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THE ART OF INDETERMINACY IN THE PROSE WORKS OF GOLIARDA SAPIENZA

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BY

ELANA STEPHENSON KRANZ

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For my family

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## INTRODUCTION

Even setting aside her accomplishments as a stage and film actress and prolific writer, Goliarda Sapienza's very name could have marked her for distinction, if not infamy. Far from a conventional Italian Catholic name, "Goliarda" derives from the Latin "goliard," the term bestowed upon a group of renegade clerics and scholars in the Middle Ages who wandered throughout Europe writing ribald anti-clerical satirical verses and living lives of carnal indulgence. In Italian, the adjective "goliardico" implies an irreverent or carefree quality, while "Sapienza" means "knowledge" or "erudition." In the words of the author Dacia Maraini, Sapienza "certainly bears resemblance to her name, which married a daring boldness with sweet wisdom. This is how Goliarda was: warrior-like and pacifist, aggressive and mild-mannered."<sup>1</sup> Born in Catania, Sicily in 1924, Sapienza authored roughly a dozen literary works, including prose, poetry, and theatrical pieces, throughout the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. However, despite her artistic output, Sapienza found it difficult to publish in Italy during her lifetime and only in recent years has started to receive critical attention.

Notwithstanding this indifferent reception when she was alive, posthumous interest in Sapienza's literary work is now growing apace. In the early 2000s, television producer Manuela

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<sup>1</sup> "Goliarda Sapienza certamente assomigliava al suo nome che sposa una ardita temerarietà con una dolce saggezza. Così era Goliarda: guerresca e pacifica, aggressiva e mite." Pellegrino quoted in the introduction to Goliarda Sapienza, *Lettera aperta* (Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1997), 9. According to this autobiographical novel, she was named after a deceased elder brother, Goliardo. She also mentions Goliardo in Goliarda Sapienza, *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa: taccuini (1976-1989)* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011).

Vigorita and Loredana Rotondo, then director of television production company Rai Educational, featured Sapienza as the first subject in a documentary television series about little known Italians called “Vuoti di memoria” (“Memory Gaps” or “Memory Lapses”). They presented the video in various parts of Italy and interest in Sapienza caught on; for example, in 2002 Daniela Unghetta, a professor at the University of Rome “La Sapienza,” devoted a full course to Sapienza.<sup>2</sup> Since then, a handful of conferences have been held on her, a biography was published in 2010, and three collections of essays entirely devoted to Sapienza have been published in the past few years with at least one other study forthcoming.<sup>3</sup> However, despite this recent attention, she is still largely absent from anthologies of Italian women writers of the twentieth century; there are only a handful of critical studies on Sapienza’s work; and perhaps most surprisingly, considering that Sapienza wrote six autobiographical works, she is neglected in the scholarship on Italian women’s autobiography.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See article by Manuela Vigorita in Monica Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza* (Milano: La Tartaruga edizioni, 2011), 22-23. The French version of *L'arte della gioia* was published in 2005, receiving a positive review on the front page of *Le Monde*. The first English translation of Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*, was released in 2013, which shows growing interest in Sapienza in the Anglophone world as well.

<sup>3</sup> A conference titled, “Appassionata Sapienza: Giornata di Studi e Formazione su Goliarda Sapienza” (“Impassioned Sapienza/Knowledge: A Day of Study and Education on Goliarda Sapienza”) was held at the Sala Agnelli Ariosteia Library in Ferrara, Italy on March 21, 2009, out of which came the above-mentioned collection of essays edited by Monica Farnetti, *Appassionata Sapienza*. The first conference in English devoted to Sapienza, “Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture,” was held at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies at the University of London on June 1, 2013. *Writing for Freedom: Body, Identity and Power in Goliarda Sapienza’s Narrative* by Alberica Bazzoni will be published as part of Peter Lang International Academic Publishers Studies in Contemporary Women’s Writing series in 2017.

<sup>4</sup> There is one sentence on Sapienza in Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood, *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235. There is an entry on Sapienza in Neria De Giovanni, *E dicono che siamo poche...Scrittrici italiane dell’ultimo Novecento* (Roma: Commissione Nazionale per la Parità e le Pari Opportunità tra Uomo e Donna, 2003), 51-52. The three books of criticism on Sapienza’s writing are the above-mentioned Farnetti, ed. *Appassionata Sapienza*; Giovanna Providenti, “*Quel sogno d’essere*” di Goliarda Sapienza: percorsi critici su una delle maggiori autrici del Novecento italiano (Roma: Aracne, 2012); and Alberica Bazzoni, Emma Bond, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, eds., *Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016). For Italian women’s autobiography (in which Sapienza is not included), see Graziella Parati, *Public History, Private Stories: Italian Women’s Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) and Ioana Raluca Larco and Fabiana Checchini, eds., *Italian Women and Autobiography: Ideology, Discourse and Identity in Female Life Narratives from Fascism to the Present* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011).

My goal is to help abate this discrepancy and fill a part of this void through an in-depth critical consideration of her contributions to twentieth-century Italian literature. Much of the current work on Sapienza reads her through a thick lens of symbolism and much of the attention she has received has focused on the more sensational aspects of her stories, particularly the murders. Indeed, Sapienza is acutely interested in transgression, and equally in the boundaries of convention, legitimacy and authority that define transgression. Her preoccupation with the creation and trespass of borders is a prominent feature of her writing, which I will explore throughout this work. However, as quick as critics have been to delve into the transgressive subject matter of Sapienza's oeuvre, less attention has been given to her technique and craft. I therefore take as my remit the investigation of Sapienza's use of narrative technique and forms, which in turn produces a new reading of her work.

Given Sapienza's historical absence from the Italian literary canon, and the influence of her personal story on her work, a brief biography is merited. Sapienza grew up in Sicily in a rare "blended" household with a number of elder sisters and brothers from her parents' previous marriages. Even more uncommon in early twentieth-century Sicily, both parents were staunch atheists who were active in the Socialist Party in Catania. Sapienza's mother, Maria Giudice, had an important role in the Italian Leftist political movement and was the first female director of the Department of Labor in Turin. Her father, Giuseppe "Peppino" Sapienza, was a prominent lawyer and local anti-Fascist. Sapienza was certainly influenced by the Socialist politics of her parents and family, and she was well versed in Antonio Gramsci's ideas, as well as those of important female political figures such as Alexandra Kollontai, a Russian Communist revolutionary and the world's first female ambassador, and Anna Kuliscioff, an important figure in workers' rights and the first wave of feminism in Italy. Her parents pulled her out of school at

the age of fourteen due to mistrust of Catholic education, but she obtained an estimable if idiosyncratic education. She was particularly influenced by Shakespeare and Stendhal; eighteenth-century British novels, including Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (which, it is said, Sapienza read seven times), and Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*; and such twentieth-century novels as D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.<sup>5</sup>

Sapienza lived in Sicily until 1941 when, at the age of seventeen, she auditioned for and received a scholarship to the *Accademia di arte drammatica* (Academy of Dramatic Arts) in Rome, run by the famous theater director Silvio D'Amico. Throughout two decades of acting, she received acclaim for her roles in Pirandello plays and, at age twenty-one, she founded the avant-garde theater group *Teatro 45*, or "T45." T45 mounted plays at the Manzoni Theater in Milan and had great success with a well-known piece at the time by Austrian-German playwright Ferdinand Bruckner, *Gioventù malata* (*Krankheit der Jugend*). Despite the critical acclaim her theater received, the following year Sapienza became severely depressed and left.<sup>6</sup> In 1947, she met the director Francesco ("Citto") Maselli, best known for his film version of Alberto Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* (Time of Indifference), who became her companion for eighteen years. During this time, she assisted Maselli in a variety of documentary shorts and acted in a handful of films, including Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954). From the 1960s on, Sapienza stopped acting and devoted her life instead to writing and in 1965 her relationship with Maselli also ended. A decade later, in 1975, she met the actor Angelo Maria Pellegrino, married him four years later, and divided her time between her home on Via Denza in the Parioli district of Rome

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<sup>5</sup> See Angelo Pellegrino's contribution to Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> See the introduction by Dacia Maraini to Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 10. Dacia Maraini is herself a well-known writer. Also see the foreword by Angelo Pellegrino to Sapienza's collection of poetry, Goliarda Sapienza, *Ancestrale* (Milano: La Vita Felice, 2013), 8.

and an apartment on the sea in Gaeta, on the coast south of Rome.<sup>7</sup> Although two of her books were published consecutively by the respected publishing house Garzanti in the late 1960s, and two more in the 1980s by Rizzoli and Pellicano Libri respectively, she remained largely ignored by critics during her lifetime.<sup>8</sup> What one might now call her magnum opus, the 624-page novel, *L'arte della gioia*, written between 1967 and 1976, was wholly rejected by major publishing houses and was not published in full until 1998, two years after her death. In fact, after being rejected by numerous editors, in later life she finally stopped trying to publish her work and continued to write simply for her own pleasure.<sup>9</sup> She died in Gaeta in 1996 at the age of seventy-two.

Why was Sapienza's work neglected by critics during her lifetime? Why did her expansive historical novel *L'arte della gioia* go unpublished?<sup>10</sup> One theory maintains that the literary director of Rizzoli at the time, Sergio Pautasso, decided the book's length created too many editorial and financial problems for the publishing house. Angelo Pellegrino, however, contends that publishers' aversion can be attributed to the book's provocative content. His claim is borne out by the fact that in the late 1970s, when a group of female writers who were friends of Sapienza wrote a screenplay based on the novel (hoping to convince editors to publish it), the director of RAI UNO, the largest television network in Italy exclaimed, "Do you want to blow up

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<sup>7</sup> Angelo Maria Pellegrino (1946- ) and Goliarda Sapienza were married October 5, 1979. See Giovanna Providenti, *La porta è aperta: Vita di Goliarda Sapienza* (Catania: Villaggio Maori Edizioni, 2010), 165. Angelo Pellegrino is himself a film actor with a significant body of work.

<sup>8</sup> When *Il filo di mezzogiorno* was published, the only critical attention it received was a short review in "Epoca" by Luigi Baldacci. *L'Università di Rebibbia* only received attention within the field of criminology; it was reviewed in the *Rassegna Penitenziaria e Criminologica* as a sort of study of inmates who grow to enjoy prison. See Pellegrino in Goliarda Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (Milano: La Tartaruga edizioni, 2003), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Pellegrino states that at a certain point Sapienza considered herself to already be "posthumous." See Pellegrino in Goliarda Sapienza, *Io, Jean Gabin* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), 123. She stopped writing in 1984, the year of the last editorial refusal she received, although she continued to write for herself in her notebooks. See Sapienza, *Il vizio*, v.

<sup>10</sup> The process of titling *L'arte della gioia* is unclear. In the postscript to Sapienza's *Le certezze del dubbio*, published in 1987, Pellegrino refers to the title of a book as *Una donna del Novecento*, which is likely *L'arte della gioia* based on the timing. See Pellegrino in Goliarda Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio* (Pellicano Libri, 1987), 193.

RAI? This [woman] is a murderer! Do you really think that RAI can make a film like this?”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the content and presentation were clearly too transgressive for mainstream television, according to RAI’s director, and the book remained unpublished for two more decades.

Sapienza’s difficulty publishing would suggest an outsider status relative to the Italian literary scene, but her position was more complicated. Angelo Pellegrino states that she was, perhaps surprisingly considering her difficulties publishing, a rather well-integrated figure in the Italian cultural environment: “She was not a secluded writer; if anything, at a certain point she isolated herself in order to finish her novel, to save her life, to save *L’arte della gioia*, but continuing to live in the heart of the political, literary, philosophical, cinematographic, [and] cultural system of those years. So she knew everyone and everyone knew her.”<sup>12</sup> Pellegrino notes that Sapienza’s first collection of poetry was read by Cesare Garboli and Niccolò Gallo, influential critics in the 1950s, and also passed along to the writers Anna Banti and Roberto Longhi to be read.<sup>13</sup> Sapienza knew Dacia Maraini in the 1960s, though Maraini admits in her introduction to *Lettera aperta* that their contact was limited.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, during her theater studies in the 1940s, Sapienza knew Silvio D’Amico and theater director Orazio Costa, and was friends with respected fellow actors Vittorio Gassmann, Giorgio De Lullo, Florestano Vancini, and Antonio Pierfederici.<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, through her career as an actress, she knew

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<sup>11</sup> “Volete far saltare in aria la Rai? Questa è un’assassina! Pensate davvero che la Rai possa fare un film come questo?” Pellegrino in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 79. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Throughout this dissertation I have chosen to use English translations in the text for ease of reading by English speakers, and have included the original Italian in the notes.

<sup>12</sup> “Non è stata una scrittrice appartata; semmai, a un certo punto si è isolata per portare a termine il suo romanzo, per salvarsi la vita, per salvare *L’arte della gioia*, ma continuando a vivere nel cuore del sistema politico, letterario, filosofico, cinematografico, culturale di quegli anni. Quindi conosceva tutti e tutti la conoscevano.” Ibid., 80.

<sup>13</sup> Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Ancestrale*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Maraini in *Lettera aperta*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10, and Pellegrino in Goliarda Sapienza, *Tre Pièces e soggetti cinematografici* (Milano: La Vita Felice, 2014), 12.

the directors Alessandro Blasetti and Luchino Visconti. Sapienza knew and admired film actors Anna Magnani and Piera Degli Esposti and wrote two plays with them in mind as the stars, *Grande bugia* (Big Lie) and *Due signore e un cherubino* (Two Ladies and a Cherub) respectively, although the plays were never staged during her lifetime (to Sapienza's great disappointment).<sup>16</sup> She was close to her partner Francesco "Citto" Maselli's sister, the artist Titina Maselli, knew Alberto Moravia, and was a friend of the fellow Sicilian poet Ignazio Buttitta.<sup>17</sup> She became acquainted with editor and poet Beppe Costa in the 1980s and was able to publish *Le certezze del dubbio* with him and the PellicanoLibri publishing company thanks to funding from the extremely wealthy model-countess Marta Marzotto (who claimed another one of the title roles in the never-staged *Due signore e un cherubino*).<sup>18</sup> The literary critic Luigi Baldacci declared her first book, *Lettera aperta*, well-written and "important."<sup>19</sup> Likewise, many of her friends in the same circle complimented her and encouraged her to write another book.

However, after publication of her second book, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, an autobiographical novel chronicling her sessions in psychotherapy, Goliarda's work reportedly fell out of favor with her literary connections. The fundamental problem was that Sapienza's work could not be easily ascribed to any well-known literary movement of the second half of the twentieth century. Her work did not sit comfortably within either generic or political categories. According to Angelo Pellegrino, "this self-centeredness" ("questa centralità del sé") that occupied her writing was considered neither literarily interesting nor politically "correct" at the time; it was deemed too "middle class" ("piccolo borghese") in contrast to the activism and self-

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<sup>16</sup> Pellegrino, *Tre Pièces*, 12-14.

<sup>17</sup> Pellegrino in Goliarda Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia* (Roma: Torino: Einaudi, 2008, 2009), ix, and Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Pellegrino, *Tre Pièces*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Pellegrino in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 81.

sacrifice in the cause of the social revolution that was lauded among the literati Sapienza knew in the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> Even in the 1950s, when Citto Maselli gave Mario Alicata (one of the cultural and political leaders of the Italian Communist Party) Sapienza's poetry to read, Alicata exclaimed, "I would not have believed that the daughter of Maria Giudice [a prominent socialist] could write poetry like any old daughter from a bourgeois family," a statement which essentially shut down Sapienza's publishing options within, or with the support of, the Party. As Pellegrino explains, this exclamation about Sapienza's work was a "sentence without the possibility of an appeal," implying ostracization.<sup>21</sup> Sapienza herself also expressed exhaustion with the very process of trying to publish, and a disinterest in traditional success as an author. Instead of dedicating a year or more to advocating on behalf of *L'arte della gioia*, she preferred to simply continue writing.<sup>22</sup> When a close friend read her book and suggested significant edits to guarantee its publication (though implying it would certainly lose some of its meaning and depth), she said she did not want this kind of "success."<sup>23</sup>

So how do we contextualize someone who was not exactly a part of any particular literary movement, not exactly a part of the Socialist movement, and not a member of the literary "elite," like famous Italian women writers Elsa Morante and Natalia Ginsburg? A rich new volume on Sapienza's work, *Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture*, aims to answer this question by exploring connections between Sapienza's work and that of other twentieth-century Italian and European writers and thinkers.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Non avrei mai creduto che la figlia di Maria Giudice potesse scrivere poesie come una qualsiasi figlia di famiglia borghese." Mario Alicata quoted by Angelo Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Ancestrale*, 6. Sapienza references this encounter on page 117 of *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa* as well.

<sup>22</sup> Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>24</sup> Published in June 2016, after completion of this dissertation, this important critical contribution came too late to be incorporated into the development or writing of the present work. However, *Goliarda Sapienza in Context* suggests that a critical consensus is building that confirms many of the insights first formulated here, particularly the

Specifically, critics in the volume place Sapienza's work in conversation with Anna Maria Ortese, Elsa Morante, Fabrizia Ramondino, Dacia Maraini, Elena Ferrante, Joan Henry, and Virginia Woolf.<sup>25</sup> While Sapienza is indeed indebted to a rich literary and cultural history and is certainly in conversation with it, Sapienza also purposefully positions herself and her work on its margins, assuming the role of outsider with intentionality. Charlotte Ross terms Sapienza an "eccentric subject" (*soggetto eccentrico*), as defined by Teresa de Lauretis in her book of the same name: "a subject who, through personal, political and textual practices, challenges and 'dislocates' herself from normative socio-cultural discourses and models of identity."<sup>26</sup> Laura Fortini describes Sapienza as *beyond* the canon, and similarly places her outside of normative socio-cultural discourses: "Bizarre for her choice of a transgressive life, always oblique and contemptuous of codified forms of femininity, Sapienza emerges as equally eccentric owing to her protean, disharmonious personality, always escaping the given symbolic order."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, while studies have traced influences from and similarities to other Italian and international authors at the time, the most accurate and illuminating description of Sapienza's work is that it is essentially extra-canonical in the twentieth-century Italian context.

Given that Sapienza herself thus occupied for much of her career a nebulous quasi-obscure on the borderlands of the Italian literary scene—due at least in part to her own transgression of sanctioned, politically correct subject matter—it is appropriate that this project focuses on four salient aspects of Sapienza's literary production that are connected to the idea of borders, both their delineation and their transgression: the transgression of the boundaries of self

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idea of the relational self, which I write about in chapter one, and the overlap between Italian feminist practices and Sapienza's writing, which I explore in chapter three. See Maria Morelli and Aureliana di Rollo respectively in Bazzoni, Bond, and Wehling-Giorgi, eds., *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Ross, "Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions: Multiple selves, gender ambiguities and disrupted desires," *altrelettere* (February 29, 2012): 3, accessed January 2, 2014, doi: 10.5903/al\_uzh-2.

<sup>27</sup> Fortini in Bazzoni, Bond, and Wehling-Giorgi, eds., *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, 132.

in Sapienza's autobiographical works, the influence of the structure and borders (both physical and narrative) of theater in her prose, constructed borders around female relationships, and Sapienza's narration of transgressive acts. The borders between the chapters themselves are thus permeable, as these four topics inform and are in dialogue with each other.

In chapter one I consider Goliarda Sapienza's autobiographical works, which she called collectively her "autobiography of contradictions."<sup>28</sup> This includes the six published autobiographical novels that make up her *ciclo autobiografico*, or autobiographical series: *Lettera aperta* (1967); *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969); *Io, Jean Gabin* (written in 1979-1980, but not published until 2010); *L'Università di Rebibbia* (1983); *Le certezze del dubbio* (1987); and *Appuntamento a Positano* (written sometime between 1980 and 1984, published in 2015).<sup>29</sup> I focus on the narrative techniques Sapienza deploys to create a vision of multiple selves, breaking from the traditional autobiography as the narrative of a retrospective, unified selfhood. I argue furthermore that beyond the construction of multiple selves, Sapienza overturns the conventions of autobiography, and indeed, the convention of a unitary narrative voice, by erasing the boundary between self and other, creating a fused/fusing autobiographical subject. It is this radically unconventional, boundary-less identity that constitutes her most unique contribution to Italian autobiography of the twentieth century.

Chapter two focuses on how theater informs Sapienza's writing in theme, form, and narrative style in her autobiographical series and in her expansive novel *L'arte della gioia* (written between 1967 and 1976, published in 1998).<sup>30</sup> I propose that Sapienza's deep

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<sup>28</sup> Goliarda Sapienza, *La mia parte di gioia: taccuini (1989-1992)* (Torino: Einaudi, 2013), 26.

<sup>29</sup> I consider Sapienza's autobiographical works to be "autobiographical novels," a category and term which I explore further in the first chapter. While the main character is named Goliarda and the family and stories are based on Sapienza's life, there are fictional elements that pervade the works and Sapienza never implies that these stories constitute a definitive or even literal autobiography.

<sup>30</sup> See Angelo Pellegrino's preface to Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, vii-viii.

background in theater illuminates three aspects of her work that have been particularly controversial or misunderstood: first, the influence of script format and performed theatrical dialogue on her writing style and narrative strategies; second, the impact of the formal physical structure of the stage on her settings and composition; and third, the ubiquity of theatrical themes throughout her oeuvre. My conclusions point to a new understanding of the previously misunderstood mixing of narrative points of view in Sapienza's works.

In chapter three I explore how physical space affects and interacts with female relationships in *Lettera aperta*, *L'Università di Rebibbia*, *Le certezze del dubbio*, and *L'arte della gioia*, including a discussion of how the Italian feminist movement is in dialogue with Sapienza's unique handling of spatiality. The idea of women's place and women's space, historically confined to the domestic realm, has been a key feature of both the daily life of women and their cultural representation throughout history. During the Renaissance, the *querelle des femmes* occupied a significant amount of literature with "the matter of woman's place [...] and the possibility that she might stray from it."<sup>31</sup> However, unlike so many Italian women writers of the twentieth century who aimed to push beyond and do away with women's historical confinement and marginality, Sapienza purposefully creates confined spaces.<sup>32</sup> She defines women's space not in relation to another (male) space, but as an autonomous realm, just as her (female) protagonists are fully autonomous subjects, not limited by or in relation to other (male) subjects. Sapienza's work therefore takes place in uniquely gynocentric, female-defined spaces that transcend metaphorical boundaries and embrace literal ones. Through the exploration of enclosed spaces, I conclude that Sapienza overturns the idea of literal confinement

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<sup>31</sup> Deanna Shemek, *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Patrizia Sambuco, *Italian Women Writers, 1800-2000 Boundaries, Borders and Transgression* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), ix, xi.

traditionally associated with women in a negative or limiting way, and makes such spaces creative, social, and even liberating spaces for female relationships.

Chapter four examines how Sapienza narrates the transgressive acts present in her works. While previous criticism has focused on the symbolic and sensational aspects of the murders that are committed in *L'arte della gioia*, it has not addressed the dissonance between the transgressive acts Sapienza represents and the surprisingly placid and neutral narrative style through which they are represented. Through close analysis of Sapienza's narrative techniques and an integration of both symbolic and realistic readings, I argue that Sapienza purposefully creates a contradictory and destabilized reading experience by means of the incongruity between narrative style and content, in order to evince in readers a sense of irresolution. Ultimately, Sapienza forces readers into an uncomfortable position of contingency and moral indeterminacy, representing the fundamentally human condition of having to exist without answers to our most difficult questions.

In his preface to *L'arte della gioia*, Angelo Pellegrino speculates hopefully about critics in the future focusing more attention on the stylistic and structural aspects of that novel.<sup>33</sup> This dissertation aims to take up this directive in all of Sapienza's novels, focusing in large part on narrative technique and forms, to arrive at a new reading and understanding of Sapienza's literary project. Of course, part of my motive in writing this dissertation is to honor Sapienza herself. Sapienza said that women, "are my planet and my research, my only '(political) party' and maybe, besides friendship, my only purpose in life."<sup>34</sup> Therefore, in homage to Sapienza's

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<sup>33</sup> "Over time, the more judicious critics will draw attention to the stylistic and structural aspects of the novel." ("Col tempo, la critica più avveduta provvederà a mettere in luce gli aspetti stilistici e strutturali.") Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), xii. Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, x.

<sup>34</sup> "Le donne [...] sono il mio pianeta e la mia ricerca, il mio unico 'partito' e forse, oltre all'amicizia, il mio unico scopo nella vita." Pellegrino in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 86.

“planet” of women, and as one of its inhabitants, I hope to bring further attention to a previously neglected woman author and expand the boundaries of the already growing space in contemporary literary criticism for Goliarda Sapienza.

CHAPTER ONE

SAPIENZA'S *CICLO AUTOBIOGRAFICO*: MULTIPLE, RELATIONAL AND  
FUSED/FUSING SELVES

It is impossible to assess Goliarda Sapienza's literary contributions in any depth without devoting careful attention to the genre that constitutes the largest part of her output: autobiography. In a series of autobiographical works over the course of several decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s—*Lettera aperta* (1967); *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969); *Io, Jean Gabin* (written between 1979 and 1980, but not published until 2010); *L'Università di Rebibbia* (published in 1983); *Le certezze del dubbio* (written in 1981, published in 1987), and *Appuntamento a Positano* (written in 1984, published in 2015)—she transformed, subverted and stretched the genre.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these works, Sapienza kept private notebooks, or “taccuini,” that were published posthumously (as *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa, Taccuini 1976-1989*, published in 2011 and *La mia parte di gioia, Taccuini 1989-1992*, published in 2013).

In the field of autobiography studies, much discussion has taken place, especially during the second wave of feminism in the early 1980s, about the unique construction of women's life stories in relation and in contradistinction to men's autobiographies.<sup>2</sup> While I want to be careful

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<sup>1</sup> In the afterword to *Appuntamento a Positano* Angelo Pellegrino describes how he includes this book in the books that make up Sapienza's “Autobiography of Contradictions.” Goliarda Sapienza, *Appuntamento a Positano* (Torino: Einaudi, 2015), 181.

<sup>2</sup> As Smith and Watson explain, “Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, feminist critics and theorists turned their attention to the long tradition of women's life writing; such works by critics Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks, Mary G. Mason, and the essays gathered by Estelle Jelinek, Shari Benstock, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, and Julia Swindells made the new field of women's life writing the vibrant field it has become. Attentive to French feminism,

not to essentialize the difference between male and female life writing, it is inarguable that due to the historical androcentric approach to the genre, particular aspects of “women’s” writing have been devalued or ignored. Sidonie Smith<sup>3</sup> inventories the following issues in critical theory and literary history that have contributed to this devaluation:

...the articulation of ‘normative’ generic definitions that in their very conceptualization preclude both aesthetic appreciation and sophisticated reading of works by women; the omission or neglect that follows from the devaluation of works by women; the impoverishment of a history of autobiography that silences women and their contribution to the genre; the facile and unexamined assumptions about gender-appropriate content, structure, style, and narrative perspective; the failure to consider gender a relevant factor in either the configuration of identity or the institution of literature itself; the unselfconscious ignorance of the relationship of ideologies of gender to ideologies of selfhood.<sup>4</sup>

This inventory speaks to the lack of attention Sapienza’s autobiographical works received during her lifetime, and to the critical omissions and oversights that the current project seeks to rectify.

One of the most notable aspects of Sapienza’s autobiographical works is that she abandons all the characteristics of the traditional autobiographical narrator: coherence, claims to truth, and an all-knowing narrative voice possessed of perfect hindsight. In their stead, she gives us a narrator mired in contradictions, telling “lies,” and in very imperfect command of her own past.<sup>5</sup> The personal ambivalences she experienced in her own life as a woman inspired her to begin writing the self-described *ciclo autobiografico* that she titles *Le certezze del dubbio* (The Certainties of Doubt; which is also the name of one of the works in the cycle). This *ciclo* is,

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theorists Domna C. Stanton and Nancy K. Miller began the work of revising gender essentialism through theories of sexual difference.” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 210.

<sup>3</sup> For a full study on the history of androcentric autobiographical criticism, see Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *A Poetics*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Sapienza explains this approach in her notebooks. Sapienza, *La mia parte di gioia*, 26.

“focused on myself, but ‘in progress,’ and in other words not read—like in all biographies—at a certain age, advanced or young does not matter, [but] instead gathered little by little each decade and over the arc of an entire life, always with the fundamental idea to grasp at the contradictions more than the coherencies [...] and it is because of this that the subtitle of the cycle should be: *Autobiography of Contradictions*.”<sup>6</sup> She thus sets forth explicit instructions to the reader as to how to read her autobiographical works: namely as a work in progress and in process, never complete or finished, but constantly *in fieri*, exposing the contradictions inherent in life and forestalling finality or closure.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars have pointed to a gendered difference between the linearity of prototypical male biography/autobiography versus the non-linearity of female versions.<sup>8</sup> These different narrative structures construct or allow different visions of selfhood.<sup>9</sup> It would seem, then, that the model of selfhood Sapienza proposes replaces the conventional assumption of a unified self with multiple selves. Among the limited number of published critical pieces on Sapienza, a large percentage focus exactly on this “autobiography of contradictions.”<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Charlotte Ross illuminates Sapienza’s postmodern sensibility and her “deconstruction of a coherent, unified subject.”<sup>11</sup> However, exploration of the various techniques through which Sapienza enacts this project at a textual and formal level is merited.

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<sup>6</sup> “...incentrato sulla mia persona ma ‘in progress,’ e cioè non letta—come in tutte le biografie—a una specifica età, avanzata o giovanile non importa, invece raccolta man mano ogni decennio e nell’arco di tutta una vita, sempre con l’idea cardine di afferrare più le contraddizioni che le coerenze [...] ed è per questo che il sottotitolo del ciclo dovrebbe essere: *Autobiografia delle contraddizioni*.” Sapienza, *La mia parte di gioia*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Angelo Pellegrino explains in further detail Sapienza’s idea of her autobiographical cycle as constantly *in fieri* in his epilogue to *Io, Jean Gabin* on page 117, and his preface to *Lettera aperta* on page 7.

<sup>8</sup> See Estelle C. Jelinek, ed. *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). Also Smith, *A Poetics*.

<sup>9</sup> In *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, Smith and Watson point out that the re-reading of Lacan (and Freud) by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva also calls into question in autobiography theory the linearity of narrative and a unified concept of selfhood, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Part Two of the book of essays about Sapienza’s work, “*Quel sogno d’essere*” di Goliarda Sapienza, is entitled “L’autobiografia delle contraddizioni” and contains eight essays on the subject.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza’s Eccentric Interruptions,” 1.

Using the background of studies on women's life writing, my aim is to detail *how* Sapienza creates a vision of multiple selves in her autobiographical novels, in essence replacing the conventional notion of "oneself" with that of a "multiself." First, the sheer multiplicity of Sapienza's autobiographical works in itself reveals the indeterminacy of her view of her life story. The very fact that she produced multiple, and sometimes inconsistent or contradictory, accounts of her life enacts her vision of autobiography as evolving and contingent, as against the tradition of one retrospective, definitive autobiography. Second, by embracing the "unreliability in the narratorial voice" and questioning the "reliability of her own memories [...]" undermining any conception of a coherent self,"<sup>12</sup> Sapienza breaks from the tradition of a retrospective, unified selfhood by creating narrators in her early works who problematize the entire autobiographical enterprise. For example, *Lettera aperta*, published in 1967, explores the narrator's childhood and adolescence, while *Io, Jean Gabin* (1979-1980) presents a different version of presumably the same childhood, but in a different light, comparing herself to, and sometimes equating herself with, the actor Jean Gabin, while *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969) revisits some of the same memories while she undergoes psychological treatment as an adult. Finally, Sapienza incorporates the stories of others so completely into her own autobiography that they often come to dominate it, turning autobiography into a deeply relational project. For example, *Appuntamento a Positano* (written in the early 1980s) details the narrator's relationship with, and the life story of, another character, Erica Benevento; *L'Università di Rebibbia* (1983) recounts the narrator's time in prison and spends as much time on her fellow inmates as on the narrator herself; and *Le certezze del dubbio* (1987) follows the story of her relationship with, and the life of, a fellow inmate, Roberta, after prison.

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<sup>12</sup> Ross, "Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions," 3-4.

As we shall see, at times in Sapienza's writing, relationship morphs into something different and more radical, erasing the boundary between self and other. On these occasions, Sapienza depicts a self that both assimilates and is assimilated by another, positing a boundary-less identity. Ultimately, I argue that it is this unique approach to autobiography and this radically unconventional depiction of self that constitutes her most unique contribution, not only to the body of work produced by Italian women writers in the twentieth century but to Italian literature more broadly.

While the genre of "autobiography" is complex, constituent of myriad different genres, I have adopted some salient definitions of autobiography for the purposes of studying Sapienza's work.<sup>13</sup> James Olney defines autobiography as the context in which metaphors of selves are performed. His emphasis on the plural "selves" has particular relevance for Sapienza's multiple autobiographies and representations of self.<sup>14</sup> French scholar Philippe Lejeune has proposed various, sometimes competing, definitions of autobiography over the course of his studies on the genre, providing some clarity while also trying to avoid essentializing the genre by reducing it to a single characterization. In *L'Autobiographie en France*, published in 1971, he provides the following: "We shall define autobiography as the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."<sup>15</sup> Lejeune later adjusted his definition, adding in *Le Pacte Autobiographique* that autobiographical writing consists of autodiegetic narration where the author, narrator, and

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<sup>13</sup> Smith and Watson provide descriptions of sixty different genres of life narrative, from academic life writing to gastrography to war memoirs in *Reading Autobiography*, 253.

