[20] Family romances have become generally accepted by psychoanalysts as part of ordinary child development, particularly in the case of frustrated Oedipal desires, and yet for Elisa these fantasies persist long past the typical period of preadolescence into early adulthood.[21] Reading continues to provide the inspiration for imaginative elaborations of her family story, in a repeating pattern of physical and mental enclosure within the solitary walls of her room.

Elisa's fantasies began long before her parents' deaths, in the period before her adoption in which her mother was physically present but emotionally absent. Morante frames the two examples of the types of fairy tales that Elisa creates for herself within a scene of maternal

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[17] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 22; "kings, leaders of men, prophets, in other words people of the highest rank".
[18] Horner, T.M., Rosenberg, E.B. "The Family Romance: A Developmental-Historical Perspective," *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 8, 131-132, citing Freud.
[19] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 23; "when my parents died they bequeathed me a mystery; thanks to this unsolved enigma, I was able to fabricate thousands of fictions to substitute for their commonplace drama."
[20] Ibid., 24; "Thanks to my illusions, I could now revenge my unrequited loves, and satisfy my secret vanities."
[21] Homer and Rosenberg, "The Family Romance," 132.

indifference, a situation which would likely arouse conflicting feelings in the neglected child. In the paragraph that precedes these tales Elisa as narrator describes Anna's "noncuranza," or negligence, in performing her motherly duties, concluding that her mother views Elisa as "una cosa insensibile, e uno dei tanti compiti indegni e amari svolti per necessità, pensando ad altro" while Anna's thoughts are clearly invested elsewhere.[22] The scene that follows is one in which the ignored Elisa sits quietly in her mother's room and invents stories, the purpose of which she claims is simply "per distrarmi," but it is clear that these stories serve an invaluable purpose beyond distraction, as they allow Elisa to address and resolve many of the key anxieties caused by her relationship with her mother. It is not surprising that Elisa's invented tales are explicitly described as being "imitate dai libri di fiabe e di sante leggende ch'erano le mie letture di allora,"[23] for as Bruno Bettelheim has argued, fairy tales as a genre are uniquely suited to helping children structure their daydreams and provide a sense of direction.[24] Fairy tales allow children the space in which to address the anxieties that plague them at the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious levels, allowing them the freedom to grapple with the thoughts and urges that would be considered unacceptable.[25] The other model listed by Elisa, religious stories, is limited in its usefulness according to Bettelheim, for they "do not propose solutions for the problems offered by the dark sides of our personalities" and instead "suggest essentially only one solution for the asocial aspects of the unconscious: repression of these (unacceptable) strivings."[26]

[22] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 501; "as if I were some inanimate thing, one of the many vulgar chores attended to while she was thinking of other things."
[23] Ibid.; "imitated from fables and legends I had read".
[24] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7.
[25] Ibid., 6, 52.
[26] Ibid., 52.

The two fairy tales that Elisa invents share themes that are clearly rooted in the conflicts and anxieties in her relationship with her mother that the young girl longs to resolve. Chief among them is one that is a very common anxiety for children: the need to feel loved amid the fear of being considered worthless.[27] In both tales the protagonists are a mother and daughter who overcome a separation in order to be gloriously reunited and this daughter is or becomes "bella" and "buona," a worthy object of the love and admiration of her mother and others. Elisa is able to attain only through her imagination the love that Anna withholds from her in reality, and in the second fairy tale Elisa allows herself to indulge in vicarious revenge by turning the tables and becoming the one who "insulta e maltratta la madre."[28] Marco Bardini convincingly argues that this second tale, in which the wicked daughter is transformed into a serpent as punishment for her maltreatment of her mother until she is able to win her mother's love in her serpentine form, sets the stage for Rosaria's later substitution for Anna as Elisa's mother, as the true mother who is able to recognize the innate beauty and goodness of her daughter.[29]

Elisa's tales demonstrate the didactic and moral element of their origin in her solitary reading of fairy tales, in which beauty and virtue are rewarded within the context of the exemplary and cautionary tales that predominate in collections intended for children. Elisa's re-elaborations represent variations of "The Kind and Unkind Girls" tales traditionally directed at a female audience, which model good behavior and reveal the consequences of vice.[30] Her invented fairy tales also highlight the kind of dualistic thinking in which the genre allows children to engage. As a child begins to struggle with understanding the meaning of the outside

[27]Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 10.
[28] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 502; "insults and mistreats her mother." Translation mine, as these fairy tales are not included in the Foulke translation.
[29] Bardini, Marco "Dei «fantastici doppi» ovvero la mimesi narrativa dello spostamento psicico" *Per Elisa. Studi su* Menzogna e sortilegio, 242-3.
[30] See Tatar, "Reward-and-punishment Tales," in *Off With Their Heads!* for a history of these tales.

world the search for order often takes the form of dividing everything into opposites.[31] Bettelheim refers to the Freudian concept of splitting to describe the mechanism by which the child addresses the chaos of his ambivalences, such as love and hate, desire and fear, as fairy tales encourage not only isolating and separating the various, confusing aspects of the child's experience into opposites, but also projecting these onto different figures.[32] Melanie Klein elaborated upon the concept of splitting, incorporating it into her theory of object relations as the process of identifying either the ego or the object as wholly good or bad, with successful development requiring the integration of the two into a single ego or object that is both good and bad.[33] It is, according to Klein, the task of the depressive position to work through the anxiety caused by the recognition of the other as a separate but whole object toward which the subject must sublimate her destructive impulses in order to preserve this ambivalently loved object, prototypically the mother.[34] In her second fairy tale Elisa accomplishes precisely this, learning to sublimate her harmful impulses toward her mother while confined to her serpentine form and then having her humanity restored once she is no longer a threat to the object of her love, who through divine aid was preserved throughout the process.

Klein maintains that the depressive position is never fully worked through and is rather revisited throughout childhood and adult life, and successful navigation of this position is a prerequisite for interpersonal relationships.[35] Morante shows Elisa's recognition of her failure to develop a capacity for such relationships as fantasy supersedes reality:

> Dopo essersi fatte credere la mia consolazione, la mia festa e il mio riscatto di contro all'inquietante realtà, le mie maschere m'imposero la negazione d'ogni realtà, in cambio del loro mondo larvale. Esse mi liberarono, è vero, dalla mia antica, dolorosa passione

[31] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 73.
[32] Ibid., 74-5.
[33] Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 35.
[34] Ibid., 75.
[35] Ibid., 92.

> per i miei simili; ma nel tempo stesso mi resero insensibile fino all'umana simpatia, fino alla carità.[36]

Elisa ends up trapped in her imaginative reworking of her family story, unable to move beyond the kind of thinking that allows fairy tales to be a potentially useful tool in a child's maturation into adulthood.

Like Elisa, Arturo uses fairy tales as a model through which to navigate his relationship with the maternal. As in the case of Elisa, reading provides consolation in Arturo's solitary childhood, and at times he uses fairy tales as models to help him articulate his own experience, such as when he alludes to the character of Sleeping Beauty to describe his sense of awakening upon hearing news of world events after so many years of growing up oblivious to the world beyond his tiny island or when he casts himself in the role of the prince on the trail of his father-Cinderella.[37] He similarly turns to this genre to attempt to make sense of what it means for him to be suddenly presented with a young stepmother in the form of Nunziata, thus finding himself in a position reminiscent of Cinderella's. Arturo engages in the kind of dualistic thinking that his literary predecessor Elisa demonstrated in order to preserve his image of the good mother, but he does so through a different mechanism. Arturo employs the trope of the wicked stepmother to characterize Nunziata before he has met her, and his need to cast her as the evil counterpart to his biological mother conforms to the common use children make of this literary figure.

In her introduction to her work on the figure of the mother in fairy tales, Torborg Lundell argues that in order to see non-sentimentalized depictions of mothers, "we must turn to the folktale which, as a genre, long before modern therapy and psychology were invented, presented a sophisticated analysis of the problems of being a mother, and of having one, particularly in a

[36] *Menzogna e sortilegio*, 25; "My masks imposed on me the denial of all reality in exchange for their false world. They freed me, it is true, from my old painful passion for others but at the same time they robbed me of any human felling, even love."
[37] *L'isola di Arturo*, 367 and 47.

culture ruled by men."[38] Fairy tales offer a depiction of mothers that is free from sentimentalization and "presents the psychological dynamics of motherhood in an entertaining form while it articulates the powerful feelings triggered by the power of a mother."[39] Lundell believes that at least to some degree this combination of mother and power are manifested in the figure of the stepmother in both popular culture and the folktale genre. Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of the role of the stepmother in fairy tales and the child's imagination emphasizes this element of power, as the stepmother is a device used to preserve intact the idea of mother as an "all-giving protector" as a separate entity from "the cruel stepmother [who] is so evil as to deny the youngster something he wants."[40] The good mother in fairy tales is usually dead, and the splitting of the mother into two separate good and evil figures allows the child to preserve the "internal all-good mother" and aim any anger or conflicting emotions at her wicked double.[41] Rather than casting Nunziata in the permanent role of the wicked stepmother, however, Arturo is shown to revert to dualistic thinking only in the moments in which he is most threatened by ambivalence in his relationship with Nunziata and is thus desperate to preserve the biological mother as the good object, Nunziata's polar opposite.

Arturo's first reference to the *matrigna* of fairy tales occurs immediately after his father informs him that he will soon have "una nuova madre," sparking the boy's immediate defense of his deceased biological mother, who to him represents pure good, and the refusal to extend the title of "madre" to any other woman.[42] Arturo is at the same time confronted with Nunziata's potential power as his father's new wife, realizing "Essa, per me, significava solo il Dovere" and

[38] Torborg Lundell, *Fairy Tale Mothers*, 11.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 67.
[41] Ibid., 68.
[42] *L'isola di Arturo*, 73; "a new mother."

"come sposa di mio padre, costei, per me, era una persona sacra!"[43] Arturo resorts to his sole source of information on the topic of stepmothers in order to distance himself from this menacing new figure: "Secondo i libri che avevo letto, una matrigna non poteva essere che una creatura perversa, ostile e degno di odio."[44] He is thus able to protect his image of his benevolent mother and justify his urge to hate this new mother figure while recognizing the threat of her role of authority.

It is significant that once Arturo actually meets Nunziata and the threat of her power over him lessens as he gets to know her, he no longer finds it necessary to rely on the trope of the wicked stepmother. It is only when she once again wields power over him, denying him what her wants from her, that the allusions to this literary figure return. Sparked by jealousy of Nunziata's affection for her baby, Carmine, Arturo turns to fairy tales as a model on which to fantasize resolution, for he declares that "L'accusava, fra me, d'essere infame proprio come le solite matrigne, che, appena avuti i figli loro, buttano i figliastri da una parte. E mi sarebbe piaciuto d'imitare i figliastri ripudiati dei romanzi, allontanandomi dalla matrigna disumana, per andarmene alla ventura."[45] Arturo's explicit reference to his experience of the canon of fairy tales underscores the history within the genre of attributing any mistreatment or neglect to a figure other than the biological mother. In her study of the Grimms' fairy tales, Maria Tatar observes that during revisions the brothers recognized a change in audience from adults to children and altered their depictions of mothers accordingly, attributing to stepmothers any behavior not in line with the ideal of the biological mother as a selfless nurturer.[46] Their belief in

[43] Ibid., 74; "all she meant to me was Duty"; as my father's wife, she was someone sacred to me."
[44] Ibid.; "Books had always told me a stepmother was beastly, hostile and hateful."
[45] Ibid., 240; "In my heart I accused her of being as wicked as stepmothers always were, who flung aside their stepchildren as soon as they had children of their own; and I would have liked to do what castoff stepchildren did in stories—to go far away from my inhuman stepmother and seek adventures."
[46] Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, 37.

children's inability to tolerate cruelty or neglect in biological mothers has contributed to stepmothers becoming nearly synonymous with evil in the collective unconscious to such a degree that Tatar concludes "One can safely argue that the phrase *wicked stepmother*, which has a nearly formulaic ring to it, is pleonastic."[47] The ambivalence of Arturo's feelings toward Nunziata as a figure who is simultaneously a stepmother and a biological mother leads him to long for the clarity of good versus bad encouraged by the tradition of fairy tales.

Arturo's final reference to the wicked stepmother coincides with the moment his relationship with Nunziata effectively ends, when she repudiates him after he suggests they run away together. Nunziata professes to no longer love Arturo as a son, declares that they no longer have any relationship and proceeds to treat him stonily from then on, leading Arturo to lament, "Ah, io avrei preferito assai di venir trattato veramente da lei come dalla più perfida matrigna dei romanzi. Avrei preferito vederla trasformarsi in una lupa assassina, piuttosto che in quella statua."[48] Arturo is again longing for the simplicity of fairy tale thinking, of being able to place Nunziata within an established category, but he is aware that the reality of his relationship with his flesh and blood stepmother is much more complex. He is unable to accept the integration of good and bad and all other conflicting traits she represents and his solution is to distance himself from her, by the end of the novel claiming to consider her simply "una povera napoletanella senza niente di speciale."[49]

Arturo thus relies on fairy tales to help him navigate the moments in which his stepmother wields the greatest power over him, first when she represents a potential authority figure, later when he sees her as withholding maternal affection and finally after she rejects all of

[47] Ibid., 141.
[48] *L'isola di Arturo*, 294; "Oh, I'd rather she treated me like the beastliest stepmother in stories. I'd rather have seen her turn into a murderous wolf than into that statue."
[49] Ibid., 377; "a poor little thing from Naples with nothing special about her."

his romantic advances and renounces any familial connection. Morante shows that both Elisa and Arturo are to some extent aware of their reliance on fairy tales as a potential interpretive tool for navigating their relationships to mothers, with the major difference in their stories resulting from the extent to which they are able to move beyond this childlike way of thinking. Arturo's story ends with a sense of his liberation as he leaves his island behind along with his childhood, while Elisa remains in her self-imposed solitary confinement with her "maschere."

Maternal Storytelling

...io sola, unica io
so con bellissime fiabe
consolare la notte.

Non è mio pregio, ma del cielo
che mi fece fantastica
se degna io sono della grazia.[50]

These verses from Elsa Morante's "Sheherazade" are a testament to the imaginative powers of the storyteller, with an emphasis on the power to console. The reference to Sheherazade is a reminder of the interpersonal aspect of the storyteller-listener relationship, and the potential for bonds to form and be strengthened as stories are shared. Many critics interpret this poem as a self-representation on Morante's part, and in addition having been an avid storyteller herself, storytelling also figures prominently in her novels.[51] Many of her characters are shown to be actively engaged in the telling of tales, and there is a strategic favoring of orality

[50] Elsa Morante, *Alibi*. I alone, only I/can, with the most beautiful fairy tales,/console the night/It is not my own virtue, but rather the heavens/that made me fantastic/ if I am worthy of this favor. Translation mine.
[51] Carlo Sgorlon takes this view, among others.

over literacy at play in her body of work. I believe Morante shows storytelling to be an integral part of the practice of mothering, fundamental for helping children navigate familial bonds, and represents a means of nurturance that is available to both biological and non-biological mothers. As the novel *Aracoeli* traces Manuele's changing relationship with the spoken and written word, Morante revisits and further explores many key aspects of the relationship between mothers, fairy tales, storytelling and family that are central to her earlier novels as well.

Aracoeli is described by her son as a "cantastorie eccelsa" and is closely connected to fairy tales. Non-biological mothers from other texts are similarly aligned to this genre when depicted as storytellers.[52] Bella recounts a tale to Useppe "in modo favoloso"[53] and when Nunziata tells a family story to her stepson it appears to him "come se raccontasse una fiaba."[54] The reading of fairy tales continues to feature prominently in Morante's final novel as Manuele's preferred genre, but unlike in the cases of Elisa and Arturo, his foray into exploration of this genre begins under the influence of maternal guidance. Bruno Bettelheim argues that the reading of fairy tales is most effective when it is a shared experience between parent and child, in which each participant in the experience makes his or her own contributions: "To attain to the full its consoling properties, its symbolic meanings, and, most of all, its interpersonal meanings, a fairy tale should be told rather than read. Telling is preferable to reading because it permits greater flexibility."[55] Morante creates a scene of this type of interpersonal exchange between mother and son when Manuele recounts their reading of an illustrated book of fairy tales, remembering "insieme Aracoeli e io ci studiavamo di decifrarle," and his instinct to ask his mother for "una spiegazione che valesse a confortarmi" when faced with troubling doubts concerning the

[52] *Aracoeli*, 178; "supreme balladeer", though the more common translation for "cantastorie" is "storyteller."
[53] *La Storia*, 556; "in a fabulous tone."
[54] *L'isola di Arturo*, 108; "as if she were telling a fairy tale."
[55] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 150.

material.[56] Maria Tatar likewise writes of a "certain bonding energy" that comes from reading a book to a child, and when an adult allows herself to become absorbed in the story along with the child and engage in conversation about it, as Aracoeli is shown to do, the result is a "harmonious, shared experience."[57] Aracoeli is the only parent in all of Morante's novels shown to participate in this kind of interpersonal experience of reading and discussing stories with her child, and Morante reveals this involvement of hers to be a key part of her mothering.

Manuele's movement in the novel away from reading as a harmonious, shared experience toward the type of solitary reading in which Elisa and Arturo partook coincides with moments of increased separation from the maternal. Shortly after Manuele explicitly identifies the moment in which he perceives Aracoeli's diminishing affection for him, the moment he first donned glasses, he describes Aracoeli's waning involvement in helping him reinterpret the fairy tales he reads and invent alternative happy endings:

> Su tali quesiti, io non cessavo di consultare, con grande foga, Aracoeli, poi che di tutto lo sterminato itinerario del sapere umano […] questo delle fiabe era l'unico territorio su cui tuttora mia madre si lasciasse tentare un poco. Ma anche qui (lei, già stata cantastorie eccelsa, e poi compagna delle nostre fiabesche letture serali!) mia madre adesso pareva immettersi a ritroso, altalenando fra una certa nostalgia di giochi e un'opportuna rinuncia. Indi la rinuncia fatalmente prevalse; e finì che lei, da se stessa, si espulse da quel nostro piccolo feudo comune. Mentre, ansioso di dialogo, io m'infervoravo nei miei soggetti fiabeschi, essa ormai, disincantata e distratta, mi badava a malapena e con una certa aria d'indulgenza superiore: quasi alienandosi di proposito da simili interessi […].[58]

[56] *Aracoeli*, 136-7; "together Aracoeli and I worked at deciphering them"; "an explanation to console me in my obscure doubt."
[57] Tatar, 3-4.
[58] *Aracoeli*, 178-9; "On these questions I never stopped ardently consulting Aracoeli, since in all the boundless itinerary of human knowledge […] the fairy-tale territory was the only terrain onto which my mother allowed herself to be lured a bit. But even here (she, who had been a supreme balladeer, and then my companion in our evening fairy-tale reading!) my mother now seemed to venture backward, alternating between a certain nostalgia for our fun and a decorous renunciation. Eventually, the inevitable renunciation prevailed; and in the end she expelled herself from our little shared estate. When, eager for dialogue, I became excited by my fairy-tale subjects, she, now disenchanted and distracted, barely heeded me and assumed a certain air of superior indulgence, as if deliberately alienating herself from such interests […]."

Aracoeli is in the process of adopting more lady-like airs, trading fairy tales for magazines dedicated to fashion and celebrities, and simultaneously becoming decreasingly dedicated to the care of her son. Arturo begins to seek consolation in reading as he withdraws further and further into himself, interpreting Aracoeli's revived interest in him as way to use up on her only surviving child the "avanzi preziosi" of tenderness she would have bestowed on her deceased baby girl, and it is now he who rejects her interest in sharing in his reading:

> Ma adesso ero io che mi sottraevo ai suoi abbracci, impacciato o diffidente, rinchiudendomi come le foglie di una sensitiva alle sue voci amorose; o rispondendo ai suoi poveri sorrisetti con una serietà umbratile che li scansava. Certe volte, nel vedermi intento alla lettura di qualche favola, essa (come già usava al tempo antico) mi diceva: «è bella? me la conti?» protendendosi curiosa. E io d'istinto coprivo con la mano il foglio, quasi a difenderlo da un'indiscrezione.[59]

Morante shows participation and guidance in shared reading to be part of the maternal care that Aracoeli once invested in her son, and which he comes to reject along with her sweet words, smiles and other loving gestures. Aracoeli sheds, along with her role as a mother, her identity as a storyteller, demonstrating a connection between the two in Morante's thinking.

Sara Ruddick considers storytelling to be an integral part of fostering growth, one of the three central elements of the work of mothering. A mother's stories represent a means of nurturance that for a mother can be "as beneficial to her children as they are to her" and can help ground a child's life story as "inextricably connected with others."[60] Ruddick further observes that "Children are shaped by — some would say imprisoned in – the stories they are first told. But it is also true that storytelling at its best enables children to adapt, edit and invent life stories

[59] Ibid., 211; "But now it was I who withdrew from her embraces, awkward or distrustful, closing myself up like the leaves of a sensitive plant at her loving words; or responding to her poor little smiles with a moody seriousness that thrust them aside. At times, seeing me intent in the reading of some fairy tale, she would say to me (as she had done in the old days), claiming to be curious, «Is it beautiful? Tell it to me?» And instinctively I would cover the page with my hand, as if to as if to defend it against an indiscretion."
[60] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 98.

of their own."[61] This relational aspect of storytelling is likewise underscored by Jody Koenig Kellas in her introduction to a volume of essays on family storytelling, for she writes that "One of the primary functions of storytelling, generally and in the family, is the construction of individual and relational identity" and that within this practice "members learn how they fit into the group by hearing and telling family narratives."[62] It is evident that Manuele turns to storytelling to attempt to identify his place within a family composed of two diverse lineages, piecing together his parents' history and that of their families with the aid of the stories he is told by Aracoeli and the scant information he receives from his Zia Monda.

The stories Aracoeli tells her son provide a rich foundation upon which Manuele is able to elaborate his own tales of his mysterious maternal ancestors. The fact that he does not have much concrete information about his mother's family can be at least partially explained by the "schermo famoso" that his paternal family members employ to "nascondere al nostro mondo la preistoria di Aracoeli."[63] Intended to hide Aracoeli's humble past unbefitting a lady of the stature she acquired through marriage, to Manuele this screen represents "una specie di porta magica" that incites him to imagine what lies beyond it:

> L'obbligo misterioso, che a casa nostra imponeva il riserbo sulle mie ascendenze materne, si offriva a me bambino come una base di possibili voli verso nidi leggendari. [...] in quei pianeti inesplorati della mia ignoranza, mia madre poteva discendere da una stirpe di gitani o di mendicanti o di toreri o di banditi o di Grandi Idalghi [...].[64]

These stories allude to the kind of family romance Elisa indulged in and Manuele's creative reworking of his mother's past echoes the way in which he re-elaborates the fairy tales he reads

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Jody Koenig Kellas, "Framing family: An Introduction" in *Family storytelling: negotiating identities, teaching lessons and making meaning*, 5.
[63] *Aracoeli*, 25; "famous screen"; hide from our world the prehistory of Aracoeli."
[64] Ibid.; "a kind of magic door"; The mysterious rule that in our house imposed secrecy about my maternal ancestors seemed to me , as a child, the base for possible flights toward legendary nests. […] on those unexplored planets of my ignorance, my mother might descend from a race of gypsies or beggars or toreros or bandits or hidalgo grandees […]."

with his mother, whose own stories arguably encourage this type of creative embellishment. As a "cantastorie eccelsa," Aracoeli is described as taking great pleasure in recounting tales of her past to her son in secret, and she tells of her childhood animals as well as neighbors, fellow villagers and relatives. Storytelling is the sole means through which Aracoeli can help Manuele connect vicariously to her family, whom the boy will never meet and who would otherwise remain hidden behind the shielding "schermo famoso."