<sup>14</sup> Olney in Parati, *Public History, Private Stories*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> See Paul John Eakin's foreword to Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), vii. Mariagiovanna Andrigo also finds LeJeune's definitions useful in discussing Sapienza's autobiography and makes the claim that, although a different type of autobiography, *L'arte della gioia* could be what LeJeune defines as the "personal novel." Andrigo in Providenti, ed., "*Quel sogno d'essere*," 119. I do not think *L'arte della gioia* can be considered autobiographical writing.

protagonist all share the same name,<sup>16</sup> a criterion clearly met by Sapienza's works in which the author, narrator, and main character all share the name of "Goliarda."

More specifically relevant in the Italian context to my treatment of Sapienza is Graziella Parati's approach in her study on twentieth century women's autobiography in Italy, in which she treats autobiography as fiction: that is, "as a narrative in which the author carefully selects and *constructs* [emphasis mine] the characters, events, and aspects of the self that she or he wants to make public in order to convey a specific message about her or his past and present identity."<sup>17</sup> However, Paul Jay points out the irony inherent in using the term "autobiographical fiction," given the futility of trying to separate autobiography from fiction: "if by 'fictional' we mean 'made up,' 'created,' or 'imagined'—something, that is, which is literary and not 'real'—then we have merely defined the ontological status of any text, autobiographical or not."<sup>18</sup> Adopting both the above definition and the corollary caveat, for the purpose of my textual analysis, I will refer to Sapienza's autobiographical writings as "autobiographical novels." Approaching the novels in this way moves the conversation beyond a fact-checking mission comparing Sapienza's life to her autobiographical works, and allows us to approach her texts as self-conscious works of literature driven by artistic as much as by psychological or self-revelatory motives.

In treating the above-mentioned works as fiction, I distinguish them from her "taccuini," or notebooks, collected by Angelo Pellegrino: *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa (Taccuini 1976-1989)*, published in 2011, and *La mia parte di gioia (Taccuini 1989-1992)*, published in 2013. Sapienza's notebooks allow us access to a different form of autobiographical writing that she did

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<sup>16</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (Paris; Seuil, 1975), 33.

<sup>17</sup> Parati, *Public History, Private Stories*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 16.

not intend to make public, a fact about which she is quite explicit: “I have to remember, if I should get sick, to destroy these notebooks. [...] Remember to destroy them or to make a note in my will.”<sup>19</sup> The fact that we are reading these very words places the reader in an uneasy, quasi-voyeuristic position to the author, implying a form of trespassing. In this instance, Sapienza is therefore drawing a boundary between herself and the reader, an utterly different stance from the inviting intimacy with which she welcomes the reader into the text in the early autobiographical novels, where she speaks directly to us using the second person plural (as I explore in the following chapter on the influence of theater in Sapienza’s prose). Admittedly, if the “ontological status of any text, autobiographical or not,” must be considered fiction, then Sapienza’s notebooks are inescapably also fiction, constructed by the author with a particular diaristic structure for artistic reasons.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, respecting Sapienza’s wish that the notebooks not be published, and following her lead in conceptualizing the published novels and unpublished notebooks as two very different enterprises, I do not treat the latter as part of her literary production for the purpose of this work.<sup>21</sup>

In the Italian tradition, Rita Wilson has noted that the format of the semi-fictional, autobiographical novel is not a new one for women writers. Women writers have repeatedly used the novel as a partially autobiographical space, just as Sapienza does, because the fictional frame allows greater freedom for self-revelation, as Wilson describes:

It is interesting that, for some time now, women writers in particular have preferred to use the novel to depict their true selves. From Gina Lagorio and Francesca Duranti, many writers have chosen to speak

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<sup>19</sup> “Devo ricordare, se dovessi ammalarmi, di distruggere questi libretti. [...] Ricordare di distruggerli o fare una nota nel mio testamento.” Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Jay, *Being in the Text*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Despite saying that she should burn her notebooks before dying, she also states: “These pages must be made public only after my death, and only by my husband Angelo Pellegrino, my universal heir from the most miserable book or mobile or picture that I own to all my edited and unedited writings.” (“Queste pagine devono essere rese pubbliche solo dopo la mia morte, e per voce solo di mio marito Angelo Pellegrino, mio erede universal dal più misero libro o mobile o quadro che posseggo a tutti i miei scritti editi e inediti.”). Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 121.

about themselves behind the mask of an invented character. This artifice seems to allow them the freedom to narrate their lived experiences to others, in first- or third- person, thereby protecting themselves from the worries and self-criticism which an explicitly autobiographical text involves. [...] Therefore the novel paradoxically becomes the real space for confession and self-revelation, while, at the same time, allowing greater creative and expressive freedom.<sup>22</sup>

While we can term Sapienza's novels "autobiographical" using Lejeune's definition, the novel-like narrative and the flexibility regarding personal history frees them from the constraints of fact as described by Wilson. Although Sapienza does not shy away from using her own name, "Goliarda," for her protagonist, the extent to which the stories and facts recounted in her works are true is purposefully obfuscated, as Sapienza participates in the modern and post-modern metafictional practice of erasing a distinction between author and narrator.<sup>23</sup>

The line between "fact" and "fiction" is not the only one that is blurred in Sapienza's autobiographical project: the line between self and other is likewise rendered ambiguous. In the 1980s, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, James Olney and Mary G. Mason asserted that women's achievement of identity is a fundamentally relational rather than individuating process, as most often represented in men's autobiography.<sup>24</sup> In the past, critics such as the historian Wilhelm Dilthey and the philologist Georg Misch inextricably tied (men's) autobiography to individual performance in the public sphere and the life of the "great man."<sup>25</sup> In her enlightening sweep of the historical androcentric criticism of the autobiographical genre,

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<sup>22</sup> Rita Wilson, *Speculative Identities: Contemporary Italian Women's Narrative* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>23</sup> For a study of the emergence of "autobiografiction" in the Anglophone tradition see Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Mason in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 210.

<sup>25</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 195.

Smith references Georg Misch's study on autobiography: "For Misch, the 'normative' definition of autobiography and the criteria used to evaluate the success of any particular autobiography lie in the relationship of the autobiographer to the arena of public life and discourse."<sup>26</sup> This idea was echoed in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, published in 1980, in which Estelle Jelinek argues that, "men distance themselves in autobiographies that are 'success stories and histories of their eras' focused on their professional lives, while women's life writings emphasize personal and domestic details and describe connections to other people. [...] Women...seek to authenticate themselves in stories that reveal 'a self-consciousness and a need to *sift through* [emphasis mine] their lives for explanation and understanding."<sup>27</sup> While this sort of generalized distinction between men's and women's life writing is perhaps no longer de rigueur in criticism on autobiography, it retains value as "contest[ing] the assumptions of an earlier critical period's understanding of canonical autobiography."<sup>28</sup> Jelinek's description of women's life-writing as an act of "sift[ing] through" resonates throughout Sapienza's works—such as the "sifting through" and "making order" of Goliarda's room and her memories in *Lettera aperta*—and has historical antecedents. For example, the Italianist John Freccero points out Saint Teresa of Avila's frustration with the story of Augustine's (male) autobiographical *Confessions* because his conversion is presented as a simple, one-time event, whereas her own (female) life experience was one of continuous struggles of gaining and losing faith, going back and forth between sinning and redemption. Freccero highlights this same distinction through his analysis of another, more modern (or, perhaps more accurately, postmodern) female writer, Anglophone

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, *A Poetics*, 7, and Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 195.

<sup>27</sup> Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Smith and Watson point out that postcolonial and feminist, "theoretical approaches to life writing up to the late 1990s accomplished several things. [...] They considered generic instability, regimes of truth telling, referentiality, relationality, and embodiment as issues that contest the assumptions of the earlier critical period's understanding of canonical autobiography." Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 211.

writer Doris Lessing, whose 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook*, “seems a deliberate refutation of the Augustinian pretense of writing a definitive life story—the red notebook and the black notebook are partial views of the definitive golden notebook that, by implication, can never be completed short of death. Lessing seems to represent as gender-specific this view of the writer’s attempt to capture her life.”<sup>29</sup> Feminist theorists from the French tradition, particularly Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, also identify the move away from a definitive view of life, characterizing “feminine” writing as, “plural, continuous, interdependent, nonsensical, roundabout, a narrative of ruptures...”<sup>30</sup> These approaches—in particular, the ideas of a non-definitive life story told in and by “partial” or “plural” episodes and selves, and a life narrative that is more relational than individuating—are all helpful in elucidating Sapienza’s autobiography.

### **Multi-Text Autobiography**

Although the protagonist in every one of Sapienza’s autobiographical novels is named Goliarda, in accordance with Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, each book is told from a different viewpoint, age, and perspective, reflecting the external and, perhaps more importantly, internal changes an individual goes through as her life progresses.<sup>31</sup> Sapienza purposely created this structure with the idea in mind that these works may eventually contradict each other, reflecting the natural contradictions, according to Sapienza, that arise throughout life’s progression. As Pellegrino explains, “Every novel was supposed to exist on its own, in other

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<sup>29</sup> John Freccero, “Autobiography and Narrative,” in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 18.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *A Poetics*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Because the protagonist in Sapienza’s autobiographical novels is also named “Goliarda,” to avoid confusion, throughout this work I use “Goliarda” to refer to the narrator and character, and “Sapienza” to refer to the author.

words, be legible without the help of the others, like an ideal deck of cards where each has its own emblem, immediately contradicted by the next.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, her first two books have a decidedly different tone and feel from her last four books, written over a decade later after she had finished composing her magnum opus, *L'arte della gioia*, the only non-autobiographical novel she wrote.

Mariagiovanna Andrigo explores the difference in tone between the early and later autobiographical novels by defining the periods of production in which they were written as pre- and post-prison. According to Andrigo, Sapienza’s work moves from an analogical-introspective format to an expressionist-interactive tone, and likewise, from autobiography that focuses on self-analysis and a reconstruction of the past, to an autobiography that focuses more on the present and the people who make up the present.<sup>33</sup> Andrigo aptly points out that, “with a strong contrary and innovative attitude with regard to tradition, [Sapienza] makes autobiography a means by which to restore a plausible reproduction of a person’s change of conscience and perspective on the facts and characters of their past with the passing of time.”<sup>34</sup> But how exactly does she do this? Not only does Sapienza reflect a “change of conscience and perspective” with the passing of time, but she does so by creating separate, often intertwining, sometimes mutually inconsistent stories that traverse multiple books (for example, Goliarda’s memories of her childhood tutor, Professor Jsaya, are recounted in different ways in three of her novels).

Furthermore, the tone of some of Sapienza’s autobiographical novels is so different from that of traditional autobiography that when the books were published critics (and presumably

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<sup>32</sup> “Ogni romanzo doveva far parte a sé, essere leggibile cioè senza l’ausilio degli altri, come un ideale mazzo di carte dove ognuna aveva la sua emblematicità, subito contraddetta dalla successiva.” Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Andrigo in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere*,” 118.

<sup>34</sup> “Con un atteggiamento fortemente contrario e innovativo rispetto alla tradizione, la scrittrice fa dell’autobiografia un mezzo attraverso il quale restituire la riproduzione verosimile della mutabilità di coscienza e di prospettiva che una persona ha col passare del tempo sui fatti e i personaggi del suo passato.” Ibid., 122.

readers) had a difficult time figuring out to which genre the books should be assigned. For example, *L'Università di Rebibbia* received quite a significant amount of attention within the field of criminology; indeed, it was the only novel ever reviewed by the *Rassegna Penitenziaria e Criminologia*, “for its scientific value with regard to the syndrome of affection for prison.”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* was largely ignored by critics, though psychoanalysts found it a “useful manual to avoid distortions, deviations, absolutes, and fanaticisms.”<sup>36</sup> The attention from the social science community and the lack of attention from literary critics attests to the recalcitrance of these works with respect to conforming to conventional generic qualities.

The variation in tone and content between the books that make up Sapienza’s *ciclo autobiografico* represents not only a life made up of contradictions, but also provides glimpses of an evolving, complicated, and contradictory life at different stages and focused on different topics, from multiple viewpoints. Like Doris Lessing’s various colored notebooks, each of Sapienza’s autobiographical novels presents a partial view of life. From Sapienza’s notebooks (*Il vizio di parlare a me stessa*), we know that she read Lessing, as she mentions Lessing’s dystopian autobiographical novel *Memoirs of a Survivor* in 1989, calling it “enjoyable” but also complaining of its pessimism.<sup>37</sup> However, I would argue that unlike Lessing’s *Golden Notebook*, which seems to imply that the various colored notebooks together (which are actually all contained in one novel) comprise a more definitive or complete, even if only posthumously,

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<sup>35</sup> “Fu l’unico romanzo a essere recensito—fatto anomalo—dalla *Rassegna Penitenziaria e Criminologica* per il suo valore scientifico a proposito della sindrome da affezione carceraria.” Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> “Al suo apparire *Il filo di mezzogiorno* fu del tutto ignorato dalla critica [...] Non fu così presso gli psicanalisti, che vi scorsero un utile vademecum per evitare distorsioni, deviazioni, assolutismi e vari fanaticismi.” Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> “I don’t know how to determine if this (otherwise enjoyable) book by Doris Lessing, *Memoirs of a Survivor*, was written under the negative push of old age or just by the hand of a ‘profiteer’ seeking consensus in pessimism.” [“Non so decidermi se questo libro (peraltro piacevole) di Doris Lessing, *Memorie di una sopravvissuta*, sia stato scritto sotto la pulsione negativa della vecchiaia o se solo dalla mano di una ‘profittatrice’ in cerca di consensi nel pessimism.”] Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 229.

“golden notebook,” as Freccero states, Sapienza’s works are physically separate books written over the course of three decades, exposing the contradictions and evolution of an author, a life, and her art. It seems then, that while Lessing conjures the possibility of a complete—if elusive—life, Sapienza dismisses the attainability, and perhaps even the desirability, of any definitive perspective on one’s own existence.

### Questioning Memory

One potent way in which Sapienza subverts the traditional linearity of the historically normative autobiographical narrative is by problematizing memory and chronology. Remembering, and equally, forgetting, play a large and looming role in Sapienza’s first two autobiographical novels. In *Lettera aperta*, Goliarda looks back on her disorganized memories of childhood, reified in the disorganized room in which she finds herself, her goal through the work being to try to “make a little order” of the room and of her past, to sort through memories and try to place or organize them.<sup>38</sup> Charlotte Ross notes that even from this first publication, “a self-conscious, deconstructive perspective on the ‘self’ is evident,” and she describes the narrative voice that oscillates, “between childish naivety and the voice of experience,” moving from past (narrated by a child’s voice) to present (an adult’s voice) and back again.<sup>39</sup> I would argue that in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, memory is brought into question even more explicitly: the narrator has gone through electroshock treatments for depression and a suicide attempt prior to the start of the novel, and the novel is made up of the psychoanalytic sessions she undergoes to try to reconstruct her past and her life.<sup>40</sup> In neither of these novels does the protagonist

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<sup>38</sup> Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza’s Eccentric Interruptions,” 6.

<sup>40</sup> Suzette Henke uses the term “scriptotherapy” to describe women’s life writing as a form of “therapeutic reenactment” for self-healing, which she identifies in multiple women writers of the twentieth century. Suzette

remember events in a chronological or clear order, and in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, in particular, reality is confused with dreams, and the narrator's memories are often oneiric. Contrary to traditional autobiography, which typically conceals the messiness of memory behind a façade of chronological orderliness, in Sapienza's novels the act of writing and the works themselves are tools through which the narrator recreates even her own lack of clarity about the past; even as the autobiographical novel is being written—and read—its indeterminacy is made explicit, which has the effect of dismantling the idea of an omniscient narrator and a coherent chronology. Smith and Watson point out that “achronological modes of emplotment” can be carried out with the use of “associational, or digressive, or fragmented remembering told through multiple flashbacks and flash-forwards,” all of which Sapienza enacts in her autobiographical novels.<sup>41</sup> With non-chronological recollection and a lapse or gap in certain memories, Sapienza reveals and embraces not only the contradictions inherent in a life history, but also the inconclusive and ephemeral nature of human experience itself.

Belying the neat compartmentalization of canonical autobiography, Sapienza allows memories to leak from one text to another and intertwine between texts. For example, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* continuously echoes events that are described in more detail in *Lettera aperta*. Anna Langiano points out the purposeful confounding of chronological order through this technique: “In letting her own memories live again in the writing, in cutting them out from her own body to give them an independent life, Goliarda Sapienza lets them thrive again at different points in the two novels, in order to show the reader that reality does not follow the

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Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). *Il filo di mezzogiorno* could be considered “scriptotherapy” by this definition.

<sup>41</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 93.

chronological order imposed by common thought, as much as the interior disorder of the human soul, the incoherent, irrevocable connections of memory.”<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the same memories resurfacing at different points in the two novels, even within the same novel, past memories and events insert themselves almost without warning into the present tense of Goliarda’s conversations with her psychiatrist, Ignazio Majore. The protagonist remembers the past incoherently, disjunctively, rather than in a step-by-step, linear, teleologically-determined way. She inlays different memories through a semi-structured stream of consciousness whereby one memory connects to another and then returns to present day. This produces a narrator/protagonist who is unable or unwilling to form a coherent, chronological story, enforcing the idea of a disjointed concept of self-history and selfhood. A clear example of this technique is present in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, when Dr. Majore asks Goliarda if she wants to be like her mother, which reminds her that her mother has dementia, or as Goliarda describes it, has “gone crazy,” while Goliarda herself is having psychiatric problems as well. As part of her rehabilitation therapy, Goliarda must practice counting, and although she knows that her therapist is a “doctor for crazy people,” her partner, Citto, and the doctor do not explicitly tell her that she is being treated for psychiatric concerns. As Dr. Majore asks her to identify and count objects in the room, Goliarda finishes by counting two armchairs, and the narration continues without pause or paragraph break to a discussion of more armchairs, though the reader comes to realize as the paragraph goes on that these are different armchairs and the location, characters, and setting in time has shifted to Goliarda’s childhood. An astute reader (of Sapienza’s other

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<sup>42</sup> “Nel far rivivere i propri ricordi attraverso la scrittura, nel ritagliarli dal suo stesso corpo per dar loro una vita indipendente, Goliarda Sapienza lascia che essi riaffiorino in punti diversi dei due romanzi, come per mostrare al proprio lettore che la realtà segue non l’ordine cronologico che il pensiero comune le impone, quanto il disordine interiore dell’animo umano, le incoerenti, inappellabili connessioni della memoria.” Langiano in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere*,” 146.

novels, particularly *Lettera aperta*) recognizes the new setting as the church-run hospital mentioned in *Lettera aperta* where, as a child, Goliarda received medical attention and treatments for a vitamin D deficiency. Dr. Majore starts:

‘Good job, armchairs. How many are there?’  
‘Two.’ In the solarium there were two black leather armchairs, and after having put me under the lamp that was supposed to strengthen me to then lay me down again under the lighting fixture, Sister Maria would sit next to me and would look at me smiling.<sup>43</sup>

In an instant, the memory of the armchairs links the present to the past memory of medical treatments as a child, connected by the visual, material memory of two armchairs. Likewise, continuing with the memory of the hospital, Goliarda remembers Sister Maria giving her small white candies that she hid under her white skirt. These candies function as a material token of memory in the same way the armchairs did: to immediately reconnect the narrative back to the present and Goliarda’s psychiatric treatment as an adult. Through stream of consciousness, the white candies hidden in Maria’s white skirt when Goliarda was a child become white prescription pills hidden in the adult Goliarda’s sheets. Speaking of Maria, Goliarda explains:

She always brought out a few small, white candies. She knew that they would have crushed me and she kept those pills for me. Chekhov’s forehead was pure white like snow. One day I would have seen Maria’s snow. Under that snow the pills were accumulating. If at least that doctor would not come anymore, I would not also have to pull together the strength to lie. But here he is coming up the stairs, here he is restarting this mockery of numbers.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “‘Brava, poltrone. Quante ce n’è?’

‘Due.’ Nella stanza del sole artificiale c’erano due poltrone di pelle nera, e dopo avermi messo sotto la lampada che mi doveva irrobustire, per poi rischiacciarmi di nuovo sotto il lampadario, suor Maria si sedeva a mi guardava sorridendo.” Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> “‘Tirava fuori delle piccole pastiche bianche. Sapeva che mi avrebbero schiacciata e conservava per me quelle pillole. La fronte di Cecov era candida come la neve. Un giorno l’avrei vista la neve di Maria. Sotto quella neve le pillole si accumulavano. Se almeno quel medico non fosse più venuto, non avrei dovuto anche fare lo sforzo di mentire. Ma eccolo che sale le scale, eccolo che ricomincia con questa presa in giro dei numeri.’” Ibid.

It is only gradually—through the memory of the white candies being connected to the present-day white pills—that the reader comes to realize that the adult Goliarda is stashing away medicine that she is being given. The narrator’s conjuring of disparate memories and insertion of the image of Chekhov’s forehead also being white (though a reference to Chekhov is made again in *Le certezze del dubbio*, it is unclear what memory is being evoked or why) adds to the effect of the disjointed chronology. The mention of having to lie then connects back to Goliarda’s focus on the lie that Dr. Majore and Citto have told her regarding the reason for her treatment, and the idea that she and her mother are both undergoing psychiatric treatments:

‘You can imagine what a nice couple mother and daughter would make here? But why don’t you tell me the truth, one good time?’

‘You must tell me the truth.’

‘And then why do you expect it from me?’ You can’t always expect the truth. How could he have said that I was crazy? I didn’t say anything to Maria either when she returned home and asked me what happened.

*‘Tell me the truth, Goliarda: what did I have?’*

*‘Diabetes, mamma, diabetes.’*

‘What did I have, Citto?’

‘Renal failure, Iuzza.’

I had been crazy and I had to hurry up [and get better].<sup>45</sup>

Sapienza inserts two asynchronous dialogues into the narration, importing them from the character’s memories of the past into the narrative present. The past dialogue between Goliarda’s mother and herself is conjured up by Dr. Majore’s not revealing to Goliarda the cause of her treatment. This dialogue then sparks recollection of another similar dialogue between

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<sup>45</sup> “‘Si immagina che bella coppia faremo madre e figlia qui? Ma perché non mi dice la verità, una buona volta?’

‘Lei, mi deve dire la verità.’

‘Io non dico mai la verità.’

‘E allora perché la pretende da me?’ Non si può pretendere la verità, sempre. Come poteva dire che ero stata pazza? Anche io non dissi niente a Maria quando tornò a casa e mi chiese cosa era successo.

*‘Dimmi la verità, Goliarda: cosa ho avuto?’*

*‘Diabete, mamma, diabete.’*

‘Cosa ho avuto, Citto?’

‘Intossicazione renale, Iuzza’

Ero stata pazza e dovevo fare presto.” Ibid., 49.

Goliarda and Citto that echoes the first. The narration then returns to the present in which Goliarda now realizes she too has “gone crazy.” The interspersed various dialogues disrupts the chronology of the story, reflecting the naturally scattered nature of the process of memory retrieval.<sup>46</sup>

Sapienza not only questions the stability, coherence and reliability of memory in this passage but also the availability of any objective or stable truth. Just as Goliarda lies to her mother about why she was hospitalized, so is she lied to. Like her mother, she is not aware at first that she is receiving treatment for a psychological breakdown, but starts to realize it in the midst of this passage, as she connects Citto’s lying to her with her own lying to her mother about the cause of their respective treatments, neither actually due to diabetes nor renal failure.

The experience of time as overlapping, recursive and scrambled is represented again in a passage in which the narrator navigates similar chronological loops and tangles through memories of conversations. When Dr. Majore arrives at Goliarda’s house and greets her, his voice suddenly morphs into Citto’s, stating something similar to what the doctor has just said:

‘Good morning, signora. You’re not saying anything to me? Not even replying to my saying good morning?’

‘Excuse me, it’s been a while since I last saw you...’

‘A while, signora? Saturday and Sunday, as usual! We must acquire a sense of time, signora, we must detach the time from these timeless infantile emotions that seize you... but you know that you’re interesting, one minute you are kicking me out, the other you are looking at me as if you didn’t know me... you are going to give me a heart attack!’...He was laughing... ‘But Iuzza, can it be possible that every time I leave even only for a few days it seems like you don’t recognize me anymore? You are going to make me die just like that, when I see you again I’m always afraid that you’ve forgotten me, you give me your hand with an indifference that makes my skin crawl.’

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<sup>46</sup> Studies of memory in neuroscience explain the retrieval of memory as a reconstructive process executed in bits and pieces, utilizing various parts of the brain, rather than a cohesive, chronological “read out.” Henry L. Roediger, Yadin Dudai, and Susan M. Fitzpatrick, *Science of Memory: Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 228.

‘I’m sorry Citto, you’re right [...] I’ll learn...’  
‘And did you learn? With me it doesn’t seem so.’  
‘With Citto yes...’<sup>47</sup>

The voice of Dr. Majore stands for a conventional, linear view of memory and self and he seems concerned by Goliarda’s apparent incoherence, interpreting it as a symptom of her pathology. Dr. Majore points out that the protagonist is “timeless” or “without time” (“senza tempo”) and he complains that she shifts between being present with him and being somewhere (or some time) else. As he is saying this, the narrative itself cuts to Citto’s voice echoing the same sentiment (reflecting exactly what the doctor was referring to), worrying that Goliarda does not recognize him. Goliarda responds to Citto, and the doctor responds to Goliarda, though these conversations have happened separately at different times and different places. These partial, plural, overlapping episodes are interdependent and recursive, as the current conversation helps spark the memory of the previous one, which in turns brings the narrative once again back to the present. Through what seems to be a pathology, Sapienza instead exposes the disjointed nature of the retrieval of all memory and questions the stability of truth. She transcribes onto the page the experience of consciousness and memory that we have all had, and the “scrambled” nature of the recollections is not necessarily evidence of mental illness, but of radical honesty and realism trumping a social and aesthetic impulse toward form and order. By doing this, she documents

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<sup>47</sup> “Buon giorno, signora. Non mi dice niente? Nemmeno risponde al mio buon giorno?”

‘Scusi, è tanto che non la vedo...’

‘Tanto, signora? Sabato e Domenica, come sempre! Dobbiamo acquistare il senso del tempo signora, dobbiamo staccare il tempo da queste emozioni infantile, senza tempo, che l’afferrano... ma lo sa che lei è curiosa, un momento mi caccia via, un momento mi guarda come se non mi conoscesse... lei mi farà venire un infarto!’... Rideva... ‘Ma luzza, è possibile che ogni volta che parto anche solo per pochi giorni sembra che non mi riconosci più? Mi farai morire di un colpo, quando ti rivedo ho sempre paura che tu mi abbia dimenticato, mi dai la mano con un’indifferenza che mi fa accapponare la pelle.’

‘Scusa, Citto, hai ragione [...] imparerò...’

‘E ha imparato? Con me non sembra.’

‘Con Citto sì...’” Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 114.

the experiential messiness of how we remember and how memories are triggered according to their own deep structure and syntax.

In *Io, Jean Gabin*, memories from different points in Goliarda's life in the form of microstories are inserted throughout the narrative, and at times connect from one to the other, irrespective of chronology. As an example, throughout chapter ten, Goliarda conjures up various memories of one of her older brothers, Ivanhoe: the memories begin with her asking him to help her read a book by Diderot, then switch to swimming as a young child in the ocean with him, to remembering that he was the one who fed her bottles as a baby and then taught her to walk, to memories of her aunt Grazia elegantly dressed in black, aghast at Goliarda's unkemptness, to asking her sister Licia what "mourning" means (referring to her aunt's black clothing). Licia describes Aunt Grazia as having a "real vocation for mourning" ("una vera vocazione del lutto") because she looked good in black, and Goliarda is so struck by the "free and ironic" ("libero e ironico") essence of this phrase that she wants to write it down to describe her childhood tutor Professor Jsaya (who appears in Sapienza's other novels). As she describes returning to her room to write the phrase down, she questions when the memory took place: "I went back upstairs to my attic – when was it? –, I went back upstairs so many times, to look for my notebook and write some phrases that time mixes into just a mass of lines now red now blue now black..."<sup>48</sup> Sapienza echoes the chronological cross-contamination in her autobiographical novel with Goliarda's "mixing" of time visible by the phrases written in different color pens in her notebook (reminiscent of Lessing's different color notebooks). This in turn reminds the narrator of a time in her youth when Professor Jsaya suggested that she might become a poet:

'You're nothing but a liar, such a liar that maybe you'll be a poet.'

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<sup>48</sup> "Torno su nella mia soffitta – quando è stato? –, l'ho fatto tante volte di tornare su, cercare il mio quaderno e scrivere qualche frase che il tempo mischia in un solo ammasso di righe ora rosse ora blu ora nere..." Sapienza, *Io, Jean Gabin*, 64.

‘But is it a bad thing, professor?’  
 ‘Obscene, little one, obscene!’  
 ‘But, professor, I wasn’t telling lies. You asked me to tell a story and I tried to...’  
 ‘In telling stories one must always stick to reality! What the fuck do I care about the color of the sun at sunset or the wind that was blowing... obscene and useless things that tarnish the world [...] Go ahead, at least write this filth, so that it can turn into real lies on paper.’<sup>49</sup>

As Professor Jsaya describes writing stories as “lies,” he also makes reference to Goliarda writing these fictions down in what becomes the notebook where Goliarda records her favorite poets’ phrases, her disjointed memories, and presumably the content that makes up the autobiographical novel(s) we are reading. Sapienza therefore suggests to the reader that what we are reading may be lies as well—or, at least, is not all truth. The memory of this notebook then immediately sparks a memory of having the same notebook with her when she was staying with nuns in Rome during World War Two: “In my notebook full of real lies told by the biggest liars that the human mind could ever imagine, I daydreamed and I forgot hunger, thirst, the Germans... Yeah, that notebook followed me all the way to the attic of the French nuns on Gaeta Street in Rome, it followed me all the way to the words of Jean, that wasn’t Gabin, she was an American refugee in the same convent during the Nazi occupation.”<sup>50</sup> The memory of her “notebook of lies” (told by poets and herself) leads to Jean, the American, which then shifts the chronology of the narrative again, leading directly into a flashback to that time, the dialogue

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<sup>49</sup> “Non sei che una bugiarda, così bugiarda che forse sarai poeta.’

‘Ma è una cosa così brutta, professore?’

‘Oscena, piccola, oscena!’

‘Ma io, professore, non dicevo bugie. Lei mi ha chiesto di raccontare e io ho cercato...’

‘Nel raccontare bisogna attenersi alla realtà! Che minchia mi frega a me del colore che aveva il sole al tramonto o il vento che spirava... cose oscene e inutili che insozzano il mondo [...] Va’, almeno scrivile queste porcherie, che diventano bugie vere sulla carta...’ Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> “Sul mio quaderno pieno di bugie vere raccontate dai più grossi bugiardi che mai mente umana poté immaginare, m’incanto e dimentico la fame, la sete, i tedeschi... Già, quel quaderno mi seguì fino alla soffitta delle suore francesi di via Gaeta a Roma, mi seguì fino alle parole di Jean, che non era Gabin, era un’americana rifugiata in quello stesso convento durante l’occupazione nazista.” Ibid., 65.

interrupting the narration directly.<sup>51</sup> The reference to another Jean further complicates both the chronology and semantics, as Goliarda had previously been associating herself with the name Jean. This episode with Jean lasts three more pages, and then cuts to a later memory of Jean when the two women were reunited as adults. Chapter twelve then begins simply with a return to the previous storyline:

...The vocation of mourning.  
Having written Licia's phrase in my magic notebook—or was it  
Professor Jsaya's [phrase]? who knows!—I realize that I'm terribly  
hungry. How is it possible?<sup>52</sup>

After a labyrinth of memories sparked by one phrase, the narrator returns to the “present” setting of her childhood, and the moment of writing down the phrase her older sister had used about their aunt.

Literary criticism on Sapienza focuses on *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* as the more introspective autobiographical works with regard to the complications of memory.<sup>53</sup> However, the same questioning and intercutting of memories also occur as a dyad in *L'Università di Rebibbia* and in the subsequent novel *Le certezze del dubbio*. Sapienza more explicitly questions memory, experience, and interpretation of what happened in prison (in *L'Università di Rebibbia*) throughout *Le certezze del dubbio*, looking back on her incarceration. For example, in the latter, Goliarda grapples with her initial interpretation of her friendship with

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<sup>51</sup> The narrative goes directly into this dialogue between Jean and Goliarda without further explanation by the narrator: “—You have to destroy this notebook, Esther (As a partisan the S.S. was looking for me so I had called myself this one day), it's full of names, if they came to do a search... What do you say, shall I burn it? —Oh yes, burn it, Jean.”

[“—Devi distruggerlo questo quaderno, Ester (mi sarei chiamata così un giorno da partigiana ricercata dalle SS), è pieno di nomi, se venissero a fare una perquisizione... Che dici, lo brucio?

—Ma sì, brucialo, Jean.”] Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “...La vocazione del lutto.

Segnata la frase di Licia sul mio quaderno magico—o era del professor Jsaya? chi lo sa!—mi accorgo di avere una fame tremenda! Come è possibile?” Ibid., 71.

<sup>53</sup> See Andrigo in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d'essere*,” 118.

Roberta while in prison, and questions whether their friendship will sustain the change of context when they run into each other almost a year later outside of prison. Not only does Goliarda have difficulty physically recognizing Roberta (she is no longer blonde, for example), but she wonders whether they will be able to recapture the same level of intimacy now that they no longer inhabit the “enchanted” space of the “faraway planet of Rebibbia” together.<sup>54</sup> When they first speak on the phone after running into each other, Roberta is abrupt with her, which impels Goliarda to question her previous interpretation of their entire relationship: “That brusque ‘OK’ put an end to all of my ponderings on Roberta, prison, my theft, the future adventures dreamed of there in the cell with her, who I had thought would have by now been my friend out on the streets. Bowing my head to that umpteenth proof that no one and no place is always ‘true,’ that no faith and no love are eternal [...], I tried to forget that ‘golden age’ that, good or bad, I had tasted in prison...”<sup>55</sup> Compared to the former novels where memory and truth are questioned implicitly through the stylistically disjointed narrative, here Sapienza more explicitly deals with the theme of “truth” and the (un)trustworthiness of memory, catalyzed by the failure of a mythologized past to align with her present reality. As the two women begin to spend more time together, they are able to rekindle their relationship, though the narrator openly contends with the fact that she had mythicized stories that she had heard while in prison. While Goliarda claims that her “experience of prison as ‘research on the present’ is finished,”<sup>56</sup> she continues to long for “emotions of a happy time when enclosed by four walls nothing could come to separate us.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “luogo incantato, emanazione del lontano pianeta Rebibbia.” Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 144.

<sup>55</sup> “Quell’OK brusco mise fine a tutte le mie elucubrazioni su Roberta, il carcere, il mio furto, le future avventure sognate là in cella con quella che credevo ormai sarebbe stata una compagna di strada. Piegando la testa a quell’ennesima prova che nessuna persona e nessun luogo sono ‘veri’ per sempre, che nessuna fede e nessun amore sono eterni [...], cercai di dimenticare quell’ ‘era d’oro’ che bene o male avevo assaporato in carcere...” Ibid., 18.

<sup>56</sup> “la mia esperienza del carcere come ‘ricerca del presente’ è finita” Ibid., 52.

<sup>57</sup> “emozioni d’un tempo felice quando chiuse fra quattro mura nessuno poteva venire a separarci.” Ibid., 137.

Sapienza's overt questioning of memory is complicated by this passage in her notebooks published as *La mia parte di gioia*: "In my *ciclo* there will also be lies, none of us can be exempt from them, but at least they will be contradicted at every step, either overturned or recognized by the character Iuzza-Goliarda as harmful errors and, because of this, harmful to others. A lie is a boomerang that does not forgive..."<sup>58</sup> Thus, while lying is presented and accepted as a part of storytelling in *Io, Jean Gabin*, in her notebooks Sapienza reveals a somewhat contradictory plan to overturn the lies of Goliarda's life. Apparently enacting her promise to "contradict" harmful lies "at every step," in *Le certezze del dubbio* Goliarda also comes to the realization that some of the "lies" she told herself about being in prison, and the people one meets in and out of prison, turned out to be true, and vice versa: "And [here] I was deluding myself that prison causes the idealization of everything that you leave outside! Instead I only needed a few hours to understand that everything that I was told in the cell corresponds to truth."<sup>59</sup> Goliarda had thought that she was indulging in mythologizing the outside world while in prison, but when she is able to confirm that the stories told in prison were true once she is on the outside, she sees that they were in fact realistic representations. While Goliarda thought others were, in a sense, lying to her about the people they knew on the outside, she was instead lying to herself. As an author, therefore, Sapienza simultaneously seems to condemn lies as harmful errors (as explained in her notebooks) *and* accept both the necessity of lying as part of storytelling and elusiveness of certainty and narrative reliability, thereby achieving her artistic aim of reproducing the contradictory nature of existence through her autobiographical novels.

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<sup>58</sup> "Anche nel mio ciclo ci saranno bugie, nessuno di noi può esserne esente, ma almeno saranno a ogni passo contraddette, o rovesciate o riconosciute come errori nocivi al personaggio Iuzza-Goliarda, e per questo nocivi agli altri. La bugia è un boomerange che non perdona..." Sapienza, *La mia parte di gioia*, 25-26.

<sup>59</sup> "E io che mi illudevo che la prigioniera portasse a mitizzare tutto quello che si lascia fuori! Invece mi sono bastate poche ore per capire che tutto quanto mi era stato raccontato in cella risponde a verità." Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 52.

## Repetition

As part of her effort to capture the iterative, non-linear character of memory, Sapienza employs the narrative technique of repetition—repeating, as we have seen, episodes, conversations, names, and individual words. A narrative voice that is unsure of (or discards) chronological order and struggles to reconstruct the past “needs” repetition in order to “remember” pieces of the story. In *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, Goliarda revisits the painful memory of receiving the news of her own psychoanalyst having a mental breakdown using the technique of repetition to represent her struggle, indeed, her trauma, at the time. Thinking of her close childhood friend Nica, who has passed away, she speaks in a dream directly to Nica: “...only if you will stay close to me, I will be able to crawl back through the dark and tortuous alleyway that threw itself in front of me seven and seven and seven and even seven more months ago, by the news that my analyst had gone crazy.”<sup>60</sup> The repetition of the word “seven” and the idea of seven months repeating again and again to create a longer and longer chronological path mirrors the repetitiveness of the metaphorical and seemingly endless alleyway of time through which the protagonist has to slowly make her way. The repetition also implies a remembering-while-telling (or a remembering-through-telling) in that Goliarda first thinks it was seven months ago, then corrects that and adds another seven months, then adds another and so on, exhibiting a lack of initial, definitive knowledge of the time frame and offering a transparent view of the revision process that is part of the act of remembering. Anna Carta also aptly points out the use of the

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<sup>60</sup> “...solo se mi starai accanto potrò ripercorrere carponi il vicolo buio e tortuoso che si spalancò davanti a me sette e sette e sette e ancora sette mesi fa alla notizia che il mio analista era impazzito.” Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 16.

alleyway as a metaphor for the labyrinth of memory and the psyche, also evident in this passage.<sup>61</sup>

In her illuminating essay comparing the manuscript of *Lettera aperta* with the published version, Anna Langiano points out that there were originally many more instances of repetition in the book, including an entire chapter dedicated to T.S. Eliot and the function of repeating a phrase or sentence as he does at the end of “The Hollow Men” (“This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper”). In particular, Langiano describes Sapienza’s repetition of an entire sentence three times, imitating what she calls a “memory trapped in an object that is not able to explain itself.”<sup>62</sup> In the chapter that was edited out of the published version of *Lettera aperta* describing this method of repetition as something learned from Eliot, Goliarda cites his quote above and goes on to write:

...following this advice of his I find myself repeating  
I do not work enough  
I do not work enough  
I do not work enough he had already said all that he kept closed in  
a seed, protected woven through the veins and nerves of his  
brain...<sup>63</sup>

While this passage seems to align with what Langiano describes as a “trapped memory” or rather a trapped rumination, in the same passage Sapienza goes on to offer a different interpretation of repetition, saying instead that “a sentence repeated multiple times opens like a flower that,

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<sup>61</sup> “L’use del vicolo come metafora dei labirinti della memoria e della psiche è scoperto in *Il filo di mezzogiorno...*” Carta in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere,*” 269, note 27.

<sup>62</sup> “la memoria intrappolata in un oggetto che non riesce a giustificare.” Langiano in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere,*” 135-6.

<sup>63</sup> “...seguendo questo suo consiglio mi trovo a ripetere

non lavoro abbastanza

non lavoro abbastanza

non lavoro abbastanza già lui aveva detto tutte [sic] quello che teneva chiuso in germe, protetto tramato fra le vene ed i nervi del suo cervello...” Sapienza in Langiano in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere,*” 136.

[when] closed, hides deeper, denser, unthinkable colors.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, to reconcile and combine Langiano’s and Sapienza’s interpretations, if a memory or meaning is trapped, repetition can function as its unveiling, a means of excavating its profundity.

In the context of the protagonist trying to make order of her memories and her past, repetition also serves a self-reinforcing function—i.e., the uncertain narrator trying to convince herself of the truth of her own utterance. In the published version of *Lettera aperta*, this repetition occurs, for example, in a passage in which Goliarda has just returned from revisiting her old neighborhood in Catania after years of living in Rome. When she knocks at the door of old neighbors, new tenants respond, acting coldly towards her and calling her a “foreigner.” Memories of the former neighbors then return to the protagonist, particularly the memory of a woman named Teresa who often used to sew, and she questions what must have become of her. Teresa’s job raising her grandson has likely come to an end (in other words, time has passed and Teresa’s grandson must now be an adult) and Goliarda repeats the following as if to convince herself that the era in which this woman lived is no longer, that the son is now an adult who likely dresses in the latest fashions (and therefore no longer in the clothes his mother made) and it is likely that Teresa is dead:

*Her task is finished*  
*Her task is finished*  
*Her task is finished*<sup>65</sup>

The first sentence may represent the straightforward fact that the woman’s task of sewing is finished, while the second and third sentences emphasize the finality of this era of the woman’s

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<sup>64</sup> “...una frase ripetuta più volte si apre come un fiore che chiuso nascondeva colori più fondi, densi, impensati.” Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “*Il suo compito è finito*  
*Il suo compito è finito*  
*Il suo compito è finito*” Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 130.

life being over, and the “task” of life itself being finished, the woman having passed away. The repetition builds and compounds meaning, as Sapienza notes; each iteration acquires deeper, denser, and more mortal significance.

## **The Relational Self**

Susan Stanford Friedman coined the term “relational life writing” to identify what she defined as a distinct form of selfhood articulated in women’s autobiography. According to her, women’s works exhibit a “sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identification that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness.”<sup>66</sup> However, more recent critical work on the subject has pointed out that the expression of self-consciousness can be relational in both women’s and men’s writing. Specifically, Sidonie Smith sees this “binary theorization of difference as a rigid and inadequate account of the polyvocality of autobiographical narration.”<sup>67</sup> Other critics, such as Paul Eakin, point out that in all autobiographical writing this relational quality can provide both “the autobiography of the self [and] the biography and the autobiography of the other.”<sup>68</sup> Leaving aside whether this relational quality is specific to women’s as opposed to men’s autobiographical writing, it is certainly conspicuously the case that Sapienza blurs the lines between self and other to incorporate the telling of others’ lives into her own autobiographical works.

Mariagiovanna Andriago correlates the emergence of the relational voice in Sapienza’s autobiography with a specific point in Sapienza’s life: according to her, a stylistic shift happens

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<sup>66</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 44.

<sup>67</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 216.

<sup>68</sup> John Paul Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 58.

after October 4, 1980, when Sapienza was imprisoned for five days, as chronicled in *L'Università di Rebibbia*. At this point, her work “passes from an autobiography of self-analysis and self-reconstruction, characterized by a kaleidoscope remembrance of her past world, to an autobiography in which her ‘I,’ stronger and more defined, integrates itself in a defined and contemporary environment, interacting and opening itself up to dialogue with third party voices.”<sup>69</sup> Though we may question how much importance to attribute to Sapienza’s brief imprisonment with regard to her writing style, it is indisputable that around this time, the autobiographical narrator becomes more engaged with her contemporary environment (as opposed to oneiric memory) and more involved and interactive with those around her. Similarly, Angelo Pellegrino points out the “immense distance” between *Appuntamento a Positano* and the earlier *Lettera aperta*, saying that the former belongs:

more exactly to that new manner of making autobiographical writing, that is born with *L'Università di Rebibbia*, when the use of her autobiographical ‘I’ changes position in the text, taking a back seat as the support and almost assistant to be able to principally tell stories of others, for her, more important than herself but an essential part of a period of her life, and because of this, worthy to be recovered and transmitted so that they could live [on] in the readers. [This was] one of the great objectives of her literary art.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, Sapienza’s last three autobiographical novels, *Appuntamento a Positano*, *L'Università di Rebibbia*, and *Le certezze del dubbio* veer slightly away from the form of self-discovery

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<sup>69</sup> “passa da un’autobiografia dell’auto-analisi e dell’auto-ricostruzione, caratterizzata da una rievocazione caleidoscopica del suo mondo passato, ad un’autobiografia in cui il suo *io*, più forte e definito, si inserisce in un ambiente circoscritto e contemporaneo, interagendo e aprendosi al dialogo con voci terze.” Andriago in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere*,” 118.

<sup>70</sup> “...lo fa risalire più esattamente a quella nuova maniera di fare scrittura autobiografica, che nasce con *L'Università di Rebibbia*, quando l’uso del suo *io* autobiografico cambia posizione nel testo facendosi defilato, sponda e quasi spalla per poter raccontare principalmente di altri, per lei più importanti di sé, però parte essenziale di un’età della sua vita, e per questo degni di essere recuperate e trasmesse perché vivano nei lettori. Uno dei grandi intenti della sua arte letteraria.” Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Appuntamento a Positano*, 181.

characteristic of her first three autobiographical novels by instead focusing on the stories and lives of others in relation to Goliarda.

The representation of Goliarda's fellow inmates in *L'Università di Rebibbia* provides an example of the "sense of shared identity" that Stanford Friedman refers to in relational life writing, and the "telling the stories of others" Pellegrino describes. Goliarda's account of her time in prison is both about the cast of characters that she encounters there and about the development of her own identity in prison in relation to the other inmates, which I describe in further detail in chapter three on the spatiality of women's relationships. Even if she does not tell the full life story of each of the other characters, she provides salient glimpses into these other women's lives. Through her encounters, the narrator introduces, among others, Giovannella (a seventeen-year-old Roman girl who has come to prison seeking an abortion), Marcella (about whom Goliarda explains "...I know that she understands me and once in a while it is good to speak with someone who speaks your same language"<sup>71</sup>), Marrò (her drug addict roommate going through withdrawal), and Annunciazione (her large, intimidating roommate who is initially hostile but later becomes protective of Goliarda). The connections grow even deeper when Goliarda is invited to join a group of women who congregate in inmate Suzie Wong's cell, and eat rice, drink tea, and talk about politics and their experiences in the world. Through these encounters, Goliarda explains that it seems Suzie Wong, "already knows me."<sup>72</sup> This connection with, and exposition of, the other characters allows us to come to know their stories in addition to Goliarda's, and to know Goliarda through them.

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<sup>71</sup> "...so che lei mi capisce e ogni tanto fa bene parlare con qualcuno che ha lo stesso tuo linguaggio." Sapienza, *L'Università di Rebibbia*, 52.

<sup>72</sup> "La piccola cinese già mi conosce." Ibid., 90.

## The Fused/Fusing Self

But this shift to focusing on the lives of other characters is indicative of something that previous critics have overlooked, something beyond an increasing relationality in her life writing, beyond simply representing others' life stories within her own autobiography ("the autobiography of the self [and] the biography and the autobiography of the other").<sup>73</sup> Sapienza's distinctive vision of multiple selves and selfhoods at times virtually incorporates "the other" into the narrating subject, absorbing or fusing the other into herself and being absorbed or fused into the other, which is distinctly different from a relational vision of the self.<sup>74</sup> The fused/fusing self is both a tempting and a terrifying prospect, as the self becomes absorbed by and absorbs the other.

In *Le certezze del dubbio*, Goliarda's connection with and representation of Roberta becomes so enmeshed with the narrator's own existence that she starts to represent Roberta and herself as one, incorporating another into her own autobiography, not just by writing *about* her but by subsuming her: "Roberta's words or, rather, the content that they express, are so identical to mine that, following her on the walk that she decided to go on to I don't know where, I almost have the impression of it being me talking or thinking out loud."<sup>75</sup> In this instant, Goliarda then has the somewhat alarming realization that Roberta may be her "sosia," or doppelgänger.

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<sup>73</sup> Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 58.

<sup>74</sup> In *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, just published in June 2016, Maria Morelli compares Dacia Maraini's *Memorie di una ladra* with Sapienza's *L'Università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, identifying prison as a Foucauldian heterotopic space. Although there has not been time to incorporate a full response to Morelli's article in this present work, I do wish to call attention to a point of interpretational alignment and divergence. While we both note Sapienza's depiction of peculiarly intense female relationships, Morelli interprets these as "merging" and "mirroring" instead of the "fusing" that I propose here. Morelli describes the protagonist "merging into the (m)other [...] that mirrors the primary symbiotic relationship of the child with the mother." I contend that once one has assimilated oneself into the other, or absorbed the other into oneself, relationship is no longer possible, as there is no longer a self and other to mutually engage. Morelli in Bazzoni, Bond, and Wehling-Giorgi, eds., *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, 199-214.

<sup>75</sup> "Le parole di Roberta, o meglio i contenuti che queste esprimono sono così identici ai miei che seguendola nella passeggiata che lei ha deciso di fare per andare chissà dove, ho quasi l'impressione di essere io a parlare o a pensare ad alta voce." Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 110.

Having been raised in Sicily, Goliarda is aware of the ancient, frightening superstitions about what can happen if one meets one's own double: "It is said that if you meet your twin it is because you betrayed your nature and you will be forced to either slaughter her or to let yourself be absorbed by her, soul and body."<sup>76</sup> Goliarda is therefore terrified by the idea of absorption even as she, the narrator, is absorbing Roberta. But even the anxiety that overtakes Goliarda because of the gravity of this remembrance is eerily understood without explanation by Roberta, as she turns to her with, "the identical preoccupation, the identical alarm that vibrates in my thoughts."<sup>77</sup> The protagonist continues to make references to Roberta as "myself" ("me stessa")<sup>78</sup> and her doppelgänger ("la sosia"). At a certain point the two women are so psychically connected that when they physically come together to embrace, Goliarda cannot distinguish which one of them is crying: "I find myself hugging her in the middle of the café, with the deaf hiccups of her chest smashed against mine, or is it me who is crying? I would never know if she had not said to me now, 'Oh, don't worry if I cry...I'm happy, thanks!'"<sup>79</sup> Eventually, the fact that this autobiography is about Roberta (while narrated by Goliarda) is made explicit: Goliarda must write to tell Roberta's story and the reader realizes that this is, in fact, the very book that we are reading. Roberta asks Goliarda why she writes and she replies that it is to extend her own and others' lives. Roberta then asks Goliarda outright if she will in this way be the custodian of her life as well.<sup>80</sup> This desire to be written about is a desire to truly

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<sup>76</sup> "È detto che se incontri la tua gemella è perché hai tradito la tua natura e sarai costretta o a scannarla o a lasciarti assorbire da lei anima e corpo." Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 110. The influence of Sicilian myths and Sapienza's authorial Sicilian predecessors, particularly Giovanni Verga and Luigi Pirandello, would be worth exploring in a future project.

<sup>77</sup> "L'identica preoccupazione, l'identico allarme che vibra nei miei pensieri." Ibid., 111.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 114, 136.

<sup>79</sup> "Mi trovo abbracciata a lei in mezzo al bar, con il suo petto squassato contro il mio da singhiozzi sordi, o sono io che piango? Non lo saprei mai se lei non mi dicesse ora: 'Oh, non ti preoccupare se piango... sono felice, grazie!'" Ibid., 142.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

be known, as the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero explores in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*.<sup>81</sup> Cavarero identifies the lack of philosophy or politics to identify *who* an individual is (while only really being able to describe *what* an individual is). Narration, which is dependent on others to tell one's life story, however, is uniquely able to reveal *who* an individual is, and in the case of *Le certezze del dubbio*, this becomes Roberta's great desire from Goliarda. At the end of the autobiographical novel, the narrator repeats the memory of their conversation and of Roberta proposing that perhaps one day Goliarda will write about her in order that she may live on. She asks herself (though we already know the answer, given we have just read the book):

Is this what Roberta wanted from me? to be born literarily, a character who lives in a book? A new confusion overtakes me now. Will I be able to, deprived of the contemptible nature of the joy of giving birth, will I be able to form inside of me that small shapeless lump of flesh into a child, if not beautiful or good, at least not deformed or missing a limb? [...] I do not know, I need to throw myself in the emptiness, going back to her, looking for her, impregnating myself with her image and grow it inside me, feeding it constantly until finally formed it can move from the darkness to the light: Roberta my daughter.<sup>82</sup>

Goliarda now feels tasked with the job of providing testimony for Roberta's life and, as she has incorporated it, she has also let it usurp her own autobiography. By the end of the book, as the narrator realizes the job to be done, Roberta goes from being Goliarda's doppelgänger, or "herself," to being her literary offspring, "my daughter" ("figlia mia"), whom she is forming from a "shapeless lump of flesh" into her literary "child." The narrator therefore converts the

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<sup>81</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1997).

<sup>82</sup> "Questo Roberta voleva da me? rinascere letterariamente, personaggio che vive in un libro? Uno smarrimento nuovo ora mi prende. Riuscerò io a forgiare dentro di me quel piccolo bozzolo informe di carne in una bambina se non bella né buona, almeno non deforme o mancante di qualche arto? [...] Non lo so, mi tocca buttarmi nel vuoto riandando a lei, ricercandola, ingravidandomi della sua immagine e maturarmela dentro, nutrendola costantemente finché finalmente modellata possa uscire dal buio alla luce: Roberta figlia mia." Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 189.

terrifying idea of fusing with another into the more natural and creative idea of giving birth, reconfiguring it through a mother-child metaphor. Instead of the murderous action (i.e. slaughtering) that one must take against the *doppelgänger* according to the myths of Goliarda's youth, we have the benign selflessness of the mother-child relationship which represents the creation and bearing of life. Both Roberta and the autobiographical novel about Roberta become the narrator's daughter as the narrator creates and arrives at artistic consciousness.

Indeed, within the context of the fusing/fused self, Sapienza uses the autobiographical textual space as a workshop in which to think about the process of writing itself, its purpose, and the nature of artistic consciousness.<sup>83</sup> This meta-literary reflection appears at the end of *L'Università di Rebibbia*, as the narrator takes up pen and paper to write, again, presumably the very book we have just finished reading: "Imitating Roberta sitting on the bed, her legs folded like a desk, a piece of paper on top, her head bent, her long blond hair dancing in the light, I picked up paper and pen too. It is necessary."<sup>84</sup> The necessity is dual: for the narrator and author's own autobiographical purposes but also for the purpose of preserving the lives of others and providing testimony for them. Indeed, in an interview on the topic of prison, Sapienza explained that she purposefully chose to go to prison because she was, "motivated by the desire

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<sup>83</sup> Other Italian women writers also include (sometimes metaliterary) reflections on writing in their works. The critic Sharon Wood argues that Elsa Morante's *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), "becomes a workshop in the art of storytelling. The narrative is clearly placed within a framework that overturns any rigid policing of spatial, temporal, and generic boundaries and borders, to be punctuated with metaliterary comments on, and enactments of, the business of writing, and most particularly the business of fiction." Stefania Lucamante and Sharon Wood, eds., *Under Arturo's Star: The Cultural Legacies of Elsa Morante* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), 106. Likewise, Natalia Ginzburg's *Le piccole virtù* is a partially autobiographical collection of essays that contains the essay "Il mio mestiere" ("My vocation") in which she describes how she discovered that writing was her calling and profession. Natalia Ginzburg, *Le piccole virtù* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 65.

<sup>84</sup> "Imitando Roberta seduta sul letto, le gambe ripiegate a mo' di scrittoio, una cartella sopra, la testa china, i lunghi capelli biondi danzanti nella luce, anch'io prendo carta e penna. È necessario." Sapienza, *L'Università di Rebibbia*, 138.

to [provide] testimony,” not only or primarily of her own experience but of the experience of others who are imprisoned.<sup>85</sup>

In *Appuntamento a Positano*, the autobiography of another person enters the narrative extensively on a formal level, and again what begins as friendship rises to the level of a fused/fusing identity. Goliarda develops a friendship with Erica Benevento, an enrapturing and initially mysterious inhabitant of Positano. Like *Le certezze del dubbio*, this autobiographical novel is made up almost entirely of the story of the two women’s friendship; the novel begins with the first time Goliarda sees Erica and details their initial encounters and the conversations through which their relationship develops. However, half-way through chapter eleven, in response to Goliarda’s question about Erica’s childhood, Erica takes over the narration throughout the rest of chapter eleven, all the way through the end of chapter fifteen (out of twenty-six chapters). She recounts her wealthy childhood, her adolescent love, her father’s death and the family’s financial ruin, her and her sisters’ move to Milan, her beloved sister Fiore’s suicide, and the remaining sisters’ eventual rise out of poverty thanks to reconciliation with an uncle with whom Erica’s father had cut ties during his life. Erica’s heart-wrenching and intimate story becomes the novel for these five chapters.

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<sup>85</sup> In the interview, Sapienza explains her story to Enzo Biagi thusly:

“‘I feel a little embarrassed because my experience was actually brief [...] and motivated by the desire to [provide] testimony.’

‘Afterward, I imagine, not before?’

‘No, no, I even wanted to go there before.’

‘You had always wanted to go to prison?’

‘Yes, yes, for a while, yes, because at my house it was also said that you really know your own country by knowing prison...’

(“‘Mi sento un po’ imbarazzata perché la mia è stata un’esperienza, intanto breve [...] e poi, mossa da un desiderio di testimonianza...’

‘Dopo, immagino, non prima?’

‘No, no, volevo andarci anche prima...’

‘Ha sempre desiderato andare in carcere?’

‘Sì, sì, da molto tempo, sì, perché anche a casa mia si diceva che...il proprio paese si conosceva conoscendo il carcere...’”) Enzo Biagi, interviewer. Goliarda Sapienza, interviewed. Accas Film, accessed February 2, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojXxjHr6MU0>

As Erica's narration ends, chapter sixteen begins in the voice of a third-person narrator who is neither Goliarda nor Erica (a technique that recurs in Sapienza's oeuvre, as I will describe in detail in the following chapter). This third-person narrator relates Erica's epiphany that she needed Goliarda all along: "Yes, Erica felt that that strange creature, with that even stranger name that the genius of Positano had her meet was exactly the friend she had always wanted since birth."<sup>86</sup> This separate, apparently omniscient, narrative voice, however, is interspersed with free indirect discourse in an unidentifiable voice that could be Erica's or Goliarda's, given the comments and tone and the fact that neither is officially narrating this section. For example, the narrator reveals the fact that Erica does not have mirrors in her house because she does not like seeing herself: "For this reason there weren't mirrors in her house, except for that hateful contraption in the bathroom. If she could only get rid of it! But where have you ever seen a bathroom without mirrors?"<sup>87</sup> The voice of a character (Erica) entering the third-person narration has the effect of creating a transitional, fused space in which the two women's voices are indistinguishable within the narrator's voice before returning to Goliarda's first-person narration. This transition happens as a fading or blending back to Goliarda's voice, merging the separate narrating voices into a narrative representation of a fused/fusing self. Furthermore, the content of the transition echoes the theme in *Le certezze del dubbio* of the self becoming merged or "one" with another person:

And what had calmed her so much at the end of this confession to her friend that had limited her to looking at her instead of rushing to lie to her or to spur her? A relief that no famous analyst knew how to give her, which she had experienced and experienced even now over a year's distance from the day in which she had told her about

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<sup>86</sup> "Sì, Erica sentiva che quella strana creatura, con quell'ancor più strano nome, che il genio di Positano le aveva fatto incontrare era proprio l'amica sempre desiderata fin dall'infanzia." Sapienza, *Appuntamento a Positano*, 96.

<sup>87</sup> "Per questo non c'erano specchi nella sua casa, a parte quell'odioso aggeggio in bagno. Avesse potuto eliminarlo! Ma dove s'è mai visto un bagno senza specchi?" Ibid.

her feeling at fault that for years made her almost lose her mind: not having been able to save Fiore.

From that relief, by virtue of that relief, our friendship was deepened so much that one time while walking I said to her: – I understand you so much that at times I have the impression of being you. Do you think this transmission into another can happen?<sup>88</sup>

In the second paragraph, Goliarda, as narrator, knows the extraordinarily personal and intimate revelation that Erica has had, which has been narrated by the third-person narrator, and incorporates it into her own revelation about the two women's friendship. As in *Le certezze del dubbio*, Goliarda has the uncanny sensation that she is the other person; her self has meshed so completely with the other woman that the two have become one. Through the insertion of Erica's story into Goliarda's, and by merging the narrator's voice formally, Sapienza evinces a paradigm of fused/fusing selfhood with another. This is not a representation of the relational self; in seeing the other as herself, Goliarda does not distinguish between self and other, and thus actually negates a relationship (which requires two individual entities). The two women's friendship instead becomes the absorption of another into the self.

With these representations of the fused/fusing self, Sapienza trespasses the ontological boundary between self and other. Sapienza recognizes that this is not a benign transgression, but ultimately she treats the experience as neither simply positive nor negative. In both *Le certezze del dubbio* and *Appuntamento a Positano*, the protagonist finds it exciting and appealing that she has found a friend to whom she is so close, with whom she feels so much empathy, who understands her so well and who feels as she does. However, being fused into another (or fusing

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<sup>88</sup> “E che cosa l’aveva calmata tanto alla fine di questa confessione all’amica, che si era limitata a guardarla invece di precipitarsi a smentirla o incoraggiarla? Un sollievo che nessun analista di fama le aveva saputo dare, che aveva provato e provava anche adesso a più di un anno di distanza dal giorno in cui le aveva parlato del senso di colpa che per anni le fece quasi perdere il senno: non essere riuscita a salvare Fiore.

Da quel sollievo, in virtù di quel sollievo, la nostra amicizia s’era approfondita tanto che una volta passeggiando le dissi: – Ti capisco talmente che a volte ho l’impressione di essere te. Pensi che possa avvenire questo travaso in un altro?” Ibid., 97.

another into you) is also a narcissistic condition in that it fails to recognize or value the subjectivity of the other. Sapienza recognizes the mystery and even danger in the doppelgänger and the fused/fusing self: connecting with another to the point of being indistinguishable from her can be both gratifying and terrifying, both inviting and sinister. This construction and subsequent transgression or erasure of boundaries becomes a trope throughout all of Sapienza's work, thematically and formally.

Sapienza's representation of the evolving, heterogeneous self in her autobiographical novels predated a critical approach to autobiography that acknowledged "a subject that is in process."<sup>89</sup> Sapienza's various works, written over the course of three decades, present a vision of selfhood that is constantly in progress through the structure of multiple autobiographical novels, the questioning of memory and narrative voice, the technique of repetition and the representation of the relational self. However, her most unique contribution rests in her vision of the exhilarating and terrifying fused/fusing self, trespassing the boundaries of selfhood to be indistinguishable from the other, which she is able to effect, in part, with a unique hybridized narrative voice. In the next chapter I will further explore the narrative experimentation that characterizes Sapienza's work in the context of her significant background in theater.

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<sup>89</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 218.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE INFLUENCE OF THEATER IN SAPIENZA'S PROSE WORKS

Goliarda Sapienza was deeply immersed in acting in theater before she shifted her creative outlet to writing. While the existing literature on Sapienza tends to focus either on her work in theater *or* on her novels, there is currently no critical work that reconciles the two. Moreover, while drama criticism has traditionally leaned on and borrowed heavily from (non-dramatic) literary criticism, which implies, therefore, that theater looks to the broader spectrum of literature for influence, I aim to enact the inverse: to look at the influence of theater on literary prose.<sup>1</sup> Existing scholarship has neglected a critical perspective on Sapienza's literary oeuvre that only an examination of her experience in theater can provide.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I propose that Sapienza's deep background in theater helps to shed light on three particular aspects of her work that are narratologically controversial or misunderstood: first, the influence of the format of the script and performed theatrical dialogue on her writing style and narrative strategies; second, the impact of the formal structure of the stage on her settings and composition; and third, the ubiquity of theatrical themes throughout her oeuvre.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Rzhevsky explores literature and literary culture's influence on theater. Nicholas Rzhevsky, *The Modern Russian Theater: A Literary and Cultural History* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2009), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Though I focus on theater in this chapter, Sapienza's work in film also played a role in the development of her writing. Angelo Pellegrino writes that working in film constituted Sapienza's real "school" in literature and Sapienza declared that film helped her learn "to see and to write." This would be a worthy area for future study. See the introduction by Angelo Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 10.

Given the limited historical material available on Goliarda Sapienza, a brief description of her acting career is in order. Sapienza devoted herself entirely to theater in her early life; in 1941, at the age of 17, she moved from Sicily to Rome to audition for entrance into the prestigious *Reale Accademia di arte drammatica* for talented young actors, and was admitted with a scholarship. She was acclaimed for her roles in Pirandello plays, such as the mendacious Ersilia Drei in *Vestire gli ignudi*, and was dubbed “the new Eleonora Duse” by Silvio D’Amico, no small compliment.<sup>3</sup> Together with fellow students Silverio Blasi, Mario Landi, and Valeria Ravot, she founded the avant-garde theater group T45 in 1945, which mounted a production of the challenging, expressionist *Pains of Youth* (1929) by Ferdinand Bruckner at the Manzoni Theater in Milan with great success.<sup>4</sup> However, after several performances, the police shut it down because the show was judged too scandalous and violent.<sup>5</sup> Her last important role on the stage was as “Mita” in Pirandello’s *Liola* at the Teatro Mercadante in Naples in 1960.<sup>6</sup> As an actress, Sapienza, like many of her peers, eventually transitioned from the theater to film, playing supporting roles in a number of films such as *Un giorno nella vita*, directed by Alessandro Blasetti, *Senso*, directed by Luchino Visconti, and *Gli sbandati*, directed by Francesco Maselli, who became her companion and collaborator for two decades following their meeting in 1947.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See the prefaces written by Angelo Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 9, and Sapienza, *Tre pièces e soggetti cinematografici*, 9. Sapienza also played Dina in Pirandello’s *Così è (se vi pare)* at the Accademia in 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Maraini, “Ricordo di Goliarda Sapienza,” in Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Gobbato in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere*,” 279.