The central figure that emerges from Aracoeli's stories is her younger brother, Manuel, who immediately becomes a hero in his young nephew's eyes. Manuel represents an example of the kind of patron saints that Elizabeth Stone discusses in her foundational work on family storytelling, figures that we need not know personally but who in some way serve as "archetypes or embodiments of what we wish we were and what we hope or strive to become."[65] Such a figure is typically not a boy's father, according to Stone, for the father represents an imposed and inhibiting presence for his son,[66] and Manuel is in fact seen to be a more approachable model for Manuele, as the child believes that for his mother "nemmeno lo splendore di Manuel reggerebbe al confronto con la luce solare di mio padre."[67] The Manuel that comes across in Aracoeli's stories is a masculine ideal that little Manuele dreams of emulating, described as being of "degna misura virile," endowed with "genio" and "valore," and whose participation in the Spanish Civil War provides endless fodder for Manuele's imagination.[68] The Manuel of Manuele's stories becomes a kind of companion for the boy, as he imagines conversations with his uncle and loyally vows to conquer his great enemy, and he is the only relative about whom the boy is eager to trade stories with Daniele.

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[65] Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins : How Our Family Stories Shape Us*, 200.
[66] Ibid.,, 207.
[67] *Aracoeli*, 6; "not even the splendor of Manuel could stand up to the solar light of my father."
[68] Ibid., 5; "worthy, virile stature"; "genius"; "valor."

As argued in the previous chapter, the orderly Daniele acts as a surrogate mother to Manuele during Aracoeli's absence during her convalescence, and his nurturing activity includes the telling of family stories to Manuele. Daniele recounts tales of his hometown, his girlfriend and his uncles in America, which enables Manuele to share in reciprocal storytelling about his own uncle. Manuele later shows that he is hurt when Daniele continues to tell stories without asking anything further about Manuele's uncle, for he laments, "Ma del mio proprio zio, Manuel, «che lottava coi tori» non mi domandò più niente: o per suo disinteresse totale, o, forse, per suo totale oblio."[69] Manuele's family stories clearly hold great importance for him, and Daniele was the only person with whom he was able to share them, which significantly was limited to the period in which Daniele was acting as his surrogate mother. Once Daniele returns to his former duties upon the return of Manuele's parents, he no longer acts as a guide to help the boy navigate his identity within the context of his family through the sharing of stories.

Non-biological mothers in Morante's other novels make greater use of storytelling as a means of constructing individual and relational identity by creating tales that form familial bonds between themselves and their child listeners. Kristin Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, critical of the predominance of the idea that family is naturally-occurring biological phenomenon, argue instead that it is "one type of small-group culture strategically produced in discourse such as family stories."[70] Storytelling is one key strategy for "doing family," constructing rather than merely representing family in a way that transcends biological relationships, and these critics agree with Elizabeth Stone's assertion that "What blood does not provide, narrative can," as

[69] Ibid., 232; "but of my own uncle, of Manuel, «who fought with the bulls», he asked me nothing further, out of either total lack of interest, or perhaps total forgetfulness."
[70] Kristin Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, "Family storytelling as a strategy of social control" in *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives*, 50.

blood connection can be dramatized through storytelling.[71] This concept of family as constructed through storytelling offers an interesting approach through which to interpret the way in which non-biological mothers such as Bella and Nunziata are able to create familial bonds through the telling of family stories.

As discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, in *La Storia* Bella tells Useppe stories that help create a sense of the child's life in relation to others, shifting seamlessly from describing the beauty of her puppies to that of "Ninuzzu mio" and Useppe himself, including them and their mother as part of her extended family that she claims as "i nostril."[72] Bella's intentions in telling this story are explicitly to offer the "conforto" and "svago" she believes Useppe needs in that moment, and her story produces the desired effect, for "abbaiato con accenti canini, lo cullava come un'aria di soprano melodiosa."[73] Both the content of the story and they way it is told provide comfort to little Useppe, assuring him not only of the beauty of those he loves but also of his interconnectedness as established in the family Bella discursively creates.

Nunziata's efforts to incorporate Arturo into an extended family through storytelling are even more pronounced. She creates an entire alternative narrative in which, rather than growing up alone, Arturo could have been raised within her Neapolitan family, "proprio uno della nostra famiglia, come un altro fratello!", sleeping in the same familial bed and participating in all of the daily activities of her close-knit clan. [74] She is re-writing their familial relationship in this way, transforming Arturo from stepson into brother, though her relationship to him remains maternal at the same time. For Nunziata, blood connections hold little importance, as she recounts her

[71] Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep*, 70.
[72] *La Storia*, 556; "my Ninuzzu"; "our people".
[73] Ibid., 555-6; "solace" and "distraction"; "barked out in canine accents, [it] cradled him like a melodious soprano aria."
[74] *L'isola di Arturo*, 108; "really one of the family, like another brother."

belief of a universal family in which all are reunited in heaven, telling Arturo "E tu pure, [in paradiso], ritroverai tua madre, e potremo stare tutti quanti insieme, fare tutta una famiglia!"[75]

In addition to establishing new familial ties through the stories she creates, Nunziata also strengthens her relationship with her stepson through storytelling. When she expresses concern that he might not believe all of the fantastic tales she tells of her native Naples and suspect her of falsehood, he reassures her that is not the case, surprising himself with the proclamation that he *knows* her:

> - Ti conosco!
> Tale frase: *ti conosco*, mi venne naturale. E al dirla mi accorsi fra me, sorprendendomi, che, per quanto curioso, ciò era proprio vero: tutte le altre persone (e mio padre, lui, più di tutti!) mi rimanevano sempre misteriose, e questa, invece, che avevo incontrata oggi per la prima volta, mi pareva già di conoscerla a memoria.[76]

Arturo has come to know his stepmother through her stories, as well as her way of telling them, and Morante depicts a bond forming between them as they share stories with each other, as Arturo describes an emotional connection as Nunziata looks at him, "Sentivo le sue pupille, confidenti, protettive, sopra di me, e ciò mi dava una buffa e favolosa contentezza."[77]

Hanna Serkowska has argued that for Morante orality is sacred and that the author associates the spoken word with the premodern world, with an ideal state of humanity free from the contamination of bourgeois society.[78] Though it may be an art of the humble, Morante shows storytelling to possess an ennobling power, endowing Aracoeli "Con la gran pompa di una regina che vanta il proprio lignaggio"[79] and Nunziatella with "quella cert'aria di pompa nobiliare da lei

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[75] Ibid., 99; "And you'll meet your mother [in Heaven] again, and we'll be all together in one big family."
[76] Ibid., 103; "«I know you pretty well!» This *I know you* came to me quite naturally. And as I said it I realized with surprise that, although it seemed odd, it was actually true. Everyone else (and most of all my father) I found mysterious: yet this girl, whom I'd met that day for the first time, I already felt I knew really well."
[77] Ibid., "I could feel her eyes on my, trustful and protective, and this gave me a strange, funny happiness."
[78] Hanna Serkowska. *Uscire Da Una Camera Delle Favole: I Romanzi Di Elsa Morante* (Kraków: Rabid, 2002), 204-5 and "Oralità o stile? La trasmissione orale e le modalità narrative ne *La Storia* di Elsa Morante" *Orality and Literacy in Modern Italian Culture* (London: Legenda, 2006), 140.
[79] Ibid., 5; "With the great pomp of a queen boasting of her lineage".

spesso usata a proposito della sua famiglia,"[80] and transforming Daniele into a member of "la nobile stirpe dei Danieli - o Danielidi" in Manuele's eyes.[81] Storytelling has the power to nurture and console, to facilitate the formation of bonds and connections, and to allow the reimagining of the family and its members.

The Maternal Narrator of *La Storia*

Among the significant differences between *La Storia* and Morante's other novels is the shift in narrative perspective from the protagonist relating his or her childhood in the first person to a third-person narrator, the complexities of which have received relatively little critical attention.[82] The narrator is identified only as a Roman woman who had some firsthand knowledge of Useppe and his family, and the few critics who have chosen to address the narrative voice of the novel have had to grapple with its many contradictions, which center around the narrator's positioning in the novel in relation to the stories and events recounted as well as her ability to express the inner workings of the characters' minds. Despite the many inexplicable and perhaps implausible characteristics of the narrative voice, I would argue that what is essential in Morante's choice of this narrator is shift from the isolation of autobiography from which the other narrator/protagonists are writing to biography created through a relationship between the narrator and her protagonist. What I believe is key in this relationship

[80] Ibid., 99; "that important air she often had when she talked about her family".
[81] Ibid., 222; "the noble breed of the Danieles—or the Danielids."
[82] Notable exceptions include Hanna Serkowska's discussion of the narrator in "Oralità o stile? La trasmissione orale e le modalità narrative ne *La Storia* di Elsa Morante" in *Orality and Literacy in Modern Italian Culture* and Margherita Ganeri's "The Shadow of the Author in *La Storia*" in *Italian Women Writers, 1800-2000: Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression*.

is the narrator's attempt to capture the uniqueness of the child whose story she has chosen to recount within the context of the monumental historical events of World War II also included in the novel, and in attempting to portray *who* little Useppe truly is the narrator's relationship to her protagonist is distinctly maternal. Many of the characteristics of the narrative voice that have bothered or baffled critics thus far take on a different meaning when considered as stemming from the perspective of a maternal storyteller attempting to express the unique identity of her child protagonist.

In her work on the relational nature of identity, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti,* the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero provides insight into the connection between narration and the self, as well as women's aptness for the role of narrator, which provides a useful approach to interpreting the purpose and perspective of the narrator of *La Storia*. As I will argue in due course, from the birth of Useppe described early in the novel to his premature death with which the work concludes, the narrator is concerned throughout the text with communicating to the reader the uniqueness of this particular boy. Cavarero, following Hannah Arendt, distinguishes between two discursive registers whose purpose is to describe *who* versus *what* a person is; philosophy serves to define the latter and "ha la forma di un sapere definitorio che riguarda l'universalità dell'Uomo," while the register of narration "ha la forma di un sapere biografico che riguarda l'identità irripetibile di un uomo."[83] Cavarero argues that from birth each individual is a narratable self whose identity depends on the presence of an other who can tell his or her life story. Morante chooses to position the narrator of *La Storia* within the context of a relationship with the protagonist, as someone who knew Useppe and can thus tell his story in a

[83] Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione*, 12. "has the form of a definitory knowledge that regards the universality of Man."; "has the form of a biographical knowledge that regards the unrepeatable identity of someone." Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood, Trans. Paul A. Kottman, 13. All English translations of Cavarero are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

way that expresses his 'unrepeatable identity', but leaves unanswered the question of the nature of this relationship.

Cavarero argues that women have an aptitude for the particular, being excluded from the masculine realm of the universal, which gives significance to Morante's choice to identify her narrator as female. This decision is somewhat untraditional, as Susan Lanser has argued that heterodiegetic narrators typically are not marked by their sex, whereas homodiegetic narrators are.[84] As will be discussed further in this section, the primary narrative voice of *La Storia* is that of a homodiegetic narrator about whose identity very little information is given apart from her gender. Cavarero describes the feminine attention to the particular as a form of care:

> Come la proverbiale cura per il fragile, il piccolo, l'esposto, squisitamente femminile è infatti da secoli la cura per un particolare che, lungi dal voler salvarsi in un'universalità più alta, gode di essere tale e non aspira a trascendersi. Si tratta del particolare, splendente di finitezza e pago del suo esistere, la cui gloria prende appunto, per gli umani, la forma dell'unicità.[…] Più che di salvezza, l'accidentale ha del resto bisogna di cura. Raccontare la storia che ogni esistenza si lascia dietro è forse il gesto più antico di tale cura. [85]

The narrator of *La Storia* is performing an act of care in telling Useppe's story, devoting attention to even the smallest details of his daily life and his exploits into the world around him. The narrator's perspective is very much rooted in the quotidian, which Cavarero identifies as providing the material on which women's stories tend to be based. These ideas of storytelling as a form of care for another and the attention the narrator devotes to capturing the particularity of that other resonate with much of what Sara Ruddick describes as the key elements of maternal storytelling.

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[84] As cited by Ruth Page in Herman, David. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, 197.

[85] Ibid., 72-3. "Just as the proverbial care for the fragile, the little, the vulnerable, the delightfully feminine has indeed for centuries been the care for a particular that – far from wanting to supersede itself in a higher universality – enjoys being such, and does not aspire to transcend itself. We are dealing with the particular, resplendent with finitude and content with existing; whose glory takes the form of uniqueness. […] Rather than salvation, the accidental needs care. To tell the story of that every existence leaves behind itself is perhaps the oldest act of such care."

Ruddick observes that "In their storytelling, mothers share and elaborate their observations, making a coherent, often amusing, dramatic, or poignant story of their children's particularities. Individually and collectively, they rehearse their judgments and establish continuities in their ongoing nurturing activities."[86] Storytelling is one of the ways in which mothers foster the healthy growth of their children, and it is a practice that according to Ruddick results in tales with three defining virtues that render them beneficial to both mother and child: realism, compassion and delight. All of these qualities are prominent in the text of *La Storia* in the passages focused on Useppe and, I would argue, are attributes that contribute to the uniqueness of the narrative voice of the novel and are also inextricably linked to much of the criticism of that voice.

Realism, in particular, has been one of the major issues for critics; as Ruddick observes of maternal narratives this characteristic is related to the question of the reliability of the narrator. Morante positions the narrator of *La Storia* in a unique way, as what Hanna Serkowska defines as a "narratore sapienziale," who transgresses the boundaries of the traditional omniscient heterodiegetic narrator.[87] The narrator is for the most part positioned outside of the world of the story, and yet at times claims to have seen or heard things firsthand. The majority of the time she demonstrates omniscience, able to describe the thoughts of her characters or action that she could not possibly have witnessed herself, but at times explicitly confesses her limited knowledge and need to resort to conjecture or rely on witnesses or various types of documents to fill in the blanks, such as when she admits that much of her information concerning Davide's stint as an unskilled worker comes secondhand from Nino and that "così la mia presente rievocazione del fatto rimane piuttosto vacante, e approssimativa.[88] This wavering between diverse types of focalization, from non- to internal focalization, to use Genette's model, has irked some critics, including Giacinto Spagnoletti, who makes the claim that "il principale errore di impostazione del libro sta in questo personaggio, diviso

[86] Sara Ruddick *Maternal Thinking*, 98.
[87] Serkowska, "Oralità o stile?", 141; "a knowing narrator"
[88] *La Storia*, 412; "And so my present memoir of the event remains rather patchy and approximate."

fra l'onniscienza del narratore ottocentesco e la donna del Testaccio, senza volto, senza nome (ma neanche identificabile nell'autore)."[89] Michel David is likewise critical of the inconsistent omniscience of the narrator, this figure who is "ora stranamente veggente, ora stranamente cieca."[90]

Hanna Serkowska directly addresses this inconsistency in an essay on the narrative modalities of the novel, and she identifies a multiplicity of narrative voices throughout the text, the principal of which is this quasi-omniscient narrator, whose usefulness outweighs its contradictions:

> La voce narrante, cui sono devoluti più compiti, è una voce eterodiegetica onnisciente e falsamente imparziale di cui la Morante evidenzia la propria neutralità. Lo sguardo epico del narratore, estraneo ai fatti raccontati in tutti i sensi (emotivo, ideologico e temporale), è dimostrato dalla scrittrice come inadeguato. Il tentativo di screditare questo tipo di narratore risulta tuttavia ambiguo, in quanto pur essendo spesso deriso e schernito esso risulta utile per poter narrare e rappresentare tutto ciò di cui l'altra principale istanza narrante, quella testimoniale (la donna del Testaccio), non avrebbe potuto venire a sapere.[91]

Serkowska adds to the list of narrative voices also the incompetent one, whose memory is often full of gaps, and I would add a fourth voice, that of a maternal narrator, who describes the adventures, accomplishments, emotions and imagination of her literary child, Useppe. This narrative voice comes across as a doting mother recording both the everyday moments and milestones in Useppe's life and very clearly defies the emotional neutrality of the traditional omniscient heterodiegetic narrator.

Many of the tales the narrator relates closely resemble the kind of amusing stories mothers tell to capture and share the uniqueness of their children. Ruddick highlights the important role that

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[89] Spagnoletti, "Scrivere alla Morante" *La fiera letteraria* 40, 6 October 1974, 12; "The principle error in the organization of the novel lies in this character, split between the omniscience of a nineteenth-century narrator and the woman from Testaccio, faceless and nameless (but not identifiable as the author)."

[90] David, *La fiera letteraria* 41, 13 October 1974, 9; "at times strangely clairvoyant and at other times oddly blind". Translation mine.

[91] Serkowska, "Oralità o stile?", p. 143. "The narrative voice of, who takes on a variety of tasks, is an omniscient, falsely impartial , heterodiegetic voice whose neutrality Morante highlights. The gaze of the epic narrator, extraneous to the facts recounted in all directions (emotional, ideological and temporal), is shown by the writer to be inadequate. The attempt to discredit this type of narrator is ambiguous, however, because although often derided and mocked it is useful to be able to narrate and represent everything the other main narrator type, that of the firsthand witness (the woman in the Testaccio), could not have known. Translation mine.

mothers have as "creative historians" of their children's past, with the ability to relate who a child was before the time he or she can remember, serving as the crucial other that Cavarero likewise identifies as necessary for one to attain his or her complete life story. The narrator of *La Storia* begins narrating Useppe's life story with the scene of his birth, and in her description of this moment she begins to establish an emotional relationship with him. Rather than being purely objective, the narrator mimics the words of the midwife in calling him a "mascolillo" and continues with her use of diminutives in her initial description of the newborn, referring to him as "piccirillo", "una creaturina" and "caruccio."[92] Throughout the novel the narrator frequently uses diminutives to demonstrate a sense of intimacy and endearment toward her characters, and this tendency extends beyond descriptions of Useppe to include Ninuzzu/Ninnarieddu and Iduzza, among others. Though it proved annoying to some critics,[93] the use of diminutives in reference to Useppe provides the most significant allusion the maternal relationship between the narrator and the boy, which occurs at the end of the novel when the narrator makes an emotional plea to be allowed to remain a bit longer "in compagnia del mio pischelluccio," language that is later mirrored in the description of Ida's death "insieme al suo pischelletto Useppe" on the final page of the novel.[94] The mirroring of diminutive forms of "pischello" accompanied by the first person possessive pronoun suggests that the narrator views herself as an additional maternal figure very attached to her little Useppe.

This maternal narrator's tale of her literary child illustrates the three principal virtues Sara Ruddick identifies as integral to maternal storytelling: realism compassion and delight in scenes like the above. By realism, Ruddick intends verisimilitude, the believability of a mother's story. In order to be useful and accepted by her audience, whether that be her child, other mothers or "sympathetic adults," that audience must find the narrator to be trustworthy. Throughout *La Storia* the narrator frequently makes overt attempts to appear credible, which include naming the sources of her

[92] *La Storia*, 95.
[93] Cesare Garboli, among others.
[94] *La Storia*, 625, 649; "my little kid"; "her little Useppe."

information when it is not firsthand. In the moments when the narrator comes across like a proud mother gushing over her child's exploits and accomplishments, it appears she is aware of the risk of her audience's potential disbelief and attempts to preempt it:

> Giuseppe, come era stato precoce nella nascita, così fino da principio si rivelò precoce in tutto. Alle solite tappe naturali, che segnano l'avanzata di ogni lattante sull'itinerario delle esperienze, lui arrivava sempre in anticipo; ma talmente in anticipo (almeno per quei tempi di allora) che io stessa stenterei a crederci, se non avessi diviso, in qualche modo, il suo destino.[95]

In a similar episode the narrator finds it necessary to assure the reader "si può credere alla mia testimonianza giurata" in describing a scene between Useppe and his brother Nino, as if such an oath would assuage any doubts on the reader's part as to the veracity of the tale.[96] Like any good maternal storyteller, the narrator avoids over-editing her stories, includes the negative as well as the positive, and records failures along with successes. When relating Useppe's challenges, she exhibits the kind of compassion that characterizes maternal tales.

As Useppe's life story takes place during World War II, the narrator does not shy away from the harsh realities of the war that touch Useppe and others, and clearly sympathizes with the difficulties he faces. She describes in great detail, for example, a scene in which Useppe sees photos of the Nazi prison camps in an illustrated newspaper and demonstrates her empathy with the child in inferring that to his uneducated mind "lo spettacolo abnorme di quelle pagine doveva apparire un'astrusità senza risposta, tanto più che la cattiva stampa della rivista rendeva certe immagini ambigue e indistinte."[97] The narrator continues to commiserate with Useppe over his exposure to these images, sympathetically referring to him as "povero" while lamenting that "Resterà per sempre impossibile sapere che cosa povero analfabeto Useppe avrà potuto capire in quelle fotografie senza

[95] Ibid., 106; "Giuseppe, precocious in birth, proved from the beginning precocious in everything. At the usual natural stages which mark every infant's advance along the itinerary of experience, he always arrived ahead of time, but so far ahead (at least for those days) that I myself could hardly believe it, if I had not shared, in some ways, his fate."
[96] Ibid., 405; "you can believe my sworn testimony".
[97] *La Storia*, 372; "that page's unusual spectacle must have seemed an insoluble riddle, especially since the cheap magazine's poor printing made some images ambiguous and unclear."

senso."[98] She remains attentive to Useppe's emotional state in the following days, demonstrating a maternal concern similar to Ida's as to whether the entire incident would pass by "senza lasciare traccia nella sua capocetta."[99]

The narrator's compassion also extends to Useppe's personal challenges, the kind of imperfection Ruddick observes that a mother recognizes as "human, rather than a particularity of her child" and like a mother, the narrator reveals that she is "clearly on her child's side […] and that she judges generously and would, if she could, make his world happier."[100] This sort of compassion is strikingly apparent in the descriptions of Useppe's disastrous time attending school while Ida is teaching in another classroom, as the child fails to grasp the material being taught and demonstrates asocial behavior in isolating himself from the other children and teachers. The narrator makes it clear that her stance toward Useppe is one of forgiveness, as she explicitly attempts to explore and possibly understand the reasons for the child's uncharacteristic behavior through her use of hypothetical comparison and verbs of perception. For example, while Useppe's teacher is discussing his behavior with Ida, the narrator observes, "Useppe stava là vicino con gli occhi grandi e meravigliati, *come se* lui stesso non *riconoscesse* quell bambino strano; e tutavia *sembrava* dire «non so perché mi succeda questo, non è mia colpa, e nessuno può darmi aiuto...»"[101] and later notes, "*Si aveva l'impressione* che quel bambino, nella sua piccolezza, davvero *consumasse* una zuffa immensa contro nemici presenti a lui solo, e a nessun altro."[102] She concludes the tale of these episodes by lamenting that Useppe returns to spending his days "in carcere," thus expressing her dismay that he is

[98] Ibid., 373; "It will be forever impossible to know what poor illiterate Useppe may have understood of those meaningless photographs."
[99]Ibid., 374: "without leaving a trace in his little head."
[100] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 99-100.
[101] *La Storia*, 448, italics mine; "Useppe stood nearby, his eyes wide and amazed, as if he himself didn't recognize that strange child; and yet he seemed to say «I don't know why this happens to me, it's not my fault, and nobody can help me…»."
[102] *Ibid.*, 451, italics mine; "You had the impression that this child, in his tininess, was really waging an immense fight against enemies present to him alone, and to no one else."

once again forced to be locked in the family home.[103] Rather than omitting Useppe's failures in learning and socialization at school, the narrator compassionately incorporates them into her tale of this boy's unique life story.