<sup>6</sup> Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Tre pièces*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Lucia Cardone lists the seven films that Sapienza appeared in during her lifetime: *Un giorno nella vita* (Blasetti, 1946), *Fabiola* (Blasetti, 1948), *Persiane chiuse* (Comencini, 1950), *Altri tempi*, episode: “La morsa” (Blasetti, 1951), *Senso* (Visconti, 1954), *Gli sbandati* (Maselli, 1955), and *Lettera aperta a un giornale della sera* (Maselli, 1970). Cardone in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 43. Although Goliarda Sapienza was an acclaimed theater actress and acted in some films, there are only a few recordings that we can access today to observe her talent and dedication to acting. One of these is Maselli’s well-known film *Gli sbandati*, which received an honorable mention at the 1955 Venice Film Festival. Observing Sapienza on screen is riveting. In the film a young bourgeois man, Andrea (Jean-Pierre Mocky), and his countess mother escape the tumultuous last days of World War II by going to their villa in the countryside, attempting to remain blissfully ignorant of what is happening in the rest of the country. Their calm escape is soon destroyed, however, by a young woman, Lucia (Lucia Bose), and her aunt Maria, played by Sapienza, who no longer have a home and request to be taken in at the villa. Although she has only a few spoken

Although the most intense years of her acting career are concentrated in her early adulthood, theatrical arts remained part of her life from her very early years until she was middle-aged. As a young teen, Sapienza's father Giuseppe introduced her to Angelo Musco and Giovanni Grasso, Jr., from whom she learned about the popular *teatro siciliano*, picking up the gestural, physical qualities of the art.<sup>8</sup> Between the 1960s and the 1980s Sapienza wrote three theatrical pieces with every intention of having them produced, though for various reasons they were never staged during her lifetime.<sup>9</sup> Sapienza's husband Angelo Pellegrino explains that the choice to turn to the form of the novel was almost "obligatory" for Sapienza: "If she could have, maybe she would have written mostly theater. But after the failed production of *Grande bugia* (*Big Lie*, her first play), and after having verified the impossibility of finding a production, she concentrated everything on *L'arte della gioia*."<sup>10</sup> Therefore the choice to invest her energies in writing novels seems to have hinged on the contingent, provisional nature of dramaturgy – a play

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lines, Sapienza's role is crucial to the plot because it ignites Andrea's transformation and fall from innocence. The first night Lucia and Maria stay at the villa, loud shrieking punctures the silence of the evening. The men rush to find out where it is coming from, and it is Sapienza in the role of Maria, screaming and shuddering. She is wide-eyed but staring blankly ahead, breathing heavily and sweating, and clearly in physical discomfort. The intense chiaroscuro lighting highlights the pitifulness of the two women huddled in the corner under a threadbare cover, in contrast to the crisp-shirted, wealthy young men who have come to see what is going on. We find out that Maria's husband was killed in a bombing, and her shrieking is a sign of her suffering from night terrors. Her screams disconcert the protagonist, who is stunned, frozen in the doorway, faced now with the first signs of the war's final destruction that has crept into his naïve, bourgeois lifestyle at the villa. Sapienza's raw, powerful, and naturalistic performance sets off the rising action in the plot of the film, and makes the scene painful, bewildering and believable.

<sup>8</sup> Cardone in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Sapienza wrote *La grande bugia* in the late 1960s, with the idea that Anna Magnani, whom Sapienza knew personally, would play the title character. When Magnani read the part, she thought it too closely resembled personal aspects of her life, became offended, and the play did not go forward. In the late '60s a group of young people who called themselves a "psychic family" and formed a sort of commune encouraged Sapienza to write *La rivolta dei fratelli*, but this piece, too, was never produced in the end. In 1987 Sapienza wrote *Due signore e un cherubino* inspired by an encounter of hers with Marta Marzotto who helped finance the publication of her novel *Le certezze del dubbio*, but this last play was also never produced. The year after Sapienza's death, in 1997, Angelo Pellegrino nominated *La rivolta dei fratelli* under the title *L'isola dei fratelli* for the Enrico Maria Salerno Prize recognizing new and unknown playwrights; it won and was finally staged posthumously. See Pellegrino's preface in Sapienza, *Tre pièces*, 10-14.

<sup>10</sup> "Lei, se avesse potuto, forse avrebbe scritto sostanzialmente teatro. Ma dopo la mancata messinscena della *Grande bugia*, dopo aver constatato l'impossibilità di trovare una produzione, si concentrò tutta sull'*Arte della gioia*." Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Tre pièces*, 10.

that is never produced never comes to life. Pellegrino recounts Sapienza saying, “At least once a novel is finished, even if it is not published, it exists in and of itself, but a play, if I do not see it realized on stage, it does not exist. I will never know if it works or not.”<sup>11</sup>

It is important to stress that, despite her movement away from writing plays, Sapienza remained involved in theater: she acted in a few more plays in the late ‘70s<sup>12</sup>, and in the ‘90s, at almost seventy years of age, she taught acting classes at the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia di Roma*, evidencing a continued connection to theatrical arts throughout her lifetime.<sup>13</sup> Pellegrino later wrote that he was in a unique position to observe the reactions of people who spoke with Sapienza over the years regarding theater and film, for whom she was a treasure trove of ideas: “What she said, for example, about the theater was a rapid-fire of bright ideas, and I saw scholars take notes, a little secretly: and they, then, wrote excellent books, scientifically developing her ideas. And as far as directors are concerned, it should be said that more than one of Goliarda’s oral stories became, behind her back, the screenplay of a successful film.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, her personal anecdotes of life in the theater proved fertile material for young scholars and film directors while at the same time providing the seeds of her own literary endeavors.

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<sup>11</sup> “Almeno il romanzo una volta finito, anche se non pubblicato, esiste di per sé, ma il dramma, se non lo vedo in scena, realizzato, non esiste. Non saprò mai se funziona o meno.” Pellegrino quoting Sapienza, *Tre pièces*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Pellegrino in Sapienza, *Tre pièces*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Vigorita in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> “Ciò che diceva, ad esempio, sul teatro era un fuoco di fila di trovate intelligenti, e ho visto studiosi prendere, un po’ clandestinamente, degli appunti: hanno poi scritto ottimi libri, sviluppando scientificamente le sue idee. E, per quanto riguarda i registi, va detto che più di un racconto orale di Goliarda è diventato, a sua insaputa, la sceneggiatura di un film di successo.” Pellegrino in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 86.

## Theater and Narration

A closer look at the form of the theatrical script will help us to understand better Sapienza's narrative innovations. While critics have only just begun to analyze Sapienza's narrative style, it has already proven a complicated and controversial subject. As we know, Sapienza received scant critical attention during her lifetime and had difficulty publishing her now best-known work, *L'arte della gioia*. The publisher Feltrinelli declined to publish this work "on the grounds that it was too traditional in its use of 'essentially nineteenth-century narrative canons' ['canoni narrativi sostanzialmente ottocenteschi'], and therefore not in line with the publisher's preference for experimental writing."<sup>15</sup> Ironically, it is precisely the challenging and innovative aspects of Sapienza's narratives that some recent critics have highlighted. Far from harking back to nineteenth-century narrative methods, she invents a hybrid genre of theatrical and literary prose. As evidence, Giuliana Ortu points to Sapienza's overlap of young Goliarda and the older Goliarda's voice (i.e. a narrator that alternates between an adult voice and the thoughts of a child), and her technique of using second-person narration in which she speaks directly to the audience/reader.<sup>16</sup> Laura Fortini catalogues Sapienza's highly unusual technique of switching unannounced between first-person and third-person narration throughout *L'arte della gioia*,<sup>17</sup> which Domenico Scarpa also notes, describing it as "pronoun gymnastics that shows artistic nimbleness."<sup>18</sup> Fortini points out that there are sections of the novel wherein the characters' dialogue becomes purely mimetic, as in theater, with the characters speaking to each other without any interjection by the narrator whatsoever.<sup>19</sup> The contradiction between

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<sup>15</sup> Susanna Scarparo and Aureliana Di Rollo, "Mothers, Daughters and Family in Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia*," *The Italianist* 35 (February 2015): 92.

<sup>16</sup> Giuliana Ortu in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Fortini in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 107, note 16.

<sup>18</sup> "un esercizio di ginnastica pronominale in scioltezza d'arti..." Scarpa in Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 518.

<sup>19</sup> Fortini in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 107, note 16.

Feltrinelli's dismissive comment on Sapienza's narrative form as not being "experimental" enough and more recent critics' attention to Sapienza's narrative experimentalism underscores the need to explore in depth the author's narrative choices. I argue that examining the narration in Sapienza's prose through the lens of theater provides a key to unlocking and better understanding the way Sapienza purposefully cross-pollinates the genre of the novel with formal aspects of theater, creating narrative techniques that may initially be uncategorizable, but are actually heavily influenced by the form of the script. This mixing of narrative styles testifies to her conscious intent as a writer to experiment with the form of the novel, and to the fundamental misconstrual and underestimation of her art by Feltrinelli and others during her lifetime.

So, what then differentiates the narrative of theater and the narrative of prose? In order to help answer this question and establish a methodology for examining the theatrical aspects of Sapienza's prose, we can turn to Cesare Segre's *Teatro e romanzo* (Theater and Novel). Segre locates the difference in the use of the second-person in theater versus first- or third-person in prose. He states that in theater "I" and "you" ("io" and "tu") predominate whereas in the novel either "I" or "he, she" ("io" or "lui, lei") predominates.<sup>20</sup> Segre explains that in theater the absence of a mediating narrator between the characters presenting the story and the audience allows for direct communication between the "I" ("io") and the audience through use of the second person ("you"). This is in contrast to the traditional narration of the novel in which the narrator either uses "I" ("io") or "he, she" ("lui, lei").

With this differentiation in mind, I will show that one of Sapienza's clear adaptations of theatrical form is her direct mode of address to the reader in her novels, revealing a style affected by the presence of the second-person in theater. This technique allows her to, as it were, break

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<sup>20</sup> Cesare Segre, *Teatro e romanzo* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1984), vii.

the “fourth wall” in the novels, as if her readership were a present audience attending her play and able to interact in the “performance” of her work.<sup>21</sup> The narrator directs herself to the reader using verbs such as “talk” instead of “write,” as if we were in the audience hearing her speaking to us. While the trope of direct address to the reader is not new—indeed, it is a commonplace in eighteenth and nineteenth-century British novels<sup>22</sup>—as we shall see, *Sapienza* employs this technique in a different way from the tradition.

At the very beginning of her first autobiographical novel, *Lettera aperta*, the narrator engages the reader directly in the story, explaining that she needs the reader’s help cleaning up the metaphorical “room” of her memories. She has asked us to assist because she needs an audience to react to her actions, to help her decide what to keep and what to throw away as she is cleaning up. The reader is thus not only an auditor, an audience member, and a witness, but implicitly a participant. The form of address and presence between the narrator and the audience is one of immediacy and proximity. *Sapienza* uses the plural form of “you” addressing the collective audience. She says explicitly that the reason she decided to “talk” to us, (note the use of this verb implying presence and performance, as opposed to the mediated verb “to write”—this is very clearly and importantly not a letter) is not simply to tell us a story: “It is not to bother you [plural] with a new story, nor to exercise my handwriting, as even I had done for a long time, nor for a need for truth—that does not interest me at all—that I have decided to speak to you about that which (not having understood it) has been weighing down my shoulders for forty

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<sup>21</sup> Giuliana Ortu points this out in her article on *Lettera aperta*: “In the act of listening the readers prepare themselves to be spectators in a virtual theater and, conversely, the writer makes herself the actress of the novel about her own life.” (“Nell’atto dell’ascolto la lettrice e il lettore si predispongono a essere spettatori in un virtuale teatro e, di converso, la scrittrice si fa attrice del romanzo della propria vita.”) Ortu in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 150.

<sup>22</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

years. You'll think: why doesn't she sort it out by herself? Indeed, I've tried. A lot."<sup>23</sup> This address to the reader is very different from the conscripted "Gentle reader" of the nineteenth-century novel, where the reader is coaxed into submission to, and collusion with, the author's will and world view. Here the reader is engaged to come to the aid of a narrator who declares herself in need of help—a relationship between readers and author anathema to the nineteenth-century tradition. Goliarda has no need for, or interest in, "the truth" as a permanent and impersonal document, an aim commonly sought through the process of recording via writing. Instead, she aims for what can be obtained via speaking: i.e., relationship and mutuality, here soliciting a dialogue with and an engaged response from the reader. There is, of course, a purely rhetorical aspect to this dramatized dialogue with a (silent) partner since it is in reality a one-sided "conversation," on a page, in which the reader cannot literally participate. The effect of this rhetorical tool is that Goliarda is talking *with* us and reacting as if we are having a reaction, or as if she can see our reaction, adjusting what she says based on the (presumed) reaction of the audience. At times she realizes that she might need to explain things further, stating, "I'll explain to you: ..." or, "You'll understand..." and adding phrases such as, "As I told you..." and, "... (that's why) I have decided to speak to you."<sup>24</sup> The last time she tried to "clean her room" and understand the first forty years of her life, the solitary endeavor brought her close to death by attempted suicide, implying that she sees traditional writing and traditional narrative forms as dangerously solitary. Therefore, she explains, this time she cannot do it by herself and needs to involve the audience so as not to be alone: "...I thought that venting with someone else

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<sup>23</sup> "Non è per importunarvi con una nuova storia né per fare esercizio di calligrafia, come ho fatto anch'io per lungo tempo; né per bisogno di verità—non mi interessa affatto, —che mi decido a parlarvi di quello che non avendo capito mi pesa da quarant'anni sulle spalle. Voi penserete: perché non se la sbrogliate da sé? Infatti ho cercato, molto." Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> "Vi spiego," "Capirete," "Come vi ho detto," "...mi sono decisa a parlarvi." *Ibid.*, 15-16.

would be better, if not for the others, at least for me.”<sup>25</sup> Goliarda explains the importance of our presence during the process of “cleaning up” as follows: “Excuse me again, but I need you in order to be able to free myself of all of the ugly things that are inside here. Talking, from the reaction of those who are listening, you can understand what can be kept and what can be thrown away. I need you in order to free myself of all the useless things that take up space in this room.”<sup>26</sup> Here again she uses verbs that imply a presence in person: “talking” and “listening,” as opposed to “writing” and “reading.” Speaking to the audience directly, involving us in her decision-making process, the narrator creates a theatrical experience on the page in which the reader is cast in a vital supporting role.

Goliarda continues to turn to her audience throughout the story to ask questions and converse with us. She often interrupts the narrative to ask us a question, for example, when she talks about being a child and not being able to get a word in edgewise among her many older brothers and sisters: “But, excuse me [she continues to use the plural form of “you” in the Italian], how does one insert a question when people talk so much, without stopping?”<sup>27</sup> We implicitly help the narrator to remember pieces of her story as she continues telling it, as when, recounting stories about the tutor that mentored her after her father pulled her out of elementary school, she admits how speaking with us has helped her memory: “Yet, before starting to talk

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<sup>25</sup> “...ho pensato che sfogarsi con qualcuno sarebbe stato meglio, se non per gli altri almeno per me.” Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 15. Charlotte Ross also comments on the role of spectator that Sapienza gives the reader: “If *Lettera aperta* begins with a plea for the reader to listen, to save Sapienza from suicidal thoughts through their attention, and to allow her to offload her memories through textual articulation, as the book progresses it seems that rather than allowing her to liberate herself from her painful past, Sapienza needs the reader as spectator to her learned performance of herself in the present moment, as constituted by a manipulated, remembered version of her past.” Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza’s Eccentric Interruptions,” 8.

<sup>26</sup> “Scusate ancora, ma ho bisogno di voi per essere in grado di sbarazzarmi di tutte le cose brutte che ci sono qui dentro. Parlando, dalla reazione di chi ascolta, puoi capire cosa va tenuto e cosa buttato. Ho bisogno di voi per liberarmi di tutte le cose inutili che affollano questa stanza.” Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> “Ma scusate, come si fa ad infilare una domanda quando la gente parla tanto, ininterrottamente? Ho l’impressione di avere, a casa mia, sempre solo ascoltato.” Ibid., 24.

with you, I barely remembered him.”<sup>28</sup> As Goliarda continues to clean her room in *Lettera aperta* and review her memories, she consistently addresses the audience for support. While she is sorting through items she has taken out of her dresser, she asks us what method she should use for organizing: “Put everything back in haphazardly? Throw away everything, you say?” She finds *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne among her books, and the cover happens to be stuck to another book. While she wants to save Sterne’s book, she thinks she should get rid of the other book, but does not know how to go about doing this, and turns to us for advice: “You don’t understand? I’ll explain it to you: the fact is that my room is a little humid, and so Tristram got all stuck to this little book, and in order to get it off I would have to rip it from top to bottom or throw away both.”<sup>29</sup> This example shows the difficulties Goliarda faces as she cleans her room – decisions that she does not want to make by herself without our help.

A short while after this she issues a warning to the reader/audience at the beginning of chapter seven by stating: “You do not have to read this.”<sup>30</sup> This chapter recalls memories of Ivanoè, her brother, and Ercole, the father of her long-time companion, both long passed away.

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<sup>28</sup> “Eppure, prima di cominciare a parlare con voi, lo ricordavo appena.” Ibid., 31.

<sup>29</sup> “Non capite? Vi spiego: il fatto è che la mia stanza è un po’ umida, e così Tristram si è tutto appiccicato a questo libriccino, e per staccarlo lo dovrei squarciare da capo a fondo, o buttarli tutti e due.” Ibid., 30. Tristram Shandy is certainly not a randomly chosen subject, and Sterne’s book itself is rife with direct addresses to the reader. Sterne’s narrator points out the similarities of writing and “conversation” with the reader, in addition to letting the reader do his/her own work in imagining while reading: “Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is), is but a different name for conversation. As no one, who knows what he is about, in good company would venture to talk all;—so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-breeding, would presume to think all. The truest respect you can pay to the reader’s understanding is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own.” Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, (Volume 2, Chapter 11), 43. This quote highlights not only the conversation that Sterne and Sapienza create with the reader, but also the importance for both authors to allow the reader significant intellectual space and interpretation while reading, which I further discuss in chapter four on Sapienza’s narration of transgression. According to Angelo Pellegrino, Sapienza said she read *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman* seven times. Pellegrino in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 70.

<sup>30</sup> “Si può non leggere,” Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 33.

Through this gesture, she includes the audience, as though we were present, in making the decision as to whether this is something we want to listen to or not. She ends the chapter by explaining this to us in more detail: “NOTE: I see from your faces that this death has made you tired, and in the doubt of whether to throw it out or keep it, I told [the story] anyway: because I don’t want to forget it. But to protect you from having to hear it, I introduced it with a ‘You do not have to read this’ or, as our dear faithful friend Tristram Shandy would have said, ‘SHUT THE DOOR.’”<sup>31</sup> Goliarda uses the verb “see,” implying that she is looking directly into our faces as she tells her story. This insinuates that, like a theater audience, we are sharing the same time and space as she is, a theatrical time and space, as opposed to simply reading her story after she has put it down on paper. She also uses the verb “hear” as opposed to “read,” to enhance the sense of a first-hand account of her story directly from narrator to audience. In so doing, she endows the novel with the characteristics of a dramatic script, where action unfolds through dialogue and stage directions.

The narrator finishes *Lettera aperta* by returning to her audience as well, explicitly weaving her acting experience into the present narrative: “Today, May 10, 1965, I turn 41 years old and I have almost finished my book here that, if I am able to learn it by memory—I don’t know how to improvise: I was an actress and to speak I must have a script—it will be my talk to you.”<sup>32</sup> Goliarda thus explicitly represents this document as a script. She goes on for a few more

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<sup>31</sup> “NOTA: Vedo dai vostri visi che questa morte vi ha affaticati, e nel dubbio se buttarla o tenerla, l’ho comunque raccontata: perché non voglio dimenticarla. Ma per proteggervi dal doverla ascoltare, ho promesso un ‘Si può non leggere’ o, come avrebbe detto il nostro caro fedele amico Tristram Shandy: CHIUDETE LA PORTA.” Ibid., 36-37. Sterne is an important predecessor for Sapienza in constructing a relationship with the reader, not merely “conscripting” the reader(s) into collusion with the narrator but enacting an ongoing pseudo-dialogue with the imaginary reader(s).

<sup>32</sup> “Oggi, 10 maggio 1965, compio 41 anni ed ho quasi finito questo mio libro che se riuscirò ad impararlo a memoria—io non so improvvisare: ho fatto l’attrice e devo, per parlare, avere un copione—sarà il mio parlare a voi.” Ibid., 146. “Parlare” means “to talk” and can be translated as “talk,” “talking,” or “speech” in this case. May 10 is, in fact, the author’s actual birthday. She was born on May 10, 1924.

short chapters about her final years as a child in Catania before moving to Rome to attend the National Academy of Dramatic Arts. The last paragraph of the novel returns to the audience to say goodbye. She has managed to clean up a bit—her room, memories, and the way she thinks about her childhood—and she now wants to do something besides talking: “I am going to leave you [plural] for a while: with this little bit of order that I was able to make around myself. I would like to stop talking for some time and go play with the earth and with my body. Good bye.”<sup>33</sup> Her explicit use of the phrase, “I am going to leave you now” and her salutation at the end of her book makes it feel as though we have spent this time physically together, as if we are watching her take a bow after performing a one-woman monologue on a stage from which she is now taking her leave to go outside.

In addition to direct address to her audience, Sapienza also uses other techniques that show the influence of her time in theater and lend her narratives a script-like quality. Perhaps the most important of these is her relinquishment of the diegetic role of the traditional narrator. Instead, Sapienza’s narrative proceeds mimetically, with the reader having to construct or infer what is going on based only on dialogue. Action performed by the characters is not explicitly described or explained by the narrator, but registered in the dialogue of the other characters, as in a play: the effect is to engage the reader in an unusually active role in co-creation or co-construction of the imagined action in the mind’s eye. This distinguishes Sapienza’s writing by adding an additional layer of involvement required of her audience. In the autobiographical novel that follows Goliarda after prison, *Le certezze del dubbio*, the protagonist spends much of her time with a former fellow inmate, Roberta, being led around Rome to engage in various

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<sup>33</sup> “Vi lascio per un po’: con questo poco di ordine che sono riuscita a fare intorno a me. Vorrei tacere per qualche tempo, e andarmene a giocare con la terra e con il mio corpo. Arrivederci.” Ibid., 159.

activities of Roberta's choosing. Though some of the action is described by the narrator, throughout the dialogue between these two characters the reader is expected to piece together other actions that are not diegetically described. In one scene, the two women are in a bar and Roberta is talking about her use of drugs when she abruptly switches mid-stream: "But you don't have to worry about my health, I know how to keep an eye on myself, I know when I have to lower my doses, change from heroin to morphine, and also I don't buy anything but the good stuff... Wait, where are you going? Not that way, we have to take the metro, come here..."<sup>34</sup> The reader must infer that Goliarda has started walking in a different direction, though the narrator does not signal it. Later, the same dialogue interruption takes place again as the two continue their journey on the metro. Roberta is making fun of Goliarda's use of vocabulary and the fact that she is older than Roberta: "Let's go, you fucking ancient intellectual, let's go! You rested enough. No, not this way, to the left, up the last escalator and we're outside... Look, look how just seeing the sun up ahead those girls are starting to walk more slowly! ugh! who can continue to be efficient under the narcotic sun of Rome!"<sup>35</sup> Like a script, which contains little diegetic description of the action on stage—left to the actors to show in person once the work is put into production—Sapienza's prose leaves the reader the task of essentially staging her drama in their own imagination, filling in the extra-dialogical action.

While occasional use of mimetic narrative technique is not uncommon in novels, it is pervasive throughout Sapienza's novels, and particularly throughout *Le certezze del dubbio*, rendering the reading of the text similar to the reading of a script. In another scene, Roberta,

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<sup>34</sup> "Ma non ti devi preoccupare per la mia salute, io so guardarmi, so quando devo scalare le dosi, passare dall'eroina alla morfina, e poi non compro che roba buona... ma dove vai? Non di lì, dobbiamo prendere la metropolitana, vieni..." Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> "Andiamo, antica letterata del cazzo, andiamo! Hai riposato abbastanza. No, non di qui, a sinistra... su, per l'ultima scala mobile e siamo fuori... Guarda, guarda come soltanto a vedere il sole in lontananza quelle ragazze stanno rallentando il passo! Eh! Chi può continuare a essere efficiente sotto il narcotico sole di Roma!" Ibid., 133.

Goliarda, and their fellow inmate Barbara have reunited and are talking about their time together in prison. During a shower together, Barbara asks if Roberta and Goliarda have ever had sexual feelings toward each other or a sexual relationship while in prison after Barbara had left. The conversation continues for an extended period of time presented mimetically by the narrator, back and forth between Barbara and Roberta, before the voice of the narrator finally retrospectively comments and explicates: “During the face-off in action, no irritability, nor hysterical outbursts, nor resentful voices bothered the proceeding of the *action time*: Barbara had wrapped Roberta’s nudity in the large blue sheet, then she had dried her shoulders, and now, with another towel, she is at least trying to get out the excess water that is soaking her hair.”<sup>36</sup> By presenting the description of the action separate from and after the dialogue, the audience gets to experience the dialogue’s rhythm as it is happening as in the banter of a theatrical performance, and then is later filled in on what was happening physically while the characters were speaking. The narrator borrows a term suited for film or theater, “action time,” to describe the small scene, emphasizing the fact that she presented it with unmediated dialogue first, and later described the action. Ending her description in the present progressive tense (“now...she is at least trying...”) intensifies the reader’s sensation of being witness to the action as opposed to reviewing a story that has previously taken place.

We can locate the distinction between theater and prose in the dominance of mimetic narration in the former versus diegetic narration in the latter.<sup>37</sup> In Book Three of the *Poetics*,

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<sup>36</sup> “Durate (sic) lo scontro in atto, nessun nervosismo, né impennate isteriche, né voci rancorose hanno turbato il procedere dell’*azione tempo*: Barbara ha avvolto la nudità di Roberta nel grande lenzuolo azzurrino, poi le ha asciugato le spalle e ora, con un altro asciugamano, sta almeno cercando di togliere l’eccesso d’acqua che le impregna i capelli.” Sapienza’s italics. Ibid., 96.

<sup>37</sup> George Whalley, trans., *Aristotle’s Poetics: Translated and with a Commentary by George Whalley* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), Book Three.

Aristotle describes the mimetic quality of drama in which actors, as characters, have verbal exchanges that create the action of the story. However, in prose, the action is presented diegetically: the writer creates and describes it and the dialogue is couched within the overarching structure of that narrative.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the traditional structure of the novel *tells* the story (diegesis) whereas the traditional structure of theater *shows* the story (mimesis). In *L'arte della gioia*, Sapienza presents various dialogues with mimetic narration by simply showing the story, without any additional commentary, omniscient or otherwise, from the narrator, which yields the reader the sense of unmediated experience, as if we are sitting in a theater watching action unfold before us, left to make of it what we will (an effect which I will explore in further depth in chapter four).

Throughout the novel, Sapienza uses various formal techniques to centralize or underscore dialogue as her predominant narrative mode. For example, she largely dispenses with dialogue tags such as “Modesta replied” or “Beatrice exclaimed.” Such dialogue tags can be seen as interpolations of the diegetic voice; thus, in omitting them, we move closer to mimesis. Moreover, instead of using quotation marks, she uses a dash to indicate characters’ speech, as, for example, in this conversation between Modesta and Stella about Mela, who is playing the piano in another room:

—No, I don’t want to see her! She has to go and that’s it!  
—And what are you doing now, are you going?  
—Yes, of course I’m going!  
—You’re leaving?  
—No! I’m going to my room.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “—No, non la voglio vedere! Se ne deve andare e basta!

—E che fai adesso, te ne vai?

—E certo che me ne vado!

—Parti?

—Ma no! vado in camera mia.” Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 277.

This technique becomes more and more dominant as the story moves along, with progressively less and less diegetic narration interrupting the dialogues throughout parts two and three of the novel. The unmediated nature of the dialogue and the rapid back-and-forth exchange between the characters emphasizes the theatrical quality of the prose, which becomes even more pronounced when Sapienza later switches to laying out the dialogue with the characters' names indicating who is speaking, exactly as in a theatrical script, presumably because there are more than two characters speaking at once:

Licata: —Be quiet, Carlo, you must not get tired out.

Carlo: —I know! I've always liked talking more than pastries.

Licata: —I know but now everyone must leave!

Carlo: —Even Elena?

Licata: —No! She stays here, because I know that she won't let you move or open your mouth. Come on guys, let's go!

Carlo: —Oh! You can take them away, but leave me Modesta too.

Pasquale: —Always the same, this ungrateful guy! Instead of us boys you prefer female company, huh?<sup>40</sup>

Sapienza continues to use this script-like technique of using the name of the character and a colon to indicate speech when three or more characters are speaking throughout the rest of the book in parts three and four.<sup>41</sup>

Theatrical influence is also evident in Sapienza's practice of supplementing dialogue with descriptions that sound more like stage directions than diegetic narration. Instead of using the past tense, the most common form of narrating action in a novel, Sapienza employs the present tense to establish the action that accompanies the characters' dialogue: "Pietro paces up and

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<sup>40</sup> "Licata: —Zitto, Carlo, non ti devi stancare.

Carlo: —Eh già! Parlare m'è sempre piaciuto più dei pasticcini.

Licata: —Lo so, ma ora via tutti!

Carlo: —Anche Elena?

Licata: —No! Lei resta qua, appunto perché so che non ti farà ne muovere, né aprire bocca. Su ragazzi andiamo!

Carlo: —Oh! Loro te li puoi portare via, ma lasciami anche Modesta.

Pasquale: —Sempre il solito ingrato! A noi carusi preferisci la compagnia femminile, eh?" Ibid., 250.

<sup>41</sup> Part Three: pages 330-342, 365-371, and 380-381. Part Four: pages 501-504.

down with an unthinkable speed” and, “As soon as Pietro exits, Miss Elena enters,”<sup>42</sup> where she even adopts the dramatic terminology of exits and entrances. When Modesta is relaxing after a particularly busy day, the narrator separates herself from first-person narration and uses third-person narration to describe Modesta’s actions in the same way, continuing to create the sense of stage directions for the actor’s movements in the present tense: “On the table, in between books, a little white pipe shines, she refills it. And sitting by the window, she smokes in the dark, staring at the sky.”<sup>43</sup> Switching from first-person to third-person narration in this instance allows the audience to observe Modesta’s actions from the outside, to see her on stage, so to speak.

Sapienza’s technique of mixing the formal, narrative elements of the theater with the novel creates a hybrid, experimental text. The effect on the reader is to induce a suspension of disbelief as one forgets that one is a reader alone in a room, separated in time and space from the novel’s action, and begins to “live” directly with the characters, experiencing their dialogue in a fictional present as it is spoken. As opposed to simply reading her work, it is as if we are “attending” a performance of it. Likewise, the frequent absence of an omniscient narrative voice means that less of the story and what we are to make of it is explicitly explained, which leaves more room for the reader’s interpretation of the events, which I will explore further in chapter four.

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<sup>42</sup> “Pietro va su e giù con una rapidità impensabile...” and “Appena Pietro è uscito, entra la signorina Elena.” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 232, 258.

<sup>43</sup> “Sul tavolo, fra i libri, luccica una piccola pipa bianca, la riempie. E seduta davanti alla finestra, fuma al buio fissando il cielo.” Ibid., 236.

## Setting the Stage: How Sapienza Uses the Structure of Theater in Setting her Novels

In her book on Gianni Celati, Rebecca West notes the intimate linkage of visual and verbal expression throughout human experience, one that in Italian literature can be traced at least back to Dante Alighieri's notion of the "visibile parlare" or "visible speech."<sup>44</sup> Marina Spunta notes that Dante approaches literature, "as a vision, as an all-sensory experience which involves the ear as well as the eye, for reading a text [. . .] both evokes its voice and projects an image of its content in the reader's mind, as suggested by the metaphor of the 'cinema naturale della mente' ['natural cinema of the mind'] . . ."<sup>45</sup> In the case of Goliarda Sapienza, the "natural cinema of the mind" assumes the form of a natural *theater* of the mind—an imaginary stage-like space in the reader's "mind's eye." Sapienza carefully designs and "sets" that imaginary space in which the readers become audience members. This quality of the visual in her writing is aptly recognized by Lucia Cardone as well: "The imagery of Goliarda Sapienza's writing is an undeniable fact that leaps out at one's eyes with clarity, yet still maintains something mysterious or ambiguous."<sup>46</sup> While Cardone goes on to point out theatrical influences in the author's adolescence, she stops short of examining the "mysterious" techniques whereby Sapienza creates a theater of the mind.

Sapienza uses the forms and structures associated with the theater, such as the space of the stage, stage directions, and the idea of a set and set design to inform the *mise-en-scène* of her novels. Most notably, the scenes of her novels consistently play out in constricted spaces, resembling the limited space required to stage a play. The present-day setting of *Lettera aperta*

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<sup>44</sup> Rebecca West. *Gianni Celati: The Craft of Everyday Storytelling* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>45</sup> Marina Spunta. *Voicing the Word: Writing Orality in Contemporary Italian Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang European Academic Publishers, 2004), 66.

<sup>46</sup> "La visività della scrittura di Goliarda Sapienza è un dato evidente, che balza agli occhi con chiarezza eppure mantiene qualcosa misterioso, di ambiguo." Cardone in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 31.

is a room of memories that acts as a frame setting that the protagonist is physically and metaphorically cleaning out by looking back on her life. The frame of the autobiographical novel—the room that the present-day narrator must clean out—appears at various points throughout the story, signaled by the voice of an older Goliarda and the need to clean the room she occupies.<sup>47</sup> Sapienza shifts scenes from one period in time to another (childhood to adulthood) and one space to another (the current room she is cleaning to the rooms of her childhood family home), as in a play, signaled also by the narrator’s voice moving between adult Goliarda and the child Goliarda. As Cesare Segre points out, in theater the rhythm of scenes is realized through a series of ellipses and topo-chronological episodes.<sup>48</sup> In both *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the rhythm of the scenes is also realized through a series of ellipses: the narrator/protagonist is an older version of herself looking back on vignettes of her life. It is as if the adult protagonist is on stage left looking back at vignettes of her life acted out on stage right; in one scene stage left is illuminated, and in the next scene stage right is illuminated, pulling the reader’s attention to that particular memory of the protagonist’s and that particular instance of the narrator’s voice.

At the end of chapter five and the beginning of chapter six in *Lettera aperta*, the narrator returns to the present day and starts thinking about what a mess she has made revisiting her childhood memories: “I shouldn’t have rummaged through the drawers, pulled everything out, moved the furniture. I find myself now between the window blocked by the table, and the only chair is full of books, objects; the door is blocked by the ladder the doorman lent me. I cannot

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<sup>47</sup> The most defined instances of the frame story are in chapters 1, 5, 6, 11, 13, 24, the beginning of chapters 27, 30, 33, 34, 35, 38, and chapters 40 and 44 (the last chapter).

<sup>48</sup> Segre, *Teatro e romanzo*, viii.

get out anymore.”<sup>49</sup> Being confined in space is a motif that returns consistently in Sapienza’s works and I will explore in more detail in the following chapter. Here, Goliarda has literally trapped herself by the objects that hold her memories; she is afraid of going through and organizing more items as these bring up memories from her childhood that may be painful for her. The scene stays in the room and in the present day as chapter six begins. Goliarda has been sleeping, unsure of how long she has been laying on the bed. She hears voices outside her room, coming from the other side of the door—the voices of her memory and her childhood home: “It’s incredible how there isn’t anything more inviting than voices heard and not heard behind a closed door. But listening means knowing. However, those voices roar so loudly that I did the right thing by closing the door.”<sup>50</sup> The present and past settings of the novel are thus captured in enclosed spaces, literally right next to each other, separated only by a closed door. This setting again gives the impression that the narrator’s present, older self is in the room on stage left while the memories that are recounted and come alive for the reader are acted out on stage right, alternating back and forth. The older Goliarda is just behind the door, separated from those memories on the other side of the stage in her own self enclosure, choosing not to hear them at this moment for fear of being overwhelmed by what she will understand now that she is an adult.

In *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the frame setting is again just one room, as in the setting of a play. Similar to the room of memories in which Goliarda is confined in *Lettera aperta*, in *Il filo di mezzogiorno* Goliarda is confined by mental illness to a room in her house where she is visited daily by a psychoanalyst who tries to help her recover her memories following electroshock

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<sup>49</sup> “Ho fatto male a frugare nei cassetti, tirare tutto fuori, spostare i mobili. Mi trovo, ora, tra la finestra ostruita dal tavolo, e l’unica poltrona piena di libri, oggetti; la porta è inchiodata dalla scala che il portiere mi ha prestato. Non posso più uscire.” Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 28-29.

<sup>50</sup> “È incredibile come non ci sia niente più invitante che delle voci intese e non intese dietro una porta chiusa. Ma ascoltare significa sapere. Quelle voci però ritronano così forte che ho fatto bene a chiudere la porta.” *Ibid.*, 30.

therapy. This severely constricted setting is again well-suited for the action of a play confined to the stage and much of the dialogue takes place between Goliarda and her psychoanalyst within this space. The narrator makes references to the room and sometimes leaves it, though this happens outside the main action of the novel. When other dialogues appear, they appear within Goliarda's memories, recreated for the readers on the page, but still contained within the framework of the setting of the room and within Goliarda's mind.

In *L'Università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, the autobiographical novels that follow Goliarda's time in prison and after, Sapienza creates compact "sets" that function like small stages. In the former, the protagonist is confined both in the restricted space of prison, and within her cell or another cell inside the prison—thus doubly confined. Given the nature of the setting, the "cast of characters" is limited with all of the action and dialogue taking place within this finite space among this small group of characters, as in a play. In the latter, the pocket of theatrical space is a jewelry store that Barbara, a former fellow inmate, owns. Goliarda, Roberta, and Barbara are in the locked store after hours talking about their time in prison and how Roberta helped Barbara get out of prison: by slitting Barbara's wrists because she did not have the courage to do it, in order to fake a suicide attempt so they would move her to the hospital. Goliarda asks if Roberta would do something similar for her, in the form of giving her drugs for an overdose, if some day she could no longer survive this, "combined penal colony/hospital that has become our society" (a reference to another restricted space) and wanted to end her life.<sup>51</sup> Roberta agrees, and Barbara is outraged by this request and this conversation, and launches into what Goliarda, the narrator, calls a "monologue" berating the two of them:

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<sup>51</sup> "questa colonia penale e nosocomio insieme che è diventata la nostra società" Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 103.

While the monologue continues I turn my eyes to Roberta who, instead of preparing her rebuttal or something like that, sat down comfortably as if she were at the theater, her little face hanging on the primadonna's gestures, steps, the rearing of her head, her unexpected turns, with an admiring expression, her mouth left ajar in a smile of delight.<sup>52</sup>

Goliarda goes on to describe Roberta's continued appreciation of Barbara: "...in a brief pause in the monologue, Roberta, turning just her eyes toward me, communicates with a look: 'She's just magnificent, isn't she, Goliarda?'" to then immediately turn back to stare at her friend and not lose even a second of the principal scene."<sup>53</sup> This passage highlights just how permeated with theatricality are the settings that Sapienza creates within her novels. Not only is Barbara's tirade treated as the recitation of a dramatic monologue, but the space of the store morphs into a miniature theater for both the actor (or primadonna, another kind of theatrical performer), in this case Barbara, and the audience (Roberta and Goliarda). Goliarda focuses particularly on Roberta as the audience member, observing Barbara's presentation of the "principal scene" of the "show." Sapienza's intimate settings retain a dimension of theatricality which she both uses (dividing the performer from the audience, for example) and violates, allowing the reader/audience to glimpse inside or "behind the curtain."

### **Theater as Theme and Metaphor**

The passage above illustrates how theater functions as a theme and metaphor in Sapienza's work as much as it serves as a structural device. Indeed, references to and

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<sup>52</sup> "Mentre il monologo continua volgo lo sguardo verso Roberta che invece di prepararsi a ribattere o cose del genere, s'è riseduta comodamente come se fosse a teatro, il visetto appeso ai gesti, ai passi, alle impennate della testa, le giravolte improvvise della primadonna, con un'espressione ammirata, la bocca socchiusa in un sorriso di godimento." Ibid., 104.

<sup>53</sup> "...in una breve pausa del monologo Roberta, voltando verso di me solo gli occhi, mi comunica con lo sguardo: 'È proprio magnifica, eh, Goliarda?' per subito tornare a fissare l'amica e non perdersi nemmeno per un secondo la scena madre." Ibid.

enactments of the theater run throughout Sapienza's prose works, particularly in *Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, and *L'arte della gioia*, carrying a variety of complex and sometimes conflicting meanings.

In Sapienza's earlier autobiographical novels, acting and the theater play an important role in the protagonist's formation. Goliarda, the young protagonist in *Lettera aperta* and in *Io, Jean Gabin*, has a budding interest in acting and is consumed by a passion for attending various forms of theatrical productions (plays, the opera, and puppet shows) and the movies. In *Lettera aperta*, as the youngest of many children and with both parents busy and active in politics, Goliarda feels she needs to find a purpose in life, though the details of this path are not always clear to her, evidenced by her trying a number of "careers" such as chair-weaving, imagining becoming a nun, and other activities in order to find her calling. However, attending performances is an ever-present aspect of her childhood and imagining herself in different careers turns into the ability to embody different characters through acting. A large part of Goliarda's time is spent observing the local puppeteer, both studying his artistic craft of creating puppets in his workshop, and attending his shows. Likewise, she attends the cinema repeatedly in order to memorize the lines of the actors. At school one day, after the young protagonist makes a comment about the priests "injecting" the students with the "drug of religion," her instructors give her a difficult time and her atheist father decides to pull her out of school. This allows Goliarda to choose her own educational path and make acting and theater her main focus: "I read all day—I couldn't study, I'd get sleepy—I read and I memorized all of the theatrical works that I could find around the house. Then at night I would recite them by myself, playing all of the parts, like puppet masters. *Commendatore* Insanguine had told me that only by doing all of the parts like the puppet master can you learn to know characters that are different than us.

Imitating their voices, as a man, as a woman, as the coward, as the brave one, you became a real actor like the great Giovanni Grasso that had been a puppet master.”<sup>54</sup> Buoyed by this lesson, Goliarda goes on to practice voice technique and recitation, ensuring that she could be heard by the audience in the last row, if necessary. Her father hears her and encourages her, showing her the texts of famous writers Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana (both also from the province of Catania where Goliarda is from), and the important Sicilian playwright Luigi Pirandello. Her father reads her various parts with different voices, introducing her to the playwrights’ characters, beginning her early education in acting and theater.

As her skills develop, Goliarda is such a natural performer that her family often asks her to sing, recite, or even cry on command for their entertainment, and she willingly obliges. This becomes her way of connecting with her large, busy family:

I don’t remember having opened my mouth, if not to cry, scream and sing, when they asked me to entertain them. I would stand in the middle of the piano room. Arminio played and I was supposed to dance, sing or imitate the variety singer that we had seen the night before. They always brought me to the theater, the cinema and even to the opera. My father [brought me] to the puppet show. They brought me all the time, so much so that I don’t remember which time was the first time.<sup>55</sup>

As she begins to learn more about herself and others, theater and acting help her to connect with family and friends and ultimately to construct an identity in the world.

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<sup>54</sup> “Leggevo tutto il giorno—studiare non potevo, mi veniva sonno—leggevo e imparavo a memoria tutti i lavori teatrali che trovavo per casa. La notte poi li recitavo da sola facendo tutte le parti, come i pupari. Il commendatore Insanguine mi aveva detto che, solo facendo tutte le parti come il puparo, si imparava a conoscere i personaggi diversi da noi. Imitando le loro voci, ora da uomo, ora da donna, ora del vile ora del valoroso, si diventava attori veri come Giovanni Grasso il Grande che era stato puparo.” Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 151.

<sup>55</sup> “Non mi ricordo di avere aperto bocca, se non per piangere, gridare e cantare, quando loro me lo chiedevano per divertirmi. Mi mettevano in mezzo alla stanza del pianoforte. Arminio suonava ed io dovevo ballare, cantare o fare l’imitazione della cantante di varietà che avevamo visto la sera prima. Mi portavano sempre a teatro, al cinema ed anche all’opera, loro. Mio padre all’opera dei pupi. Mi portavano sempre, tanto che non mi ricordo quando fu la prima volta.” *Ibid.*, 25.

When the protagonist becomes an aspiring actor, she reflects on how crucial an audience has always been to her identity as such. Indeed, the relationship between actor and audience is a recurrent preoccupation. Early on, she craves the attention of her mother, and thinks of acting and storytelling as a means of capturing it. Goliarda gleans the material for adventurous stories from films she watches repeatedly, from the opera performances she attends, and even from the stained glass windows of her room. Gazing at the images in those stained glass windows, she imagines creating stories to tell her mother when her mother is elderly and their roles are “reversed,” i.e., when she will take her mother’s place as the storyteller. It is important to note that she does not invent these stories merely or chiefly to entertain herself—in her mind, telling stories is first and foremost a means of connecting with other people. In other words, the presence of an audience is integral to her imaginative world—an audience who can be seduced, entertained, mesmerized, held. Goliarda memorizes the stories by reciting them over and over, practicing her performance when her lawyer father is napping, and inventing her own imaginary children, who look like her real-life siblings, as spectators:

To practice more effectively, all day, especially in the afternoon when the lawyer was sleeping and I wasn’t supposed to make noise, I recited the stories aloud. With time, telling the stories to myself or in the mirror, where I pretended that my face was the face of my mother as a baby, was no longer enough, so first I invented a little daughter who looked like Licia, and then a boy who looked like Goliardo... With the two of them seated on the balcony [...] or behind the piano that closed off a corner [of the room] making it just like a dark room, I recited. Little by little I discovered that I invented more stories that were even more adventurous.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “Per esercitarmi meglio, tutto il giorno, specialmente il pomeriggio quando l’avvocato dormiva e non bisognava fare rumore, le raccontavo ad alta voce. Col tempo non mi bastò più raccontarle a me stessa, o allo specchio, dove facevo finta che il mio viso fosse quello di lei bambina (her mother, to whom she’ll tell the stories when she is old), ma mi inventai prima una piccola figlia che somigliava a Licia, e poi un bambino che somigliava a Goliardo... Con loro due seduti sul balcone [...] o dietro il pianoforte che chiudeva l’angolo, facendo proprio come una stanza buia, raccontavo. A poco a poco, scoprii che ne inventavo altre di storie anche più avventurose.” Ibid., 43.

Goliarda creates an imagined audience in order to improve her performances. As Lucia Cardone points out, “Goliarda therefore realizes from a young age the necessity of a public, of the spectatorial component in the deployment of performance.”<sup>57</sup> This focus on the spectatorial component links back to the narrator’s use of her readers as an active audience in the narrative structure of the novel as a whole, explored in the previous section.

Catering to her audience becomes Goliarda’s way of connecting with neighbors in her building, and with the many family members who are much older than she and, from Goliarda’s young perspective, never seem to have enough time to spend with her. The Bruno family shares the courtyard of the same building with Goliarda’s family, and Goliarda is shocked to discover that Pino, at twelve the eldest of the five children, has only ever been to the movies twice and has never been to the theater, a puppet show, or the opera. This difference highlights the sharp contrast between Goliarda’s non-traditional, atheist education and that of the pious Brunos for whom church attendance constitutes the only cultural exposure. She attempts to describe and partially recreate a movie she has seen for the Bruno children, but frustrated that she cannot achieve the same effect as when she performs stories for her family, she practices determinedly until she can perform the stories to her satisfaction. The neighbor children follow the accounts of all of the movies that she has seen with fascination, and Goliarda recalls how performing for the children imbued her with a very particular sense of power:

I put all my will into it, I told it to them scene by scene, reciting first the part of the male, next the part of the female, then the part of the bad guy and then the part of the old mother. [...] My great victory was when they would start crying from emotion: I liked to see them cry. The description of Queen Cristina’s departure by boat, her love

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<sup>57</sup> Cardone in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 34-35.

killed out of pure evil by a wicked courtier, was my triumph: everyone was crying and Rosina even had hiccups.<sup>58</sup>

Not only does Goliarda relish acting as a way to connect with others, she also relishes the capacity to manipulate others through drama, as evidenced by her satisfaction seeing the children cry and hiccup at her rendering of the dramatic story: “For the first and last time in my life, I felt I had an advantage over other people.”<sup>59</sup> Theater thus becomes a tool whereby the young Goliarda, who no longer attends the religious public school and seldom has a voice among so many older brothers and sisters, achieves a sense of mastery and even a form of dominance.

Beyond giving Goliarda a sense of connection, power, and advantage in relation to others, theater becomes a vehicle for personal memory and self-recreation. She tells us, the readers and audience, that before she started recounting this story to us she barely remembered her old tutor, Professor Jsaya, and now that she is recalling her childhood, many memories of the professor are returning. This highlights once again the importance of having an audience present, both for the protagonist’s acting and the narrator’s storytelling. Memories of Professor Jsaya then turn into memories of the people she met during her time in theater and a broader reflection on the nature of theater:

Yet, before starting to talk with you, I barely remembered him [Professor Jsaya]. It astonishes me and brings back other names, faces, years in which I did theater. Theater—this is not a new idea—is life burned through in a few hours. An opening night is like a birth. And when the curtain drops on the last line of the actor, it is like a funeral, between the perfume of flowers and the line of handshakes, hugs, tears. In other words, when man invented wine and perfume, he also invented this concentration of actions, passions,

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<sup>58</sup> “Ci mettevo tutta la volontà, gliela raccontavo scena per scena, recitando ora la parte di lui ora la parte di lei, ora del cattivo ora della vecchia mamma. [...] La mia grande vittoria era quando si mettevano a piangere per la commozione: mi faceva piacere vederli piangere. La descrizione della partenza della Regina Cristina sulla nave, con il suo amore ucciso per pura cattiveria da un perfido cortigiano, fu il mio trionfo: tutti piangevano, e Rosina addirittura singhiozzava.” Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> “Per la prima e l’ultima volta nella mia vita sentii avvantaggiata sugli altri.” *Ibid.*, 25.

this extract of life . . . to be able to grasp in your fist for at least a couple of hours.<sup>60</sup>

For Sapienza, then, theater is a way of capturing, concentrating and rendering comprehensible the ephemeral passions and moments that constitute a life.

In Sapienza's subsequent autobiographical novel, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, which chronicles the narrator's attempts to recover memories through psychoanalysis after losing them as a result of electroshock therapy, the theme of theater again plays an important role. While theater works as a token or souvenir at the beginning of the book to help Goliarda connect memories of the past to her current situation, it also brings to the surface more chilling memories of the protagonist's adulthood, and towards the end of the book it turns out ironically to play the opposite of its role in *Lettera aperta*, threatening to disconnect Goliarda from her family.

Sapienza weaves memories of her beginning in theater with the beginning of *Il filo di mezzogiorno*. The second page retraces Goliarda's memories of her mother as the two women take the train from Catania to Rome so that Goliarda can audition for a scholarship to enter the Academy of Dramatic Arts, directed by Silvio d'Amico. After a tense audition period, Goliarda is admitted provisionally for three months, on the condition that she lose her Sicilian accent within that time. Within a few pages, memories of various voices start slipping together and the reader is not necessarily able to discern whose voice is whose. As she slips back into her child-self, the voices of her uncle Nunzio, her psychoanalyst, and the academy's acting director all converge and collide, showing that her memories still need sorting out:

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<sup>60</sup> "Eppure, prima di cominciare a parlare con voi, lo ricordavo appena. Mi stupisce e mi riporta ad altri nomi, visi, anni nei quali facevo teatro. Il teatro—non è una novità—è vita bruciata in poche ore. Una 'prima' è come una nascita. E quando cala il sipario, sull'ultima battuta dell'attore, è come un funerale, tra il profumo di fiori e il marcio delle strette di mani, degli abbracci, delle lacrime. Insomma, quando l'uomo ha inventato il vino, il profumo, ha inventato anche questo concentrato di azioni, passioni, quest'estratto di vita. Per tenerla in pugno almeno per un paio d'ore." Ibid., 31.

‘I’m pleased, Goliarda, you are becoming strong and hardy, I’m pleased.’ ‘I’m pleased, *signora*: you are making extraordinary progress,’—it’s not Nunzio. It’s a different, ageless man seated near me on the couch... Why that couch? In the piano room there are no couches: and why is he making me read the headlines in that newspaper? ‘Talent, talent, but the diction – what horror!’ ‘Good, *signora*. And what does the word ‘mamma’ mean? What does it remind you of? It doesn’t remind you of anything?’ sweating and embarrassing myself. Why is he calling me *signora*?<sup>61</sup>

The fact that this is the first memory that returns to her as she begins psychoanalysis suggests that the attempt to “lose” her Sicilian accent represented a crisis of identity that she is now re-enacting. As the confusion of voices continues (Nunzio, the doctor, Silvio d’Amico, and the doctor again), the voice of Goliarda’s psychoanalyst starts inserting itself into the story more and more. Her psychoanalyst asks what she remembers after taking the train to Rome with her mother and she replies, but she one again confuses the voice of the doctor with the director of the academy and worries about her accent:

‘Ah! Yes, I took the exam at the academy. Yes, I had a fever of 40 that morning. It was really cold in Rome. I was admitted nonetheless, with the scholarship, yes, but...’ I felt my blood freeze in lumps of ice. I shouldn’t talk: I still didn’t know if the ‘o’ of scholarship is [pronounced] open or closed. I shouldn’t talk. One can notice that I know how to pronounce only mechanically: that the words of that brief scene... (right! the crazy old woman in ‘Ile’ by O’Neill). If he realizes, he will revoke his decision to confirm the scholarship for me and will take it away. He commands here. I will seem rude, but I must not open my mouth. ‘Good, good, child: you made miraculous [progress]. It’s incredible! Good job, the

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<sup>61</sup> “‘Mi compiaccio, Goliarda, stai diventando forte e robusta, mi compiaccio.’ ‘Mi compiaccio, signora: fa dei progressi straordinari,’—non è Nunzio. È un signore distinto e senza età, seduto vicino a me sul divano... Perché quel divano? Nella camera del pianoforte non ci sono divani: e perché mi costringe a leggere i titoli di quel giornale? ‘Talent, talento, ma la dizione che orrore!’ ‘Bene, signora. E la parola mamma cosa significa? Cosa le ricorda? Non le ricorda niente?’ sudando e vergognandomi. Perché mi chiama signora?” Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 21. Giuliana Ortu also uses parts of this example in a note in her article on *Lettera aperta*, showing how the chronology in both books, “weaves together and the threads are held together by the narrative voice that proceeds with fluid associations.” Ortu in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 151-152.

scholarship is confirmed. Well, you aren't going to say anything?  
You can be happy...'<sup>62</sup>

The importance of theater and performing is highlighted with these initial pages that open the story of her journey through psychoanalysis. Her beginning in theater is the strongest memory that Goliarda has retained throughout her memory loss from electroshock therapy, but ironically the aspiration to perform is inseparable from anxiety about speaking, giving her true identity away through language. It is notable too that the role she specifically recalls performing here as she struggles for her own sanity is that of a mad woman.

We discover that part of Goliarda's reason for seeking the help of a psychoanalyst is related to her own mother's dementia. The theme of theater provides the linkage between her mother's dementia and her own memory loss. When Goliarda begins to visit her mother in a mental hospital, her mother's grim state and the bleak setting make an impression on her which she is actually able to use to her advantage in acting. The protagonist eventually plays the part of the "crazy old woman" in the one act play "Ile" by Eugene O'Neill, and she draws upon memories of her mother's behavior to be able to represent a woman who has lost her mind. She recalls a visit to her mother where her mother insists that her daughter, Goliarda (who is actually standing in front of her), has been captured by Fascists and is being tortured in the adjacent cell. The narrator's description of her mother is desolate: "Oscillating her head and fixating on an indefinite, precise point above my head she got closer to me, her mouth frayed by a humble smile, gaping with oxidized teeth and with the flaming hot breath of obsession: 'It's my fault if

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<sup>62</sup> Ah! Sì, feci l'esame all'Accademia. Sì, avevo la febbre a quaranta quella mattina. A Roma faceva tanto freddo. Venni ammessa lo stesso, con la borsa di studio, sì, ma... Sentii quagliarmi il sangue in grumi di ghiaccio. Non dovevo parlare: ancora non sapevo se la 'o' di borsa è aperta o chiusa. Non devo parlare. Si può accorgere che so pronunciare solo macchinalmente: che le parole di quella breve scena... (già! la vecchia pazza della 'Pesca' di O'Neill). Se se ne accorge, ritorna sulla sua decisione di confermarmi la borsa di studio, e me la toglie. Lui comanda qui. Passerò per scortese, ma non devo aprire bocca. 'Bene, bene, ragazzina: hai fatto dei miracoli. È incredibile! Brava, la borsa è confermata. Be', non dici niente? Puoi essere contenta...' Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 23.

Fascism slaughtered so many victims and if Goliarda, Licia, and Olga are dead.”<sup>63</sup> Shortly after recalling this memory, the narrator fuzzily recalls a parallel voice of a man complimenting her acting: “‘You recite really well, signora, it is a pleasure to stay and listen to you’ (Who was this man?) Yes, Fascism had fallen and I had learned that rhythmic and repetitive oscillation of my mother’s head.”<sup>64</sup> Although Goliarda and her mother had anxiously been awaiting the fall of Fascism, when it comes, it comes along with Maria’s dementia; thus, the end of the war signals the end of Goliarda’s mother’s sanity. The next paragraph reveals that the protagonist, now in psychological treatment herself, may be close to suffering the same affliction as her mother. She asks the psychoanalyst desperately: “Tell me the truth. I was locked up because I was crazy? Crazy like my mother? Tell me the truth.”<sup>65</sup> While her mother’s dementia inspired her portrayal of a “crazy old woman” in the theater, it also triggers unsettling questions about the stability of her own mental health, and the unstable nature of Goliarda’s identity from the beginning. Her constant adopting and discarding of other personas in her acting and her life ultimately affect her own stability and contribute to her breakdown. Theater thus becomes a conduit for exploring the border between sanity and mental illness in the protagonist herself.

As *Il filo di mezzogiorno*—and the psychoanalysis<sup>66</sup>—progresses, theater occupies a very different role from its function in *Lettera aperta*. Goliarda’s memories, particularly of acting, are now seen from a different and disturbing angle. Where she once saw performing as her way of forming a bond with her family, she is now forced to see the child-actor as driven by fear and

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<sup>63</sup> “Oscillando il capo e fissando un punto indefinito e preciso sulla mia testa si avvicinava, la bocca sfrangiata da un sorriso umile, spalancata dai denti ossidati, dal fiato arso dell’ossessione: ‘È colpa mia se il fascismo ha mietuto tante vittime e se Goliarda, Licia, Olga sono morte.’” Ibid., 38.

<sup>64</sup> “‘Racconta proprio bene signora, è un piacere stare ad ascoltarla’ (Chi era quest’uomo?) Sì, il fascismo era caduto e io avevo imparato quell’oscillare ritmato e sempre uguale dalla testa di mia madre.” Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “Mi dica la verità. Sono stata rinchiusa perché ero pazza? Pazza come mia madre? Mi dica la verità.” Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Psychoanalysis itself could be seen as a form of performance in Sapienza’s work: the patient/performer establishes a relationship by way of performing—telling or reenacting (true or false) stories for the analyst/audience.

compulsion. Among the many dreams the protagonist discusses with her psychoanalyst is a recurring one in which she plays the part of Woyzeck in the play of the same name by Georg Büchner. Her psychoanalyst interprets this as representing Goliarda's constant drive to please her family to the detriment of her own individuation:

You never left this room/infantile emotion and you make yourself, as we were saying, recite the part of Woyzeck to entertain your friends that clearly, excuse me if I repeat myself, but we need to understand clearly, are actually in your dream and in reality your brothers and sisters. And as a child you were forced, so as not to lose their favor, to entertain them, being the last one born and fearing that you robbed your parents' affection from them, fearing that you took their place.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, rather than performance being seen as Goliarda's means of enchanting and exerting power over her many brothers and sisters, it is now portrayed by her psychoanalyst as something she was "forced" to do out of "fear" of losing their affection: "Therefore from this fear, the necessity to save yourself, not to bother others, not to show more intelligence than them, or more beauty or other qualities that could bother them. [...] It is because of this that you do not support your success in theater..."<sup>68</sup> The doctor goes on to explain that Goliarda is subconsciously afraid that if she achieves success, jealousy will drive away everyone she is close to. The same thing that gave her a sense of identity and confidence in the earlier novel is now construed as divisive, fear-driven and based in pathology.

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<sup>67</sup> "Lei non è mai uscita da questa stanza-emozione infantile e si costringe, come dicevamo, a recitare la parte di Woyzeck per divertire i suoi amici e amiche che chiaramente, scusi se mi ripeto, ma bisogna che capisca chiaramente, sono ancora nel sogno e nella realtà i suoi fratelli e le sue sorelle. E da bambina lei era costretta, per non perdere il loro favore, a divertirli, essendo l'ultima nata e temendo di aver rubato loro l'affetto dei genitori, temendo di aver preso loro il posto." Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 119.

<sup>68</sup> "Quindi da questa paura la necessità, per salvarsi, di non dar fastidio, non dimostrare maggiore intelligenza di loro, né bellezza né altre qualità che potrebbero infastidire. [...] È per questo che lei non supportò il successo in teatro..." Ibid., 120.

Theater is also woven thematically throughout Sapienza's novel *L'arte della gioia*.<sup>69</sup> While the act of producing theater brings the family in the novel together, it is also a conduit whereby the broader historical movements of the time—the Second World War, the loss of soldiers, and the oppressions of Fascist Italy—invade the family space. Modesta's large family mounts theatrical productions in their villa as part of their familial traditions during the reign of Fascist Italy. The children act out plays like *Hamlet* with a curtain, stage, lighting, and all the necessary physical aspects of theater.<sup>70</sup> Theater even enters into the text of the novel with the family putting on a full-fledged theatrical production, with part of the dialogue of the play being reproduced in the novel. Because Joyce, the close friend-turned-lover of the protagonist, Modesta, is in political trouble with Fascist Italy and therefore cannot leave the house or be seen in public, she misses a performance by one of Modesta's "adopted" daughters, Mela, at the conservatory in Palermo. To make up for this loss, Modesta's family recreates the performance and puts on a play for Joyce in their home, which also draws many of the local young people to their home to watch. Sapienza makes reference to the many men called away during the war by commenting on the audience for their plays: "Each year those friendships grew, and there wasn't an empty seat in the little theater, despite the absence of so many friends... of Paolo, Andrea and Franco, called into the army to fight for the Empire."<sup>71</sup> The lack of familiar faces in the audience of their little theater highlights the effects of the war. In contrast to the political environment of the era, the play that Modesta's children put on is a source of levity. In the villa, the children act

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<sup>69</sup> Laura Fortini also claims that the structure of *L'arte della gioia*—four parts in which time passes in between—can almost be considered a sort of theatrical representation in which the baton (the role of the "testimone", or witness) is passed from one character to the next, though she does not elaborate why she considers this specifically a theatrical structure. Fortini in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 101.

<sup>70</sup> Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 315.

<sup>71</sup> "Ogni anno crescevano quelle amicizie, e non c'era un posto vuoto nel teatrino malgrado l'assenza di tanti amici... di Paolo, di Andrea, di Franco chiamati alle armi a combattere per l'Impero." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 316. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 418.

out a familiar episode about Giufà, a well-known, innocent, comedic character in the Sicilian oral tradition, played by one of the children Modesta has taken under her wing, 'Ntoni, the son of a wet nurse, Stella, who lives with the family. Giufà's mother tells him to "pull" the door behind him when he leaves the house to meet her at church, because there have recently been robberies in their village. Giufà, innocently misunderstanding, takes the door off its hinges and literally pulls the door all the way to church with him. In the scene that the family acts out, Giufà recounts this gaffe and is comforted by a tree and by the moon, benevolent and soothing influences, played by Bambù (Modesta's sister in law's daughter) and Mela respectively. The script of the play is recreated word for word within *L'arte della gioia*, occupying three pages, allowing the readers to be audience members in Modesta's home, watching the play along with her family. Here, an excerpt:

GIUFÀ: At dawn this morning, she gets all dressed up and she tells me word for word: 'Tidy up the house, water the garden, then put on nice clean clothes – don't make me look bad – and come to church. Today is Santa Rosalia's feast day and all the relatives will be at Mass. But remember to pull the door behind you before you go out, Giufà; there are rogues and thieves running around! Don't forget! Pull the door behind you.'

MOON: So?

GIUFÀ: I struggled for three hours to unhinge the door, and then carried it, heavy as it was, on my back. And she, when she sees me in the piazza, flies into a rage, yelling at me and raving to the heavens!<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> "GIUFÀ: All'alba stamattina, si veste bella azzimata e mi dice parola per parola: 'Rassetta tutta la casa, annaffia l'orto, poi vestiti bello pulito – non mi fare sfigurare – e vieni in chiesa che oggi è Santa Rosalia e alla messa c'è tutto il parentado. Ma ricorda Giufà, prima d'uscire tirati dietro la porta, mariuoli e ladri girano intorno! Non te ne scordare, tirati dietro la porta.'

LUNA: E allora?

GIUFÀ: Tre ore ho lavorato a scardinare la porta, e poi pesante pesante sulle spalle gliel'ho portata. E lei in piazza quando mi vede va in furia e mi urla al cielo furiosa!" Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 321. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 425.

The seriousness of war outside the villa, an initiative at the national level “for the Empire,” is counterpointed by this local, lighthearted, comedic, oral tale. ‘Ntoni, who plays Giufà, apprentices with Angelo Musco, and the choice to formally study acting helps ‘Ntoni avoid the war as well: “The opportunity had come: Angelo Musco’s troupe. ‘Ntoni was leaving in September, signed up to go on tour. Better an acting company than a regiment.”<sup>73</sup> Theater thus becomes a subversive activity—a way to avoid joining the army and to implicitly protest the effects of the war by not enlisting, while at the same time keeping local comedic traditions alive. Ultimately, in *L’arte della gioia*, theater constitutes an alternative world that protects those in political disfavor (Joyce) and those who are against the war (Modesta and many of her family members) within the cocoon of the villa Modesta has created.

In conclusion, although Sapienza ultimately exited the stage and gave up acting for writing, we see that Sapienza’s prose is heavily influenced by theater: formally, spatially, and thematically. Sapienza’s narrative style and engagement with the reader-audience are consistently and explicitly based on the model of theatrical performance. In addition, Sapienza constructs limited spaces for the settings in her novel that are informed by the structure of theater and the space of the stage. Finally, theater, acting, and performance comprise recurring thematic elements throughout her novels and in the lives of her characters, assuming different and sometimes contradictory meanings from one book to the next. Throughout these various permutations, Sapienza uses the structures of theater as tools to construct and deconstruct

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<sup>73</sup> “L’occasione era venuta: la compagnia di Angelo Musco. A settembre ‘Ntoni partiva scritturato per la tournée. Meglio una compagnia di comici che un reggimento.” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 317. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 420. Angelo Musco was a well-known actor who started his career with marionette performances (popular in Sicily at the time) and went on to own a theater company and produce and act in plays by Luigi Pirandello.

identity and create contradictions, as she does with the autobiographical form. In the next chapter, I will show how Sapienza's continued exploration in limiting spaces and settings allows for new ways of thinking about women's space and relationships with each other.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CONFINEMENT AS LIBERATION: FEMALE SPACES IN SAPIENZA'S PROSE WORKS

As we saw in the previous chapter on theatrical influences in her work, Sapienza's settings often have a contained, stage-like quality: the courtyard of Goliarda's childhood apartment building and the room in which she shuts herself to remember that childhood in *Lettera aperta*; the apartment where Goliarda meets with her psychoanalyst in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*; an all-women's prison in *L'Università di Rebibbia*; and in *L'arte della gioia*, Modesta's childhood shack, a convent, a villa, and a prison cell. Sapienza consistently encloses her characters within walls (or on "stages," as it were). While certainly this technique shows the influence of the theater, that influence does not explain her strong attraction to or preference for these enclosed spaces. In this chapter I will argue that it is precisely these physical boundaries that allow her to explore and extend the social and emotional boundaries of traditional female relationships.