In concluding her characterization of maternal stories, Ruddick remarks, "Although trustworthy narrators must be realistic, and realism often requires compassion, the primary mood and virtue of a maternal narrator is delighted admiration for a child's accomplishments and shared pleasure in her pleasures."[104] She further observes that "delight is often a disciplined response," one which often requires "patient curiosity" and "imaginative generosity" to discern what interests, accomplishments and pleasures are important to the child. The narrator of *La Storia* demonstrates these maternal characteristics and her shared pleasure in Useppe's delight in scenes throughout the novel, particularly when relating Useppe's milestones, accomplishments and adventures with Bella. One of the many scenes in which the narrator exhibits her maternal attachment to Useppe and amusement in and attention to his uniqueness occurs when she describes his first forays into language:

> Non s'era mai visto una creatura più allegra di lui. Tutto ciò che vedeva intorno lo interessava e lo animava gioiosamente. Mirava esilarato i fili della pioggia fuori della finestra, come fossero coriandoli e stelle filanti multicolori. E se, come accade, la luce solare, arrivando indiretta al soffitto, vi portava, riflesso in ombre, il movimento mattiniero della strada, lui ci si appassionava senza stancarsene: come assistesse a uno spettacolo straordinario di giocolieri cinesi che si dava apposta per lui. Si sarebbe detto, invero, alle sue risa, al continuo illuminarsi della sua faccetta, che lui non vedeva le cose ristrette dentro i loro aspetti usuali; ma quali immagini multiple di altre cose varianti all'infinito. Altrimenti non si spiegava come mai la scena miserabile, monotona, che la casa gli offriva ogni giorno, potesse rendergli un divertimento così cangiante, e inesauribile.
>
> Il colore d'uno straccio, d'una cartaccia, suscitando innanzi a lui, per risonanza, i prismi e le scale delle luci, bastava a rapirlo in un riso di stupore. Una delle prime parole che imparò fu ttelle (stelle). Però chiamava ttelle anche le lampadine di casa, i derelitti fiori che Ida portava da scuola, i mazzi di cipolle appesi, perno le maniglie delle porte, e in séguito anche le rondini. Poi quando imparò la parola dóndini (rondini) chiama dóndini pure i suoi calzerottini stesi a asciugare su uno spago. E a riconoscere una nuova ttella

[103] *Ibid*.; "in prison".
[104] Ruddick, 100.

> (che magari era una mosca sulla parete) o una nuova dóndine, partiva ogni volta in una gloria di risatine, piene di contentezza e di accoglienza, come se incontrasse una persona della famiglia.[105]

Through the use of hyperbole (Useppe is the merriest of babies), diminutives (such as "faccetta"), attention to and amusement in the quotidian moments of Useppe's linguistic development (underpants as swallows), the narrator appears in moments such as this to embody the role of a mother entertaining a sympathetic audience with a tale of son, whose daily life and accomplishments are worthy of recounting. The scene then continues with the narrator's pride and delight in Useppe's great accomplishment of adding to his budding vocabulary, including transforming his own name from "Giuseppe" to the "Useppe" by which he is known for the remainder of the novel, emotions which mirrors Useppe's brother, Nino's, as she records every syllable pronounced by that tiny mouth, tenderly described as filled with "i suoi primi denti di latte da poco nati."[106]

Scenes such as the above remind the reader of the issue of the narrator's positioning in the novel and her inexplicable and inconsistent omniscience. The narrator is clearly not Useppe's primary caretaker, is not present in the moments the boy shares with his family members and other characters in the novel and could not possibly be a witness to everything she narrates. It is worthy of note that in an early manuscript of the novel, rather than leaving a mystery the identity of the narrator, Morante identified herself as both author and narrator, creating a scene at the end of the

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[105] Ibid., 120; "A merrier baby than he had never been seen. Everything he glimpsed around him roused his interest and stirred him to joy. He looked with delight at the threads of rain outside the window, as if they were confetti and multicolored streamers. And if, as happens, the sunlight reached the ceiling indirectly and cast the shadows of the street's morning bustle, he would stare as it fascinated, refusing to abandon it, as if he were watching an extraordinary display of Chinese acrobats, given especially or him. You would have said, to tell the truth, from his laughter, from the constant brightening of his little face, that he didn't see things only in their usual aspects, but as multiple images of other things, varying to infinity. Otherwise, there was no explaining why the wretched, monotonous scene the house offered every day could afford him such diverse, inexhaustible amusement.

The color of a rag, of a scrap of paper, suggesting to him the resonance of all prisms and scales of light, was enough to transport him to awed laughter. One of the first words he learned was *ttars* (stars). However, he also called the lightbulbs in the house ttars, and the derelict flowers Ida brought from school, the hanging clusters of onions, and later also swallows. Then when he learned the word *wallows* (swallows) he called wallows also his underpants hanging out on a line to dry. And in recognizing a new ttar (which was perhaps a fly on the wall) or a new wallow, he burst out each day in a magnificence of laughter, filled with contentment and welcome, as if he were meeting a new member of the family."

[106] *Ibid*.; "his first baby teeth, just sprouting."

novel in which she visits Ida in the hospital and says to her "Mi riconosci? Sono Elsa. Ti ricordi? Ci conoscemmo quando insegnavi a Via Portuense…"[107] This scene was later omitted and I agree with Graziella Bernabò's conclusion that if Morante had chosen to include it and identify herself as the narrator it would have been excessively restrictive, rather than representing a more universal maternal voice that unites Morante with the many mothers in her text. Such a voice does not exclude the argument of some of the many critics who interpret the narrator as an autobiographical representation of the author that the novel represents an effort on Morante's part to substitute the lack of biological maternity with a literary one.[108]

Even without identifying Morante and the narrator, the text raises the question of the compatibility of women's intellectual activity with motherhood. As Margherita Ganeri has convincingly argued, in this novel Morante demonstrates a sense of ambivalence in regards to the role of female intellectuals.[109] The narrating voice, identified as feminine, represents a position outside both the pre-intellectual state of the women and child victims in the text and the male-dominated oppressive forces of history. From this position as outsider, Morante is able to represent through her narrator the female face of history, in which maternity figures prominently as a force affirming life in the face of the death and the violence of war.[110] She demonstrates the importance of maternal storytelling, later underscored by Ruddick:

> Heroic national or political sagas often stir grand feelings in a child while leaving unarticulated the smaller, intense emotions of his own life. These and many other public stories illuminate and inspire. But no public story can substitute for the story of a child in her world. It is this story that no expert or patriot should drive underground.[111]

By entrusting her narrator with this maternal responsibility Morante differentiates her from Ida and other biological mothers in her texts, creating an intellectual mother who cares for Useppe

[107] Cited by Graziella Bernabò, *La Fiaba Estrema: Elsa Morante Tra Vita E Scrittura*, 201-202.
[108] For such an interpretation, see, for example, Anna Patrucco Becchi, "Stabat Mater: Le madri di Elsa Morante."
[109] Ganeri, "The Shadow of the Author."
[110] Ibid., 101.
[111] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 101.

through her attention to his uniqueness and her thoroughness in capturing his essence in a written form that can be shared with others, a form of nurturance clearly shown to be beyond Ida's capabilities. She thus imagines a way in which a woman can engage in both intellectual and maternal work beyond the confines of biology.

CHAPTER 3

DACIA MARAINI: REIMAGINING THE MATERNAL AND THE FAMILY

As one of Italy's leading contemporary writers, Dacia Maraini is renowned not only for her novels and short stories, spanning from the early 1960s to the present, but also as a prolific poet, playwright, film writer and critic. She is also widely recognized for her contributions to Italian feminism as both an activist and theorist, committed to her self-described role "dalla parte delle donne."[1] Her engagement in feminism has taken many forms, ranging from investigations of conditions in women's prisons in the early 1970s to the formation of the feminist theatrical association La Maddalena in 1973 to the numerous articles published in major media outlets throughout her career on women's issues such as abortion, prostitution and violence against women.[2] Maraini's interest in feminism is very clearly reflected in her literary works, most visibly in those written in the 1970s, though a focus on women's subjectivity and self-expression is central throughout her body of work. In her monograph on Maraini, Virginia Picchietti aptly

[1] "on the side of women"; See Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Ada Testaferri's introduction to *The Pleasure of Writing. Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini*, 3–20 for Maraini's use of this term.
[2] A selection of which form Maraini's *La bionda, la bruna e l'asino.*

identifies the family as the principle site in which women's identities have historically been shaped, and observes that "Although critical of traditional familial patterns as confining to both women and men, Maraini's texts afford us a look at how beneficial redefinition of the family is possible, and how this revision is instrumental in developing women's subjectivity."[3] For Maraini, as for the majority of contemporary feminist writers, the traditional patriarchal family is an oppressive space for women, particularly for the mother. A central current in her work is dedicated to redefining the dynamics of this space.

The fact that the majority of Maraini's protagonists do not fit within traditional characterizations of biological mothers has complicated critical approaches to motherhood in her novels. There has been a noticeable lack of critical attention dedicated to the mother from the mother's perspective,[4] rather than through the daughter's expectations or considerations of the mother's role in her own development, which at least partially accounts for why so many of Maraini's non-biological mother characters have been overlooked thus far. Focus on the daughter is of course in line with developments in second-wave feminism in Italy from the early 1970s through the 1990s, which witnessed the daughter's initial rejection of the mother followed by an eventual reconsideration and recuperation of this figure, in both biological and symbolic terms. As Picchietti observes of this progression, "[feminists] looked to the daughter as an agent of change for all women, for she holds the privileged position between the domestic and public spheres.[5] Maraini devotes a significant amount of attention to daughter protagonists who occupy this position and engage to varying degrees in the changing social realities for women that

[3] Picchietti, *Relational Spaces: Daughterhood, Motherhood and Sisterhood in Dacia Maraini's Writings and Films*, 14.
[4] Gabriele shares this view and while I agree with Gabriele that Picchietti's study is an exception to this tendency, unfortunately her analyses in her chapter on motherhood are devoted exclusively to portrayals of biological mothers while *affidamento* is considered as a form of sisterhood.
[5] Picchietti, *Relational Spaces*, 15.

parallel changes in feminist discourse. At the same time, however, I would argue that she is equally invested in exploring alternatives through which women can mother outside of the traditional paradigm that the majority of her protagonists reject, as well as in imagining new configurations of family that could potentially liberate women from an oppressive maternal role. This mothering takes various forms in Maraini's novels and short stories, from surrogate mothering of non-biological children to symbolic mothering within adult relationships. My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate the extent to which expanding the meaning of the maternal and potential outlets for its expression represents a fundamental part of Maraini's project to redefine the family. I will consider the nontraditional mother characters of suor Attanasia and other nuns engaged in maternal practice, Teresa of *Memorie di una ladra* and Armida of *Il treno per Helsinki,* who all participate in multiple modes of mothering and enable Maraini to problematize biological and relational distinctions central to feminist reevaluations of the role.

A consideration of the aforementioned figures in Maraini's work, most of which have received scant critical consideration, would offer a new perspective on the issue of the author's portrayal of motherhood in her works and how it relates to her engagement in feminist discourse, a subject on which there has been a lack of consensus among critics.[6] In her study of mothers in Maraini's 1994 novel *Voci*, Judith Bryce claims that "in spite of Maraini's intense and long-lasting feminist commitment, the mother is often a problematic figure in her writing and remains so in *Voci*,"[7] while Pauline Dagnino has argued that Maraini's negative portrayals of "bad" mothers are part of her feminist critique of institutionalized mothering under patriarchy, as

[6] With the exception of Gabriele's examination of suor Attantasia in "The Pregnant Nun."
[7] Bryce, "Paternal Perpetrators in Dacia Maraini," in *Crime Scenes: Detective Narratives in European Culture Since 1945,* 217.

articulated by Adrienne Rich.[8] Many critics have focused on the rejection of biological motherhood by Maraini's early protagonists[9] while others, such as Dagnino and Picchietti, have emphasized instead the value of symbolic motherhood in other texts through the feminist practice of *affidamento*. There are very few positive critical interpretations of biological mothers in Maraini's texts, with the exception of Susan Amantangelo's view of the redeeming nature of the title character's mothering in the historical novel *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*.[10] Tommasina Gabriele considers these diverse perspectives as well as the survey of Maraini's "dominated" and "dominating" mothers and concludes that it is because of, rather than in spite of, her feminist commitment that the author "gives her readers such a range of configurations of mothering".[11] Such a diversity of approaches underscores the complexity of Maraini's treatment of motherhood in her fiction. A consideration of the range of surrogate and symbolic forms of mothering the author depicts outside of the biological mother-child bond would contribute to a fuller understanding of how the mother's role must change along with transformations in the Italian family.

[8] Dagnino "*Fra Madre e Marito*: The Mother-Daughter Relationship in Dacia Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*," in *Visions and Revisions: Women in Italian Culture*.
[9] See, for example, Merry, Bruce. *Women in Modern Italian Literature.*
[10] Amantangelo, Susan. "Coming to Her Senses: The Journey of the Mother in *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*."
[11] Gabriele, "The Pregnant Nun," 66.

The 'mamma suora' and the maternal potential in female religious communities

Maraini has underscored the extent to which her interest in reclusion, which she traces to the two years she spent as an internee in a Japanese concentration camp with her family when she was a child, has influenced her intellectual investigations and writing.[12] Two of the author's early novels, *La vacanza* and *Memorie di una ladra*, are the fruit of this long-standing interest of hers. I will argue that the first of these novels contains the initial seeds of the author's exploration of the maternal potential of communities of women in convents that is re-elaborated in subsequent works, through both the nuns' role as surrogate mothers and within their relationships with each other. Women's reclusion in prisons spurred Maraini to investigate their conditions, and an interview with a female inmate inspired the author's third novel, *Memorie di una ladra*. Motherhood is a central concern in both of these novels, with a particular focus on alternatives to biological mothers who are absent, whether involuntarily or by choice. From the start of her career Maraini chooses to depict nontraditional images of the family, challenging cultural preconceptions about the conditions under which successful mothering can and should occur.

These two novels are typically categorized as bridging the gap between Maraini's first two "proto-feminist" novels and the beginning of her involvement in the feminist movement in 1968, the influence of which is reflected in the works that follow, culminating in her 1975 novel *Donna in guerra*.[13] Bruce Merry has described Anna, the protagonist of Maraini's first novel, *La vacanza*, as an early and less traumatic version of Maraini's later protagonists, who are for the most part daughters and whose rejection of the role of the mother corresponds to the motivations

[12] Dacia Maraini at New York University, Book Presentation of *Chiara di Assisi: Elogio della disobbedienza*, interview with Jane Tylus, YouTube.com, March 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaVLCqZMp6A.
[13] See, for example, Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, "Introduction," in *The Pleasure of Writing*.

behind the feminist rejection of the figure.[14] Within Italian feminist discourse the mother has been "put […] on trial for her complicity with patriarchal norms and for being the agent of their perpetuation, for holding back the daughter's process of individuation, for acting as a regulator of her sexuality, and generally for hindering her emancipation and autonomy."[15] Maraini has explicitly expressed her understanding of this problematic position of the mother in a way that demonstrates empathy toward this figure, for she has said:

> the mother is a losing character in this world, and it is therefore necessary to get close to her, to try to understand her, to try to also understand the inherent contradictions in guaranteeing the laws of the father and at the same time bringing a daughter into this world. These are contradictions because the father's rules are often against the daughter, against the daughter's freedom, and the mother finds herself lacerated by this division. This laceration causes sickness, unhappiness, self-hatred and hatred towards her daughter.[16]

Yet despite her comprehension of the bind in which the mother finds herself, Maraini surprisingly avoids expressing the mother's point of view on her position in her early works. She instead portrays protagonists such as Enrica of *L'età del malessere*, Vannina of *Donna in guerra* and Bianca of *Lettere a Marina*, who all refuse to take on the role of mother themselves, resorting to abortions when necessary in order to avoid undesired maternity. Unlike these later protagonists, the young Anna is still in need of mothering, and in her exploration of potential surrogate mothers in *La vacanza* Maraini is very much focused on the issues of how mothers navigate the opposition of the father's rule and the daughter's will as raised in feminist discourse.

Anna is in many ways similar to one of Elsa Morante's child protagonists, for like Arturo of *L'isola di Arturo* her biological mother is deceased and she is unceremoniously presented with

[14] Merry, *Women in modern Italian literature*, 195.
[15] Giorgio, *Writing mothers*, 5.
[16] Maraini's words in a 1992 interview with Virginia Picchietti, quoted by Picchietti, *Relational Spaces*, 72.

a "seconda mamma" by her father in form of his girlfriend, Nina.[17] Unlike Arturo's stepmother, however, Nina shows no interest in mothering Anna, for through her first-person perspective Anna notes that right from the start Nina is "annoiata di noi" and participates in typically motherly tasks "di malavoglia."[18] Even at the end of the holiday of the book's title, which coincides with the end of the novel itself, Nina clearly doesn't consider herself part of her boyfriend's family, refusing to be included in the family photograph he plans to have taken. Maraini challenges the assumption, expressed through Anna's father, Mumuri, that Nina would naturally or voluntarily assume the role of a "seconda mamma" and all of the duties it entails.[19] The principal maternal surrogate in the novel is rather the community of nuns that manage the collegio in which Anna and her brother have been educated in the eleven years since their mother's death, the summer break from which constitutes the action of the novel.

In his well-known introduction to *La vacanza,* Alberto Moravia characterizes Maraini as a realist writer, as one who loves reality for what it is rather than what it should be, which is evident in the objectivity of Anna's first-person narrative voice.[20] Anna's lack of subjectivity is striking in a novel about an adolescent navigating the arduous transition into adulthood that omits all of the protagonist's feelings regarding the key events and facts of her life, such as losing her mother at a young age, being raised by nuns rather than her father and being abruptly removed from her boarding school to spend a summer with her father and a new stepmother

[17] "second mama"; *La vacanza,* 20. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of *La vacanza* are from *The Holiday: A Novel*. Trans. Stuart Hood (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966). This scene is quite similar to Arturo's sudden introduction to his "nuova madre", Nunziata, in *Isola di Arturo,* 73.
[18] "fed up with us"; "reluctantly"; *La vacanza,* 23-4. Interestingly, however, Nina demonstrates increasingly maternal behavior towards Anna's brother Giovanni, perhaps because he is a few years younger or because of the gender difference.
[19] See chapter 1 of this dissertation for a discussion of motherhood as a "natural" role for women.
[20] Moravia writes in his introduction to *La vacanza*, 12: "Dunque tu sei soprattutto una scrittrice realista. Cosa intendo per realista? Intendo lo scrittore che ama la realtà per quello che è e non per quello che dovrebbe essere, cioè soltanto e appunto perché è realtà; e che non si ritrae di fronte ad alcun aspetto per quanto imprevisto di questa realtà.

figure. As Maria Grazia Sumeli Weinberg observes in her analysis of the novel, Anna's gaze is cinematic in its external focus and faithful recording of all that she sees and hears in the historic and social reality in which she finds herself.[21] The periodic flashbacks in which Anna recounts memories or aspects of her experience at school represent the only interruptions in the otherwise linear chronology of the narration, yet they maintain the objective and external focus that characterizes the more immediate events of the novel. These flashbacks are significant to the focus on mothering in the novel, for they serve to incorporate the nuns' fulfillment of their caretaking role toward the children under their tutelage into the reality Anna describes, a reality that takes center stage in a text in which the subjectivity and psychological development of the protagonist are entirely absent. *La vacanza* thus signals not only the incipiency of Maraini's exploration of non-biological motherhood, but also of convents as spaces imbued with maternal potential.

In various works Maraini reflects on the contradictory nature of convents, for she alternately focuses on the mothering functions nuns undertake in society as opposed to women's historical possibility of escaping the destiny of marriage and motherhood by choosing the veil. Maraini has written both theatrical and prose works based on the lives of exceptional women who have chosen to enter convents in order to avoid inevitable marriages at a young age and the expectation of bearing a child on a yearly basis, a dangerous prospect given the rates of deaths during childbirth.[22] Maraini's 1980 play *Sor Juana* and her most recent book, *Chiara di Assisi: Elogio della disobbedienza* are two such works that describe the lives of extraordinary women who unlike many of their peers were able to dedicate their time to intellectual pursuits because of their freedom from the typical demands on married family women. In the latter of these works

[21] Sumeli Weinberg, *Invito alla lettura di Dacia Maraini*, 40.
[22] Maraini discusses these risks in various passages framed within her position as author in *Chiara di Assisi*, for example, 89, 106 and 110.

Maraini underscores, however, the question of Chiara's and her peers' literacy and the known fact of their greater dedication to menial tasks, as opposed to intellectual work.

At the time of Maraini's early writing career nuns in Italy were for the most part engaged in the kinds of work represented in *La vacanza* and *Memorie di una ladra* — educating children and tending to the ill and incarcerated. A feminist study of Italian nuns in the early 1970s explicitly characterizes this work of theirs as an extension of the maternal role.[23] Even their more intellectual work, which consisted of teaching children (for the most part girls) was limited by the relative lack of education completed by the women before becoming nuns.[24] Thus, nuns have long been engaged in the kind of "maternal" work that Maraini explores in *La vacanza,* and I would argue that she aligns this kind of work in the novel with the typical expectations for the mother in a traditional Italian family in order to demonstrate the need to rethink the way women mother under patriarchy. Maraini herself spent three years at the Collegio Santissima Annunziata in Florence and in her work on Clare of Assisi she links this experience to her interest in the convent as a "luogo di collegialità e di pensieri celati, come luogo di ubbidienza ma anche di una profonda e arcana libertà."[25] The author is aware of the extent to which autonomy in a religious order is predicated upon subordination to the church,[26] and she enacts this tension in her consideration of the way nuns mother in her works.

In order to examine the ways in which the nuns in *La vacanza* engage in maternal work, I will refer to Sara Ruddick's framework that identifies preservation, *g*rowth and social acceptability, which entail a mother's commitment to preservative love, nurturance and training

[23] Bernardi et al., *Casalinga di Cristo*, 9. "prolungamento del ruolo materno."

[24] Ibid., 19. In 1974, 40% of nuns in Italy had received no more than an elementary school education and only 3.7% had obtained a college degree.

[25] "space of collegiality and of hidden thoughts, as a space of obedience but also of a profound and arcane freedom."; Translation mine. *Chiara di Assisi: Elogio della disobbedienza*, 124.

[26] Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna,* 180.

as the essential components of maternal work.[27] I believe that Maraini is particularly interested in the first of these, in the protection that children "demand" as a requisite of their preservation, for she emphasizes the protection inherent in mothering throughout her works. In this novel she directly introduces the questions of whether and how much protection is beneficial to a 14-year-old girl like Anna. As Ruddick has observed, "To be committed to meeting children's demand for preservation does not require enthusiasm or even love; it simply means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care rather than abuse, indifference, or flight."[28] Maraini portrays the nuns as the only figures in the novel who respond to Anna's vulnerability with care, as opposed to her father's and Nina's indifference or the abuse of Scanno and other male figures. Maraini explicitly emphasizes Anna's tender age and vulnerability through a comparison between Anna and the daughter of Scanno, the older man who takes advantage of Anna's passivity and sexually abuses her. When Scanno complains Anna's curiosity is as annoying as his daughter's, his cousin observes, "– L'hai detto: è una bambina; tale e quale tua figlia. Solo che tua figlia è tenuta d'occhio dalla governante tedesca, mentre lei è sola."[29] Maraini reiterates this need for protection when she reflects back on the novel in a 1999 interview and describes her earliest protagonist as a young girl "che si affacia al mondo, cerca l'accudimento e invece trova il rifiuto, la manipolazione."[30] The nuns' protection is symbolized at the start of the novel through the description of the gate of the *collegio*, "quel portone alto cinque metri" that Anna and her brother leave behind for the summer.[31] Maraini, however, problematizes the protectiveness of the nuns by juxtaposing it with Anna's flashbacks to the oppressiveness she felt while enclosed within the

[27] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking,* 17. For a more in-depth discussion of Ruddick's framework, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
[28] Ibid., 19.
[29] *La vacanza,* 50-1; "'You're right, she's a little girl, just like your daughter. Only your daughter is under the eye of her German nanny, whereas she is alone.'"
[30] Cesare Severino, "La cipolla era un sogno celeste. Intervista con Dacia Maraini" in *Dedica a Dacia Maraini*, 33; "who ventures into the world, seeking care and instead finding rejection and manipulation." Translation mine.
[31] Ibid., 16; "that gate five meters high"; Translation mine.

school's walls and the sense of freedom she finally experiences during her summer holiday, "la libertà che avevo atteso tanti anni chiusa fra le mura del collegio."[32]

In both their efforts at preservation and at training a new generation of children, the nuns take great pains to prohibit everything, particularly the budding sexuality of their female pupils. The students are told not to ask about "imbarazzanti" topics in an environment in which "Quasi tutti gli argomenti erano proibiti"[33], and variations of the refrain "Ogni cosa era peccato" pepper Anna's memories of life at her boarding school.[34] Maraini has frequently written and spoken about the extent to which the influence of the Catholic Church has shaped the lives of Italians for centuries, an influence so strong that it affects even non-believers, particularly concerning the ideas young women develop regarding their bodies and sexuality. Maraini, for example, writes that she pondered during a nighttime reflection on the topic of abortion,

> [la] dolorosa questione dei rapporti che le donne hanno sempre intrattenuto con chi si è inventato controllore e guida del loro corpo, delle loro teste. Ho visto, nel mio dormiveglia, una sfilata in puro stile felliniano, di uomini di Chiesa dal passo elegante con mitrie d'oro sul capo, anelli luccicanti alle dita, intenti a impartire lezioni di comportamento alle ragazze nelle chiese, nelle scuole.[35]

This Fellini-like parade continues with men of science, doctors and fathers, all of the men who have historically tried to suppress female sexuality and whose values have been perpetuated by mothers. The nuns responsible for Anna's care and education are fulfilling that culturally-determined maternal role which is heightened by their position from within the structure of the

[32] "the liberty I had been waiting for all these years shut up between the walls of a boarding school"; Ibid., 46.
[33] "embarassing"; "Almost all topics were forbidden"; Ibid., 154.
[34] "Everything was a sin"; Ibid., 71 (a variation of which appears on 181).
[35] "the painful matter of the relationship women have always had with those who appointed themselves controllers and overseers of their bodies, of their minds. I saw, in my half-wakeful state, a typically Fellini-like parade: churchmen walking elegantly by with gold mitres on their heads, shining rings on their fingers, intent upon giving lessons in behavior to young women in churches, in schools." Dacia Maraini, *Un clandestino a bordo*, 21. English translation is from *Stowaway On Board*. Trans. Giovanna Bellesia & Victoria Offredi Poletto (West Lafayette, IN: Bordighera Press, 2000).

Church. Maraini highlights through their example the inevitable result: young women uncomfortable with and unknowledgeable about their bodies.

Thus Maraini shows the nuns of *La vacanza* to be fulfilling the maternal role as prescribed by patriarchal Italian society, and even the ways in which they nurture the children under their care are shown to be clichéd and free from attention to the particularity of each individual child. Anna recalls that the nuns repeat the kinds of clichéd warnings and advice that mothers are known for, such as admonishing Anna and her brother, "Attenti ai colpi di freddo" as they depart for their summer holiday. [36] She similarly recalls that a cup of warm milk and a slice of bread and jam were the nuns' only remedy for a child's tears, regardless of the cause.[37]

At the end of the novel Maraini explicitly raises the question of biology in pointing to the split between birthing and raising children through the voices of the nuns who often talk of "madri snaturate" and who Anna recalls saying, "le madri non pensano mai ai figli. Fan presto a gonfiarsi la pancia […] ma i figli, guarda come li tengono."[38] Maraini interestingly locates the potential for subverting cultural expectations of mothering within the figure of the biological mother who can choose to refuse to conform to the model of the "naturally" selfless mother devoted to her offspring. The nuns, on the other hand, in their position between the laws of the father (represented in the novel by their financial dependence on fathers like Mumuri paying tuition) and the freedom of the daughter, clearly take the path of least resistance and perpetuate paternal rules. In later reconsiderations of maternity Maraini instead shifts the subversive

[36] *La vacanza*, 15; "Watch that you don't catch a cold."
[37] Ibid., 154. "Quando eravamo tristi, le suore ci consigliavano con il cibo. Ci mettevano tra le mani una tazza di latte bollente. – È solo un po' di raffreddore – dicevano, e se una piangeva le preparavano una fetta di pane con la marmellata di fichi."
[38] Ibid., 192; "unnatural mothers"; "They soon get a big belly […] but their children – just see how they look after them."

potential from biological mothers to the nuns while reimagining what motherhood can mean within communities of religious women.

In Maraini's 1999 collection of short stories, *Buio*, the darkness of the title is reflected in the abuse, neglect and violence that characterize the stories. Published over thirty-five years after *La vacanza*, following the years of Maraini's sustained involvement with the Italian feminist movement, the author returns her attention to exposing the abuse still being inflicted on women, children and other vulnerable groups in society. In "Le galline di suor Attanasia", the nun of the title remains pregnant after an attack on her convent, during which she is raped by one of the Muslim attackers and many of her fellow nuns are brutally murdered. Through the unconventional figure of a pregnant nun, Maraini is able to juxtapose Attanasia's biological and non-biological maternity, as well as the mothering she receives from her religious sisters. This shift toward symbolic mothering among adult women will be more fully explored in the following section of this chapter, but its manifestation in female cloistered communities as represented in "Le galline di suor Attanasia" and Maraini's *Chiara di Assisi: Elogio della disobbedienza* represents a continuation of Maraini's interest in the maternal potential of these religious women that spans her entire career.

By choosing suor Attanasia's chickens as the title characters of the story, rather than the nun herself or her biological daughter, I believe Maraini aims to establish from the outset of the story the centrality of the mothering that suor Attanasia and others participate in beyond biological relationships. Maraini mirrors details of suor Attanasia's biological mothering in her care of her chickens so as to suggest a parallel relationship, likening the nun's "dialogo affettuoso" with the child in her womb to her "ore di conversazione e canzone" with the chickens

that not only calms them but also encourages them to lay eggs.[39] As the pregnant nun imagines the fetus growing inside her, Maraini goes so far as to draw a physical comparison between the sister's biological and symbolic animal children, as the nun tells her unborn daughter she loves every part of her, down to her "collo minuto da gallina."[40]

In her study of the concept of "arrested maternity" in Maraini's work,[41] Tommasina Gabriele observes that suor Attanasia's pregnancy progresses within a "nurturing maternal religious order" and the nun's pregnancy blends into her "nurturing existence" of performing daily tasks ranging from office work to cooking to gardening.[42] Coexisting with suor Attanasia's various forms of mothering is her fellow nuns' mothering of her. In particular, the mother superior Madre Orsola, whose name carries connotations of a protective mother bear,[43] takes great pains to protect suor Attanasia and her secret, going so far as to build higher walls around the garden so that the young nun can continue her labors in safe seclusion. There is even the sense that Suor Attanasia's unborn child is the product of this entire maternal community, for she tells her daughter in her womb that she will be praised as "il frutto prezioso del convento delle suore della Carità in Cristo!"[44] As long as Madre Orsola preserves the seclusion of her female community from male religious authority, Suor Attanasia's pregnancy can progress within the maternal harmony of the convent.

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[39] "Suor Attanasia," 46; "hours of conversation and songs." Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the story are from *Darkness: Fiction*. Trans. Martha King (South Royalton, Vt.: Steerforth Italia, 2002).
[40] Ibid., 44; "little chicken neck."
[41] In "The Pregnant Nun: Suor Attanasia and the Metaphor of Arrested Maternity in Dacia Maraini," Gabriele focuses on the motif of "arrested maternity", a term she uses to describe the repeated instances in Maraini's work of pregnancies that do not reach term (whether due to voluntary or forced abortions as depicted in *Donna in guerra* and *Isolina, la donna tagliata a pezzi* or stillbirth in the case of Armida of *Il treno per Helsinki*). She argues that this paradigm is representative of the poor conditions for positive mothering in Maraini's work, and she identifies Suor Attanasia as the ultimate metaphor for arrested maternity, for though her maternity is desired and her pregnancy reaches term, it is unsuccessful because it is prohibited by the Church.
[42] Gabriele, "The Pregnant Nun," 72-3.
[43] The name derives from the word *orsa*, meaning female bear.
[44] Ibid., 44; "the most precious fruit of the Sisters of Charity in Christ convent!"

Ultimately, however, Madre Orsola disrupts that seclusion by contacting the fathers of the church to ask what should be done about the pregnant nun's situation. In a telling exchange between Madre Orsola and the younger and more "combattiva" suor Giuditta the latter attempts to encourage her superior to break away from the patriarchal authority of the church and to follow their own hearts and minds in the matter. To Madre Orsola's resolution to ask the bishop for advice suor Giuditta objects, "Neanche fossimo ai tempi della monaca di Monza!"[45], which echoes the dismay that Maraini herself has voiced time and again regarding the lack of female authority and power in the hierarchy of the church.[46]

Maraini's longstanding interest in the dynamics of the maternal and power within communities of women is reiterated in her latest work on Clare of Assisi, in which the author turns to the Church's past in search of a role model for young women today. In documenting Clare's exceptional life, Maraini emphasizes the saint's lifelong resistance to male authority. In this text the third-person omniscient narrator that allowed for the expression of multiple viewpoints on Suor Attanasia's pregnancy is here replaced by the direct inclusion of Maraini's voice as author in this structurally hybrid work. In the narrative frame of the text, the author shows herself to be inspired by an email from a reader to investigate in detail the life of Saint Clare, and the narrative that follows contains a mix of fiction, biography and socio-historical analysis that utilizes texts from the period of the saint's life to aid the author in reconstructing her life story. Maraini intertwines her own opinions as well as memories and autobiographical comparisons in order to coax from the shadows of Saint Francis of Assisi the story of Saint Clare, an exemplary and courageous proponent of women's equality. In this work, Maraini uses her authorial voice to resurrect from the past a paradigm of mothering amongst women in a

[45] Ibid., 42; "We're not living in the seventeenth century!"
[46] Dacia Maraini at New York University, Book Presentation of *Chiara di Assisi: Elogio della disobbedienza*, interview with Jane Tylus, YouTube.com, March 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaVLCqZMp6A.

religious community that defies subordination to a male-dominated, hierarchical religious structure.

Maraini repeatedly marvels at Clare's insistence, as reported by her religious sisters and in her struggle to gain approval for her monastic Rule of Life, on a lack of hierarchy within her order. As abbess, she led by example rather than controlling through authority, pleading with rebellious sisters instead of commanding them. Maraini describes Clare as "come una sorella più matura e materna che cerca prima di tutto di proteggere la sorella minore,"[47] emphasizing the fluidity of her sisterly and maternal roles. The convent, in fact, becomes "una comunità solidale e affettuosa, […] più famiglia che collegio, più focolare che convitto."[48] Maraini reminds us again of mothers' historical role as "Fedeli esecutrici del volere patriarcale, spesso aguzzine delle loro figlie" and argues that Clare served as a forerunner in defending women's rights, enacting a sort of "disubbidienza legittima" based on her belief of the equality of all men and women as preceding church law.[49] As abbess, Clare took a different approach than the fictional Madre Orsola, for according to Maraini during the many years in which she fought for the ratification of her monastic Rule she led as she saw fit rather than conceding to the authorization of church leaders.

Maraini focuses on Clare's relationship with Saint Francis of Assisi, of whom she was a devoted follower, in order to imagine an alternative to the traditional power dynamics between men and women of the Church. Maraini relates a dream Clare herself had described in which she nurses at Saint Francis' breast, leading Maraini to the conclusion "Si può ipotizzare che per

[47] *Chiara di Assisi*, 190; "as a more mature and maternal sister who seeks above all to protect her younger sister." All English translations of this work are mine.
[48] Ibid., 215; "asupportive and affectionate community […] more of a family and a hearth than a boarding school."
[49] Ibid., 102; "Faithful perpetrators of patriarchal will, often acting as their daughters' jailers."; "legitimate disobedience."

la giovane e fedele amica, Francesco fosse anche un poco madre."[50] Though less explicitly maternal, the resident priest in Suor Attanasia's convent similarly refrains from imposing his authority over the nuns with whom he resides. He finds unproblematic Suor Attanasia's status as "la futura mamma suora"[51] and is shown to desire equality and inclusion in the sisterhood of the convent, refusing the hierarchical arrangement of being served by his sister nuns. Maraini thus emphasizes alternative scenarios to the historical exercising of male authority within the Church in which the maternal can flourish within religious communities.

It is ultimately Madre Orsola's choice to submit to male authority that brings an effective end to the maternal environment and all forms of mothering within the convent: suor Attanasia's daughter is forcibly removed to an orphanage and the nun dies shortly thereafter, while Madre Orsola is no longer allowed to mother the nuns under her charge as she previously did, for she is now "costretta a diventare più severa e guardinga."[52] The church's preoccupation with the virginity of its brides of Christ cannot allow biological maternity to coexist with this religious vocation.[53] The fluidity of the maternal as represented by suor Attanasia and her ability to simultaneously mother and be mothered in different ways seems to be possible in Maraini's mind only from a position that is free from the influence of patriarchal rule. For Maraini the convent represents a space in which women could potentially be free from such rule, and through the nuns in both *La vacanza* and "Le galline di suor Attanasia" Maraini is able to explore the extent to which these religious women adhere to cultural preconceptions on how to mother and also

[50] "One can hypothesize that for his young and faithful friend Francis was also something of a mother." Ibid., 120. Maraini returns to this idea of a maternal man by focusing on the similarities to a dream of another religious woman, Perpetua, 146.
[51] "the future mamma-sister"; "Suor Attanasia", 49.
[52] "forced to become more severe and watchful."; Ibid., 53.
[53] Maraini directly discusses Church fathers' 'obsession' with virginity in *Chiara d'Assisi*, 109.

imagine, even if only briefly, an alternative space in which mothering could freely take place without this external influence.

The relational nature of mothering within nontraditional families

Before moving from Suor Attanasia's maternity to a consideration of some of Maraini's other literary mothers, it is important to note that the nun's death in the story raises significant questions regarding the biological and relational components of motherhood. After her daughter is taken away, the nun appears to return to her earlier maternal existence prior to her baby's birth, tending to her chickens, singing to them and telling them about her baby girl. In the final paragraph of the story, however, Maraini abruptly informs the reader that Suor Attanasia's body was found dead on a stone inside the chicken pen, suggesting, as Gabriele has argued, that she dies from a broken heart "locked in her maternity."[54] Such a conclusion highlights the relational aspect of motherhood, the extent to which suor Attanasia's identity becomes predicated on the presence of a biological child. In her study of literary representations of the complex and ambivalent figure of the 'mother without child,' Elaine Hansen problematizes precisely this relational aspect of Western definitions of motherhood which necessitate the presence of and interaction with a child.[55] She argues that when the relational aspect is somehow disrupted the nature of motherhood is put into question. Hansen includes within the 'mother without child' rubric mothers who have had their children taken from them, as in the case of suor Attanasia, as well as mothers like Teresa of *Memorie di una ladra who* are prisoners or who abandon their

[54] Gabriele, "The Pregnant Nun", 75
[55] Hansen, *Mother Without Child*, 1-15.

children and thus are historically considered "bad" mothers, and women like Armida of *Il treno per Helsinki* who never give birth due to abortions or miscarriages. *In the case of* suor Attanasia, the thwarting of the relational aspect of biological motherhood results in a crisis of maternal identity and, ultimately, the death of the mother. Through Teresa and Armida, Maraini further explores the relational nature of maternity as it relates to the agency of the mother and her choices regarding mothering within and outside of traditional family paradigms.

In her study of the ways in which Italian women writers have used traditional genres to tell stories unique to their positions living and writing in a particular place and time, Carol Lazzaro-Weis analyzes Maraini's appropriation of the picaresque, romance and the historical novel. In the case of Memorie di una ladra Maraini makes use of elements of the picaresque to depict her protagonist's position from outside of Italian society, though she also demonstrates that Teresa conforms to some extent to society's values. Lazzaro-Weis notes that while "Like the traditional picaro, Teresa prefers estrangement and roguery to any traditionally prescribed female role" ultimately her ability to avoid that predetermined role, "depends on her limited ability to manipulate the patriarchal institution."[56] I believe that the most significant way in which Maraini shows Teresa to occupy a precarious position between conforming to and rebelling against society is in her relationship to the traditional structure of the family. Through Teresa Maraini creates a complicated portrait of a woman who, rather than being simply a "bad" mother who relinquishes custody of her son, circumvents the expectations of others in order dedicate herself to maternal work in a manner of her choosing. Though Teresa is by no means a model of what increased freedom in mothering could or should look like, Maraini's depiction of such a subversive figure enables her to problematize society's assumptions about mothering.

[56] Lazzaro-Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream*, 71-3.

The fact that the novel begins with Teresa's recounting her mother's many childbirths serves as an immediate signal of the centrality of motherhood in this novel, which, though based on Maraini's interviews with Teresa Numa, whom the author met during her prison investigations in 1969, is nevertheless a work of fiction that the author rewrote three times before it was published. The work crosses boundaries of genre, as it is a novel that encompasses elements of its origins as the fruit of a socio-anthropological investigation, evidence of which can be found in the emphasis on exposing the poor conditions and treatment of women in social institutions such as prisons and hospitals. The choice of the first-person point of view creates the semblance of autobiography, an effect reinforced by Maraini's efforts to reproduce Teresa's linguistic register as she recounts the events of her life in an immediate and unsentimental narrative style.[57] Yet rather than a passive and faithful transcription of her notes and recorded interviews with the real-life thief on whom her protagonist is based, Maraini chose to "entrare nel mondo di Teresa, metterci qualcosa di mio e farne un tutto unico."[58] In her role as author Maraini took great care in the structuring of Teresa's stories into a cohesive narrative, and there is thus significance in deliberate choices such as beginning the novel by locating Teresa within the history of generations of mothers as a preface to her unique approach to her own maternity.[59]

Maraini's description of Teresa's mother's childbirths highlights many of the historic realities of women giving birth contemporaneously with Teresa's mother, such as the first occurring at the tender age of fifteen, the child mortality rate as represented her mother's having

[57] Dacia Maraini discusses this in an interview collected by Lietta Tornabuoni that appears at the start of the 1984 Bombiani second edition of *Memorie di una ladra*, VIII. The author found Teresa's narrative style to be quite similar to her own.
[58] Ibid., IX; "enter in Teresa's world, contribute to it something of my own and make of it something unique;" Translation mine.
[59] Maraini remarks that one of her greatest challenges in her collaboration with Teresa was the latter's lack of temporal awareness; the creation of a sense of chronology can thus be attributed largely to Maraini as author. Ibid., VII.

"già fatto parecchi figli, alcuni vivi, altri morti" and Teresa's own perilous birth.[60] The novel concludes, however with a much less traditional picture of family life, as Teresa imagines creating a home with her boyfriend and a child that is not biologically hers, and Maraini constructs a decreasingly restrictive fictional representation of Teresa's own relationship to motherhood in the action between these radically different maternal images.

Maraini prefaces Teresa's becoming pregnant with the character's perspective on her relationship with her own mother, a figure reminiscent of the oppressed mothers in works such as *L'età del malessere* whose fate their daughters take care to avoid. Teresa's mother dies as a result of her fear of her tyrannical husband, which leads her to hurry home to prepare his lunch rather than taking the time to change out of her rain-soaked clothes, resulting in a fatal case of pneumonia. Teresa claims "Quando è morta mia madre io non ho sofferto per niente." and she later emphasizes the annoyance she felt by the inconvenience caused by her mother's death: "Sono rimasta male quando ho visto che era morta. Ma non sentivo niente. Io ancora non avevo il sentimento. Ho pensato che oltre i panni ora mi sarebbe toccato pure fare la cucina. E così è stato."[61] When Teresa becomes pregnant with her boyfriend Sisto's child she is shown to risk taking on a similarly confining traditional role, for she claims to have so much housework that it is a wonder she didn't have a miscarriage and yet she is nevertheless interested in marrying the father of her child. Teresa is completely ignorant about childbirth and her labor and delivery are described passively, as if becoming a mother were something that happened to her without the necessity of her participation.

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[60] *Memorie di una ladra*, 5; "already had several children; some were living, some dead." Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of *Memorie di una ladra* are from *Memoirs of a Female Thief*. Trans. Nina Rootes (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1973).

[61] Ibid., 15-16; "When my mother died, I didn't grieve for her at all."; "I was disconcerted when I realized she was dead, but I felt no sorrow. I was still without any feeling. My only thought was that now I would have to do the cooking as well as the washing. And I was right."

Once her son is born Teresa initially seems to embrace her maternal responsibilities, but Maraini's careful word choice in describing the scenes between Teresa and her baby reveal a sense of the character's detachment from her infant son. The baby is never called by his name, Maceo, in these passages, and he is instead referred to most commonly by Teresa and others simply as "il pupo," with the absence of a possessive adjective suggesting a lack of emotional attachment.[62] Breastfeeding becomes just another one of Teresa's daily chores, and though Teresa observes that her husband and his family become very fond of the child, her own feelings are never expressed, and she explicitly states at one point that the child is neglected to some degree, for "nessuno se ne curava. Per fortuna era buono. Non piangeva mai."[63] Thus Teresa is shown to barely meet her child's physical needs but seems ill-disposed to establish an emotional connection with him. Motherhood for her means duty and it is significant that Maraini depicts her entrustment of the child to her sisters-in-law as a choice rather than a consequence of one of her many forced incarcerations.

In order to free herself to visit Sisto during his military posting in Sicily Teresa's choice to leave Maceo with her sister-in-law Ines is expressed in very succinct terms: "Dico: lascio il bambino a Ines e me ne vado in Sicilia a fare quattro bagni."[64] Though intended as a temporary reprieve from her maternal responsibilities, Teresa only briefly regains custody of her son before returning him to his aunts, allegedly just until she is able to find work, and she never takes care of him again throughout the remainder of the novel. Other than two failed attempts to visit him when Teresa impulsively thinks of him, Maceo is barely mentioned throughout the bulk of the text. From a relational standpoint, Teresa ceases to engage in the work that would define her as a

[62] an informal noun synonymous with 'child'.
[63] Ibid., 31; "Nobody took care of him, but luckily he was good and never cried."
[64] Ibid., 46; "I thought to myself: I'll leave the baby with Ines and go down to Sicily for a bit of sun and sea."

mother when she voluntarily relinquishes custody of her son, and Maraini interestingly complicates the question of defining Teresa as a biological mother as well.

At a certain point in Teresa's story having more children ceases to be an option for her, for she is left sterile after a procedure to treat her peritonitis, though she does not clearly understand how: "m'hanno freddato il peritoneo, che per fortuna si è calmato. Col peritoneo, però, mi hanno freddato anche le ovaie, non so acciocché mi hanno impedito poi di avere figli. Infatti da allora sono diventata sterile."[65] This description of Teresa's loss of fertility underscores once again her lack of knowledge of what happens to her body and places the blame on the medical staff performing her procedure, since they *prevented* her from having any more children. Teresa alternately sees this loss as a curse and a blessing throughout the rest of the novel. At one point she says she would love to have a child with her boyfriend Ercoletto, but Maraini's description of this claim hints at a sense of Teresa'a ambivalence, as she privileges her partner's desires over her own when she claims, "[Ad Ercoletto] sarebbe piaciuto fare un figlio con me. Io pure, ma per via di quell'infiammazione, di quella peritonite che m'hanno raffreddato le ovaie, non posso più fare figli. Lui sarebbe morto per fare un figlio con me."[66] During her final incarceration, after witnessing the near death of a fellow inmate following a self-performed abortion, Teresa frames her sterility as a saving grace when she exclaims, "Meno male che ho le ovaie infreddate io, non c'è pericolo che rimango incinta."[67] Teresa's lack of control over her body and reproduction reflects the intense feminists fight in this period for the legalization of

[65] Ibid., 156; "fortunately the freezing calmed my peritoneum and made it better. When they froze it, however, they froze the ovaries as well, or something, so now I can't have children. From that time on I was sterile."
[66] Ibid., 197; "He would have loved to have a child by me. I would have loved it, too, but because of that inflammation, that peritonitis, when they froze my ovaries, I can't have any more babies. He would give his life to have a child by me."
[67] Ibid., 296; "Thank the Lord my ovaries are frozen, there's no danger of my getting pregnant."

abortion and other measures to endow women with greater rights in determining their biological maternity.