In the 1970s, Sapienza's novel *L'arte della gioia* received numerous rejections from publishers, one of which, judging by her response, must have included a comment about the book's focus on women. Explaining or justifying herself, Sapienza wrote, "Women – as you know – are my planet and my research, my only '(political) party' and maybe, besides

friendship, my only purpose in life.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, all of Sapienza’s protagonists are women and the most intense and significant relationships in her works are among women.

Sapienza’s reference to women as her only “(political) party” or “partito” is significant because, particularly in Italian, the word denotes a group occupying a shared intellectual space. While she says that women are her “political party,” Sapienza was not explicitly involved in the intellectual formation of the Italian feminist movement during the decades she was writing, and I do not argue any specific, direct influence of Italian feminism on Sapienza. However, she was certainly aware of some of the key practices of Italian feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, and I believe these ideas help to shed light on the environments she creates in the particular, enclosed settings in her novels. One of the defining books on the Italian feminist movement, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* begins this way: “This book is about the need to make sense of, exalt, and represent in words and images the relationship of one woman to another.”<sup>2</sup> This could virtually serve as a template for Sapienza’s literary project as she foregrounds, and in her own way, exalts women and women’s relationships with one another. The striking parallels between key precepts of the Italian feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s and Sapienza’s contemporaneous writing will structure this chapter, while my argument will show how, especially in her use of enclosed female-centric spaces, Sapienza mirrors certain practices from the movement, while establishing her own strain of feminism which goes beyond the polite philosophical discourse of Italian feminism.

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<sup>1</sup> “Le donne – come tu sai – sono il mio pianeta e la mia ricerca, il mio unico ‘partito’ e forse, oltre all’amicizia, il mio unico scopo nella vita.” Pellegrino quoting Sapienza in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 86.

<sup>2</sup> The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). The Italian-language original is Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis, *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell’idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne* (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987).

The non-traditional female relationships that engage Sapienza occupy not only intellectual but physical space as she locates and contains them in intimate and demarcated spaces or settings, inverting the traditional view of the dichotomy between the public and private domains. Contrary to the historical and patriarchal vision of the private sphere as a place of deprivation, it is exactly this restricted, private sphere that, in Sapienza's novels, allows for a female freedom where women can develop relationships with each other that they are precluded from developing in the presence of men. However, even though they are within enclosed physical boundaries, Sapienza's characters do not remain confined by social or cultural boundaries.

Before I elaborate on the unique spatiality of Sapienza's novels, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of the characteristic of confinement in women's traditional spaces. In her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt lays out the clear separation between public and private realms, explaining that, historically, "private" was synonymous with privation or deprivation: "To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an 'objective' relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself."<sup>3</sup> In their exploration of European feminine identity, Elena Pulcini and Luisa Passerini note that since antiquity, and more especially since the eighteenth century, women have been confined to the private sphere, which has most often meant the realm of the family. This dichotomy originated in Greek thought with Plato and Aristotle's differentiation between *polis* and *oikòs*, public life and private home:

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 54-55.

For the orderly and rational world of the *polis*, women represent the threat of *pathos*; they incarnate the chaos and irrationality of nature and of the emotions which are confined in the name of law and order to the private world of the *oikòs*. [...] This implies a subordination and obedience to a man in the private sphere as well as her [woman's] exclusion from public life. This inequality translates into a fatal injury to women's identity.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, from the perspective of the male-oriented *polis*, a women's occupation of, and limitation to, the private sphere is a privation and must have a negative effect on female identity and, therefore, the female being.

But the private sphere has not always carried a negative connotation. In more recent modernity, Pulcini and Passerini note, "the family becomes, in modern Europe, an area of affections based on love marriages and on partners' right to free choice. The family is called upon to perform the delicate and complex task of fulfilling the individual's need for happiness. [...] It has become the centre of control and regulation of the individual's emotional life. [...] As active protagonists of the private sphere, women are identified with this new affective code."<sup>5</sup> However, this positive revisualization of the purpose of the private sphere is still in relation to, and a reflection of, men's lives and needs. Sapienza turns this on its head. What powerfully distinguishes her writing is that this limitation of space to the private sphere is not concerned with men. The female spaces she creates are measured neither by their proximity to nor their remoteness from the male sphere. Instead, they are valued precisely and solely insofar as they allow for the unique development of women, their needs and wants, and the creation and exploration of a variety of relationships between and among women.

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<sup>4</sup> Elena Pulcini and Luisa Passerini, "European Feminine Identity and the Idea of Passion in Politics," in *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, eds. Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (New York: Zed Books, 2002), 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Sapienza is not the only female author of the time who investigated female space. Other Italian women writers also explored the themes of female public and private space and how women interacted within them. In Graziella Parati's *Public History, Private Stories: Italian Women's Autobiography*, from 1996, these themes are shown in the autobiographical writings of Fausta Cialente, Rita Levi Montalcini, and Luisa Passerini.<sup>6</sup> In her book, Parati argues that women's autobiography is, "a realm where women can construe a discussion on the boundaries of the domains that they have traditionally inhabited. The public act of writing a private life is the locus where women writers can seek to come to terms with the still contradictory relationship between the role of women in the public and private spheres."<sup>7</sup> Parati thus implies that writing of the private life and private sphere is a safe space for women. One of Parati's signal contributions to the study of Italian women's autobiography of the twentieth century is her definition of what she calls the "matroneum," the limited realm to which women are confined by virtue of their sex. She explains that, "*matroneum* is intended as a 'space within a space,' as a limited realm whose boundaries are defined by patriarchy but whose inner dynamics cannot be totally controlled. In such a space, women have influence, but not the power to redefine its boundaries."<sup>8</sup> The matroneum is the private space that women are forced into, but where they can still exert some control. Parati explores both how the matroneum functions and those female characters who transgress its bounds in the works of various twentieth-century Italian women authors.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Parati, *Public History, Private Stories*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Using Fausta Cialente's autobiography, *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger* (The Four Wieselberger Girls) (1976), Parati analyzes the construction of public and private histories and spaces and the characters that make up those stories. The usually silenced members of the matroneum are foregrounded as part of her story, creating what Parati defines as a female "gynealogy" in contradistinction to traditional genealogy. Parati argues that Cialente embodies the transgressive daughter who moves beyond the borders of traditional paternal power into the public sphere. While she starts her life, and the story, in the private sphere of the home, she ultimately takes up space in the public

Parati is interested in how female characters in the works she explores transgress the traditional boundaries of the private domain in order to interact, at varying levels, with the public sphere. Sapienza, however, conceives of space in a radically different way. Her characters are not compelled to transgress the private domain because that domain is not construed as a limiting space defined by subordination and obedience to man. While the delimited spaces she uses are spatially confined, they are not *confining* in the sense of restricting or diminishing her characters' opportunities for intellectual, sexual, and emotional growth and exploration as they transgress social and cultural norms. While more conventional readings of the private sphere portray it as a place of lower and lesser value—in terms of status, scope, and freedom—to which women are relegated, in Sapienza's works, the delimitation of space is vital to the development of her female characters and their relationships. Indeed, it is precisely the limited and enclosed nature of these spaces that allows for the women to express themselves most fully and to form creative relationships.

Sapienza's productive writing years parallel the most important period of development in the second wave of feminism in Italy, roughly from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.<sup>10</sup> An exploration of feminist thinkers during this period sheds light on the spatiality of female relationships in Sapienza's novels.<sup>11</sup> The concepts I will describe are not current but rather of a

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sphere outside the home and living in exile. In Rita Levi Montalcini's autobiography *Elogio dell'imperfezione* (In Praise of Imperfection) (1987), the limits of patriarchal society and space are highlighted as Montalcini finds herself doubly excluded as both a female in the world of science and as a Jew. She is consistently pushed back into the private sphere. Parati also explores women in the public and private spheres in *Autoritratto di gruppo* (Group Self-Portrait) (1988), the autobiography of the academic Luisa Passerini. Writing about her life in the public domain, particularly during the 1960s student movement, she reexamines those experiences within the private realm of autobiography. For Passerini, the autobiographical act respatializes public life and experience into the private sphere.

<sup>10</sup> Feminist and philosopher Teresa de Lauretis highlights the period of neo-feminism in Italy that she explores as ranging from 1966 to 1986 (Milan Women's Bookstore, *Sexual Difference*, 2).

<sup>11</sup> The Oxford Dictionary of Geography defines "spatiality" as: "The effect that space has on actions, interactions, entities, concepts and theories."

past moment in feminist theory and practice, in order to explore the feminism that was contemporaneous with Sapienza's writing. In particular, three major concepts and, more specifically, practices that grew out of the Italian feminist movement during this time structure this chapter: the practice of *differenza sessuale* (sexual difference), the practice of *autocoscienza* (consciousness of self), and the practice of *affidamento* (entrustment). Sexual difference is an overarching concept that includes many different, and sometimes competing, ideas, but broadly denotes the idea that equality between men and women is a false ideal, and women need a space (intellectually and physically) of their own, separate from men. The practice of *autocoscienza* encouraged women to form groups to explore a purely female consciousness based on their own experiences. Finally, the idea behind the practice of *affidamento* (entrustment) was to allow (usually) younger women the opportunity to learn from (often but not always) older women in an all-female mentoring and teaching lineage that did not rely on masculine models.

Although Sapienza's artistic vision often parallels and reifies the practices of Italian feminism explained above, her explicit disavowal of the political movement highlights her tendency to avoid ideologies of any kind.<sup>12</sup> While we cannot completely reconcile the contradiction between her political and artistic visions (and, in fact, Sapienza would likely not want this contradiction to be reconciled, in line with her vision of an "autobiography of contradictions"), the transgressive actions of some of her female characters--sexual exploration,

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<sup>12</sup> Sapienza's biographer, Giovanna Providenti, describes Sapienza's interaction with the feminist movement as scant. Providenti points out the shared timeline of Sapienza's finishing *L'arte della gioia* in 1977 and the feminist movement in Italy having made major achievements: the innovative family law enacted two years prior in 1975 and the law making divorce legal. Providenti also describes one failed encounter between Sapienza and the feminist movement. Sapienza was aware that not far from her home Roman feminists were inaugurating a "Women's House" and she wanted to attend. However, once she was in the chaos of the street, which she was no longer used to after working on her novel for so many years, she realized she was afraid to go because none or few of the women would resemble or understand someone like Modesta, her protagonist. And more importantly, going to a political meeting would necessarily mean encountering the "fucked god of ideology." The source of this quote is from Sapienza's notebooks, Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 151. Providenti, *La porta è aperta*, 165.

lesbianism, incest, terrorism, and even murder—place her definitively outside the polite philosophical discourse of the feminist movement in Italy. In the following sections I will discuss the three major feminist ideas outlined above, trace their literary influence, and then explore the ways in which Sapienza’s characters move beyond those practices to define her own expression of personal feminism.

### **Sexual Difference**

Luisa Muraro, of the influential feminist collective Diotima, argued for separatism rather than equal rights for men and women.<sup>13</sup> One of the defining movements within Italian feminism at the time, though certainly not the only one, it sprung from a philosophy known broadly in Italy as “sexual difference.”<sup>14</sup> Given that sexual difference is a multifaceted concept embracing diverse and sometimes even competing ideas from a broad range of philosophers and feminists in Italy, rather than trying to distill their views down to a single definition, I will describe how various groups interpreted and contributed to the notion.<sup>15</sup>

The practice of sexual difference was a response to the more widespread advocacy of “equality” between the sexes as a socioeconomic and political goal, which these female

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<sup>13</sup> Diotima was started in Verona by a group of women called “Fontana del ferro” (Fountain of Iron). The ideas that began to germinate in Diotima came from an article called “Più donne che uomini” (“More women than men”) originally published in the pamphlet “Sottosopra” (“Upside-down”). Libreria delle donne di Milano, January 1983. Adriana Cavarero et al., *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milano: La Tartaruga edizioni, 1991) 175, and Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> For further background on sexual difference see The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*.

<sup>15</sup> Graziella Parati and Rebecca West, eds., *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 26. In fact, Adriana Cavarero and the other feminist philosophers of Diotima agreed that, ultimately, an objective knowledge of sexual difference cannot truly exist, because sexual difference is a determination originating from the subject. Adriana Cavarero et al., *Diotima*, 182.

philosophers argued not only offered women false hope, but was a structural and conceptual impossibility. Given the androcentric development of our culture and society over thousands of years, they argued, the notion of an objective “equality” is inevitably doomed, and, in the words of Carla Lonzi, “misdirected since equality is ‘an ideological attempt to subject women even further,’ to prevent the expression of their own sense of existence, and to foreclose the road to women’s real liberation.”<sup>16</sup> If every aspect of life as we know it is structured by men, and women have been forced to operate in a man’s world, then equality simply forces women to bend further away from their true essence.

But if equality is not the goal, then what is? One of the first groups in Italian feminism, Demau, short for “demystification of patriarchal authoritarianism,” began by proposing alternative goals in their “Manifesto programmatico del gruppo Demau” (Manifesto of the Demau Group’s Program) from 1966.<sup>17</sup> Though the idea of sexual difference was not yet clear in Demau’s manifesto, precursors to its development can be detected. For one thing, Demau argued against a simple “emancipation” of women, which would merely “free” women to then join the ranks of men in society. Because our society remains androcentric, integration politics are, “a placebo for the real ill.”<sup>18</sup> The best that those who seek equal rights for women can achieve is “to integrate [women] into a masculine world, [but] this world remains opposed to them because it is masculine, that is, founded on women’s exclusion, while women are at the center of another, clearly separate kind of world.”<sup>19</sup> As explained by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Demau wanted to resituate woman from her traditional position as object

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<sup>16</sup> Carla Lonzi in The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Demau’s manifesto quoted in Rosalba Spagnoletti, ed., *I movimenti femministi in Italia* (Rome: Savelli, 1971), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

to a position as subject: “It is not enough to study women’s conditioning; we must consider ‘woman as both object and autonomous subject of analysis.’”<sup>20</sup>

In her own project to create a fully self-defined female subject, Sapienza was largely in accordance with the thinking and practices of contemporary Italian feminism, but she takes the project a bold step further by creating female protagonists who break all taboos applied to women in an androcentric world. Not only do they transcend the boundaries of the traditionally feminine, they transgress the boundaries of decency, morality and legality. Actions disallowed even for men are all the more shocking when committed by the women in Sapienza’s novels, who engage in lesbian relationships, incestuous sex, terrorism, and even murder.<sup>21</sup> In defiance of the ideals and images of femininity invented and projected onto women by men, Sapienza’s transgressive protagonists constitute fully-fledged and fully unbounded female subjects.

The concept of sexual difference as an ideological alternative to the goal of equality, and as a way forward for women, started to emerge further in the “Manifesto di Rivolta femminile” (Manifesto of Women’s Revolt) and Carla Lonzi’s 1970 book, *Sputiamo su Hegel* (We Spit on Hegel). She continues to argue for woman as subject rather than object: “Man has interpreted woman according to an image of femininity which is an invention of his... Man has always spoken in the name of the human race, but half of the human race now accuses him of having sublimated a mutilation.... we consider history incomplete because it was written, always, without regarding woman as an active subject of it.”<sup>22</sup> And in *Sputiamo su Hegel*, she declares: “The unexpected fate of the world is to start its journey all over again in order to make it with

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<sup>20</sup> The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> The topic of transgression is explored in depth in chapter four of this dissertation.

<sup>22</sup> Lonzi, “Manifesto di Rivolta femminile,” in Spagnoletti, ed., *I movimenti femministi in Italia*, 102, 104. According to The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, the manifesto was originally a mimeographed text from 1966 that first appeared posted in Rome and Milan in July 1970. The writing style of the manifesto is considered to be Carla Lonzi’s. The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 151.

woman as subject.”<sup>23</sup> According to the manifesto, equality cannot accomplish this; therefore, women need to create their own symbolic space as a way toward liberation: “To identify women with men is to eliminate their last road to liberation. Liberation, for women, does not mean accepting man’s kind of life . . . but expressing their own sense of existence.”<sup>24</sup> With woman as subject, and precisely her own sense of existence, the idea of sexual difference as a counterpoint to the ideology of equality starts to emerge.

But how does woman create her own sense of existence separate from man? The Feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro believed and promoted the idea that female communities were a “permanent necessity.”<sup>25</sup> A female community thus becomes a definitive criterion for sexual difference, a prerequisite for women to begin to build their own history. Again, Sapienza’s artistic vision is in alignment with feminist theory as she creates spaces specifically for the purpose of cultivating all-female communities. The enclosed spaces that proliferate in her narratives bind women to one another and create or permit the development of relationships between women that may not have been possible outside these restricted settings. In short, it is precisely because of, not despite, confinement that women in Sapienza’s novels can create alternative ways of relating to one another beyond the culturally-accepted relationships of an androcentric society.

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<sup>23</sup> Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel: La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale; e altri scritti* (Milano: Rivolta Femminile, 1977), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Lonzi in The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Parati and West, *Italian Feminist Theory*, 18.

## ***Autocoscienza, or Consciousness of Self***

The confined and male-excluding spaces in Sapienza's novels also reflect another of Italian feminism's defining concepts, that of *autocoscienza*. The feminist movement during the decades in question not only advocated for separatism, but also for the importance of women creating an intellectual space where they could develop a discrete feminist consciousness, or consciousness of the (female) self. Coined by the feminist Carla Lonzi, *autocoscienza* referred to the practice of groups of intellectual women who were trying to uncover a female-centered consciousness: "The small autocoscienza group was the social site where, for the first time, women could talk about their experience openly, and where this talk had acknowledged value."<sup>26</sup> As a novelist, Sapienza enacts informal, situational, flexible versions of the practice, particularly in *L'Università di Rebibbia*.<sup>27</sup> In fact, this novel can be seen as testing out the three defining characteristics of *autocoscienza* groups: they were small (the women who are able to fit into a prison cell), the discussion was limited to personal experience, and there was no (male) mediation or interpretation (it takes place in an all-female prison). In the prison, the protagonist is "encouraged by the free flow of the conversation [...] that does not formally obligate you to be falsely intelligent," compared to the world outside of the prison.<sup>28</sup> She also notes that, "All of the women have such profound culture and experience of travels, politics and life..." which they share with each other. The women enjoy the open, free conversation of these gatherings so much that they joke that Rebibbia should be a place one pays to enter, "like a big, famous university; it could even be given a striking name: Rebibbia University. [...] Perking up electrified, everyone

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<sup>26</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Clotilde Barbarulli explores the idea of the female body in *L'Università di Rebibbia* and first makes the observation that the group meetings in the novel may be seen as a form of *autocoscienza*. She does not make a broad connection to the various practices of sexual difference as I aim to, but instead focuses on concepts of the body, desire, and physical collectiveness. Barbarulli in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> "rinfrancata dal libero fluire della conversazione che non ti obbliga [...] a impegnarti formalmente, a essere falsamente brillante..." Sapienza, *L'Università di Rebibbia*, 87.

seizes the idea starting a whirlwind of ideas on how to make ‘our university’ world-famous.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, this small cell within the all-female “Rebibbia University” puts into practice the theories and structure behind the Italian feminist *autocoscienza* consciousness-raising groups, allowing women a space that is unmediated by men. Teresa De Lauretis writes of the practice of *autocoscienza*, “They were intentionally small groups [...] and consisting exclusively of women who ‘met to talk about themselves, or about anything else, as long as it was based on their own personal experience,’”<sup>30</sup> in which women would learn “how to take note of the contents of [their] experience without censuring them.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, women were gathering together in groups to talk about their problems and share their experiences long before the feminist movement, but the *autocoscienza* groups were intentional gatherings in which the free expression of their thoughts and experiences became a political practice intended to cultivate and catalyze purposeful social action. The reason for the necessity of these groups is described in the introduction to a 1972 publication titled *Donne e’ bello*, cited in the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective:

‘We women,’ it begins, ‘have never really communicated with one another.’ Our first reaction is to ‘feel that problem as something personal,’ but it is a mistake to do so. In reality, our isolation derives from the ‘divisions between women created by men.’ Masculine culture has imposed on women an ‘oppressive straitjacket of models.’ Because of the ‘solitude’ of our lives, these models have given each of us ‘the feeling that we are misfits, antisocial, neurotic, hysterical, crazy.’ ‘Isolated and unhappy,’ women tend to ‘think of their problems as personal defects.’ Those problems are, instead, ‘a social and political phenomenon,’ because they are common to all women.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “come una grande università famosa; si potrebbe anche darle un nome suggestivo: Rebibbia University. [...] Tutte, drizzandosi elettrizzate, si impossessano dell’idea dando inizio a un carosello di idee tutte volte a come rendere la ‘nostra università’ famosa nel mondo.” Ibid., 96.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41.

Forming groups to practice *autocoscienza* was necessary because women had never formed groups in a way that was not mediated by or referenced to men or the male model, which, it was argued, had isolated women from one another. The argument was that women needed to learn about themselves through the model of other women and purely female experiences. These groups were inherently educational, and the basis of this education was not male-defined history, but instead the subjective experiences of the women that made up the group.

It is worth noting that there was an existing cadre of women writers exploring the concept of creating all-female spaces in narrative, but they did so largely by displacing their stories into the future. Sapienza is one of the few authors who sets her narratives within the bounds of her own time and space, i.e. twentieth century Italy. In her book on the narrative strategies of twentieth-century women writers, Rachel Blau DuPlessis explores those speculative novels that depict a female-centric other-time and other-place. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Doris Lessing, for example, “challenge the world as we know it by a resolute imagining of other times and other customs.”<sup>33</sup> These narratives deliver a lesson or message from a different type of world or social structure, “dissolv[ing] assumptions about the way our world works by confronting its norms with another outlook or world view.”<sup>34</sup> This form tends to imagine a collective protagonist instead of an individual, and it is the group that benefits from the process of growth in mutual collaboration throughout the novel. Blau DuPlessis cites the example of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), a novel that imagines a utopian existence where there are no men, and where a maternal spirit infuses all aspects of interaction and society: “*Herland* is a collectivized sisterhood where the powers of mother and sister love, ‘united action’ without competition,

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<sup>33</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 179.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

produces a whole nation serving all ‘our children.’”<sup>35</sup> Gilman invokes a kin or family model for the public sphere: “The country was a unit—it was Theirs. They themselves were a unit, a conscious group; they thought in terms of the community.”<sup>36</sup> Gilman creates a collectivist female utopia only by resorting to a sort of science fiction.

Rather than expanding the sphere of women into a whole world, Goliarda Sapienza creates her own “herlands” by withdrawing into smaller spaces, confining her characters to a prison, abbey, or aristocratic villa in order to create an all-female space in modern-day Italy. *L’Università di Rebibbia* (1983) takes place in a women’s prison run by nuns who are also the guards. The absence of male characters in this microcosm of society is significant. Both in Gilman’s creation and in *L’Università di Rebibbia*, with males removed from the scene, women can form into a collective. However, instead of conflating the public and private, as Gilman does, Sapienza confines characters in an alternative space, a counter-space, to outside society. Allowing for relationships among women that could not form in the presence of males, incarceration generates self-exploration in the spirit of feminist *autocoscienza*. Rather than being a place of strict order and delineation, the prison fosters a kind of informality and freedom as prisoners move freely amongst one another’s cells; intimate connections, friendships, infatuations and relationships that violate the norms of the outside world thrive within the prison’s walls. Most importantly, the prison is a place of learning for the women, hence the title of the book, *L’Università di Rebibbia* (Rebibbia University), not only with regard to their expanded relationships, but also with regard to their own female self-learning and self-consciousness, paralleling the practice of *autocoscienza*. It is therefore the construction of boundaries that, ironically, intellectually “frees” the women within those boundaries.

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<sup>35</sup> Gilman in Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 180.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

The narrator and protagonist Goliarda explicitly notes the absence of men in this all-women's prison when she sees a tattoo on one of her cellmate's arms that spells out "Marco." Simply seeing the image of this male name shocks Goliarda into recognizing how otherwise free of men this environment is: "That name expanded in my mind until it filled the cell. Never had the thought of being only around women seized me as in this moment. In order to forget that male name, I inspect the nearby walls: between the colorful drapes that cover them almost entirely there are a couple photographs, but none contain man's image, also there, only women. [...] Now I realize that all the cells I have had a glimpse of are full of clippings of weekly magazine covers that only depict women."<sup>37</sup> Even the simple vision of a male name on her cellmate's arm disrupts Goliarda so profoundly that she feels she must take action to forget it, as if it has the power to contaminate this female space. Moreover, we learn that the prison walls are pasted with pictures of females, reinforcing the barrier to the male gaze. The fact that the inhabitants of the prison choose to decorate the walls that enclose them, literally imprison them, with feminine images is significant, suggesting a collective decision to protect and "purify" this female space.

Like Carla Lonzi's description of a reimagined world with woman as subject, in this all-female space the women do not have to accept "man's kind of life," and they can express "their own sense of existence," leading to a new form of liberation. When Goliarda discovers a group of women who meet together regularly in the cell of another inmate, Suzie Wong, she stumbles upon a kind of *autocoscienza* group in progress. The difference of this cell from other parts of

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<sup>37</sup> "Quel nome mi si allarga nella mente fino a riempire la cella. Mai il pensiero di essere soltanto fra donne si è impossessato di me come in questo momento. Per dimenticare quel nome maschile scruto intorno alle pareti: fra i drappi colorati che le ricoprono quasi interamente c'è qualche fotografia, ma nessuna porta l'immagine dell'uomo, anche lì solo donne. [...] Ora mi rendo conto che tutte le celle finora da me intraviste sono piene di ritagli di copertine di settimanali che rappresentano solo donne." Sapienza, *L'Universita di Rebibbia*, 92.

the prison and others cells strikes Goliarda immediately: “Once again prison time and space surprises me and leaves me speechless: it is as if, from Parioli, we had walked to Campo de’ Fiori after just a bit more than thirty meters! Or Shanghai, or Bangkok...”<sup>38</sup> Even within the confined space of Rebibbia, one cell drastically differs from the next as the inmates express themselves through their use of space. Goliarda’s impression of “prison time and space” is one of spaciousness and expansiveness—especially when the cold austerity of other parts of prison gives way to a warm, lively, colorful, and uniquely feminine, cell of Suzie Wong. The perfume of high quality soap, luxury tobacco, incense and even a touch of hashish wafts through the air. Suzie Wong has decorated the cell with silk drapes and a large bouquet of flowers, and she serves tea in glass cups from a separate kitchen space she has set up, which adds a touch of luxury compared to the usual plastic cups of prison. Goliarda is surprised to find this enclave of community within the prison, this space within a space, where a group of “colorful and elegant” women congregate and talk: “...I stay quiet in a corner, more than happy not to be obligated to participate, also because the surprise of the existence of that select, hidden nook had subverted any former idea of prison I had carried with me...”<sup>39</sup> Observing this collective of women, her perception of the confined space of prison is forced to change: “The voices of the girls stream out cultivated, some actually scholarly and witty. The reality of prison has drifted toward other shores to be explored, just like neuroses, female biology, and perhaps all of the changing social body.”<sup>40</sup> Part of Goliarda’s delight in the place derives from the fact that it allows for a group of

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<sup>38</sup> “Ancora una volta tempo e spazio carcerario mi sorprendono lasciandomi senza parole: è come se dai Parioli avessimo raggiunto a piedi Campo de’ Fiori dopo poco più di trenta metri! O Shanghai, o Bangkok...” Ibid., 70.

<sup>39</sup> “... me ne sto quieta in un angolo, ben felice di non essere costretta a intervenire, anche perché la sorpresa dell’esistenza di quel cantuccio elitario ha finito di sconvolgere ogni idea a priori del carcere che mi portavo appresso...” Ibid., 71.

<sup>40</sup> “Le voci delle ragazze affluiscono coltivate, alcune addirittura dotte e spiritose. La realtà del carcere è slittata verso altri lidi tutti da esplorare, così come le nevrosi, la biologia delle donne e forse tutto il divenire del corpo sociale.” Ibid.

women who would otherwise never cross paths to form a micro-society. Critiquing society's division of people into categories and classes, she notes that the confinement in this female prison paradoxically facilitates a form of social mobility and liberation (returning again to Carla Lonzi's idea of liberation from the androcentric world): "From just a short time ago I escaped from the immense penal colony that is in force outside, a social life sentence distributed in rigid sections of professions, class, and age, that this sudden being together—citizens of all social states, cultures, and nationalities—cannot but appear to me a crazy, undreamed-of freedom."<sup>41</sup>

Being enclosed also ensures that the women will, indeed must, develop relationships with each other due to their proximity. The women of Suzie Wong's group joke that they do not have to worry about losing track of one another after this meeting, as, "the beautiful thing about prison is that you're always sure to see each other again."<sup>42</sup> In other words, they have reproduced inside the prison a kind of female village that the protagonist claims does not exist outside: a community of mutual recognition on the *autocoscienza* model. That mutual recognition facilitates an emotional and psychic solidarity among the women, as Goliarda explains: "[t]hose women still know the art of 'attention to the other,' they know that the psychic condition of one can depend on the condition of others."<sup>43</sup> Goliarda is struck by the sense that Suzie Wong understands and already knows her, and is able to speak directly from her emotions and personal experience, the defining characteristic of the *autocoscienza* groups: "Like everyone here she has attained the profound and simple language of emotions, so that languages, dialects, class and education differences are swept away like useless disguises of the real motives (and needs) of

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<sup>41</sup> "Sono da così poco sfuggita dall'immensa colonia penale che vige fuori, ergastolo sociale distribuito nelle rigide sezioni delle professioni, del ceto, dell'età, che questo improvviso poter essere insieme –cittadine di tutti gli stati sociali, cultura, nazionalità—non può non apparirmi una libertà pazzesca, impensata." Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>42</sup> "La bellezza del carcere è che si è sempre sicuri di rivedersi." Ibid., 71.

<sup>43</sup> "...quelle donne conoscono ancora l'arte dell' 'attenzione all'altro,' sanno che dalla condizione psichica di una può dipendere quella delle altre." Ibid., 90.

one's depth: this makes Rebibbia a cosmopolitan university where anyone, if they want, can learn the *first language*.”<sup>44</sup> This “first language” suggests a pure, lost *mother* tongue of shared feeling and empathy that becomes submerged and repressed by an androcentric culture and society and is revived in this female micro-utopia. Women in the outside world are compelled to disguise their true selves—to, as it were, speak a foreign, male tongue—whereas here they revert to their natural, genuine, and feminine “first language.”

In *Le certezze del dubbio*, the 1987 novel that follows the story after *L'Università di Rebibbia*, the representation of the larger society throws into relief the important role that spatiality plays in the development of unique relationships among women. Goliarda is living in Rome after her release from prison and reunites, and subsequently meets frequently, with Roberta, her former fellow inmate who is now involved in political activities that the government deems terrorism. Their equality in prison changes to an imbalanced relationship as the narrator attempts to reconnect with her former inmate friend in this drastically different setting: having gone from the small, contained, and paradoxically comforting space of the prison to the “free” city of Rome and expanse of society, their relationship initially flounders. Sapienza highlights their loss of intimacy in this new space by making the enemy of their former female community here both the expanse of the city—the simple opportunity to leave someone's presence at a whim, which Roberta does consistently to Goliarda—and the presence of a male character, Albert, Roberta's friend and financial supporter, whose occasional presence inhibits the further development of Roberta and Goliarda's relationship. However, Sapienza manages to create

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<sup>44</sup> “Come tutte qua è approdata al linguaggio profondo e semplice delle emozioni, così che lingue, dialetti, diversità di classe e di educazione sono spazzati via come inutili mascherature dei veri moventi (ed esigenze) del profondo: questo fa di Rebibbia una grande università cosmopolita dove chiunque, se vuole, può imparare il *linguaggio primo*.” Ibid., 91.

pockets of spaces in enclosed locations throughout Rome (mostly in cafés) that allow for the two to reconnect and eventually reestablish their relationship outside prison.

Throughout the novel, the two women shift among ways of relating to one another—as ersatz mother and daughter, doppelgängers, soulmates, lovers, and even each other’s “lifeblood.” The polymorphous nature of their relationship reflects Sapienza’s interest in exploring and imagining unique, novel ways for women to be together—without men. The uniquely layered, rich and multivalent relationship between the two women exists because of the time that they spent incarcerated together. Goliarda notes that the space created by the four walls of prison allowed for the two women to be together and almost merge into one mind without outside distractions, while outside of prison there are only brief epiphanic memories of that earlier world. For example, Roberta recreates the environment of prison in one of the cafés in which they meet in Rome by adding the powdered milk that they drank in prison to Goliarda’s coffee. Goliarda observes: “I immerse myself in the powdered milk—the emotion dried my palate—but even in that liquid, usually a friend, the venom or nectar that my carceral siren secretly poured in invades my senses with a flood of memories, emotions of a happy time when, enclosed between four walls, no one could come between us.”<sup>45</sup> She refers to the café as an “emanation of the distant planet Rebibbia”<sup>46</sup>—a “planet” where women can develop relationships with each other that can only be replicated in fleeting moments when they are spatially confined and protected from the outside world.