Though Teresa's interest in mothering her biological son is inconsistent throughout her story and her desire to have more children seems unenthusiastic, her affection for and dedication to acting as a surrogate mother for her nephew Orlandino are conversely presented as sincere and unwavering. I agree with Tommasina Gabriele that "For Mariani, the first, though not sole, condition for a successful maternal experience, is that a woman must desire maternity."[68] I would argue that Maraini shows Teresa to desire a different kind of maternity in this novel, a relationship with a child of her choice, rather than perpetuating the kind of relationship with a child as an unwanted burden that has tied women down for generations, including Teresa's own mother. Unlike the descriptions of Teresa's detached mothering of her biological son earlier in the novel, the protagonist's mothering of Orlandino underscores her maternal agency. She directly explains her choice by stating, "In quel periodo Orlando è andato un'altra volta dentro, e io ho preso in casa il figlio suo più piccolo, Orlandino. A questo bambino mi ci sono affezionata, non lo posso lasciare alla madre perché quella lo mette in collegio."[69] Thus Teresa voluntarily embraces the work of mothering Orlandino just as Ines had previously expressed her willingness to mother Maceo.[70] The other potential surrogate mothers in the text, the nuns, are significantly viewed as an unacceptable option in Teresa's mind, her distrust of the nuns as caretakers likely deriving from her own experience with their leadership during her incarcerations. Such a view reflects the one Maraini herself formed during her investigations of

[68] Gabriele, "The Pregnant Nun," 70.
[69] Ibid., 259; "It was during this period that Orlando went inside again and I took his youngest son, Orlandino, to live with me. I am very fond of this child, I don't want the mother to have him or she'll send him away to boarding-school."
[70] Ibid., 46; "She sent the message through a third party saying: 'Ines è contentissima di ospitare Maceo, dice di mandarlo subito e ci pensa lei a dargli da mangiare e pure l'istruzione.'"

women's prisons in the late 1960s, when she observed the "violenza culturale" in which the nuns participated there in their attempts to transform the incarcerated women into model housewives:

> Le suore tendono a rieducare più che a punire, ma impongono alle donne di conformarsi ad un modello preciso, fortissimo, vedono le carcerate come povere incoscienti, bambine senza personalità, minori traviate che vanno educate a diventare buone mogli e buoni madri alla maniera cattolica.[71]

This ideological domination is comparable to the impersonal and oppressively prohibitive training perpetuated by the nuns of Anna's boarding school in *La vacanza*.

Unlike her own infant son, whom she described as rarely crying and requiring little care, at three months of age Orlandino "Era già terribile", but despite his being a challenging child, Maraini underscores the mutual affection, joy and tenderness between Teresa and her son by choice:

> Gli ho comprato il biberon, i vestiti nuovi. E me lo sono tenuto. Era cattivo, è ancora cattivo, ma si è affezionato a me, moltissimo. Dormiamo insieme, io abbracciata a lui e lui rannicchiato sul mio petto.
>
> La mattina quando si alza, mi bacia la faccia, mi dice: svegliati che è tardi! smuoviti culacciona! scendi dal letto figlio di puttana. Mi mette allegria.[72]

Clearly not all mothers would appreciate being called "culacciona" or "figlio di puttana", but to Teresa they appear to be interpreted as terms of endearment, contributing to the sense of her being the person best-suited to mothering this particular child. The above description continues with details of Teresa's patient care in potty training Orlandino, and includes his calling her "mamma", reinforcing the sense of their mutual recognition of their mother-son bond. Unlike in the case with Maceo, in which Teresa is shown to think of her son only in rare moments,

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[71] Dacia Maraini, in an interview collected by Lietta Tornabuoni that appears at the start of the 1984 Bombiani second edition of *Memorie di una ladra*; "cultural violence" (which Maraini contrasts with the physical violence that dominates male prisons); "The nuns tend to re-educate rather than punish, but they force women to conform to a precise, powerful model; they see the inmates as poor, unknowing girls with no distinct personalities, corrupted minors in need of being educated to become good wives and mothers in the Catholic tradition." Translation mine.

[72] *Memorie di una ladra*, 259-260; "already he was a holy terror"; "I bought him a feeding-bottle and some new clothes and I kept him at my place. He was naughty, he's naughty still, but he's become very affectionate with me. We sleep together, I put my arms around him and he nestles against my breast. In the morning when he wakes up, he kisses my face and says, 'Wake up, it's late! Move your great fat arse! Get up you lazy slut!' He makes me laugh."

Orlandino is constantly in her thoughts when they are separated by her subsequent incarcerations, and as previously noted the novel ends with Teresa's desire to create a home with her boyfriend Ercoletto and Orlandino and avoid future criminal activity and incarceration.

Of course, Teresa has been presented as an unreliable narrator throughout the novel, in keeping with the history of the picaresque genre's derivation from criminal confessions, or in other words, to use Claudio Guillen's definition, "the confessions of a liar."[73] The reader is therefore justified if suspicious of Teresa's resolve to remain on the straight and narrow and avoid returning to a life of crime, but the veracity of her desire to take care of Orlandino is supported by the consistency of her commitment to him in the novel. Thus, in Maraini's early novels, motherhood is most successful when it follows a conscious choice on the part of the mother in response to a particular child, whether biological or not.

While Maraini's early works explore the mothering of children within and beyond traditional family structures, beginning with her 1975 novel *Donna in guerra* there is a shift in her focus toward reimagining the maternal within networks of adult friendships.[74] As Virginia Picchietti has observed of Maraini's works,

> Friendships do not represent constrictive parallels of family relationships, but rather are developed through redirecting family bonds, sometimes even filtering out the power dynamics defining familial relationships, and endowing the friendships with the most promisingly beneficial aspects of relationships.[75]

This idea of reworking family bonds through friendships, particularly those among women, has been explored by various critics of Maraini's work, with a great amount of attention dedicated to the benefits Vannina derives from relationships that can be characterized as versions of the

[73] Claudio Guillen quoted by Lazzaro-Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream*, 71.
[74] Including, of course, the communities of nuns discussed in the previous section of this chapter.
[75] Picchietti, "Symbolic Mediation and Female Community in Dacia Maraini's Fiction," *The Pleasure of Writing*, 103-4.

feminist practice of *affidamento* in the novel.[76] These readings, however, place their emphasis on the beneficial aspects of friendships for the woman fulfilling the daughterly role. Though I will consider in the next chapter the centrality of storytelling in the maternal relationship that two of the village women, Tota and Giottina, form toward Vannina in the novel, I show in what follows that Maraini's most mother-centric depiction of the reworking of familial ties through friendships is to be found in the protagonist Armida's diverse modes of mothering in *Il treno per Helsinki*. By juxtaposing various constructions of family, from the traditional model of the heterosexual nuclear family to a more fluid familial network of friends, Maraini challenges the continued validity of the patriarchal definition of family. At the same time, she anticipates key issues of the ongoing debate on family that has continued into the twenty-first century, such as the significance of blood versus affective ties and the stability and support provided by various familial constructions. Through Armida's ambivalence stemming from the maternal role she is expected to embrace within her family through marriage and her circle of friends I will argue that Maraini explores both the subversive power of and limits to redefining maternal roles through friendships.

The twenty years preceding the 1984 publication of the novel marked a period of great change in the structure of Italian families.[77] Numerous political, social, economic and legislative developments in the 1970s contributed to the decreasing dominance of the traditional nuclear

[76] "entrustment," a practice in Italian feminism "whereby a woman entrusts herself to another woman by choosing her as a symbolic mother, guide, and mentor." See Graziella Parati and Rebecca West. *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*, 59. Picchietti argues in "Symbolic Mediation" that the relationship with Tota and Giottina recasts Vannina as a daughter; the bond with Suna politicizes her; through her relationship with Rosa Vannina is situated in a female space of difference. Pickering-Iazzi, Lazzaro-Weis, and Dagnino have likewise underscored the centrality of Vannina's friendships with other women in her development, alternately focusing on her relationships with the villagers Tota and Giottina, with the political and transgressive character Suna and with her unconventional colleague, Rosa.

[77] Marzio Barbagli and Chiara Saraceno, *Lo stato delle famiglie in Italia*, 7.

family consisting of two married adults living together with their biological offspring.[78] Two significant laws passed in the 1970s legalized divorce and eliminated the figure of the *capofamiglia* as a legal entity, granting equal authority within the family to both spouses and essentially putting an end to the principal of patriarchal authority.[79] Decreases in marriage and fertility rates, combined with an increased average age for individuals at the time of marriage and increased divorces rates and households consisting of a single unmarried individual with or without children meant that for adults like the characters Maraini depicts in *Il treno per Helsinki* marriage and children were no longer considered a foregone conclusion. The author contemplates in the novel the tendency for individuals to form networks of friendships in order to meet many of their needs for emotional and material support that were historically provided by members of one's blood or legal family.[80] The dynamics of marriage and separation, friendships and maternity are all at play in Maraini's portrayal of Armida.

The 1980s also marked a period of great change in focus in Italian feminism, shifting from the phase of emancipation and equality that marked to previous decade to a new, less political phase of affirming female difference. Many feminists perceived a risk of complacency or regression into old roles due to an impression of the movement's demands having been met through the legalization of divorce and abortion, and this text serves as a reminder on Maraini's part of the need to continue the ongoing fight against female oppression. The structure of *Il treno per Helsinki* encourages reflection on the recent transformations in both feminism and the structure of the Italian family. Framed by brief scenes of present-day Armida at the start and

[78] In 1981, for example, only slightly more than half of Italian families (53.3%) were of this typology according to Umberto Salinas in *Evoluzione Strutturale Della Famiglia in Italia,* 64.
[79] Chiara Saraceno, *Mutamenti Della Famiglia,* 54.
[80] In the introduction to her study on kinship in the Italian context, *Conceiving Kinship: Assisted Conception, Procreation and Family in Southern Europe*, Monica M.E. Bonaccorso laments the lack of focus on kinship in the Italian context on the part of both Anglo-American and Italian anthropologists [*Conceiving Kinship: Assisted Conception, Procreation and Family in Southern Europe*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009, 9.] Kinship studies focused on adult friendships in Anglo-American contexts will, therefore, inform my discussion of this novel.

conclusion of the narration, the body of the novel consists of a prolonged flashback ending fifteen years prior to the moment of Armida's writing, rooting the action in the late 1960s, a period of political and social turmoil in Italy in which traditional values were being challenged. As Vera Golini has noted, Maraini's female characters' "fundamental quest" of understanding the self requires evaluating not only the society and circumstances in which they live, but also comprehending the family structure.[81] By reflecting on the family in light of fifteen years of change to that structure, Maraini is able to rework familial bonds through adult relationships and emphasize the continued need for change to the role of the mother.

Maraini begins blurring the lines between mothering children and adults at the start of the novel by portraying Armida's nuclear family as consisting of two men, her husband and brother-in-law, who are described as childlike and demanding her to meet their needs in different ways. Armida's husband Paolo seeks reunion with the primal maternal through her, and her first memory portrayed in the novel is of his beating his drum, which Armida interprets as his thinking he's still in the maternal womb, "un richiamo dalle nere buiezze della vita primaria. È il cuore del bambino che cerca di adeguarsi ai ritmi del sangue materno. È una agonia in cui si piange per la futura nascita."[82] Paolo's impulse to return to the maternal womb is soon shown to be directed at his wife, for in the next scene between the two she is woken by her husband's climbing on top of her and she interprets his efforts to thrust himself inside her as mimicking his drumming: "E lui pigia al ritmo del tamburo: vuole entrare in me anche con il bacino anche col sedere anche con le gambe e perché no rinculando e pestando anche con la testa. Non una parola

[81]Golini, "The Life and Prose Works of Dacia Maraini," in Maraini, Dacia, and Vera Golini, *My Husband*, 147.
[82] *Il treno per Helsinki*, 4:"The drum is a call from the primeval darkness the creation of life. It is the heart of the baby trying to adapt to the rhythms of its mother's heart-beat. It is the agony in which the baby weeps for his future birth."

un bacio. Solo questo ottuso inabissarsi nelle acque nere del ventre materno."[83] Armida is thus awakened from a dream in which she's flying, her sense of freedom in flight suppressed by the weight of her husband's attempts to return through her to a sense of the primordial maternal.

Armida is presumed to embody the maternal in a more practical way in the expectations from Paolo and his family that she will care for her brother-in-law, Lamberto. Though twenty-five years old, Lamberto is described as having suffered from an illness, "che lo tiene bambino. Spastico col corpo di un undicenne invecchiato precocemente."[84] Lamberto represents a man-child both physically and mentally, and Armida's care of him spans the range of what is typically required by a child, from teaching to helping dress him, from cooking for him and cutting up his meat to patient concern for his emotional well-being. Armida and Paolo are both actively engaged in the care of this adult child and enacting to a certain degree the normative nuclear family arrangement consisting of two heterosexual married adults focused on nurturing and educating a childlike individual. This mothering of Lamberto is presented as unproblematic for Armida, work in which she engages without questioning why and how she should perform it. The abrupt announcement of her pregnancy in the novel provides the impetus for her problematizing the role of mother, for her impending biological maternity would further root her within the context of the patriarchal family. Maraini emphasizes this fact through Paolo's repeated claim of authority over this child as he frequently reminds Armida that it will be his as well.

During her pregnancy, Armida is filled with ambivalence regarding her imminent maternal role, with affection and understanding toward her unborn son mixed with doubt of her

[83] *Il treno per Helsinki*, 10; "He thumps away with the rhythm of a drum. He'd like to penetrate me with his pelvis and with his bottom and with his legs and even by drawing back and thrusting into me with his head. Not a word. Not a kiss. Only this gross submersion into the black waters of the mother's womb."
[84] Ibid.,, 11; "[because of illness] he has remained like a child. He's a spastic with the body of a prematurely aged eleven-year-old."

maternal capacities. Her doubts spring from her awareness of the external expectations placed on mothers, what they should think about and be able to do. At a certain point, she wonders whether she is even maternal or whether Paolo might be more suitable for the work of raising a child:

> Lo veglierebbe meglio di me che sono distratta dolorante e forse nemmeno tanto materna. Lo educherebbe scientificamente secondo le ultime scoperte pediatriche prendendolo delicatamente per la schiena posandolo sulla bilancia argentata scaldandogli il latte alla giusta temperatura coprendolo con lo scialle bianco fatto da mano da sua madre.[85]

Armida's definition of what is maternal is clearly influenced by dominant ideas in society, reflecting the increased expectations of mothers accompanying the greater awareness of the complexity of children's needs and developments.[86] As Badinter observes, for countries like Italy in which such strong patriarchal traditions have endured for so long, the expectations on mothers are particularly demanding and have served to discourage women from choosing to have children.[87] In the novel, Maraini links Armida's insecurity regarding her ability to meet all of her child's needs to her awareness of her body's physical inability to do so: "La mia pancia però è *restia* a lasciarsi convolgere nutre *di malagrazia* questo figlio troppo esigente e non resiste alla *tentazione proibitissima* di lasciarsi sgusciare fuori dal ventre un rivoletto di sangue fresco dal colore squillante della lacca cinese." (emphasis mine).[88] The choice of descriptors in the passage underscores the extent to which Armida's body is thus rejecting what is biologically required of a mother, physically enacting the ambivalence she feels about taking on this role.

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[85] Ibid., 67-8; "Paolo would watch over him better than I do. I am too distracted, too full of aches and pains and perhaps not very maternal anyway. Paolo would bring him up scientifically according to all of the latest paediatric research lifting him gently on his back and placing him on silver scales warming the milk to just the right temperature wrapping him in the white hand-made shawl that used to belong to his mother."
[86] Elisabeth Badinter, *The Conflict*, 69-70, 126.
[87] Ibid., 145-7.
[88] *Il treno per Helsinki*, 69; "My belly however refuses to become involved. It's full of ill-will towards this over-demanding child. It can't resist this stream of fresh blood as red as Chinese lacquer gushing from my womb."

As will be discussed further in the following chapter, *Il treno per Heslinki* marks the start of an autobiographical vein in Maraini's prose, with Armida's writing her memories as a form of reflection mirroring the author's own developing ideas regarding the value of writing as a form of self-analysis crucial to the formation of a feminist identity. Though Maraini has fictionalized the events of the novel, her descriptions of Armida's ambivalence while pregnant draw upon the author's own, echoing Maraini's words in her review of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* regarding the parallels between Rich's experience and her own as expectant mothers:

> When I was pregnant I could no longer write: I would vomit every time I sat down at my desk. [...] And just like the author, I too started to knit – a peculiar thing, since I had never done it before and did it badly [...]. But I felt, for reasons that were not clear to me, that I had to adapt myself to motherhood, by changing myself in order not to "harm the baby."[89]

Maraini underscores in this review the same awareness that Armida gains of the reality that it is the social system rather than the child that imposes "this absurd tyranny" on expectant mothers, and she sees as unique her and her protagonist Armida's position as having experienced the emotions provoked by impending motherhood and then being able to choose a different life rather than trying again to have a child.

The outcome of Armida's pregnancy recalls Maraini's experience with stillbirth and her subsequent decision to leave the marriage in which the child was conceived, and Armida firmly resolves to never have another child as she moves out of the home she shared with her husband.[90] Armida guiltily thinks of both her mother's and mother-in-law's desire for her to remain in her nuclear family and reinforce it by trying for another child, internalizing the latter's voice as she

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[89] Maraini, "Viewpoint: On *Of Woman Born*," 690.

[90] Maraini writes of her own experience of the loss of her baby leading to a end of her marriage and a shift in her life focus: "That child whom I had felt move inside me, for whom I had denied myself any feeling of autonomy, had died, leaving me alone and lifeless. All that had occurred, and was unacceptable to me, was considered by my husband, relatives, and friends as "normal": a pregnancy that goes badly is part of the foreseeable and foreseen things in a marriage. But for me it was the end of my marriage and the beginning of a life decidedly more involved with my literary craft.", Ibid. 691.

both reassures and threatens: "Sarà il tuo studio bambina dove potrai lavorare al tuo teatro con tranquillità […] Che non ti venga in mente di distruggere la famiglia! Ti ho affidato i miei due figli e ora non puoi squagliartela a nessun costo."[91] Maraini has emphasized the question of space and Armida's ability to focus on her writing career throughout the character's pregnancy, for the fact that her study in the home she shared with Paolo was repurposed as a nursery correlates her impending maternal identity with the loss of her professional one. Armida is ultimately able to withdraw from the social system that dictates the rules governing the institutions of marriage and motherhood, but it is significant that this does not signal an end to her fulfilling a maternal role in the novel.

Maraini segues immediately from the breakdown of Armida's family through marriage to the possibility of a similar disintegration in what is potentially the most stable family structure in which Armida belongs, her network of friends. Maraini's depiction of Armida's 'family' of friends touches upon many of the key issues linked to the changing family and the reality of adults seeking in friendship networks the support they are missing for various reasons from a nuclear family predicated upon blood or legal relationships. Armida's chosen family of friends challenges many of the assumptions regarding gender identity and sexuality, serving to highlight the changing boundaries between familial and friendship relationships.

Tommasina Gabriele has investigated the subversiveness of Maraini's portrayal of gender roles and the extent to which the author has anticipated and challenged discourse on the questioning of naturalized gender identity. Though Gabriele does not include this novel in her study, Armida's friends disrupt traditional ideas regarding sexual identity in ways similar to

[91] *Il treno per Helsinki*, 95; "It'll be your studio my child. Where you can work at your play without anyone disturbing you […] Don't take it into your head to destroy the family. I've entrusted you with both of my sons and now you can't slide out of it – not on any pretext."

those raised by the critic in regards to Suna of *Donna in guerra* and Bianca of *Lettere a Marina*, such as the fixity of sexual identity and the validity of binarism in such labels as straight, gay or bisexual.[92] The refrain repeated throughout the novel regarding love and desire hints at the challenge of stable coupling: "Nico è innamorato di Dida che è innamorata di Cesare che ama non riamato Ada che a sua volta ama Dida. Una catena di sentimenti febbrili che ritorcono su se stessi senza arrivare a capo di niente."[93] Armida herself enters into this web of emotional entanglements when she strikes up a relationship with the newest member of the group, Miele, and the dynamics of romantic and sexual relationships are forever changing, with various members of the group engaging in relationships with members of either or both sexes. Maraini aligns the fluidity of gender and sexual relationships with the need to rethink personal relationships beyond the heteronormative notion of family.

In Maraini's segue from the disintegration of Armida's legal family to the state of her 'family' of friends she questions the idea of marriage as the foundation on which to construct family. Though Armida professes the binding capacity of marriage, her friend Ada expresses what ultimately reveals to be the reality for their family of friends: "Il matrimonio serve solo a puntellare una costruzione che crolla. Ci si sposa per avere l'illusione che il gruppo rimanga in piedi. Ma è una rovina."[94] The stability of 'families of choice'[95] is a question that remains under debate today, centering on the questions of the varying degrees of permanence and obligation

[92] Gabriele, "From Prostitution to Transsexuality," 245-6.
[93] *Il treno per Helsinki*, 13; "Nico is in love with Dida. Dida is in love with Cesare. Cesare is in love with Ada. Ada does not return his love because she also is in love with Dida. A chain of febrile emotions that spiral in on themselves leading nowhere."
[94] Ibid., 97; "Marriage only serves to shore up a building that's collapsing. Getting married may create the illusion that the group's staying on its feet. Actually it's in ruins."
[95] This term has been used within and beyond the context of gay and lesbian family dynamics, encompassing a wide range of meaning. Allan, 234 and Roseneil, 243.

people place on friends, partners, and family members.[96] Maraini's depiction of Armida's family of friends emphasizes the fluidity of the group, for as she returns to the present Armida as narrator reveals that it has somehow lost its cohesiveness.

Armida's role as mother collapses along with the disintegration of her friend network. From the start she held the maternal role of 'kin-keeper',[97] cooking for the group that met nightly in the home she shared with Paolo and providing advice and support for her friends. They in turn supported her emotionally following the breakdown of her marriage and enacted familial dynamics of group identity and sharing resources during the train trip of the novel's title. There is a key moment during the trip in which the friends explicitly consider the nature of the family they have formed together and debate which members hold the roles of mother and father. Armida is almost unanimously cast as the mother, as "la più mamma" despite being the youngest, and at the conclusion of the debate the protagonist is reminded: "Vedi che sei la madre imperdonabilmente madre; ti preoccupi prima di tutto della pace in famiglia."[98] Though the group is willing to consider greater variability in the characteristics and gender of the group's father, the mother represents such a strongly defined archetypal role that there is no debate. Armida is unsettled by her friends' view of her as maternal, particularly of Miele's observation that she's maternal inasfar as she "ha bisogno del bisogno degli altri."[99] Maraini once again depicts Armida as struggling with the meaning of maternal and with having maternity projected upon her by others. Though the family has been shown to be in a state of re-elaboration in the novel, it appears that the expectations for the mother and her role have not changed along with it.

[96] See, for example, the contrasting views expressed in *Families in Society: Boundaries and Relationships* by Graham Allan and Sasha Roseneil, with the former arguing that friendship ties are more fluid and easily broken than familial ones, while Roseneil challenges this view in her contention of a high level of permanence and obligation in friendships.
[97] Allan emphasizes the role of the mother in initiating contact and communication that maintain the family network.
[98] *Il treno per Helsinki*, 167-168; "you're the most motherly"; "Look who's the mother now. Armida the archetypal mother. Concerned above all with peace in the family."
[99] Ibid., 167; "needs the needs of others."

The novel suggests that the relational nature of mothering allows for a mother to engage in maternal behaviors in a variety of relationships, but leaves open the question of how these behaviors can be reworked to best suit the needs and desires of the mother.

The novel concludes with Armida alone, with little information concerning her current situation but with details of the destinies of her friends and their various choices with regards to divorce, marriage and children reflecting the contemporary social realities of Italian families. The family of friends thus remains a single current in the fluidity of relationships these characters navigate as they form and reform families, and the novel ends with the continued need to rethink family and the mother's role within its changing dynamics. As we will see in the following chapter, the mother's engagement with the written and spoken word takes on greater centrality in Maraini's later works and is aligned with an increased freedom from the preconceptions about mothering that the author shows in her novels to be so ingrained in Italian society.

CHAPTER 4

«RACCONTA, MA'»: MATERNAL STORYTELLING IN DACIA MARAINI'S LATER NOVELS

Beginning with the 1984 novel *Il treno per Helsinki* a significant autobiographical current develops in Dacia Maraini's prose. Two of her most overtly autobiographical works, her 1993 memoir *Bagheria* and the 2001 *La nave per Kobe: diari giapponesi di mia madre* are closely connected to the author's mother, Topazia, for they respectively recount the author's childhood years spent in Topazia's ancestral family home following the Maraini family's release from a Japanese concentration camp and a family history in which passages of Topazia's internment diaries are interwoven with her daughter's memories and digressions. Maraini has also remarked on her tendency in this period to project, to a varying degree, aspects of herself onto female protagonists of her novels as wide- ranging as the eighteenth-century duchess Marianna Ucrìa of the eponymous novel and the journalist Michela Canova at the center of the crime novel *Voci*.[1]

[1] "Incontro con Dacia Maraini" in Vitti, Antonio, *Incontri Culturali Tra Due Mondi*, 314.

Though less explicitly reflective of themes in Italian feminist discourse than many of her early works, Maraini's novels from the mid-1980s on continue to explore questions of women's subjectivity and self-expression, as well as female roles within the family and society. [2] In reflecting on the question of potential exploitation in her appropriation of another person's life story transformed into a literary work in regards to *Memorie di una ladra*, Maraini concludes a 1984 interview by reflecting on that ideological moment of her career and outlining the changing influence of feminism on her work:

> Questo libro appartiene a un momento ideologico che non rinnego: ma oggi la mia ottica è diversa; oggi penso che sia più importante parlare, scrivere di sé. Il femminismo mi insegna che il primo sfruttato sono io, che la conoscenza di me può servire a capire meglio anche l'emarginazione altrui.[3]

This intersection of feminism and autobiography has been investigated by critics such as Graziella Parati, who describes autobiography as a "hybrid and malleable genre that partakes of other genres and becomes a literary space where a woman can experiment with the construction of a female 'I' and, sometimes, a feminist identity."[4] Like Parati, the authors of a volume on Italian women writing of their own and others' lives identify a fluidity of boundaries between autobiography, biography and fiction within the genre of life writing. This generic term was first used by feminist critics and has since been elaborated to include hybrid narratives that include both autobiographical fact and fiction, and more recently, increasingly incorporates women's biography as well.[5]

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[2] See the previous chapter of this dissertation for a discussion of these themes in Maraini's early novels.
[3] "This book belongs to an ideological moment that I do not now repudiate: but today my viewpoint is different; today I think that it's more important to speak and write about oneself. Feminism has taught me that I am first among the exploited, that self-knowledge can help me better understand the marginalization of others." Translation mine. Dacia Maraini, in an interview collected by Lietta Tornabuoni that appears at the start of the 1984 Bombiani second edition of *Memorie di una ladra*.
[4] Parati, *Public History, Private Stories*, 2.
[5] Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson, "Re-Thinking the Politics and Practice of Life Writing," in *Across Genres, Generations and Borders*, 2.

In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which Maraini explores the fluidity of boundaries between the self and others, between fact and fiction that characterize women's life writing in the development of female subjectivity and in the relationships among women in her novels *Dolce per sé* (1997) and *Colomba* (2004). As Maraini continues to use genre to forward her thematic aims she experiments not only with biography and autobiography in these two works, but also with the epistolary text in the earlier of the two, and her forays into generic hybridity culminate in the unique structure of *Colomba*.[6] These two novels are also connected by the central theme of maternal storytelling, a leitmotif that figures prominently in the author's autobiographical works as well. Both *Bagheria* and *La nave per Kobe* depict Maraini's insatiable appetite for stories as a child, requests for which were primarily directed toward her mother but also toward other female members of her maternal family of origin. These stories serve an essential purpose in these works, grounding the author in the female lineage of her family.

I will focus on the centrality of the storyteller in Maraini's novels, who consistently embodies the characteristics Walter Benjamin famously praised in the figure.[7] Maraini's storytellers possess the gift of drawing their listeners into tales full of wisdom based on both first-hand experience and that which is passed from generation to generation. Early in her career Maraini demonstrated an interest in the capacity of storytelling to bind generations of women who are not biologically related in the maternal relationship established between the villagers Tota and Giotta and their symbolic daughter Vannina in *Donna in guerra*. These stories also highlight the educative and subversive potential of maternal stories to disrupt the perpetuation of culturally-determined female roles. The author revisits earlier themes of the ties that bind

[6] As underscored by Carol Lazzaro-Weis in *From Margins to Mainstream* and Grazia Sumeli Weinberg in *Invito alla lettura di Dacia Maraini*, among others.
[7] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov."

families, with an emphasis on intergenerational female bonds, in the novel *Dolce per sé*, in which I will identify a depiction of non-traditional, non-biological mothering centered on the sharing of family and personal stories. I will conclude with a discussion of *Colomba* as a culmination of much of Maraini's thinking about family, storytelling, and female genealogy, in which she positions herself as author within a tradition of maternal storytellers. I contend that Maraini demonstrates maternal storytelling to be a positive means through which to cross boundaries of biological ties and generations in order to establish and strengthen bonds among women.

'Sarà di tutti e tre': the subversive power of maternal storytelling

It is worthy of note that the first positive critical interpretations of mothering in Maraini's work revolve around relationships of symbolic rather than biological mothering in the author's 1975 novel *Donna in guerra*, which has been universally considered Maraini's most overtly feminist novel. The plot's reflection of elements of 1970s feminist discourse has led one critic to describe it as "A virtual feminist manifesto itself"[8] and others to debate whether the ideological content overshadows fictional aspects such as psychological character development.[9] Many critical interpretations of the novel focus on the movement of Vannina from the subjugated roles and spaces women have historically occupied into the social, political sphere in which she is able

[8] Picchietti, *Relational Spaces*, 116.
[9] See, for example, Picchietti, Pallotta.

to achieve self-realization and fulfillment.[10] Central to such interpretations is Vannina's choice not to become a biological mother and to instead abort the pregnancy that results from an instance of marital rape. I believe that Virginia Picchietti rightly locates Vannina's relationships with her peers Suna and Rosa within the realm of sisterhood, for as I observed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, their relationships most closely resemble the Italian feminist practice of female mentoring termed *affidamento*, while the relationship Tota and Giottina form with Vannina represents a more complex reworking of the mother-daughter relationship. As I will argue, this relationship revolves primarily around maternal storytelling, which Maraini firmly roots within the realm of the theatrical in order to emphasize the power of performance to either perpetuate or disrupt culturally prescribed gender roles. Maraini explicitly differentiates the stories the men tell in the novel from those told by Tota and Giottina, endowing the women's tales with greater potential to subvert dominant notions surrounding women's sexuality and roles, culminating in a rethinking of motherhood. This early version of intergenerational storytelling will be more fully elaborated in Maraini's later novels, with a continuing emphasis on the importance of creating a sense of female community and the possibility of successful co-mothering than enables women to engage together in the various aspects of maternal work to which each is best suited.

Vannina meets Tota and Giottina, two close friends who live on the island on which Vannina is vacationing, early in the novel. As Picchietti has observed, the relationship among the three women recasts Vannina in the role of the ambivalent daughter, caught between acceptance of and resistance to the power her symbolic mothers hold over her. Vannina frequently feels suffocated by her relationship with Tota and Giottina throughout the time of her holiday on the island, right up to the friends' parting embraces at the end of the summer: "Mi

[10] Lazzaro-Weis, Merry, Pickering-Iazzi.

sentivo mancare l'aria. Quegli abbracci fangosi mi scaldavano il ventre. Non volevo essere travolta. Ho fatto per liberarmi. Ma ero chiusa, vincolata da quattro braccia muscolose."[11] Vannina, however, becomes keenly aware at a certain point that it is she who takes initiative in continuing the relationship, and makes clear that her motivation to return to the launderette in which the women meet stems from the seductive power of their storytelling.[12] She describes the cave-like spaces as "un teatro buio e afoso dove si improvvisano inquieti giochi dell'immaginazione. Giochi rustici, spericolati, pieni di sensualità agra, selvatica che mi affascina nonostante la nausea."[13] This reference to the theater, though mentioned in passing by Picchietti,[14] merits further attention, as throughout the novel theatrical references are connected to the performative nature of the roles men and women play and the potential for them to be subverted.

In her relationship with Tota and Giottina Vannina re-enacts the archetypal mother-daughter bond with its struggle of power and submission, rejection and reconciliation. These tensions culminate in a scene in which Maraini deftly frames their interaction within the context of theater, emphasizing the extent to which the three women are playing set roles. Tota brings Vannina to the launderette to apologize to Giottina for abandoning her in favor of new

[11] *Donna in guerra*, 143; "I was being engulfed by those suffocating hugs. I didn't want to be overwhelmed and I tried to free myself, but I was pinioned by four muscular arms." Unless otherwise noted, English translations of this novel are from *Woman At War*. Trans. Mara Benetti & Elspeth Spottiswood (New York: Italica Press, 1988). Vannina frequently experiences the feeling of suffocation in her interactions with Tota and Giottina, even using the verb 'soffocare' directly on page 10. Even Vannina and Tota's initial meeting is characterized by the older women's forcefulness: "Mi ha afferrata per il braccio. Mi ha accompagnata ad un'altra bottega. Camminava al mio fianco contenta, sostenuta.", 5.

[12] Ibid., 46; Vannina observes this shift with apparent surprise: "Sono io anzi che chiedo di andare alla lavanderia."

[13] Ibid., 14; "a dark theatre where they improvise disturbing fantasies, reckless games full of bitter sensuality that fascinate me in spite of the nausea." Vannina's nausea stems from the hot, humid, closed space of the launderette. When Vannina recognizes that she is now the one seeking out the other women, as cited in the previous footnote, she similarly describes the attraction of her friends' stories as having an extravagant quality "che mi distrae dalla noia di queste mattinate solitarie." Ibid., 46.

[14] In *Relational Spaces*, 117, Picchietti notes the "theatre-like" launderette and refers to Tota's and Giottina's "theatrics" but does not delve into further detail.

acquaintances, and as soon as they enter Vannina shows an awareness of the fact that the three of them are theatrically enacting the dynamics underlying their relationship:

> Giottina non mi ha salutata. Ha continuato a stirare, energica, rabbiosa, facendo finta di non avermi vista.
>
> - Vanna ti portò le paste, Giottina.
>
> - Se le può pure riportare, qui mica siamo in un bordello che uno entra e esce e non si sa chi è.
>
> - E tu perdonala Giottina, è un'amica veramente.
>
> - Una mala amica.
>
> - Guarda che le fai dolore, Giottina, guarda la faccia sciacquata di Vannina come diventa brutta, guarda.
>
> Giottina ha sollevato un momento gli occhi selvatici su di me. Tota mi indicava col dito, eretta in posa teatrale, come un banditore.
>
> - Non la voglio, mandala via!
>
> - Ti portò le paste Giottina per farsi perdonare, mangia una pasta del perdono, una soltanto, per addolcire la bocca.
>
> - No.
>
> - È pegno d'amore.
>
> - No.
>
> Tota ha preso la pasta e gliel'ha messa sotto il naso. Giottina continuava a storcere la bocca. Tota, con due dita asciutte e rugose, si è aperta un varco fra le labbra serrate dell'amica. Le ha dischiuso i denti con le unghie e poi le ha premuto la pasta sulla lingua. Giottina si è arresa: a occhi socchiusi ha preso a succhiare la crema. Poi ha affondato i denti nella crosta molle, lenta e ingorda, immusonita.
>
> - Ecco, ora sei perdonata Vannina, dài un bacio alla tua commare d'ammore.
>
> Eravamo in piena recita. La nausea mi chiudeva la gola. Avrei voluto scappare. Ma nello stesso tempo ero presa da una strana perversa dolcissima simpatia per le due folli amiche. Mi sono avvicinata a Giottina. L'ho baciata sulla guancia, come una sorella.[15]

[15] Ibid., 121-2; "Giottina didn't greet me. She carried on ironing with concentrated energy, pretending not to see me. 'Vanna has brought you some cakes, Giottina.' 'She might as well take them home, we aren't in a whorehouse where people come and go without you knowing who they are.' 'You must forgive her, Giottina, she's a real friend.' 'A bad friend.' 'Look at her, you're upsetting her, Giottina. Look at Vannina's face, how ugly it's become, how weak, do look.' For a moment Giottina lifted her wild eyes at me, She stood dramatically upright and pointed at me with one finger, like a prophet. 'I don't want her, take her away.' 'She's brought you some cakes so that you'll forgive her. Have one of the cakes for forgiveness, go on, just one, to sweeten the taste in your mouth.' 'No.' 'It's a pledge of love.' 'No.' Tota picked up the cake and put it under her nose. Giottina kept on twisting her mouth up. With two rough dry fingers Tota opened a gap between her friend's tightly shut lips. She separated her teeth with her nails and pressed the cake on her tongue. Giottina gave in: with half-opened eyes she started sucking up the cream. Then still frowning she sank her teeth into the soft crust, slowly and greedily. 'That's it, now you are forgiven, Vannina, give a kiss to your loving friend.' We were in full performance, it was like a theatre. My throat was blocked with nausea, I would have liked to run away, but at the same time I experienced a strange perverse sympathy for my two crazy friends. I went up to Giottina and kissed her on the cheek, like a sister."

I've included such a long excerpt of this scene in order to illustrate many of the key aspects it contains concerning Maraini's portrayal of a theater of the maternal characterizing this relationship. Maraini makes explicit references through Vannina's first-person narration of the scene to Giottina's "theatrical pose" and Vannina's awareness of participating fully in a theatrical performance. Even without such clear allusions to the theater, the structuring of the scene itself recalls the rapid exchange of lines to be found in theatrical dialogue, which is particularly significant given the structuring of the novel as a whole as a diary, in which narration typically dominates over dialogue. As Anthony Tamburri notes in his discussion of the work, the prevalence of dialogue over narration creates a greater sense of immediacy, as opposed to the reflective hindsight afforded to narrator or diarist favoring the past tense. The use of direct discourse also more actively engages the reader in interpreting verbal exchanges that are reported directly in the text.[16] By intermixing dialogue and narration, Maraini draws attention to the significance of the theatrical nature of the scene and of the women's interactions throughout their relationship. There is a sense of Tota's directing the scene, from requiring Vannina to purchase the "past[e] del perdono" to eliciting the actions that make up what Vannina later terms, "la ceremonia della nostra reconciliazione."[17] The fact that this reconciliation hinges on the sensual feeding of each other is an integral part of Maraini's thinking about the maternal, as for her food, sensuality and maternity are inextricably linked.[18]

Vannina's final action in the scene cited above, in which affection for her friends prevails over the impulse to escape and she willingly submits to the required sisterly kiss, reminds the reader of the freedom afforded the protagonist because Maraini portrays her as being aware that

[16] Tamburri, "Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra*", *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy: A Modern Renaissance*, 139-140.
[17] Ibid., 123; "la ceremonia della nostra riconciliazione."
[18] Serena Anderlini et al., "Dacia Maraini: Prolegomena for a Feminist Dramaturgy of the Feminine," 151.

she is simply playing a part. Maraini, in fact, imbues the relationship between these women with the theater motif throughout the novel and outside of this closed feminine space. Right up to the scene of their farewells Tota and Giottina are shown to still be acting roles, as Vannina notes that Giottina "è scoppiata a piangere teatralmente" and Tota "si preparava a recitare la stessa scena, gli occhi gonfi, la faccia raggrinzita da una smorfia di dolore, il corpo proteso spasmodicamente verso di me."[19] Though Maraini creates moments of genuine maternal affection between the older women and their symbolic daughter,[20] here as elsewhere there is a sense of characters' being forced roles they are not free to define themselves. Vannina plays at fulfilling the submissive daughterly role, demanded by this *commedia* she performs with her friends, but she is shown to be aware of how oppressive this role can be and begin to question her conformity to such roles. She will, in fact, later refuse to continue acting the part of the subservient housewife, a role she occupies from the start of the novel.

Maraini similarly shows stereotypical male roles to be reinforced through theatrical storytelling, though she differentiates the men's stories from the women's, underscoring the subversive capacity as exclusive to maternal storytelling. In the scene in which Vannina and her husband have dinner at his friend Santino's house, Maraini depicts the misogynistic counterpart to the "teatro buio" of the launderette in which female roles are re-enacted. Here as Santino's brother Toto pauses during a story of how he and his brothers gang-raped a German tourist who tried to solicit him, Vannina notes the reaction of Toto's brothers, who "continuano imperterriti a masticare, ma il loro silenzio e la loro attenzione sono quelli di un pubblico che stimola e

[19] *Donna in guerra*, 142; "burst theatrically into tears"; "Tota was getting ready to repeat the same performance, with her eyes swollen, her face wincing with pain, her body stretched spasmodically toward me."
[20] For example, Vannina's understanding of the true emotion behind Giottina's kissing her hand when Vannina complains of being tired during their hike to the American's hut: "Per tutta risposta Giottina mi ha dato un bacio sulla mano. In quel bacio c'era una preghiera così fervida e tenace, c'era tanta umiltà e affetto, che non ho avuto il coraggio di insistere. Ho ripreso a camminare veloce." Ibid., 75.

protegge il suo attore preferito dentro un teatro buio."[21] When the brothers' mother interjects, lamenting that this story couldn't possibly interest their guests as she herself has heard it a thousand times and finds it "schifosa", she is immediately silenced by her sons and returns to her exaggeratedly submissive role of cooking and serving the meal to her family and guests.[22] This version of storytelling framed again within the context of theater is the male version of performing stereotyped gender roles, asserting the power and virility expected of men along with the silent subservience demanded of women. The German tourist in Toto's story is part of the culture of the island in which handsome young men from the village, termed "i belli", are nightly bought as escorts by the highest bidder among the foreign women vacationing there. The act of rape and its retelling function for the men involved as a way to reassert their domination over the female and perpetuate the role they feel they are expected to fulfill in their society. Only one of the brothers, Orio, demonstrates embarrassment and shame as the story is told and it is revealed that his brothers essentially forced him to participate in the rape. Yet he is aware that he must be part of the "complicità dei fratelli, [la] protezione del padre e [il] silenzio della madre" that authorizes Toto to continue his story.[23]

While the content of Toto's story reinforces the male archetype of virility, in their maternal storytelling Tota and Giottina focus on subjects that destabilize gender and sexual identities. As Pauline Dagnino has observed, the women's tales of the sexual exploits between a mistress and her maid and of beings who are neither wholly female nor male and transport Vannina into a space outside of the norms of heterosexuality and divisive male superiority over

[21] Ibid., 34; "carry on eating indifferently, but their silence is like that of an attentive audience doting on their favourite actor in the darkness of a theatre."
[22] Ibid., "disgusting."
[23] Ibid., 35; "his brothers' support, his father's protection and his mother's silence."

the female, and thus beyond the confines of patriarchal society.[24] The man is not the center of the action in these tales, made secondary in or excluded entirely from sexual encounters. One story is particularly significant in that it subverts not only the rules defining gendered roles but destabilizes prevailing notions of motherhood as well.

This tale is jointly recounted by Tota and Giottina, who begin with the announcement that "La serva è rimasta incinta." and immediately exclude male involvement by ruling out the impotent chauffeur as a potential father, before revealing that the maid is pregnant by the mistress herself.[25] In addressing the question of how this is possible, the two women explain that the mistress decided not to undergo the physical burdens of fulfilling her husband's wish for a child and thus came up with an alternative plan of using her servant as a surrogate. The husband is emasculated in the story, reduced to crying and begging his wife for a child, yet is unwilling to impregnate the maid himself. The mistress says that she will add something of herself to the process so that "il figlio nasce di tutti e tre congiuntamente" and implants her husband's seed into their maid so that the child "sarà di tutti e tre perché lui l'ha sputato, lei l'ha seminato e la camerante l'ha nutrito."[26] This tale sheds light on the typical power dynamics of conception by reinterpreting them, as the mistress becomes the active agent while the husband passively desires a child and the maid has no agency due to her inferior social position. Tota and Giottina thus raise the issue of agency before the scene of marital rape in which Vannina's husband attempts to force her into bearing his child.

Most significantly, this story redefines motherhood along with fatherhood, as it explores an alternative to the heteronormative model and raises questions regarding how maternal

[24] Dagnino, "Revolution in the Laundry," in *The Pleasure of Writing*, 239.
[25] *Donna in guerra*, 135; "The maid is pregnant."
[26] Ibid., 137; "the child will come from all three of us equally"; "will come from all three of them, because he ejaculated it, she sowed it and the maid nourished it."

responsibilities might be shared once the baby is born. Tota and Giottina can themselves serve as an example for how co-mothering can take place. Maraini emphasizes at the start of the narration of this story of conception, as throughout all of the instances of the village women's storytelling, Vannina's sense of the fluid way in which the women co-narrate their tales, as she anticipates that as always, as the tale unfolds, "Le voci si alterneranno inseguendosi, incalzandosi, senza mai accavallarsi."[27] I disagree with Dagnino's interpretation of Tota and Giottina as two undifferentiated, merging bodies lacking distinct identities,[28] and rather view them as complementing each other in storytelling as in mothering Vannina, each contributing and anticipating the contributions of the other. Tota holds the role of mediator between the outside world and the cavernous laundry over which Giottina presides, bringing Vannina into that space, collaborating in the ritual of storytelling and helping to resolve conflict such as in the previously discussed scene of the reconciliation ritual between Giottina and Vannina. The two elder women mother Vannina together, most significantly though storytelling, and I would argue that their subversion of gender roles in their storytelling serves as an inspiration for Vannina to similarly disrupt the perpetuation of stereotyped roles in the final scene in the novel in which Maraini incorporates theater to highlight role-playing.

At the end of the novel, Vannina returns to her teaching position and is confronted with the enacting of male dominance in the form of a staged scene of sexual violence in which four of her male students mimic raping a seemingly complicit female student, while the other female students look on, giggling. Instead of punishing the boys, Vannina seizes the opportunity to educate all of her students by asking the student 'victim' in the performance if she understood what was happening to her and encouraging her to question her reaction to the boys' aggression.

[27] Ibid., 135; "Their voices will take turns, following each other swiftly, without ever getting entangled."
[28] Dagnino, "Revolution in the Laundry," 238.

As she begins a lesson in sexual education and gender roles, Vannina is shown to embrace for the first time her profession as a teacher, and at the end of the day she remarks that "Per la prima volta, tornando a casa chiusa dentro l'autobus affolato, sudata e stanca dopo cinque ore di scuola, non mi sentivo avvilita e svuotata, ma presa da una febbre di allegria."[29] This newfound passion for teaching, a vocation in which Vannina finally sees opportunity to effect real change on the next generation, undoubtedly plays a major role in her subsequent decisions in the final pages of the novel to abort the pregnancy that was forced upon her and would require her to give up her work, and to leave her husband and start a new life on her own. Maraini shows Vannina to break the cycle of blindly perpetuating historical gender roles that are detrimental to women, inspired in large part by the storytelling of her symbolic mothers.

'Cara Flavia': navigating family and maternal relationships through letters in *Dolce per sé*

Maraini once again explores the potential for establishing maternal relationships through storytelling in her 1997 novel *Dolce per sé*. This epistolary novel consists of a series of letters written by the fifty-year-old Vera over the course of seven years to Flavia, the niece of the man with whom Vera is in a romantic relationship and who at the start of the novel is six years old. There is thus no legal or biological familial bond between Vera and the young girl to whom she writes. Unlike Maraini's early protagonist Anna, Flavia is not shown to be in need of a substitute or surrogate mother, as her biological mother Marta's presence in her daughter's life is

[29] *Donna in guerra*, 258; "For the first time, on my way back home shut inside the crowded bus, all perspiring and tired after five hours of teaching, I didn't feel demoralised and empty, but seized with a fever of happiness and fulfillment.'

thoroughly depicted in Vera's letters. Taking her cue from the nontraditional relationship between Vera and Flavia as described in the former's letters, Laura Salsini concludes that their bond is not a "maternal" one, as Vera does not treat Flavia as a child and there are no "overtones of a mother-daughter relationship."[30] I believe that such an interpretation highlights, rather, the difficulty in defining the meaning of "maternal" in contemporary Italian society and literature. I find that in her detailed study of motherhood in twentieth-century Italian literature, Laura Benedetti aptly identifies the relationship between Vera and Flavia as indicative of the expanding view of motherhood in this period, as it "replicates the ties of a maternal connection" but is developed between individuals who have no biological link.[31] Salsini's and Benedetti conflicting views point to the difficulty of defining the maternal in a non-biological sense, and I interpret Salsini's judgment as stemming from the fact that Vera's treatment of Flavia diverges from the typical image of nurturing, selfless care historically expected of mothers. I would argue that through portraying both Vera and Marta as mother figures, Maraini is able to distinguish between various types of maternal work and present a paradigm of co-mothering as part of her continued project to redefine the family. Through her use of the epistolary genre and emphasis on storytelling in the novel's missives, the author further explores the capacity of stories to create and strengthen familial bonds.