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<sup>45</sup> “Mi tuffo nel latte assetata—l’emozione secca il palato—ma anche in quel liquido, di solito amico, il veleno o nettare che la mia sirena carceraria ha versato di nascosto, mi invade i sensi con un diluvio di ricordi, emozioni d’un tempo felice quando chiuse fra quattro mura nessuno poteva venire a separarci.” Sapienza, *Le certezze del dubbio*, 137.

<sup>46</sup> “emanazione del lontano pianeta Rebibbia.” *Ibid.*, 144.

## ***Affidamento*, or Entrustment**

The defining book on the concept of sexual difference in Italian feminism, “Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale,” was published by Tartaruga Edizioni in 1987,<sup>47</sup> the same year that Pellicano libri published Sapienza’s *Le certezze del dubbio*. One of the main sections of the *Diotima* book is “L’affidamento nel rapporto pedagogico,” or “Entrustment in a pedagogical relationship,” advocating for the importance of a mentoring relationship between an older and younger woman. Entrustment hinges on creating a symbolic order in which younger, more naïve women connect with a generation of older, more experienced women: “The relation of entrustment is this kind of alliance, whereby old means having the consciousness that comes with the experience of defeat, and young means having one’s claims intact, the one and the other entering into communication to empower each other in the face of the world.”<sup>48</sup> The disparity between the older and younger woman is acceptable and, in fact, necessary and important, because it creates a positive hierarchical structure in which women pass along knowledge to other women, shifting power away from the traditional patrilineal structure of education and meaning-making. In a world that consists of androcentric models and male-centered genealogy, entrustment creates a symbolic female “gynealogy,” Graziella Parati’s term to describe a matrilineal genealogical structure. As the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective states, this necessary disparity between two women accords value to both, because each woman’s point of reference is now another woman.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Tartaruga Edizioni was the first feminist Italian publishing house, founded in 1975 by Laura Lepetit in Milan. Rinaldina Russell, ed., *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 107.

<sup>48</sup> The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 123.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

This mentoring relationship is, crucially, *not* a biological one. Italian feminism did not see the figure of the mother as a model. Indeed, “the feminism of the 1970s was essentially a movement of daughters, which chose as its antagonist the figure of the mother and everything she represented.”<sup>50</sup> The reasons for this antagonism are connected to distrust of the mother as essentially a victim of and a stand in for patriarchal repression:

In her nuanced analysis, Marianne Hirsch describes four reasons for the feminist rejection of the mother: the perception of motherhood as an essentially patriarchal construction; the discomfort with the vulnerability and lack of control associated with maternity; a ‘fear of the body’ (for which Elizabeth V. Spellman coined the term ‘somatophobia’) that carried with it a distrust for certain activities – such as pregnancy, birth, nursing – that rooted women in their bodies; and, finally, ambivalence towards power and authority.<sup>51</sup>

It is a given in this feminist theory that patriarchy had poisoned and coopted the biological bond between mothers and daughters. Therefore, the practice of entrustment had to be built on a relationship free from both biology and patriarchy.<sup>52</sup>

This is the sort of relationship Goliarda observes in prison in *L’Università di Rebibbia*, when, for instance, she sees two older women in passionate conversation with a group of young women and notes that this sort of interaction would surprise any “lifer from the metropolis” (that is, someone serving a “life sentence” outside prison):

Within these walls, unwittingly, one is trying something really new: the fusion of experience with utopia, through the contact between the few seniors that knew how to understand their own lives and the youth that yearn to know, the coupling of the biological circle that contains the past with the present, without the fracture of death. It insinuates in one’s mind a hope, uncertain hope, perhaps lying but alive: in this place the only revolutionary potential is arriving—even

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<sup>50</sup> Laura Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 94.

<sup>51</sup> Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 95.

<sup>52</sup> The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 121.

if by side streets—that still survives the almost total flattening banalization that triumphs outside.<sup>53</sup>

Whether it is women from different age groups or different socioeconomic strata, the walls of prison allow for unsanctioned, perhaps subversive, potentially revolutionary, connections to occur among women.

In *L'arte della gioia*, the protagonist, Modesta, moves through a series of three different limited, largely female spaces where relationships between older and younger women are centralized. The first is the biological home where Modesta rejects her mother, in accord with contemporary feminism. However, the lengths to which Modesta goes in order to rid herself of her mother and her mother's way of life show how far Sapienza's feminist imaginary departs from the more mainstream movement. The second two settings, a convent and an old aristocratic villa—led by the female authority figures of an abbess and a princess respectively—initially provide pedagogical female models for Modesta, mirroring the practice of *affidamento*.<sup>54</sup> The quality of disparity which is part of the practice of *affidamento* serves an important function for Modesta in prompting her to examine her life choices and trajectory. Feminists argued that

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<sup>53</sup> “Fra queste mura, inconsapevolmente, si sta tentando qualcosa di veramente nuovo: la fusione dell’esperienza con l’utopia attraverso il contatto fra i pochi vecchi che hanno saputo capire la propria vita e i giovani che anelano a sapere, la congiunzione del cerchio biologico che racchiude il passato col presente senza frattura di morte. Si insinua nella mente una speranza, speranza incerta, forse menzognera ma viva: in questo luogo arriva—anche se per vie traverse—l’unico potenziale rivoluzionario che ancora sopravvive all’appiattimento e alla banalizzazione quasi totale che trionfa fuori.” Sapienza, *L’Università di Rebibbia*, 72.

<sup>54</sup> Susanna Scarparo and Aureliana Di Rollo write about mother-daughter relationships, non-traditional family structure, and non-biological motherhood in “Mothers, Daughters and Family in Goliarda Sapienza’s *L’arte della gioia*” (2015). In *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, just published in June 2016, I note with interest that Aureliana Di Rollo reworks her original article and adopts my framework of identifying parallels to the practice of *affidamento* in Modesta’s relationships. Although there has been insufficient time since publication of her richly reworked article to incorporate an extended response in this present work, I see from a brief review of her essay that we concur that Modesta’s biological mother serves as a negative foil or antimodel to the *affidamento*-like relationships that Modesta will go on to have. However, we differ drastically in our interpretations of the settings in which these relationships grow. Di Rollo argues that the relationships Modesta develops with Mother Leonora and Princess Gaia do not ultimately align with *affidamento* because they take place in patriarchal settings (and this feminist practice only really flourishes later when Modesta becomes a mother). I argue, on the contrary, that these settings are already de-patriarchalized, run by women (the head abbess and princess, respectively), and inhabited mainly by women—that they are already enclosed, protected, female spaces. See Di Rollo in Bazzoni, Bond, and Wehling-Giorgi, eds., *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, 38.

“mirroring” between equals (in age, experience, etc.) fails to push women forward: “The lack of female authority in and over the world is the result of an unfortunate mirroring between women.”<sup>55</sup> It is in the very nature of authority— “authority to decide for oneself what to think, and what to want”<sup>56</sup>—that it must be bestowed by others, as it is a quality that obtains only in relation to others, and that only someone with authority can pass on.<sup>57</sup> Modesta can be interpreted as a sort of archetype of this practice: initially the female in the lesser role in these relationships, her life’s goal is to create her own authority, which she does by usurping the roles of her mentors, ultimately moving beyond the principle of *affidamento* in distinctively transgressive ways. Departing from traditional Italian feminist philosophical theory (and practice), Sapienza creates a character in Modesta who manipulates, murders, and pursues any sexual opportunity in order to obtain authority, freedom and self-determination. While the *affidamento* model is more about building a community through relationships, Sapienza’s version in *L’arte della gioia* centralizes individual self-realization.

Sapienza begins *L’arte della gioia* with the protagonist occupying the enclosed space of the home, albeit in her case, the small hovel is a kind of dark inversion of the safe and comforting place normally associated with a childhood home. Indeed, this first biologically-defined space serves as a negative foil to the other enclosed settings which Modesta will inhabit as her life, and the novel, progresses. Far from the ideal of the all-female community she will seek and create as she ages, her childhood home is a depressing, disempowering, limiting space where she is endangered rather than protected. The traditional, biological relationships between women with which the book starts—between mother, daughter and sister—are portrayed as

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<sup>55</sup> The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 126.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> For exploration of the concept of authority (as opposed to power) in *L’arte della gioia*, see Scarparo and Di Rollo, “Mothers, Daughters, and Family,” 97.

confining and dysfunctional, echoing the rejection of biological privilege in Italian feminism. In fact, the book portrays the age disparity between mother and child as the opposite of the nurturing, mentoring relationships of *affidamento*.

Modesta starts her life as a poor five- or six-year-old girl in rural, inland Sicily who lives with her mother and developmentally disabled sister. Through Modesta's first-person description of the shack in which they live, the reader encounters a modest life (her name aptly describes her beginnings, though not her personality) in a dilapidated dwelling that is infused with a sinister aura. The only way to enter the home is through a "large opening in the wall, closed off only by a black curtain swarming with flies."<sup>58</sup> The house consists of one dark room where the family conducts all of its activities, which amount merely to sleeping, eating bread, olives or onions, and sewing (allowed only on Sunday). Modesta's mother never talks—she either screams or is silent—and the description of her appearance mirrors the ominous description of the space; her "heavy fall of black hair is matted with flies" just like the curtain that covers the doorway of the hut.<sup>59</sup> The narrator's description of her sister, Tina, who always simply sits staring at their mother, is similarly dismal: "My sister, sitting on the ground, stares at her from two dark slits buried in folds of fat."<sup>60</sup> Modesta, on the other hand, even as a young child, is a liberated spirit, free to come and go as she pleases, spending her time outside of the home exploring the countryside with a neighbor boy named Tuzzu. As a child, Modesta is already exploring her sexuality with Tuzzu, when she lets him gently perform oral sex on her. Thus, in the first pages of the book, Sapienza presents Modesta as a not-so-innocent child who is starting to explore her sexual life. While Modesta has these experiences in the outside world, her

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<sup>58</sup> "nel buco grande della parete, chiuso solo da un velo nero pieno di mosche." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 5. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> "I capelli di velo nero pesante sono pieni di mosche." Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> "Mia sorella seduta in terra la fissa da due fessure buie seppellite nel grasso." Ibid.

mother and sister always occupy the interior space of the home and rarely leave. In fact, the outside world is associated with trauma, especially for her sister: when their mother leaves the house, she locks Tina in the bathroom because otherwise Tina would follow her, afraid to be by herself. Locked in the bathroom, Modesta describes listening to Tina yelling, pulling out her hair, and pounding her head against the wall until their mother returns home. Modesta's transgressive nature begins to show when she surprisingly becomes sexually stimulated by hearing the wrenching and guttural groans her sister makes while locked up. These enclosed—and physically locked—spaces at the beginning of the novel literally and metaphorically separate Modesta from her sister and her biological family as a whole. Once Modesta exercises her agency to move away and in the direction of freedom, we see how this first enclosed space serves as a counter-template to the liberating, empowering enclosed spaces that populate the novel later. In some ways, it seems that she is seeking to redeem her past by creating positive, empowering versions of the childhood home later on.

The section of the story in which Modesta lives with her mother and sister ends in a dramatic rupture that underscores the complications and limits of biological relationships: a man claiming to be Modesta's father enters and contaminates the biologically female space. One day when Modesta is roughly nine years old, she returns home and the man is facing her, sitting at the table, "as if waiting for me."<sup>61</sup> We find out, in fact, that he is waiting for her. Modesta describes him as, "a tall, vigorous man," "a giant with a mass of tangled hair falling over his forehead."<sup>62</sup> His presence in the space immediately changes the dynamic: whereas Modesta's mother has been usually silent, she is now tense and alert, her powerlessness as a woman confronted by this man, on display to her daughters. There is a frisson of tension in the room as

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<sup>61</sup> "come se mi aspetasse" Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 11. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 12.

<sup>62</sup> "un uomo alto e robusto," "un gigante con una massa di capelli arruffati sulla fronte" Ibid.

he veers toward inappropriate interest in Modesta: “Well, well, just look at what a fine piece of skirt my daughter turns out to be!” and “You’re tall too, and round and red like a pomegranate.”<sup>63</sup> As he makes further advances, Modesta’s mother tries to stop him but he locks her in the bathroom, ironically enclosing her in the space where she, herself, usually locks Tina. At first Modesta likes this situation, the attention, and even the man’s caresses. When he asks her if she is scared she responds that he did the right thing by locking up her mother because, “That will teach her for always yelling at me and punishing me for everything.”<sup>64</sup> However, Modesta soon becomes uncomfortable. Noticing that her father’s blonde body hair looks like fields of rye, she experiences as flashback another frightening event when she was caught in a fire in the rye fields and the “smoky serpent was strangling her throat.”<sup>65</sup> The situation in her home soon turns even more painful for Modesta: the man claiming to be her father rapes her, the strangling serpent of smoke turning into the metaphorically strangling phallus of her father. After he falls asleep, Modesta is bleeding and in pain, and understands that this experience has changed her. Previous words of warning from her mother come back to her now: “It’s a misfortune to be born a woman; once the blood comes [here she is referring to menstruation], goodbye peace and contentment! All they [men] want is their own pleasure, they quarter you from top to bottom, never satisfied.”<sup>66</sup> Remembering these words, Modesta knows she has been permanently changed. She is still in danger as this man could rape her again, and she needs to escape. With this event she has transformed from a child to a woman (as her mother sees it); she has become an object of sexual interest, a woman who is not her own subject, and this man will

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<sup>63</sup> “Ma guarda un po’ che bel tocco di figlia mi ritrovo!” “Pure alta sei, e piena e rossa come una melagrana.” Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> “Cosi impara a gridare sempre e a punirmi sempre per tutto.” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 12. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> “La segala bionda bruciava e il serpente di fumo strangolava la gola...” Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> “È una disgrazia nascere femmine, ti viene il sangue e addio salute e pace! Quelli non cercano che il loro piacere, ti squartano da cima a fondo e non si saziano mai...” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 15. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 18.

continue to rape her: “Before, I was a child, but now I’m a woman, and I have to be careful: he’s already moving. I have to get away.”<sup>67</sup> Confronted with the failure of her sister and mother to achieve their freedom from male power, despite the mother’s apparent attempt to isolate herself and her daughters from male incursion, Modesta sets the house and all of its inhabitants—her entire biological family—on fire.

Modesta literally burns her biological bridges, rejecting her birth family, and with it, her allotted fate, and even, as it were, her narrative destiny (as rape victim, as abused daughter of an impoverished single mother, etc.). Though her willingness to kill her family for her own betterment is objectively morally abhorrent, Sapienza does not paint her protagonist in a negative light. In fact, this first daring action is a blueprint for Modesta’s self-liberation, evidence of her undeterred and transgressive will to secure her freedom, become her own subject, and ensure her own authority. Modesta takes her mother’s diatribe against men (“All they want is their own pleasure, they quarter you from top to bottom, never satisfied”), turns it around, and adopts it as a plan of action for her own life against those who might try to objectify her. At nine years old, Modesta makes the decisive move to destroy the space and, consequently, her family within that space, in order to move toward a future that she will have a hand in determining. The biological family and mother-daughter paradigm was disabling. It is precisely the given, predetermined nature of that space and those relationships at the beginning of the book that Sapienza burns to the ground to provide a point of contrast to the non-traditional, chosen female relationships that she will go on to create throughout the novel.

As the protagonist goes on to inhabit other enclosed settings (an abbey and a villa), she finds female mentors with whom she develops relationships that echo the feminist practice of

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<sup>67</sup> “Io prima ero una bambina, ma ora sono diventata femmina e devo stare attenta: quello già si muove. Devo scappare.” Ibid.

*affidamento*, or entrustment. First, in the days after she is raped, orphaned, and burns her house down, she is taken in by the mother superior of an abbey, Mother Leonora, and given a safe place to live indefinitely. Inside this walled space, the relationship between Modesta and Mother Leonora develops multiple layers: protector/protected, mentor/mentee, teacher/pupil, as well as undertones of a sexual nature. The absence of men in the space of the abbey seems to be the prerequisite condition for this *affidamento*-like relationship between Modesta and Mother Leonora to flourish, for ideas and skills to be passed from woman to woman. While at first she is in the lesser role, yielding to Mother Leonora's authority, Modesta eventually rejects her subordination and moves toward achieving her own power.

Mother Leonora initially protects Modesta from male police questioning and gives her guidance, both intentionally and unintentionally. Modesta carefully watches Mother Leonora and immediately starts learning from her. Even from the beginning, however, the relationship is more complicated than simply that of leader and follower: while claiming that she is following Mother Leonora's guidance, Modesta cunningly uses her status as a poor, orphaned girl to manipulate Mother Leonora in order to remain close to her and in her good graces. Modesta constantly observes Mother Leonora to figure out how to behave to get what she wants. For instance, when the police appear to question her about the arson and murders, she jabs her nails into her hands so that she will turn white and her physical appearance will scare off the police: "Once again Mother Leonora's voice let me know what I had to do: clench my fists even tighter so that the nails would drive more deeply into the flesh. Enduring this pain was better than answering that man with the black moustache, his eyes as hard as stones: if he kept questioning me, he might make me say something I didn't want to say. [...] I had to follow the suggestions of

that sweet voice. What was she saying now? What was it I had to do?”<sup>68</sup> As the policemen leave, and the space recoups its feminine exclusivity, the budding relationship between Mother Leonora and Modesta develops further. “She had guided me not only with her voice, but also with her smooth white hands, even smoother than that downy soft blanket, whiter and more fragrant than those sheets that had magically replaced the coarse grimy ones in the big bed where I had always slept before...before the blood had come.”<sup>69</sup> Modesta compares this new environment, safe in the comforting confines of the convent with Mother Leonora, with her previous biological home and the dark dangers with regard to man’s subjugation of women that are now associated with it.

In addition to initially being a trusted mentor for Modesta, Mother Leonora is her literal teacher. Observing Mother Leonora reading and studying, Modesta is inspired to become a scholar. When Modesta arrives at the convent she is poor and uneducated, and Mother Leonora teaches her: “From Mother Leonora’s tender, rosy lips – sometimes she let me touch them – I learned so many beautiful new words that at first, listening closely so I could catch them all, my head would spin and I felt breathless.”<sup>70</sup> The contrast to her biological mother is strong: while Modesta’s mother’s cupboards were filled with “cups and plates and glasses,” Mother Leonora’s are full of books. Mother Leonora also takes Modesta to the tower of the convent to observe the

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<sup>68</sup> “Ancora la voce di madre Leonora mi indicava quello che dovevo fare: stringere sempre di più i pugni, che le unghie si conficassero più profondamente nella carne. Sempre meglio questo dolore che rispondere a quell’uomo coi baffi neri e gli occhi duri come pietre, che a furia di domandare mi poteva far dire quello che non volevo dire. [...] Dovevo seguire i suggerimenti di quella voce dolce. Che diceva adesso? Che cosa dovevo fare?” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 17. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 21.

<sup>69</sup> “Non solo con la voce me lo aveva comandato, ma anche con le mani bianche e lisce, più lisce ancora di quella coperta pelosa e morbida, più bianche e profumate di quei lenzuoli che come per incanto si erano sostituiti a quelli duri e neri del letto grande dove avevo sempre dormito prima... prima... quando il sangue non era ancora venuto.” Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “Dalle labbra rosee e tenere di madre Leonora – a volte mi permetteva di toccargliele – seppi tante parole nuove e belle che nei primi tempi, a furia di stare attenta per acchiapparle, mi girava la testa e mi mancava il fiato.” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 20. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 26.

stars and constellations with a telescope. When Modesta observes, "...shining Sirius: the brightest star in the firmament," her use of advanced vocabulary prompts Mother Leonora to exclaim, "How wonderful! It sounds like a poem. You're extraordinary! Not only intelligent, conscientious and good, but with an imagination that is almost frightening! You will be a poetess: a nun and a poetess."<sup>71</sup>

Mother Leonora therefore initially seems like an ideal combination of mother and mentor/teacher, redeeming Modesta's abysmal biological maternal relationship. However, Sapienza complicates the maternal paradigm by transgressing traditional boundaries of that relationship; as Modesta spends more time in the convent, Mother Leonora becomes a source of physical pleasure. At this point, Modesta's radical narcissism moves her away from the *affidamento* model, and reveals the transgressive nature of Sapienza's protagonist. When Modesta introduces sexuality into their relationship, Mother Leonora refuses to meet with her anymore. Thus, while the enclosed space of the abbey initially created an environment that allowed for a multifaceted relationship to develop between the two women, Mother Leonora's antagonism towards sexuality now becomes limiting for Modesta, and her subordinate position and lack of authority and autonomy become unbearable. In order to shift this paradigm, Modesta takes steps to kill Mother Leonora, thus once again eliminating a mother figure who is perceived as repressive. This signals that the *affidamento* relationship is subordinate to and less important than self-individuation and the triumph of Modesta's will.

Once Mother Leonora is dead, Modesta moves from the all-female space of the convent to another all-female space—an aristocratic villa where the patriarch has died and the matriarch,

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<sup>71</sup> "...Sirio splendente: la stella più splendente del firmamento." "Ma che meraviglia! Sembra una poesia. Sei straordinaria! Non solo intelligente, coscienziosa e buona, ma con una fantasia che quasi spaventa! Una poetessa sarai: suora e poetessa." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 25. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 33.

Princess Gaia Brandiforti, rules supreme. Through cunning and intelligence, Modesta works her way into the Princess's favor and is eventually put in charge of managing the entire estate. Modesta admires Princess Gaia's fierceness and independence and the two form another age-disparate entrustment relationship in which Modesta learns from the Princess as a mentor. However, when Princess Gaia starts to become a hindrance to Modesta's dogged pursuit of personal freedom, Modesta begins to understand that Princess Gaia is not well and "she was determined to die, taking us all with her."<sup>72</sup> Despite the war being over and the townspeople celebrating, Princess Gaia insists that the war will never be over for her because it caused her son's death, and she orders that anyone who leaves the villa in celebration never be allowed to re-enter. She thus literally makes the villa a prison as well as a spatial expression of her will and power. Because Modesta refuses to live the rest of her life without any personal autonomy, she takes the same extreme measures she did with her biological family and with Mother Leonora: "I trembled before another individual's resolve, which I was facing once again, but I was no longer panic-stricken. And since I had my own objective, or plan, or intent, call it what you will, which might seem crazy to others, I would deal with this madness with the same firm hand as that grand old woman whom I so admired. I admired her, but she had to die."<sup>73</sup> Modesta sees the Princess's death wish as a threat to her own individualistic vitalism: "She had to die. My insane will to live versus her insane will to die."<sup>74</sup> In order to accomplish this, Modesta withholds the medication Princess Gaia has come to rely on, and she allows her to die, finding her legal will

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<sup>72</sup> "Aveva deciso di morire trascinandoci tutti con lei." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 113. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 159.

<sup>73</sup> "Tremai davanti alla volontà dell'altro, che ancora una volta si scatenava davanti ai miei occhi, ma non più con smarrimento. E poiché anch'io avevo una mia volontà, o piano, o decisione, come volete, che agli altri avrebbe potuto sembrare pazzia, l'avrei fatta agire, questa pazzia, con lo stesso polso fermo di quella grande vecchia che ammiravo. L'ammiravo, ma doveva morire." Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Doveva morire. La mia pazzia – volontà di vita contro la sua pazzia – volontà di morte." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 118. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 165.

and discarding it. Because she is married to the remaining male heir, Modesta becomes the princess and takes Gaia's place.

As in *L'Università di Rebibbia*, Sapienza uses the enclosed space of prison in *L'arte della gioia* to create a space where Modesta can develop a unique relationship with her cellmate, Nina. Incarcerated due to political activism, Modesta discovers the confining space of the prison cell to be conducive to the flowering of female intimacy. She and Nina experience a physical proximity free of outside distractions that leads to a deep connection and sexual relationship, as I discuss in chapter one. Once they have left prison, Goliarda expresses the loss of this physical and emotional closeness, when she is trying to hear Nina amidst the noise of trains and crowds on the outside: "I'd like to drive off those crowds and go back with her to a small cell, where being more than a few feet apart from one another is unthinkable. Why is that? Is it nostalgia for that lost cell that's making me cry like this? How could I have known it if life hadn't shown me? How could I have known that my greatest joy lay concealed in the seemingly darkest years of my life?"<sup>75</sup> Imprisonment, in this case, provided a place apart, a space of quiet, calm and, once again, liberty in which the two women could allow their relationship to develop unfettered.

These variable and flexible ways for women to be together and relate to one another appear in adolescent form in Sapienza's first autobiographical novel, *Lettera aperta*, published in 1967. The main character, also named Goliarda, is a young girl who spends much of her time in the enclosed courtyard that her family's apartment faces in the San Berillo neighborhood of Catania, Sicily, nicknamed, "La Civita." Female community develops in the courtyard, which

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<sup>75</sup> "Vorrei scacciare quelle folle e tornare con lei in una piccola cella dove non è pensabile allontanarsi più di un metro l'una dall'altra. Com'è possibile? Il rimpianto di quella cella perduta mi fa piangere così? Come potevo saperlo se la vita non me lo diceva? Come potevo sapere che la felicità più grande era nascosta negli anni apparentemente più bui della mia esistenza?" Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 469. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 616.

becomes a workshop for the formation of female relationships. Goliarda forms unique relationships with a female artisan in the courtyard, with a group of girls with whom she plays, and with one older girl in particular with whom she develops a deeper, non-traditional relationship. The safety of the enclosed, female space of the courtyard allows for the relationships that make up these female communities to flourish. Even the frame story of the book, in which the narrator remembers back to her childhood, takes place in an enclosed room where the protagonist looks through furniture to find objects that reignite her memories to tell the story.

As a child eager to learn a skill and find a career, Goliarda starts frequenting a corner of the apartment building's courtyard where a chair-maker named Anna works. She hopes to learn an artisan skill from her, so that she can feel useful and have a purpose in life. Anna, a low-income, working class woman, and Goliarda, the daughter of a lawyer, become unlikely mentors for each other in the space of the courtyard, enacting an entrustment model as the older woman teaches Goliarda a practical skill, while the young girl reciprocates with her own skills: "She would sing; she didn't know how to read, and I taught her the words by voice. [...] She would learn immediately, and afterward would sing them better than me."<sup>76</sup> The relationship does not last long, however, due to complications caused by a male presence: Anna's sister murders her rarely-present husband one night and the entire family must move away. Hence, even the absent male inadvertently disrupts the budding relationship between Anna and Goliarda. As a young girl, Goliarda does not understand, and she sits on Anna's doorstep in the courtyard, hoping for her to return, confused by the life of adults. Years later, as an adult, the narrator returns to her old neighborhood and her old house, and it is still the enclosed space of the courtyard that draws

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<sup>76</sup> "Le cantava, non sapeva leggere, e io le insegnavo le parole a voce. [...] Imparava subito, e dopo le cantava meglio di me." Sapienza, *Lettera aperta*, 86.

her: “Even if I am not waiting for Anna anymore, the courtyard attracts me. Inside the house, the empty rooms push me downstairs, a little bit because of habit and a little bit (and a lot) because I can still tell the story of Anna.”<sup>77</sup> The connection between the two women in the private space of the courtyard is a lasting memory for Goliarda, even as an adult.

Goliarda also makes connections with other young girls in the courtyard after Anna moves away, and they use this space for imaginary play. A woman and her daughter, whom the courtyard nicknames respectively The Dope (“la minchiona”) and Big Curly (“la ricciolona”), move in to Anna’s old apartment, now redecorated by the new inhabitants. They invite all of the young girls of the courtyard over to play and dance. Big Curly dresses in men’s clothes, and acts as a dancing partner for the girls: “Big Curly dressed in the clothes of her brother who died on the continent, and she made us dance in couples, accompanying us with the guitar...”<sup>78</sup> The girls play “dress up” in other ways as well. Big Curly and Nica, another girl in the courtyard, “get married,” with Nica wearing the old wedding gown and veil of Big Curly’s mother:

Of course, Nica was only nine, but it was [just] for fun. In Anna’s corner [of the courtyard] there was a small altar and Teresa was the priest. There were even flowers. Nica was excited, she did not believe she would have had that honor: because Big Curly had already married Teresa, Grazia, Nunziata and had proposed to Sara. But this one had refused and, sure enough, was not there now. The ceremony was over, they exchanged rings and while The Dope entertained us with rosolio liquor, pastries and a ricotta cake, the newlyweds, behind the second screen, spent their first honeymoon night. It had been an extraordinary party.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Anche se non aspetto più Anna, il cortile mi attrae. In casa le stanze vuote mi spingono giù, un po’ per abitudine e un po’ (e molto) perché posso ancora raccontare di Anna.” Ibid., 93.

<sup>78</sup> “La ricciolona si vestiva con gli abiti di suo fratello morto nel continente, e ci faceva ballare a coppie accompagnandoci con la chitarra...” Ibid., 94.

<sup>79</sup> “Certo Nica aveva solo nove anni, ma era per scherzo. Nell’angolo di Anna c’era un altarino e Teresa faceva il prete. C’erano anche i fiori. Nica era emozionata, non credeva che avrebbe avuto lei quell’onore: perché la ricciolona aveva già sposato Teresa, Grazia, Nunziata ed avevo richiesto Sara. Ma questa si era rifiutata e difatti ora non c’era. La cerimonia era finita, si scambiavano l’anello e mentre la minchiona ci intratteneva col rosolio, le paste e una torta di ricotta, gli sposi, dietro il secondo paravento, passavano la loro prima notte di nozze. Era stata una festa straordinaria.” Ibid.

The play wedding in their private courtyard is an opportunity for the girls to act out roles and engage in behavior that they would not otherwise. The enclosure of the space and its privacy, and specifically, the absence of males from this zone, empowers the girls to explore sexual relationships with each other under the guise of traditional heterosexual “marriages.”

Goliarda develops a unique relationship her neighbor, Nica, allowed for in the intimacy of the apartment buildings’ shared courtyard and in Goliarda’s room. Nica is older, and is in fact Goliarda’s older half-sister, although the two do not know it. Their relationship is complicated in other ways because of Nica’s role as a mentor, but also as the poorer, illegitimate child of Goliarda’s father. In their childhood games, Nica and Goliarda are friends, “husband and wife,” and adolescent “lovers,” roles allowed in the settings Sapienza creates of the sphere of childhood and the safety of these enclosed spaces. Nica and Goliarda “get married” like the other girls and this allows the two girls to experiment sexually with each other. “Big Curly did not propose to me, but Nica, one afternoon when we were playing telephone operators, asked me: ‘Do you want to marry me?’ I was so excited that I did not know what to respond: ‘But how do you do it?’ ‘Like this.’ And she started to undress me, and then she undressed herself.”<sup>80</sup> Nica instructs Goliarda based on her interactions with Big Curly. “‘She does it like this, I learned from her,’ and she started to kiss me and hug me. ‘Now you be the woman, and I the man.’ ‘Now you be the man and I the woman.’”<sup>81</sup> With time, this non-traditional relationship adjusts to accommodate another courtyard girl as well. The inclusion of this third “spouse” highlights the

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<sup>80</sup> “La ricciolona non mi richiese in sposa, ma Nica, un pomeriggio che giocavamo alle telefoniste, mi chiese: ‘Mi vuoi sposare?’ Ero così emozionata che non sapevo cosa rispondere: ‘Ma come si fa?’ ‘Così’ E cominciò a spogliarmi, e poi si spogliò anche lei.” Ibid., 96.

<sup>81</sup> “‘Lei fa così, ho imparato da lei,’ e cominciò a baciarmi e a stringermi. ‘Ora tu fai la donna, e io l’uomo.’ ‘Ora tu fai l’uomo, e io la donna.’” Ibid.

innocent play aspect of these relationships that the girls are creating but also the flexibility with which they are exploring the range of possible relationships among them: “We got married that afternoon and remained man and wife until [Nica] brought up Nunziata and wanted her to be a second husband.”<sup>82</sup> Being in private, enclosed spaces allows the girls to experiment with various types of roles that would be unavailable to them if males were present, and sanctioned in a public space.

In this chapter I have investigated how Sapienza’s use of delimited spaces allows for the flourishing of non-traditional female relationships and characters. An exploration of the Italian feminist concepts and practices of *differenza sessuale*, *autocoscienza*, and *affidamento*, originating in the same decades in which Sapienza was writing, provide a point of comparison for the intellectual and physical spaces that Sapienza creates for the women in her works. It becomes clear, however, that even though there are strong similarities in structure, Sapienza’s vision departs radically from Italian feminist theory. By creatively reinventing the very conditions of spatial restriction that the patriarchy has historically imposed on women, Sapienza offers a novel way for women to discover themselves, develop non-traditional relationships, and transgress social boundaries—to free themselves within the condition of confinement.

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<sup>82</sup> “Ci sposammo quel pomeriggio e restammo marito e moglie fino a quando portò su Nunziata e volle che anche lei fosse un secondo marito.” Ibid.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NARRATING TRANSGRESSION; OR, WHY MODESTA KILLS

Among the most unexpected moments in Sapienza's oeuvre—which is rife with the unexpected—are the scenes of the protagonist of *L'arte della gioia*, Modesta, killing her biological mother and sister, and then subsequently two additional mother figures. In an otherwise relatively nonviolent narrative, these transgressive acts stand out as moments that bring the reader up short, interrupting the reading experience by dramatically violating the reader's expectations. Moreover, given that some of the most important relationships in Sapienza's works are among women, as shown in the previous chapter, these matricides become even more surprising and perplexing. In this chapter I attempt to elucidate why Sapienza pushes her characters to such extremes of behavior, the extent to which these transgressions should be read as metaphorical or symbolic—or both, and what kind of relationship to the reader is forged by means of Sapienza's narrative style and strategy. Finally, I argue that Sapienza's purpose in narrating transgression as she does is to induce in her reader an experience of moral irresolution and indeterminacy that replicates the contingent, *in media res* quality of life.