Salsini includes Maraini in her study of the ways in which modern Italian women writers have revitalized the epistolary genre, repurposing this traditionally female form as a platform through which to re-examine women's roles. Salsini convincingly argues that Maraini, like many of her contemporaries who use the epistolary text to challenge literary and social perceptions of women, "co-opts the genre as a provocative means of addressing feminist

[30] Salsini, *Addressing the letter*, 358.
[31] Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 120-121.

issues."[32] In particular, in *Dolce per sé*, the author is invested in the feminist project of developing a female cultural genealogy. Salsini reads Vera and Flavia's relationship as a form of the Italian feminist practice of *affidamento*, with Vera initiating the recipient of her letters into the shared history of women's struggle to negotiate expectations toward family with vocation, particularly artistic calling.[33] While I agree that the educative function traditionally associated with the epistolary genre is here focused on teaching a member of a new generation how to navigate womanhood, the extent of Vera's attention to Flavia's individual story is crucial to the girl's process of identity formation. In telling Flavia her life story in her letters, Vera is enacting the relational practice as theorized by Adriana Cavarero in her concept of the "narratable self".[34] Vera acts as the essential other responding to the self's desire for unity through narrating her unique life story, expressing 'who' rather than 'what' Flavia is in regards to collective women's history. Though she may recognize common traits, Vera avoids dissolving Flavia into the "collective *we*" of common identity as women.[35] For Sara Ruddick, this focus on the child's particularity, her "unrepeatable uniqueness," to borrow Cavarero's terminology, is a key aspect of mothering, and I will demonstrate the maternal quality of Vera's stories.[36] In addition to responding to Flavia's need for unity of self through telling her unique story, Vera also uses family stories as a means through which to transcend the limits of biological and legal notions of family formation.

Maraini begins her reflection on maternal work early in the novel, showing Vera's attention in her second letter to the kinds of tasks performed by the girl's biological mother, Marta. Maraini explicitly posits this work as antithetical to Marta's abandoned career as a

[32] Salsini, *Addressing the letter*, 98.
[33] Ibid., 98-135.
[34] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*.
[35] Ibid., 92.
[36] Ibid., 33.

concert pianist, urging Flavia to reflect on who would complete the required maternal duties in her stead, "Chi ti sveglierebbe la mattina, che ti preparerebbe la colazione, chi ti porterebbe a scuola, chi ti racconterebbe le favole per addormentarti?".[37] These questions are of course part of Vera's offering direction through which Flavia can rethink motherhood as her destiny, and the incompatibility of maternal and professional work is further emphasized through Vera's description of Marta's forced choice "fra professione amata e maternità."[38] Flavia shows the early signs of awareness and questioning of gender roles, as she asks Vera "perché i papa partono sempre e le mamme rimangono a casa ad aspettare?".[39] Maraini thus continues her critique of institutionalized motherhood that spans her entire career, this time as a preface to the non-biological alternative she imagines through the figure of Vera.

The questions Vera poses to Flavia call attention to that which constitutes the component of preservative love central to maternal work as theorized by Sara Ruddick.[40] Marta is shown throughout the novel to dedicate herself to this kind of work, tending not only to Flavia's physical needs, but also to the training necessary to her social acceptability, passing on her "gesti misurati" and guiding her development into a "bambina a modo."[41] It is significant that Maraini includes bedtime storytelling among Marta's maternal tasks, as it represents a means of nurturance key to fostering Marta's growth. As discussed in the second chapter, family storytelling can aid children in individual and relational identity formation, providing them with insight into their place within the family. Though Maraini shows Marta to be engaged to some extent in the kind of maternal storytelling beneficial to Flavia's growth through the assumption

[37] *Dolce per sé*, 24-25; "Who would wake you up in the morning, who would get your breakfast ready, take you to school, put you to bed and tell you stories to put you to sleep?" Unless otherwise noted, English translations of this novel are from *The Violin*. Trans. Dick Ketto & Elspeth Spottiswood (London: Arcadia Books, 2001).
[38] Ibid., 25; "a career that she loved and motherhood."
[39] Ibid., 13; "Why do daddies always go away and mummies stay at home waiting for them?"
[40] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*. For a more in-depth discussion of Ruddick's framework, see chapters 1 and 3 of this dissertation.
[41] *Dolce per sé*, 44; "measured gestures"; "nicely-behaved little girl."

of a nightly bedtime story, it is Vera who throughout the text is shown to most fully embrace this role. Vera's stories consist of a mix of descriptions of moments shared with Flavia, as well as family stories from both Flavia's and Vera's families that ground the girl within an expanded network of familial ties.

Vera's letters both contain stories addressed to Flavia and recount Vera's engagement in oral storytelling in moments when the two spent time together. Vera's first letter begins with a story that exemplifies the kinds of tales she tells to capture the young girl's uniqueness. Vera recounts the last time she and Flavia saw each other, during a trip to the Hotel Bellevue together with Marta's family, including the girl's uncle Edoardo, Vera's partner. Vera's description of Flavia directed at the girl as she enters "come un angelo infuriato […] il cappellino rosso ciliege in testa, la gonna scozzese che ti saltellava sulle ginocchia, le scarpe rosso pomodoro col fiocchetto da ballerina", precedes the narration of their complicity in playing a trick on Edoardo.[42] Clothing and shoes, in particular, are quickly shown to be a mutual interest and topic of discussion between Vera and Flavia, as the letter quickly progresses to Vera's solicited advice as to what shoes to wear, with her meditations on the ideal shoe size for a woman leading to a reflection on Flavia's temperament, telling her "sei una bambina ordinata e volitiva con una leggera tendenza alla malinconia."[43] Vera's stories accomplish many of the goals of maternal storytelling as theorized by Ruddick, for through them Vera helps instill in Flavia a sense of who she is, connects with the girl through their understanding of shared experience and encourages

[42] *Dolce per sé*, 7; "like a furious angel with a cherry-red beret on your head. You were wearing a tartan skirt that skipped over your knees and tomato-red shoes with little ballerina bows."

[43] Ibid., 12; "you are a well-behaved little girl with a strong will of your own, and with a slight tendency to feel gloomy." Christina Siggers Manson has traced the motif of women's shoes in Maraini's work beginning with the author's 1987 essay "*Riflessioni sui corpi logici e* illogici delle mie compaesane di sesso". Manson observes that Maraini aligns the mountain boots (scarponcini col carro armato) that Vera recommends to Flavia in this passage with young women setting off on the path to equality, in contrast to the noiseless footwear worn by the victims of violence in the novels Voci and Colomba. Vera's encouraging Flavia to don hiking boots can thus be read as part of her initiation of Flavia into feminist ideology.

their knowledge and acceptance of one another.[44] Vera reminds Flavia of her particularities that may be overlooked or forgotten as the girl matures, as well as of time they spent together. She also confides in the young girl, telling her more about herself and identifying traits they share, and her stories are characterized throughout by the Ruddick's maternal virtues of realism, compassion and delight.

It is perhaps Vera's realism and refusal to treat Flavia as a child who must be shielded from harsh realities that can give readers like Salsini the impression that Vera's bond with Flavia is not "maternal". Maraini shows Vera to muse that a fifty-year-old woman and a six-year old child make a strange combination and wonders "Cara Flavia che non mi sei parente, che non mi sei coetanea, che nonostante tutto questo mi sei vicina, come è possibile che ti scelga come confidente quasi fossi una donna fatta con tanto di passato alle spalle?"[45] Some of the content of Vera's letters is, in fact, arguably quite mature for her young audience, and yet though Maraini does not include any responses from Flavia, she does choose to include evidence of Flavia's reception of Vera's letters,[46] thus establishing the girl as a true recipient of the letters and their content.[47] As Sarah Ruddick observes, including some details of adults' emotional lives is important in establishing the realism of maternal stories and the trustworthiness of their narrator, and the maternal narrator must exercise judgment in what and how much they reveal.[48] Though she may at time push the boundaries of appropriateness, Vera clearly invokes a sense of trust in

[44] Ruddick, *Maternal thinking*, 98.
[45] *Dolce per sé*, 21; "Dear Flavia, you are not related to me, we are not the same age and although we are close to each other, how is it that I choose to confide in you as if you were a fully adult woman with a long past resting on your shoulders?"
[46] Maraini makes this explicit in only one letter in the novel: "Tuo zio si è fatto vivo l'altro giorno. Mi ha detto che ha saputo da te, dalla lettera che ti ho scritto, i particolari della malattia di mia sorella." Ibid., 143.
[47] Salsini notes that the reader occupies the space between the sender and receiver of letters in an epistolary text, and plays an "integral part in interpreting the missives sent to and from the protagonists." *Addressing the letter*, 11. Maraini ensures that there can be no doubt that Vera's letters are read by Flavia as well as the external reader, further strengthening the sense of their relationship and making the mature content more striking.
[48] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 99.

Flavia by truthfully telling her stories that girl longs to hear, and about which she is curious. In one letter, Marta discourages Flavia from asking for the story of how Vera met her uncle Edoardo, telling the girl "Lascia in pace lo zio e pensa ai compiti," and Vera decides to take the opportunity through her letter to tell Flavia the requested story of their first meeting.[49] It is Vera, rather than Marta, who is shown to understand that children are "tantalized by what they don't know, inventively constructing their world" and recognize the importance of truthful tales that provide enough information to enable the child to create the kind of undistorted stories they need.[50]

Vera's stories are likewise compassionate, for she acknowledges Flavia's struggles to do what is expected of her, such as when Vera observes the girl's "passettini buffi" and lets Flavia know that she understands that they are a result of an effort to "conciliare il desiderio di scatenarti con la grande consapevolezza dei tuoi compiti di 'bambina a modo.'"[51] What most strongly characterizes Vera's stories, however, is the primary maternal virtue of shared delight with the child recipient of the story, which often requires a disciplined response in identifying sources of pleasure or pride.[52] Maraini shows Vera to nurture Flavia's imagination, inventing stories about "il mio folletto che ha fatto la cuccia tra i miei libri, che ogni tanto russa così forte che mi impedisce di scrivere."[53] In other tales of the elf Flavia asks whether he is eating and Vera recounts his coming down to sit on her typewriter, and Vera rightly fears Flavia's family's potential disapproval that the woman might put "qualche idea balorda" in the young girl's

[49] *Dolce per sé*, 88; "Don't bother about your uncle, think about your homework."
[50] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 99.
[51] *Dolce per sé*, 44; "funny little footsteps"; "reconcile your longing to run wild with the weight consciousness of your duty as a nicely-behaved little girl."
[52] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 100.
[53] *Dolce per sé*, 41; Lately [the little elf] has made his bed among my books, and from time to time he snores so loudly that it stops me writing."

head.[54] Yet the sharing of the elf stories and other moments of imaginative sharing[55] help strengthen Vera's and Flavia's bond, and Maraini shows Vera's great attentiveness to how their relationship fits within the girl's family network.

It is important to note that unlike the majority of letter writers in epistolary novels, Vera does not write from a position of isolation, nor does her relationship with the recipient of her missives exist solely through the text.[56] Vera is instead shown to interact not only with Flavia but with members of her immediate and extended family as well, and one scene of such interaction in the novel captures particularly clearly the way in which Vera's mothering through storytelling complements and differs from Marta's role as the child's biological mother. Vera describes one evening when Marta descends the stairs very upset because she is unable to coax Flavia into falling asleep and doesn't know what to do. Vera offers to tell the girl a story, to which Marta "ha acconsentito un poco riluttante perché non amava che qualcuno invadesse quello spazio sacro che univa la sua persona alla tua."[57] Vera enters this "sacred" maternal space, reminding her of her own childhood requests for stories from her mother, and describes the kind of experience Maria Tatar depicts in opening her work on the impact of sharing fairy tales with children, in which bedtime storytelling can often elicit the opposite of the desired effect, keeping the young audience engaged and awake rather than lulling them to sleep:[58]

> Invece di addormentarti quella sera tu hai presto a sorbire la mia storia sgranando sempre di più i grandi occhi sorpresi. Ti aggrappavi ai personaggi come a delle rocce sporgenti dall'acqua marina per non affondare nel liquido sonno. E quando io rallentavo mi incoraggiavi a proseguire: allora?, e poi? Così sono andata avanti per non so quanto,

[54] Ibid; "some silly ideas." The other elf stories can be found on pages 26 and 60.
[55] Such as whispering about a clarinet-serpent during a concert or sitting together watching angels throw themselves of mountain ledges during a family trip, Ibid., 79.
[56] See, for example, Salsini *Addressing the Letter*, 10-12 and Elizabeth Campbell, "Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women," 338.
[57] *Dolce per sé*, 155; "agreed a little reluctantly because she didn't like anyone invading the sacred space between herself and you."
[58] Tatar, *Enchanted Hunters*, 2. Chapter One contains a more thorough examination of bedtime reading.

> forse mezz'ora. Anche tua madre si era acquietata, forse dormiva o ascoltava anche lei la lunga storia […].[59]

Though initially resistant to potential encroachment upon her maternal domain, Marta is shown to become calm as Vera engages with Flavia in storytelling, possibly becoming engaged herself or simply relaxing as the burden of getting her child to sleep is lifted by another. In this scene, as throughout the novel, Maraini underscores Vera's impulse toward inclusion, creating relationships with Flavia and her family and assuming a maternal role that does not conflict with or usurp that of the girl's biological mother. Storytelling plays a key role not only in Vera's establishing a maternal position in relationship with Flavia, but also in the way in which Vera reworks family bonds to establish a familial connection in the absence of biological or legal ties.

Beginning with her earliest letter, Vera uses stories both to root Flavia within the girl's own family of origin and to extend family connections to herself and her family. As previously mentioned, Maraini shows Vera to explicitly meditate on the nature of family connections and to attempt to describe her relationship to Flavia in the absence of preexisting definitions on which to rely. Vera alerts Flavia to her awareness of the fact that "Lo zio Edoardo è il nostro legame, la nostra conquistata parentela, il nodo di affetti che ha portato te a me e me a te." and ponders the possibilty of a relationship forming between two people "quando non sono parenti".[60] Vera returns to this vein of meditation on 'acquired kinship' throughout her letters, realizing that through her romantic relationship "non mi ero imbarcata in una storia d'amore con un uomo dal meraviglioso talento musicale ma con una intera tribù profondamente legata e solidale. Una tribù i cui legami sono così complicati e robusti e profondi che non ho potuto neanche capirli

[59] *Dolce per sé*, 156; "On that particular evening, instead of going to sleep, you became more and more absorbed in my story, your eyes big with surprise. You clung to the characters as if they were rocks rising out of the sea so you would not sink down into the water of sleep. Whenever I slowed down you encourage me to carry on saying 'Then, and then?' So I went on for I don't know how long, perhaps half an hour. Even your mother grew calm, perhaps she went to sleep or perhaps she was also listening to the long story […]."

[60] Ibid., 9; "Uncle Edoardo has been the link in our relationship, the knot of affection bringing me to you and you to me;" "given they are not related."

veramente."[61] Attempting to comprehend the complex web of family ties in Edoardo's family, as well as her own place within them is a central concern in Vera's letters, and storytelling is the primary means through which she creates connections and transcends the limitations blood ties.

In her first letter to Flavia, in addition to reflecting on their connection, Vera also begins telling family stories that ground the girl in a family network. Vera tells Flavia stories of the girl's ancestors, telling her of her great grandfather and his marriage to an Egyptian princess, drawing a comparison between the tastes of this princess Amina and Flavia's own.[62] As this story expands to include other members of Flavia's lineage, the tales Vera tells serve the purposes of two of the primary categories of family stories Elizabeth Stone describes in her work on family storytelling, those that help incorporate individual members into family definitions and those that relate love, lineage and marriage as fundamental to establishing family foundations.[63] Here as elsewhere, Vera traces Flavia's traits to her ancestors, such as her inheriting her particular capacity for memory from both her father and uncle, as well as her mimicking of an expression typical of her grandmother, and throughout the text Vera emphasizes the passing down of artistic talent from generation to generation, a tradition in which she hopes Flavia will continue, and a characteristic shared by many of the spouses in the family not related by blood.[64] Including Flavia in shared traits and values is a means to solidify both the girl's belonging to the family and the family's continued cohesion and sense of group identity, as put forth by Stone.[65] It is significant that these stories come from Vera, a non-biological member of the familial group

[61] Ibid., 35; "I had not only embarked on a love-affair with a man of wonderful musical talent, but with an entire tribe that was deeply a solidly united. A tribe in which the ties are so complex and strong and deep that I have not really been able to understand them."
[62] Ibid., 15-16; "Come te, Flavia, preferiva un cetriolino sott'aceto a una caramella al miele."
[63] Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins*, Chapters 2 and 3.
[64] This passages can be found in *Dolce per sé*, 49 and 9.
[65] Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins*, 32-37.

whose ties to the family are precariously based on a romantic relationship lacking the binding status of marriage.

Maraini, in fact, shows the relationship between Vera and Flavia to outlive Vera's romantic one with Edoardo, for she continues to write to the girl long after she observes the changes in the nine months since she last wrote:

> Quando ti ho scritto la lettera di dicembre ero un'altra persona: stavo bene con un piede dentro la vostra famiglia, tanto mi erano care le persone che la abitano. Ma ora quel piede mi è stato tagliato di netto. Anzi, a dire la verità, me lo sono amputato da sola e così cammino male, zoppicando.[66]

Vera thus depicts her attachment to Flavia and her family as a physical part of herself, the separation from which is a source of great pain, and her meditations on the boundaries of the family, what constitutes being in or outside of the group, illuminates many of the complexities inherent in the formation of families. The initial story of Flavia's great-grandfather's two wives exhibits such complexities, which Stone underscores as central to the challenge of 'making family' through marriage, assimilating new members not biologically related into preexisting familial groups while simultaneously creating a new family unit.[67] Vera includes in her narration of Flavia's great-grandfather's meeting with his first wife the fact that his choice of bride was considered a sign of his "stravaganza" and that their meeting was the stuff of the "migliori romanzi d'amore" inasfar as the two met in the "circostanza romanticamente drammatica" of an emergency plane landing that led to the meeting and "una grande passione sfociata in un matrimonio."[68] This tale typifies Stone's description of a courtship tale, which serves as a

[66] *Dolce per sé*, 64; "When I wrote to you last December I was another person. I was feeling good, with one foot inside your family since I care so much for the people who are part of it. But now that foot has been cut off. To tell the truth I amputated it myself and so now I am walking badly with a limp."
[67] Ibid., 63.
[68] *Dolce per sé*, 16; "unconventional[ity]"; "best love story tradition"; "romantically dramatic circumstances"; "a great passion ending in marriage."

creation myth in relating how the new family began, and contains the crucial sense of an inevitable destiny.

Vera demonstrates her awareness of the importance of the "Piccole mitologie familiari" surrounding these ancestors, as she remarks that "una famiglia senza mitologie sarebbe come un cielo senza stelle, un buco vuoto e inquietante."[69] Vera also includes the very different story of Flavia's great-grandfather's meeting with his second wife, the violinist Teresina, who was treated as "una estranea", subjected to "ostracismo familiare" due to the fact that she was seen by her stepson as having "preso il posto della madre amata."[70] Vera thus underscores the importance of including all members in the family's stories, even those not related by blood, and in drawing attention to her coining the term "bisnonnastra, la vogliamo chiamare così?" to create a descriptor for Teresina's relationship to the family, Vera points to the need to expand existing definitions of familial relationships to be more inclusive.[71]

Teresina's peripheral position in relationship to the family and her relatives' refusal to accept her into the group is in many ways similar to Vera's situation. She knows that she is not invited to family dinners because of the

> "pensiero segreto che […] serpeggia nella tribù: perché un giovanotto di così grande bellezza, di così grande talento, di così grande sensibilità deve perdere la sua vita con una donna più vecchia di lui, con un mestiere così chiassoso per giunta, invece di sposarsi con una bella ragazza giovane che gli faccia subito un figlio tondo e bello che probabilmente si chiamerà Arduino come il nonno o Fiorenza come la nonna nel caso fosse una bambina?[72]

[69] Ibid.;"Little family myths"; "a family without myths would be like a sky without stars, an empty and disquieting cavern." See Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins*, 96-108 for an elaboration on family myths.
[70] Ibid., 17; "a stranger"; "family's need to ostracize"; "taken the place of his much-loved mother."
[71] Ibid.; "step-granny – shall we call her this?"
[72] Ibid., 42; "the secret thought that […] snakes its way among this tribe: 'Why should a young man who is so good-looking and has so much talent and so much sensitivity, lose out on life by living with an older woman who has such a showy profession? He should be marrying a lovely young girl who would soon have a child called Arduino like his grandfather, or Fiorenza like his grandmother if she happens to be a girl.'" Vera reiterates the ostracism and her awareness of being considered "eccentrica" by Edoardo's family, Ibid., 113, though the female members of his family tend to be more accepting.

Maraini shows Vera to be acutely aware she is undesirable as a mate for Edoardo due to the unlikeliness of her continuing the family line through biological motherhood, which for her represents a potential motivation for seeking an alternative maternal relationship with Flavia. Through her letters Vera attempts to tie Flavia to Vera's family in a similar way that she tied Flavia to her own family through storytelling. Not only does Flavia use expressions reminiscent of her biological grandmother, as previously discussed, but Vera observes a linguistic familial tie to the girls as she tells her "è buffo che tu abbia adoperato un termine che usava la mia nonna Amalia: 'tiriamo le foto; diceva".[73] Vera describes her own relatives to Flavia in a similar way to those she told of Flavia's ancestors, strengthening the sense of an extended family blending together various branches. It is in the act of storytelling itself, however, that Vera most strongly emphasizes a familial bond, for Maraini shows Vera to use stories as a means through which to include Flavia in a female genealogy.

In the scene previously described in which Vera tells Flavia a bedtime story in an attempt to lull her to sleep, Maraini includes Vera's reflection on the similarity to her own experience of maternal storytelling as a child. As she begins her tale, she recalls

> «Mi racconti una storia, mamma?» chiedevo da bambina e lei si accingeva a sbrogliare pazientemente, davanti ai miei occhi, la matassa intricata delle vicende di quel re che aveva tre figlie e in giardino un albero che faceva le mele d'oro. Sento ancora sulla lingua il sapore dell'attesa: cosa sarebbe successo quando un uccello enorme, dalle ali d'oro, avesse rubato tutte le mele d'oro del re? […] Il piacere era profondo e diramava le sue radici nel sottosuolo dell'immaginazione come una pianta che cerchi l'acqua nelle oscurità della terra. Quella terra è la memoria, una memoria che abbiamo in comune con la specie e che ci rende tutti dipendenti dalla sublime arte del narrare.[74]

[73] Ibid., 74; "it was strange how you took on an expression my grandmother Amalia used to use. 'Shooting' snapshots she would say."
[74] Ibid., 155-156; "'Tell me a story, mummy,' I used to ask as a child and my mother would start to unravel the intricate skein of happenings when a king had three daughters and in the garden there was a tree with golden apples. I can still savour on my tongue the taste of expectation. What would happen when an enormous bird with wings of gold, stole all the king's apples? […] The pleasure was so deep, sending its roots into the subsoil of the imagination like a plant reaching for water in the darkness of the earth. The earth is memory, a memory we share with all of mankind making us dependent on the sublime art of storytelling."

Vera's mother is thus linked not only through the reference to a skein to the ancient female art of weaving and its use as a metaphor for storytelling,[75] but she is also represented as a nurturer through her tales, leading her child to the nourishment of memory essential to life. Through storytelling, mothers ground their children in a sense of shared history, in this novel shared female history, that which Vera describes at the close of her final letter to Flavia as "quella memoria femminile che è entrata nel mio bagaglio sapienziale come un talent innato: cercare, studiare, cogliere, mettere da parte, cucinare, trasformare, accudire, cibare."[76] Maraini enacts Flavia's participation in the perpetuation of this female memory through storytelling, as Vera begins this same letter by recounting that Flavia planted some beans in her little vegetable garden because of a story Vera had once told her about Fagiolino, a story that had been transmitted to Vera by her own mother.[77] This is evidence of Maraini's desire to maintain a genealogy, which Salsini has aptly argued is indicative of the inclusionary politics at the heart of the author's work, in which "both male and female cultural history can be fonts of inspiration and creativity."[78] The welcoming of Flavia into a genealogy that embraces all-inclusive ties, intertwining blood connections with those of Vera's family, provides the inspiration for the woman's letters and the novel that contains them.

It is important to note the extent to which Maraini infuses autobiographical elements into the fictional character, Vera, as it represents an important development in the author's use of autobiography for its essential connection to maternal storytelling. In addition to identifiable autobiographical elements such as Vera's profession, her vacations in the Italian Alps and the

[75] See Kruger, Kathryn Sullivan. *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production*, Chapter One for an in-depth discussion of the historic use of this metaphor.
[76] *Dolce per sé*, 184; "the female memory that has become part of my mental baggage, like some inborn talent. To look, to study, to pick, to put to one side, to cook, to transform, to make ready, to nourish."
[77] Ibid., 172. This is, significantly, the reason for which Vera writes this final letter, for though she had decided to stop writing, hearing of Flavia's gardening from Edoardo led her to change her mind.
[78] Salsini, *Addressing the Letter*, 138.

details she includes of the death of her sister, Maraini also begins in this novel to elaborate the autobiographical origins of the theme of maternal storytelling.[79] Maraini's subsequent two works have a maternal focus, as in *La nave per Kobe. Diari giapponesi di mia madre,* she transcribes and comments on her mother Topazia's diaries, and in *Colomba* Maraini brings maternal storytelling to the fore as the driving force behind a novel about generations of mothers and daughters.

Colomba: Autobiography, authorship and maternal storytelling

Maraini's 2004 novel *Colomba* is a structurally complex work, exemplary of elements of what Marisa Rusconi has identified as a part of a new female genre of literary experimentation, a hybrid work in which fragments of autobiography permeate a text composed through a seemingly objective lens, with the writer's own stories defying exclusion and bursting forth here and there amongst the stories of others.[80] This is a fitting description for *Colomba*, in which the protagonist Zaira's search for her missing granddaughter, the Colomba of the book's title, coexists with Zaira's tracing her ancestry through storytelling as part of the metanarrative frame of the author composing the novel in conversation with her protagonist. Thus the detective novel genre is intertwined with personal and family biography, as well as meditations on authorship,

[79] Maraini's sister Yuki died from a throat infection in 1995, as Maraini was concluding the writing of the novel. In a 1997 interview Maraini says of her sue of autobiography in the novel: "Si', Vera l'ho fatta simile a me, ma non ci ho messo tutto di me. Manca qualche parte, ho lasciato qualcosa in ombra. Volevo anche poterlo guardare da fuori questo personaggio, ho lasciato un margine fra identificazione e distacco." Polese Ranieri, "MARAINI Lettere mai spedite a una bambina", *Corriere della sera,* 6 aprile 1997, 27.

[80] Rusconi, "Nuovi percorsi tra esperienza e scrittura", *Ciao Bella: Ventun Percorsi Di Critica Letteraria Femminile Oggi,* 164. Though written before *Colomba* was published, Rusconi labels "buona parte" of Maraini's work as fitting this description, and I would argue that this novel is no exception.

and the *filo rosso* that connects the various elements within the work is storytelling. *Colomba* represents a reworking not only of genres central to Maraini's *oeuvre*,[81] but of themes as well, such as role of storytelling in the construction of family, women's roles within the family and the need to establish a female genealogy the enables women to share in their collective history. It is in this work that Maraini most profoundly locates storytelling within the maternal, and through incorporating details of her own life story she claims a position for herself within the tradition of maternal storytellers. She explicitly characterizes writing as a maternal process, incorporating her critical reflections into a depiction of how her characters and works are born, while at the same time tracing the maternal origin of her gift as a writer.

"La donna dai capelli corti", the figure of the writer with which the novel opens and who is identifiable as Maraini herself, demonstrates a keen interest in severed familial ties, in missing family members who disappear through force or by choice.[82] She claims to have been intrigued since her childhood by missing persons who leave behind no trace and who exist in "quell'esile confine tra la morte e la vita."[83] This interest takes root in Zaira's story of the missing Colomba, dramatized through the character of Zaira's knocking at the writer's door in the early pages of the novel to insist that her story be heard, a story that consists not only of Colomba's life and disappearance, but of six generations of their family's history. Zaira's tale begins not with the details of her granddaughter's disappearance, which she instead transmits to the writer by giving her a copy of a local news article describing it, but rather by telling of the orphan Mosè del

[81] Zaira's investigation into Colomba's disappearance is in many ways similar to Michela Canova's search for Angela Bari's killer in the *poliziesco*, or detective-novel *Voci*; family history and autobiography mix in works such as *Bagheria* and *La nave per Kobe. Diari giapponesi di mia madre*.
[82] See Christina Siggers Manson, "In love with Cecchino," 100 n1 for further evidence supporting the argument that the writer depicted in the novel is Maraini herself, including her physical description, reference to previous works and details of her personal and family life.
[83] *Colomba,* 70; "that thin boundary between death and life." All translations of the novel are mine.

Signore whom she identifies as the origin of her family.[84] She explains that the loss of her granddaughter has spurred her to get to know her family better, as she hopes her genealogical research will bring to light some of "quelle caratteristiche ripetitive che distinguono una famiglia dall'altra."[85] Maraini emphasizes once again the extent to which individual identity is formed through relationships within the family, as Zaira hopes to come to know Colomba better by knowing her family better and to thus be able to discern possible contributing factors to her disappearance.

This sense of repetition of characteristics or patterns in family history is specifically focused in the novel on the cyclical nature of women's experiences, to which Zaira points when she describes her daughter Angelica as part of "una tradizione di ragazze madri" abandoned by their partners and left to raise their children alone.[86] This observation prefaces Angelica's confession to her mother that her step-grandfather had sexually abused her, emphasizing the history of mistreatment of women by the men of the family. As Christina Siggers Manson has aptly observed, Zaira's oral testimony is part of Maraini's project of encouraging a sense of solidarity among women through establishing a female genealogy.[87] Mothers often do not fare well in the family's history, as the tragic deaths of Angelica and her great-grandmother Pina result in Zaira's taking care of her grandchild just as her great-grandmother and namesake did three generations earlier. In her study of women's writing in the latter part of the twentieth century, Adalgisa Giorgio highlights the role that the grandmother has played in the wave of narratives focused on blood genealogies and female family lineage in the two decades preceding the publication of *Colomba*. Women's relationships with their grandmothers in these texts are

[84] Ibid., 15; "ha dato origine alla nostra famiglia."
[85] Ibid.; "those recurring characteristics that distinguish one family from another."
[86] Ibid., 174; "a tradition of single mothers."
[87] Siggers Manson, "In love with Cecchino: opening the door to violence in Dacia Maraini's *Colomba* and *Voci*," 92.

generally shown to be more positive and less ambivalent than those with their mothers,[88] yet Maraini complicates this tendency by showing Zaira to occupy the dual role of mother and grandmother.

Zaira's and Colomba's relationship replays many of the emotions and tensions historically associated with the mother-daughter relationship, and throughout the novel Zaira is shown to be a second mother to her granddaughter. When the writer first introduces Zaira as a potential character demanding her attention at the start of the text, she includes the important relational detail that "Da timida e impacciata qual è, diventa decisa e intraprendente quando si tratta di sua nipote Colomba, detta 'Mbina. L'ha tirata su come una figlia."[89] Zaira is shown to co-mother her granddaughter even before her daughter Angelica's sudden death, and upon hearing of Angela's accident Zaira realizes she will have to take on the role of both mother and father.[90] At the conclusion of the novel, when Zaira is finally reunited with her granddaughter, the two must learn together "la difficile arte della convivenza", like generations of mothers and daughters who have had to learn to overcome their tensions and peacefully coexist.[91]

Maraini incorporates storytelling as an integral part of Zaira's mothering, for in a passage in which Zaira directly addresses her deceased daughter she highlights Angelica's love of family stories, recalling "La storia di famiglia ti appassionava. E io raccontavo, magari andando avanti e indietro come un gatto inquieto, ma tu non eri mai sazia."[92] As the writer in the novel, Maraini mirrors both this passion for family stories and Angelica's flood of questions for the storyteller

[88] Giorgio, "The novel, 1965-2000," in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, 226.
[89] *Colomba*, 70; "She transforms from her usual timid and awkward self to become determined and resourceful when her granddaughter Colomba, called 'Mbina, is concerned. She raised her as her daughter."
[90] "For earlier examples of Zaira's mothering of Colomba, see, for example, Ibid., 264.
[91] Ibid., 355; "the difficult art of coexistence."
[92] Ibid., 301; "The family story excited you. And I would tell it, perhaps going back and forth like a restless cat, and you were never satiated."

when she explicitly casts herself in the role of daughter waiting for maternal stories from her protagonist:

> La donna dai capelli corti deve ammettere, a questo punto della storia, che si è affezionata alla famiglia Bigoncia Del Signore, che aspetta con trepidazione le parole di Zaira per saperne di più, di più ancora, come faceva con sua madre da bambina, quando la subissava di domande su storie vere e inventate raccontate prima che si addormentasse.[93]

Maraini, in turn, acts as a literary mother to her character, Zaira, bringing her to life as I will shortly demonstrate. The scenes of the writer's childhood experience of hearing her mother's stories woven throughout the novel, always introduced by the request "Racconta, ma'", demonstrate Maraini's sense of being part of a history of women like her characters, links in the 'chain' of generations of mothers.[94] The fluidity of women's roles changing throughout time is visible in this relationship as well, as Maraini often reflects on her mother's ageing in these passages, and in a similar pattern to her relationship with Zaira Maraini shows herself to fulfill both the role of biological daughter in the scenes of her mother's stories and maternal storyteller, as she writes "Quando osserva sua madre, può scoprire nei suoi occhi interrogativi lo sguardo della bambina che è stata. […] Ora è lei a farle da madre e raccontarle delle storie, ora è lei a sorprenderla, a trascinarla nel mondo burlesco dei racconti di famiglia".[95]

The setting of the woods lends itself to this fluidity in moving in and out of roles through time, with its capacity to "rimescolare le generazioni, fare sgusciare fuori da una terra addormentata, mai coltivata […] qualcosa di vivo e fresco […] il frutto dei ricordi sepolti le cui

[93]Ibid., 134; "The short-haired woman must admit, at this point in the story, that she has grown attached to the Bigoncia Del Signore family and that she awaits Zaira's words with trepidation, anxious to know more and more, she like she used to do with her mother as a child, when she would overwhelm her with questions about real and invented tales told before she fell asleep."
[94] Ibid., 195.
[95] Ibid., 217; "When she observes her mother she is able to discover in her inquisitive eyes a glimpse of the little girl she once was. […] Now it is she who mothers her and tells her stories, now it is she who surprises her and carries her away into the burlesque world of family tales."

radici si ramificano in lontananza, nel sottosuolo della memoria."[96] Like the metaphorical fruit of the woods, stories arise from memory and are rooted amongst the generations. As the text progresses Maraini carefully constructs the revelation that the character of Zaira who comes knocking at the writer's door has her origins in the maternal tradition of storytelling. Only a few pages after the description of the woods Maraini portrays the "incrocio" between Zaira and the writer's mother, continuing the story through her mother's voice, as Zaira has somehow managed to "insinuarsi nei pensieri di una madre perché li comunichi alla figlia bambina."[97] The writer's mother is added as a link in the chain of the generations of women transmitting this family story, which continues with the writer passing the story on to her readers.

It is in these passages of the mother telling bedtime stories to the writer as a young girl that Maraini most fully incorporates her autobiographical experience, revealing the significant impact her mother Topazia's storytelling had on her development as a writer. As Cinzia Sartini Blum underscores in her discussion of Topazia's role in Maraini's previous work *Bagheria* in "reconstructing the bonds of female ancestry" and connecting her daughter to the collective history of the women of the family, a project Sartini Blum sees as continuing in the successive works *La nave per Kobe: Diari giapponesi di mia madre* and *Colomba*.[98] In this novel Maraini makes explicit that "L'esperienza profonda e misteriosa di raccontare storie le veniva da sua madre. […] Era stata sua madre a introdurla per sempre nel mondo fantasmagorico del racconto verbale."[99] Maraini and her mother are shown to discover together "l'arte del racconto" at the

[96] Ibid., 110-111; "remix generations, to hatch from the dormant, uncultivated earth […] something fresh and alive […] the fruit of buried memories whose roots branch out widely in the subsoil of memory." As Christina Siggers Manson has observed, the woods are likewise a fitting setting for the fairy tale theme she traces through the novel, "In love with Cecchino ", 94.
[97] Ibid.; "insinuate herself into the thoughts of a mother so that she communicates them to her young daughter."
[98] Sartini Blum, *Rewriting the Journey in Contemporary Italian Literature*, 161.
[99] *Colomba*, 256; "the profound and mysterious experience of telling stories came to her from her mother […] It was her mother who introduced her forever to the phantasmagoric world of the oral tale."

same time Zaira and Colomba are learning to live together.[100] The autobiographical element of the maternal origin of Maraini's passion for storytelling sheds light on the contemporaneous act of writing in the novel, which Maraini has long considered it to be a maternal experience as elaborated in her critical reflections on the process of writing.

Sartini Blum has observed the lack of hierarchical distinction in the "maternal heritage" of storytelling in the novel between the written and spoken word.[101] Maraini, in fact, roots both the oral and literary traditions in the maternal, and in *Colomba* she dramatizes the process of giving life to characters that she has elaborated in her critical reflections on the nature of writing. As early as 1987 Maraini describes writing as "profondamente femminile e materna", in particular concerning the novel, "legato com'è al senso del divenire".[102] She later elaborates on the 'birth' of characters, figures who "nascono da noi, sono carne della nostra carne"[103] and with whom her initial relationship is "obscure, like a mother-daughter relationship […] made of emotions."[104] As we have seen, Maraini and Zaira alternate between maternal and filial roles as their relationship plays out in the novel, and once Maraini has completed the maternal task of giving form to Zaira and her story through the text, her protagonist no longer has need of her.[105]

Maraini not only concludes but also begins *Colomba* with a metanarrative focus, responding to the question she is asked about how a novel is 'born', describing the kinds of visits with metafictional characters she has similarly elaborated in her critical writing. Zaira is one of these characters who, in true Pirandellian form, "pretendono di raccontare la loro storia in prima

[100] Ibid., 355; "the art of the tale."
[101] Sartini Blum, *Rewriting the Journey in Contemporary Italian Literature*, 167.
[102] "profoundly female and maternal"; "tied as it is to a sense of becoming"; "Riflessioni sui corpi logici e illogici delle mie compagne di sesso" in *La bionda, la bruna e l'asino*, xvii.
[103] "Characters are born from us, they are the flesh of our flesh"; "Nota all'edizione 1996," *L'eta del malessere,* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 6.
[104]Serena Anderlini, et al. "Dacia Maraini: Prolegomena for a Feminist Dramaturgy of the Feminine."
[105] *Colomba*, 365; "Ma sono loro, i suoi personaggi, che hanno scelto così. Soprattutto Zaira detta Zà,che l'ha condotta nei boschi a cercare la nipote, e dopo averla trovata, averla vegliata per settimane all'ospedale, dopo averla riportata a casa sana, ora le mostra appagata, con garbo che non ha più bisogno di una romanziera."

persona."[106] There is similar presumption inherent in the act of creation for Maraini, as she contends that "C'è qualcosa di molto presuntuoso nel volere dare forma all'informe. Ma ogni progetto di maternità è nello stesso tempo presuntuoso (creare un altro essere umano, ma è pazzesco!) e umile: la madre in qualche modo si mette da parte per fare posto a un altro da sé."[107] Maraini the writer has concluded her "project of maternity" at the novel's close as she returns once more to her mother as archetypal storyteller who, having finished one tale, "ravviandosi i capelli, si accinge a ricominciare," thus signaling the start to a new cycle of maternal storytelling.[108]

[106] Maraini, in an interview with Paola Gaglianone, *Conversazione Con Dacia Maraini: Il Piacere Di Scrivere*, 6; "demand to tell their own story in the first person"
[107] Ibid; "There's something very presumptuous in the desire to give form to that which is formless. Yet every project of maternity is at the same time presumptuous (creating another human being, that's crazy!) and humble: the mother puts herself aside in some way to make room for an other."
[108] *Colomba*, 365; "tidying her hair, prepares to begin again."

CONCLUSION

The influence of Elsa Morante and Dacia Maraini is evident in the works of the 'post-feminist' generation of Italian women writers, those born from the 1960s on who came of age after the height of the ideology and political activism of the feminist movement of the 1970s. Theirs is a society undeniably indebted to the changes spurred by this activism, as they experienced as adults a world in which both divorce and abortion were already legal, and women held unprecedented power in determining their reproduction and in forming families of their own. Yet the choice to embrace biological motherhood continues to be a challenging one for many contemporary Italian women, as reflected in the country's declining birthrate that was already one of the lowest in the world at the close of the twentieth century and has now reached a historic low not seen since the birth of the Italian state in 1861.[1] Those who do choose to have children have increasingly waited until a later age to do so, as the mean age of first-time mothers in Italy is one of the highest in Europe.[2] Women's quest for motherhood against the odds of age

[1] Source: Monnier, "La situazione demografica dell'Europa," 23 and ISTAT statistics for 2014, according to which Italy registered only 8.4 births per 1,000 residents. http://demo.istat.it/

[2] According to the Eurostat report issued on May 13, 2015, Italy currently holds the highest mean age for the birth of a woman's first child, 30.6, closely followed by Spain at 30.4.

or physical complications through the aid of reproductive technologies has begun to be reflected in the work of contemporary Italian women writers.[3] Conflicting feelings regarding motherhood continue to feature centrally in fiction by women, and many of the issues raised in their texts are in conversation with elements of the discourse on mothering in the works of Morante and Maraini examined in this dissertation.

As Stefania Lucamante has observed in her study of the contribution of women writers' to the contemporary Italian novel, although the work of the writers under discussion differs from previous feminist models it is nevertheless engaged with ideological issues without allowing this engagement to interfere with the literary value of the novel.[4] As these writers navigate their place in society and relationships with its norms, motherhood continues to be placed under scrutiny as a potentially oppressive role for women, and the ways in which the role is deconstructed, rejected or reimagined reveal both reference to their literary predecessors and innovation. In terms of Morante's legacy, Lucamante maps the intertextuality between novels by Mariateresa Di Lascia, Elena Ferrante and Simona Vinci and the work of their literary mother.[5] These writers alternately draw on both the narrative structure and thematics of Morante's work, particularly in turning to the family as the site in which both men and women struggle to conform to societal norms and expectations for their gender roles.

Vinci follows Morante's example in deconstructing the mother-son relationship, echoing the son's need to free himself from his overwhelming, unresolved relationship with his mother central to *Aracoeli*. Ferrante exposes the oppressiveness of societal prerogatives for women in a

[3] Laura Lazzini, for example has studied the reflection of a woman's desire to become a mother at any cost in the novels of Margaret Mazzantini and Eleonora Mazzoni, in connection to recent psychological discourse on the subject, having presented a paper on the topic of "Maternità ad ogni costo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea" at the 2014 AAIS Annual Convention in Zurich.
[4] Lucamante, *A Multitude of Women*, 3-17.
[5] Ibid., Chapter 1.

manner reminiscent of Morante's earliest two novels. *Menzogna and sortilegio* in particular serves as a model for both Ferrante's re-working of the mother-daughter bond in *L'amore molesto* and the protagonist's struggle against her female heritage in Fabrizia Ramondino's *Althénopis*.[6] Di Lascia's *Passaggio in ombra* follows a pattern of narration similar that of Morante's first novel, in which her protagonist similarly explores her different relationship to two mothers, one biological and the other adoptive. The questioning of the development of gender identities and the reworking of the Oedipal complex represents another thematic in contemporary novels that was featured prominently in Morante's work. Authors such as Ippolita Avalli, Francesca Mazzucato and Pia Pera revisit questions of paternal authority and influence that remained unresolved in novels such as *L'isola di Arturo* and *Aracoeli*.[7]

Maraini's influence is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the work of Rossana Campo, whose sustained interest in women's identity formation in many ways mirrors that of her literary predecessor. Situated in a society in which women reap the benefits gained through the feminist movement, Campo's protagonists for the most part move out of the constrictions of family life in order to create relationships with women that recreate and substitute familial bonds. Campo further liberates her protagonists from heterosexual norms, imagining configurations of friends and romantic attachments that prove more sustainable than those Maraini earlier explored in *Il treno per Helsinki*, and has been deemed 'feminist' insofar as she depicts women's sexual emancipation in unprecedented ways.[8] As Lucamante has noted, the mother does not represent a strong presence in Campo's early works, neither as an identity

[6] Adalgisa Giorgio has studied these works in depth as part of her work on the mother-daughter relationship in Italian literature. See "The Passion for the Mother," *Writing Mothers and Daughters*, 126-133.
[7] See Ibid., Chapter 2 for Lucamante's in-depth discussion of a selection of these writers' novels.
[8] Silvia Contarini, "Riflessioni sulla narrativa femminile degli anni '90," 157. Lucamante has labelled Campo "the quintessential post-feminist writer" (A Multitude of Women, 15) while Peter Gahl has taken issue with this terminology,

considered by her protagonists nor as a figure against which to struggle for an independent identity.[9] Yet while the unplanned pregnancies that occur in texts such as *Mentre la mia bella dorme* and *Il matrimonio di Maria* are not represented as posing a threat to women's other identities in the text, they force women to rethink the family structures they create.

In *Il matrimonio di Maria*, in particular, Campo employs the colloquial register that characterizes her work along with the element of orality stemming from the work's origin as a radio play, to signal in a light-hearted fashion the imminent questions that accompany the changes in the Italian family at the close of the twentieth century. Born of a traditional Sicilian family, the protagonist Maria must navigate the unacceptability of her lesbian relationship. The child that results from her decision to enter into a heterosexual marriage is at the end of the text at the center of an attempt to rework familial arrangements in which Maria, her lover and the child's biological father intend to cohabitate as they co-parent. This work calls for a rethinking of both maternal and paternal roles to keep pace with changes a society in which gay and lesbian families and decreasing biological motherhood necessitate new paradigms through which to imagine the maternal outside of biological relationships.[10]

It is my hope that this study on non-biological motherhood in the works of two of the most influential Italian women writers of the past century will serve as one contribution to a growing dialogue on the issues raised by broader conceptualizations of mothering represented in Italian literature. As Adalgisa Giorgio has noted, the mother's subjectivity has gained greater attention in narratives by women from the 1990s on, and as more narratives take the perspective

[9] Lucamante, "'Una laudevole fine': femminismo e identificazione della donna nella narrative di Rossana Campo,"
[10] As evidenced in the survey of contemporary gay and lesbian literature by Derek Duncan and Charlotte Ross in *Trends in Contemporary Italian Narrative*, the Italian literary tradition has lagged behind many of its international counterparts in terms of the representation of gay and lesbian desire and subjectivities. In terms of the depiction of gay and lesbian families in Italy, where adoption by same-sex couples is still illegal, only very recently have these found representation in narrative, for example in Melania Mazzucco's 2015 *Sei come sei* and Claudio Rossi Marcelli's 2011 *Hello daddy! Storie di due uomini, due culle e una famiglia felice*.

of the mother I believe there will be a greater call for critical discussions of the ways women as well as men views themselves as mothers within and beyond biological relationships.

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