Although the murders certainly stand out in the narrative, they are far from the only transgressive acts committed by Sapienza's characters. Indeed, throughout all of her novels Sapienza's female protagonists transgress the boundaries of what was considered appropriate behavior of the time in which the stories took place in a variety of ways. In her insightful article

on gender nonconformity and sexual ambiguity in Sapienza's work, Charlotte Ross writes, "[Sapienza's] behavior and that of her female protagonists challenge the boundaries of acceptable ethical conduct."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Susanna Scarparo and Aureliana di Rollo trace Sapienza's deconstruction of male and female gendered roles and then further highlight her creation of an unconventional mother and family in *L'arte della gioia*.<sup>2</sup> While various critics have highlighted this or that type of provocative or unconventional behavior, none has addressed the idea of transgression itself as an animating principle of Sapienza's artistic project, the broad range of transgressive behaviors that characterize her novels, or the disconnect between the dramatically transgressive content and the often neutral narrative voice by means of which it is conveyed. In addition to murder, same-sex desire, gender and sexual ambiguity, unconventional motherhood and family creation, Sapienza's female characters also transgress social or ethical boundaries by committing incest, crime (drug trafficking), terrorism, and—less dramatically though still importantly beyond the pale of acceptable behavior in the 1930s through the 1950s when the action takes place—working outside of the home.<sup>3</sup>

But of all these transgressive acts, it is certainly the murders that place the reader into the most problematic relation to the protagonist, and to which we will devote most of our attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross conflates biography and fiction in this sentence—a widespread practice throughout the current criticism of Sapienza. Ross, "Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions," 2.

<sup>2</sup> Scarparo and Di Rollo, "Mothers, Daughters and Family in Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia*," 91.

<sup>3</sup> The post-Second World War decades of the 1950s and 1960s saw significant change in the makeup of Italian society and economy, and women's roles in society. With the economic boom and mass migration from rural to urban and south to north, women's lives changed significantly and new positions were available to women as secretaries, factory workers, and shop assistants, increasing their visibility in the workforce outside the home. More women held jobs in the public sphere. For a history of women's employment in the twentieth century, see Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). For changes in roles within the Italian family see Chiara Saraceno's helpful article in Daniela Del Boca and Margherita Repetto-Alaia, eds., *Women's Work, the Family, and Social Policy: Focus on Italy in a European Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003).

Monica Farnetti identifies and explores these homicides in an article in the first critical collection of essays on Sapienza's work, in which she claims that the character's actions are fundamentally acts of defense of herself and her gender: i.e., all of Modesta's victims are women and, in killing these submissive or weak women, the character is killing off that version of femininity as well as those aspects or potentialities in herself.<sup>4</sup> The Italian literary critic Maria Teresa Maenza elaborates on this idea by arguing that for Sapienza these acts of violence are necessary preludes to the creation of a new symbolic female heroine free from the traditional conceptions of womanhood embodied by the homicide victims.<sup>5</sup> Modesta is born on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1900, and thus can be seen as symbolically representing the new woman of the twentieth century. I concur that Sapienza creates a fiercely self-liberating anarchic protagonist whose transgressions serve to propel her out of the gravitational pull of the oppressive patriarchal norms of Italian society, and even its literature. It is undeniable that power and freedom both engender and are engendered by transgression.

However, as valid as the aforementioned readings may be, they fall short in crucial ways. For one thing, they fail to identify or address the sometimes disturbing—and at other times welcome—dissonance between the transgressive acts Sapienza represents and the way she represents them. For another, such purely symbolic interpretations of Modesta's actions take the friction out of the fact that our protagonist, however admirable and refreshingly “liberated” at times, is also a murderer. In relation to this, Charlotte Ross aptly points out the “discomfort which may be produced by [Sapienza's] writing.”<sup>6</sup> By looking closely at the language in which Sapienza narrates these transgressions, I aim to show that the murders can be read as

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<sup>4</sup> Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 89.

<sup>5</sup> Maenza in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d'essere*,” 243.

<sup>6</sup> Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions,” 2.

simultaneously symbolic and real, and that Sapienza purposefully creates a contradictory and destabilized reading experience by means of the incongruity between narrative style and content, in order to evince a sense of moral irresolution. This stylistic dissonance may be most clearly and simply demonstrated in the protagonist's name, Modesta.<sup>7</sup> Given that Modesta's personality and actions are far from "modest," by creating this ironic moniker, Sapienza not only satirizes the traditional feminine virtue of modesty but also forces the reader to question his or her presumptions about the semantic stability or trustworthiness of ordinary language.<sup>8</sup>

The archetype in Western culture of the troublesome and subversive feminine principle goes back as far as Eve and Lilith, and is reified frequently over the centuries. For example, Deanna Shemek notes that in the literature of the Italian Renaissance, women are often seen as

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Carta also points out the antiphrastic nature of Modesta's name: "...Modesta also possesses a 'quality' name, a name that however reflects only antiphrastically, or rather through the effect of semantic overturning, the decisions of her character." ("...anche Modesta possiede un nome 'qualità', un nome che però ne rispecchia solo antifrasticamente, ovvero tramite un effetto di capovolgimento semantico, le determinazioni del carattere.") Carta in Providenti, ed., *Quel sogno d'essere*, 262. Angelo Pellegrino mentions the ironic quality of the name in his contribution to Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Recent studies of Sapienza's manuscripts evidence her careful choice of language and meticulous revisions, revealing a full intentionality with respect to issues of tone and narrative voice. In her illuminating article, "*Lettera aperta*: il 'dovere di tornare,'" Anna Langiano compares the final, typewritten manuscript of *Lettera aperta* with the edited text that was published in 1967. Langiano in Providenti, ed., *Quel sogno d'essere*, 132. In various locations throughout the typewritten text, Sapienza offers variations for her writing in parentheses. Langiano explains that the different linguistic options Sapienza tests are not usually variations in syntax or sentence structure, but rather very subtle semantic choices between two synonyms. These offer a glimpse of Sapienza's thought process as a writer, and highlight her precision in choosing specific vocabulary and her sensitivity to the meaning behind it. One of the most significant examples Langiano points out is in the first sentence of the manuscript, where the narrator explains why she is writing this book: "It is not to bother you with a new poetic story—I know that you have had to put up with a lot of those recently—nor to do an exercise in literature (handwriting), as even I had done for a long time [...]." ("Non è per importunarvi con una nuova storia poetica—so che ne avete avute tante da sorbirvi in questi anni—né per fare esercizio di letteratura (calligrafia), come ho fatto anch'io per lungo tempo [...].") The published version reads: "It is not to bother you with a new story, nor to exercise my handwriting, as even I had done for a long time [...]." ("Non è per importunarvi con una nuova storia né per fare esercizio di calligrafia, come ho fatto anch'io per lungo tempo [...].") Langiano points out that the decision to replace a fraught word like "literature" with the simpler, more straightforward "handwriting" is representative of Sapienza's aim to give her words an autonomous meaning and free her writing from being compromised by literary tradition. I would also add that the change from "poetic story" to, simply, "story" is significant. The choice to remove the adjective "poetic" in the published version liberates the meaning of "story" to a significance that could be considered something else besides literature, perhaps something personal, whereas if she had kept the adjective, the phrase "storia poetica," or, "poetic story" implies a literary text. This simplifies her language and allows her to remove herself from those attempting to produce Literature-with-a-capital-L for the literary establishment, and simply write her own story. These examples demonstrate Sapienza's purposefulness and meticulousness and highlight the importance of a close study of her language.

the source of potential social disorder. She writes that many canonical texts entertain "...the possibility that woman might exceed whatever bounds society has set for her, might deviate from the path authorized by a culture centered on male privilege, and might for this reason pose a danger to individual men or to the order of the community as a whole."<sup>9</sup> Because there are more societal restrictions on women, there are naturally more opportunities for them to transgress. We can see Sapienza centuries later embracing this mythos of the anarchic female in order to play with, and upon, patriarchal anxiety over the unpredictability of women. Through the representation of transgressive acts, she tests the boundaries that society has set for the "dangerous" woman, including a character who may pose a danger to the community as a whole (e.g., Roberta in *Le certezze del dubbio*, who engages in terrorist activities) while at the same time presenting these characters and acts in a surprisingly benign way.<sup>10</sup>

The collision of style and content forces readers to form their own reactions to the non-conforming behavior displayed by the protagonist. Specifically, the juxtaposition of an emotionally and morally neutral tone with dramatic, transgressive actions destabilizes and disorients the reader, at times intensifying, and at others diluting the provocative and sometimes disturbing nature of the content. So what are we to make of the tonal disconnect, the narrative and cognitive dissonance, between the transgressive behavior narrated and the sometimes (seemingly) indifferent way it is described? By stylistically suggesting that her characters' transgressive acts are unremarkable, Sapienza deftly shifts the moral ground under the reader's feet, opening up assumptions about what is right, wrong, or acceptable. This neutrality of tone

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<sup>9</sup> Shemek, *Ladies Errant*, 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> As Emily Cooke points out in her review of *L'arte della gioia* in *The New Yorker*, speaking about Modesta's desires: "Among the novel's remarkable qualities is an easy way of asserting the unremarkableness, the ordinariness, of transgressive desire." Emily Cooke, "Disobedience is a Virtue: On Goliarda Sapienza's 'The Art of Joy,'" *The New Yorker* (January 23, 2014), accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/disobedience-is-a-virtue-on-goliarda-sapienzas-the-art-of-joy>

not only destabilizes the reading experience, but intentionally abstains from and refuses to pass judgment. Meanwhile, the reader can—perhaps must—fill the space that is created with his or her own interpretation, judgment, and multiple meanings, inducing a purposely ambiguous and contradictory reading experience.

One of the ways that Sapienza creates this ambiguous space is by removing any trace of an omniscient or moralizing narrator, particularly during scenes of transgressive acts, in favor of mimetic narration. Rebecca West's exploration of minimalism provides a helpful critical lens through which to look at Sapienza's technique, though on the whole Sapienza's aesthetic is not minimalist. In her book on the author Gianni Celati, West reverses Frederick Barthelme's seven-part negative definition of minimalism with the goal of redeeming it as a positive term.<sup>11</sup> Of particular importance to my reading of Sapienza's characters' transgressive actions is the quality that Barthelme terms "moral poverty" and which West renders more complexly as "moral inconclusiveness." In other words, this type of writing, "typically leaves the drawing of conclusions to the reader rather than incorporating a necessary moral within the logical and structural emphases of the stories themselves"<sup>12</sup>—a critical effect for the reading of Sapienza's neutrally-represented transgressions. West goes on to clarify the terminology of moral inconclusiveness thus: "I think it absurdly reductive to state that minimalist fiction actively seeks to avoid or is innocently unaware of moral questions (as is implied in the accusation of 'moral poverty'); what this mode of narration tends to avoid is, instead, an overt 'moral' to the stories told."<sup>13</sup> West notes the absence of an "authorial narrating voice in the book that directs us to a clear 'moral,'" as well as the absence of "structural conclusiveness, by means of a *denouement*,

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<sup>11</sup> West, *Gianni Celati*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

that reveals to us an end (in the double sense of termination and goal) that was inherent – and therefore inevitable – in both the etiology and development of the narrative events themselves.”<sup>14</sup>

The foregoing serves as a good description of Sapienza’s style; she is not interested in hand-holding the reader or managing the reader’s reactions by means of melodramatic language or narrative, particularly in the scenes in which transgressive action takes place. Instead, she eases and blurs the boundaries of “acceptable” (female) behavior through neutral, matter-of-fact language and representation. West acknowledges the potentially profound implications of this narrative choice: “...minimalism’s challenge to traditional representational techniques in which experience is recreated mimetically and teleologically can be seen as a broader ‘political’ challenge to the ostensible permanency of values connected with transparent and moralizing narratives.”<sup>15</sup> Sapienza’s use of mimetic narration and her narrative “removal” therefore create an objective and unapologetic prose space in which the boundaries of acceptable and transgressive are made permeable, eroding some of the moral judgment that would be expected to accompany such actions. West concludes that minimalism as a style cleaves more closely to lived experience than does traditional narrative and therefore achieves a richer “moral complexity”:

There is a ‘moral of no clear moral,’... we are left to consider fundamental questions of decidability, evidentiary knowledge, justice, ‘final’ meaning. I would therefore argue that the so-called moral poverty of much minimalist writing is instead moral complexity, and that, in this sense, it is a narrative mode much more reflective of real, lived experience than many moralizing tales still told to us by literature and other, more potentially ‘dangerous’ forms of discourse in the social and political spheres.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> West, *Gianni Celati*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

I aim to show that *Sapienza*, too, represents the real, lived experience of moral inconclusiveness and moral complexity through her neutral representations of transgressive acts. Rather than simply erasing what has come before, as other critics have argued (i.e. the woman oppressed by the patriarchy is simply murdered and thus removed violently from the narrative), *Sapienza* recruits readers into the work of redrafting the boundaries that define the extent and kinds of transgressions necessary—or not—in formulating the female subject. Just as Whitman recognizes and celebrates the complexity of his male subject, *Sapienza* creates a female subject who can be contradictory and “contain multitudes.”<sup>17</sup> In so doing, *Sapienza* represents the inherent moral complexity and ambiguity of the world in which we live and act. In creating this minimalist and therefore morally complex space, *Sapienza* also ultimately challenges ideological absolutism, creating narratives that resist or elude ideology of any kind, as I will explore in more detail later in the chapter.

Before proceeding further, it will be helpful to define how I am using the term “transgression” for the purposes of this work. The dictionary defines transgression as “the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin.”<sup>18</sup> However, just as law is subject to jurisdiction and time, so what is considered right can change depending on who holds authority, and what that authority dictates. To complicate this further, as Bonnie Braedlin and Hans Braedlin write, “Systems that limit and acts that transgress limits necessitate, ‘authorize,’ each other,”<sup>19</sup> thus acting as complementary forces with and against one another. The existence of authority means

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<sup>17</sup> From Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”:  
“Do I contradict myself?

Very well then... I contradict myself;  
I am large... I contain multitudes.”

<sup>18</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “transgression”

<sup>19</sup> Bonnie Braedlin and Hans Braedlin, eds., *Authority and Transgression in Literature and Film* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 1.

that acts that go beyond or outside that authority are transgressive and, likewise, transgressive acts confirm the existence of authority by their nature of being outside the realm of acceptability. In terms of delimitation, authority and transgression represent, “opposites of constructing and deconstructing boundaries.”<sup>20</sup> This *pas de deux* is essential to Sapienza’s work, as I elaborate in chapter three on women’s relationships and spaces. When Sapienza represents boundaries in her novels, it is so that she can question what they keep in and what they keep out and; similarly, she creates characters who transgress boundaries in order to question the validity and permeability of socially constructed sanctions and our own construction of boundaries, or limits, for subject formation.

The notion that authority is defined by transgression, and vice versa, is particularly relevant to Sapienza’s work because she specializes in characters who resist and evade authority at varying levels. It is important to point out that these transgressions are not all equal: some acts are illegal, some have been traditionally morally or religiously prohibited, and some are simply socially unacceptable for women in the patriarchal Italy of the 1930s to the 1950s—acts that range from socially contingent, historically contextual normative transgression (such as women working outside the home), to (nearly) universal taboos such as incest, to moral crimes and illegal acts such as murder. Thus, in some cases the authority that the author is working against is a patriarchal society, and in some cases it is *any* society’s preconceived notions of what is sanctioned and what is taboo.

I have identified seven different areas in which Sapienza’s characters transgress boundaries, authority, or the law and have categorized these transgressions (keeping in mind that some of her characters commit multiple transgressions of different types) as follows: women

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

working outside of the home prior to the 1970s, particularly in *Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, and *L'arte della gioia*; creating and raising an unorthodox family in *L'arte della gioia*; female same-sex desire and sexual relationships, particularly in *Le certezze del dubbio* and *L'arte della gioia*; crimes that lead to imprisonment in *L'Università di Rebibbia*; terrorism in *L'Università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*; incest in *Lettera aperta*; and, finally, murder in *L'arte della gioia*. Clearly Sapienza does not represent all of these transgressions as symbolic; arguing for a symbolic reading of the murders alone thus wrongheadedly eliminates exactly the challenge to and provocation of readers to which Sapienza is committed. We should also note that neutrality is not always her narrative default: at times she takes a clearer ideological stance and employs more judgmental language to describe certain transgressions (e.g. “pro”-incest in *Lettera aperta* and “pro”-criminality in *L'Università di Rebibbia*), while using a more neutral language and withholding narrative judgment to describe others, particularly same-sex desire and Modesta’s murders, leaving the borders of right and wrong open, and leaving the reader to grapple with moral uncertainty. It is therefore these latter transgressions and their neutral representation that demand a more in depth exploration herein—one which will reveal that the creation of moral and narrative friction is at the heart of Sapienza’s literary project.

### **Same-Sex Desire and Relationships**

Charlotte Ross aptly describes Sapienza’s writing as disruptive of “normative meaning making machines.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the contradictions inherent in her writing “challenge understandings of gender, sexuality and identity over and over again, and refuse to settle into any

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<sup>21</sup> Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza’s Eccentric Interruptions,” 16.

pattern, refusing to align with narratives of feminism, or even with themselves.”<sup>22</sup> However, when it comes to same-sex desire, Ross argues that Sapienza’s characters, and even Sapienza herself, *suffer* from the “interruption” of same-sex desire. That is, when it comes to the topic of lesbian desire, rather than provoking or disrupting of “normative meaning making machines” (which is what Ross argues Sapienza otherwise does regarding other topics, such as gender identity), Sapienza herself suffers from the thwarting or disruption of (her own same-sex) desire. Ross’s claim is that Sapienza’s writing oscillates between freely expressing same-sex desire and expressing heteronormative or even homophobic views.<sup>23</sup> One of Ross’s examples is from *Lettera aperta* when Goliarda (as a child) and her young friend Nica play at “being married,” and explore their relationship erotically. When her mother, Maria Giudice, finds the two girls, she slaps Goliarda. As Ross writes, “this disruption of her sexual discovery of herself left her ‘bloccata’ (blocked or stunted), stuck in a phase of homosexual exploration that should have given way to a presumed ‘normal’ heterosexual sexuality. Her comments are both transgressive for a text published in 1967, since she declares herself ‘omosessuale’ (homosexual), and rather homophobic, since this is cast as a problematic state of arrested development.”<sup>24</sup> However, there are a significant number of occasions in Sapienza’s work that detail what some may consider the transgressive behavior of same-sex desire in a way that leaves the interpretation entirely up to the reader, without judgment offered by the narrator or other characters. As I describe in chapter two on the influence of theater in Sapienza’s works, one of Sapienza’s techniques is to use pure mimetic dialogue with little or no interjection from the narrative voice. This technique, in addition to endowing scenes with a sense of influence of a theatrical script or performance,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza’s Eccentric Interruptions,” 17.

allows for the narrator's neutrality (via absence) on the subject of same-sex desire in *L'arte della gioia*. The reader is thus left to piece together an understanding and interpretation of the characters' actions without the influence of a narrative voice. As I explore in chapter three on women's relationships and spaces, Sapienza crafts settings that allow for non-traditional relationships between women, including lesbian relationships, to grow in the absence of judgment because there are no outside eyes to observe them.

Modesta's relationship with Nina provides an example. Modesta is imprisoned for being suspected of supporting anti-Fascist politics and action, and develops a relationship with her fellow cellmate, an anarchist named Nina. Throughout the chapters recounting Modesta and Nina's time in prison together, Sapienza creates a structure whereby the two women and their relationship are protected from outside influences. The reader observes Nina and Modesta's interactions primarily via dialogue, with very few interjections from the (usually) first-person narrator. The effect of this is that the reader views the relationship from a detached, almost anthropological perspective in which the characters speak for themselves.<sup>25</sup> The situation that Sapienza creates as the moment the two women start feeling a connection toward one another may also be considered transgressive, as it centers around Modesta's bowels (a rather unusual way to develop a romantic connection, though perhaps not completely surprising coming from the singular Modesta and her unique creator, Sapienza). Nina tries to get Modesta to defecate, as we find out from her monologue that Modesta has been painfully constipated. As Nina speaks, action (that is not described mimetically to us) takes place, and we must piece together what Modesta's reactions must be:

“You pull this filthy sheet that Sister Giuliana calls a curtain closed and take a crap. Okay? No? Get over it now—what's your name,

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<sup>25</sup> This idea of an anthropological narrative comes from Rebecca West's course taught on Gianni Celati at the University of Chicago in the winter of 2007. See also West, *Gianni Celati*.

anyway? Goddamn it! –this princess stuff isn't for me... Modesta? Hell, what a name! Who named you that? It's worse than Princess. Imagine calling such a beautiful lady Modesta, especially one who's crying because she doesn't want to poop... I can call you Mody, you say? Oh yes, that's better... Look, Mody, will you make up your mind? What are you worried about if I swear I won't look at you? The sound you might make? Or the stink?"<sup>26</sup>

Nina continues speaking, and presumably Modesta is reacting, though we do not yet hear Modesta's voice. When she does reply, we have only Modesta's voice quoted directly, continuing the theatrical influence of a script on the dialogue-monologue, and the absence of an omnipresent narrative voice. By eliding such a determining narrative voice, Sapienza is refusing to lead the reader to an overt moral conclusion, instead allowing events to unfold and putting readers in the position of having to make of it what they will.

When Sapienza presents a *non*-neutral perspective on same-sex desire, it is through the character of Joyce, herself a lesbian who has conflicting feelings about lesbianism. Joyce has a long-term relationship with Modesta and lives with Modesta as part of the family. But when Beatrice's daughter, Bambolina, and Mela, a family friend who has come to live with them, develop an intimate relationship, explored and portrayed within the confines of the villa, Joyce expresses discomfort. She acts as a kind of mediated and mediating consciousness between the outside world and the world within, since she herself is attracted to women, and lives within the walls of the villa where Modesta reigns. When Modesta sees Bambolina and Mela being sexually intimate with each other, Joyce expresses concern about how they might be viewed, and Modesta asks Joyce:

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<sup>26</sup> "Tu chiudi 'sto lenzuolo lercio che suor Giuliana chiama tenda e fai la cacca. Ti va così? No? Fatti 'na ragione—come ti chiami? Porco cane! –non mi va 'sto principessa... Modesta? Mannaggia che nome! E chi te l'ha messo? È peggio di principessa. Tu guarda se si può chiamare Modesta una così bella che per giunta piange perché non vuole fare la cacca... Ti posso chiamare Mody, dici? E sì, è più carino... Senti Mody ci vogliamo decidere? Che ti preoccupa se io ti giuro che non ti guardo? Il rumore che puoi fare? O il puzzo?" Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 425. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 557.

“In your opinion I should send Mela away, right?’  
‘I didn’t...’  
‘That’s what you said. Don’t you see that by doing that I would make those girls feel that they’re sinning? I would be branding them – I, who represent, who embody society to them...’<sup>27</sup>

Thus, when the conventional judgment of outside society is passed on transgressive behavior within the walls of the villa, that behavior is protected, even counteracted. In lieu of being exposed to outside scrutiny, Modesta takes up the place and role of “society” for the two women, essentially protecting them from judgment.

## **Murder**

At the far extreme of the transgressive behaviors that Sapienza portrays are the murders committed by the protagonist of *L’arte della gioia*. Within the first part of the book alone (of four parts total), Modesta kills four, perhaps five, people, all of whom are related to her either by blood or as adopted caretakers, with no one ever finding out that she is the culprit. After a man claiming to be her father rapes her in her mother’s home, in order to escape the rapist and a life that could include further sexual violence, Modesta sets fire to the home and the people who are in it: her mother, her sister, and the rapist father (though while the mother and sister’s deaths are confirmed, the book leaves the question of whether the father was also killed or not).<sup>28</sup> Years after being taken in by the mother superior of a nearby abbey, Mother Leonora, Modesta starts feeling pressured to enter the novitiate, and takes steps to “remove” Mother Leonora as well.

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<sup>27</sup> “Secondo te dovrei allontanare Mela, no?’

‘Non...’

‘Così hai detto. Ma non capisci che con questo atto farei sentire a quelle bambine che peccano? Le marchierei, io che rappresento, sono, la società per loro...’” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 348. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 459.

<sup>28</sup> Laura Fortini analyzes this “missing” homicide in the article “‘L’arte della gioia’ e il genio dell’omicidio mancato” (“‘L’arte della gioia’ and the genius of the missing homicide”). Fortini in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 101-126.

The nun frequently goes up to the roof to look at the stars through a telescope, and Modesta saws away at the barrier that Mother Leonora typically leans on, so that one day she eventually falls off the roof. Modesta is then taken in by Mother Leonora's aristocratic family, specifically the matriarch Princess Gaia, who in turn also becomes an obstacle to Modesta's vision of life, particularly with regard to the freedom to make her own decisions. Modesta positions herself to be the Princess's heir by marrying her mentally disabled son, and when she becomes pregnant (though it is with another man), the Princess suspects something: "How come you've put on so much weight, Mody? You're not playing tricks on me, are you? I told you that I don't want any children from that 'thing'! Tell me if that's the case, since in the early months, with a good doctor, it's child's play to get rid of it."<sup>29</sup> Modesta is then in the ironic situation of feeling the need to kill her mother-like figure in order to be able to become a mother herself. When Princess Gaia catches the Spanish flu, Modesta purposefully withholds medication from her, causing her death.

While these murders are plainly ruthless, the reader at times, amazingly, can still sympathize with the protagonist to a point of complicity. Maria Teresa Maenza attributes this to the fact that it is satisfying, from the reader's perspective, to see Modesta grow out of her humble, "wild" beginnings, "sustained by her faith and love for herself."<sup>30</sup> The key is to believe that Modesta commits all of the murders in order to maintain or gain the liberty to choose her life

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<sup>29</sup> "Com'è che sei ingrassata tanto, Mody? Non è che mi fai qualche scherzo? Te l'ho detto che figli da quella 'cosa' non ne voglio! Avvertimi se fosse, che nei primi mesi, con un buon medico, una sciochezza è disfarsene." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 118. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> "Reading *The Art of Joy* it is possible to 'feel' through Modesta the fullness of being woman and, even being present for the 'elimination' of three important women, we did not judge her crimes as bad. Because we were cheering her on." ("Per una lettrice, per una donna, è estremamente positivo vedere che Modesta 'cresce,' anche un po' 'selvaggia,' sostenuta dalla fede e l'amore per se stessa." Maenza goes on to explain further: "Leggendo *L'arte della gioia* è possibile 'sentire,' attraverso Modesta, la pienezza di essere donna e, pur assistendo alla 'eliminazione' di tre donne importanti per lei stessa, non abbiamo giudicato male i suoi crimini. Poiché facevamo il tifo per lei.") Maenza in Providenti, ed., "*Quel sogno d'essere*," 243-244.

path, a goal that we as the readers endorse after seeing the squalor, poverty, and violence she has had to face as a young child. However, the relationship the reader has with Modesta is more complicated, as the reader is always simultaneously identifying with her and alienated by her, pulled in two directions at once. Acts of murder would seem to be intrinsically alienating to a reader, particularly by the time Modesta has committed the third one, and at the same time the reader often still finds herself hoping that Modesta will make her way in the world.

These murders have been the focus of recent literary criticism on Goliarda Sapienza's novels. As noted at the outset, Monica Farnetti explores what the four female victims have in common in an article entitled "*L'arte della gioia* e il genio dell'omicidio" ("*L'arte della gioia* and the genius of the homicide").<sup>31</sup> Arguing that the murdered women all in some way restrict Modesta's freedom, she goes further to claim that in their submissiveness and weakness they represent the female gender in a way that violates Modesta's mythos of womanhood. Modesta hates them for it, literally cannot stand their presence, and must eliminate them, as psycho-symbolic embodiments of these negative qualities. Farnetti refers to the feminist Luisa Muraro's claim that a woman can hate another woman who represents a humiliating vision of womanhood to the point where the detested female becomes a nemesis. According to this psychological reading, Modesta's murders are perpetrated in defense of herself, her freedom, and her vision of womanhood, which explains why the character ultimately does not regret her actions.<sup>32</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>31</sup> Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 89-100.

<sup>32</sup> "For those who read it and understand it, a position is reserved that is anything but easy, since to absolve her is impossible but to condemn her is as well, and is perhaps a worse crime than hers." ("A chi la legge, e la comprende, è riservata una posizione tutt'altro che facile, giacché assolverla è impossibile ma condannarla lo è altrettanto, ed è forse un reato peggiore del suo.") To escape this impasse, Farnetti looks to Dante's approach to Francesca da Rimini, a sinner in Canto V of *Inferno*, who Farnetti states was at once guilty but proud, and suggests that we, as the readers, can perhaps only have the same reaction that Dante had when faced with a person like Francesca, or Modesta: to faint: "In a situation that is analogous in many aspects, it is worth stating that in front of Francesca da Rimini, as we know, Dante in fact does not condemn nor absolve but, strategically, faints. Well, I think that also in front of Modesta one can, faint, and easily, because Modesta, too, like Francesca, appears guilty and at the same time proud..." ("In una situazione per molti aspetti analoga, vale a dire di fronte a Francesca da Rimini, Dante infatti

Farnetti posits that in Modesta's actions one can observe the memory of the ancient legend of "Morte Feconda," or the death that gives life.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, ultimately, to understand and sympathize with Modesta and applaud her audacity, we are compelled to read the victims of these murders as purely symbolic or metaphorical barriers to a life free from patriarchy and constriction. The text itself, however, militates against such a reading because Modesta's relationships with Mother Leonora and Princess Gaia, as well as the characters themselves, are represented as too fully human and complex to be simply symbolic. A purely symbolic or metaphorical reading removes the complexity and tension from these transgressions and decreases both the moral and narrative friction that I believe Sapienza purposefully creates. First, Modesta states herself that the more time she spends with Princess Gaia as she becomes ill, the more she admires her: "In the three weeks we spent together, my admiration for her only grew. Not one complaint, not when the attacks came, nor when she labored to rest or talk to me."<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it is clear that Modesta does not simply or merely hate Gaia. Second, while Mother Leonora and Princess Gaia do eventually restrict Modesta from leading the life that she envisions for herself as Farnetti points out, it should also be noted that they both play a role in educating Modesta and opening up new and significant opportunities for her, as I elaborate in chapter three. Mother Leonora takes Modesta under her wing at the abbey and teaches her how to be a scholar, certainly not the most humiliating pastime for a woman!

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come si sa non condanna né assolve ma, strategicamente, sviene. Ebbene, io credo che anche di fronte a Modesta si possa, e sia bene, svenire, perché anche Modesta, come Francesca, ci appare colpevole e allo stesso tempo fiera..." Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 99.

<sup>33</sup> "Maybe in her actions there is the memory of the ancient legend of the *Morte Feconda*, or *Gravida*, death that gives life, [an] icon that survives intact in many Mediterranean rituals and in Sicily." ("C'è forse nel suo agire memoria dell'arcaica credenza della Morte Feconda, o Gravida, la morte che dà la vita, icona che sopravvive intatta in molti rituali mediterranei e nondimeno in Sicilia.") Ibid., 97.

<sup>34</sup> "Nei venti giorni che passammo insieme, la mia ammirazione non fece che crescere. Non un lamento, né quando l'attacco veniva, né quando faticosamente riposava o parlava con me." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 118. Translation by Anne Milano Appel. *The Art of Joy*, 164.

Princess Gaia is a fierce, aristocratic matriarch who leads an entire estate with an iron fist and manages the accounting and financials “like a man.”<sup>35</sup> She, too, becomes Modesta’s mentor, teaching her how to manage an estate and positioning her to be her heir and successor, a side of Princess Gaia that can certainly not be considered submissive or weak. An all-or-nothing view of these relationships discounts the fact that these women are important, relatively strong models for Modesta, a young woman who is trying to understand her options in a society with few such role models. Finally, these two women hold positions of power: both women exist in social environments that are “closed” (an abbey and a private aristocratic estate), but inside these prescriptive boundaries they have created significant power for themselves. It is power and freedom that Modesta wants as well, her story also being one of social mobility (which could be considered, in itself, as a form of transgression). Therefore, rather than dismissing the seriousness of these murders as somehow warranted because these women are simply symbolic failures to fulfill Modesta’s ideal vision of woman, it is worth examining what these transgressive acts might mean in the narrative context. The very practical skills and life lessons they teach the protagonist, and the nuanced relationships Modesta forms with them over time, demand a literal (not just symbolic) reading of these characters as active players in the unfolding of the narrative and plot.

Despite her reading of the murders as essentially mythological in nature, Farnetti concedes that Modesta’s lack of remorse for her actions, her seeming freedom from guilt, makes the book frightening at times.<sup>36</sup> Charlotte Ross likewise identifies a “discomfort which may be

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<sup>35</sup> “I would not be a silly woman. Like the Princess, that’s how I wanted to be. Now there was a woman who was as strong and willful as a man.” (“Io non sarei stata una donnetta. Come la principessa volevo diventare, quella sì che era una donna forte e volitiva come un uomo.”) Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 61. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 94.

produced” by Sapienza’s writing.<sup>37</sup> This uncomfortable and/or frightening aspect of the books is related to the reader’s inability to either absolve or condemn Modesta for her actions—precisely the condition, I argue, that Sapienza intends the reader to experience: a state of unresolved and unresolvable tension, backed into a state of moral contradiction.<sup>38</sup>

Like Farnetti, Maria Teresa Maenza argues that female readers (and, I would argue, most readers) are likely to feel gratified at witnessing Modesta’s development and growth, including growth in self-love, throughout the novel. Maenza takes the stance that we are, as readers, implicated in the elimination of three important women in Modesta’s life, because Sapienza has us cheering for her since, in a symbolic reading, these women represent negative visions of women.<sup>39</sup> She concurs with Farnetti that, through Modesta, Sapienza creates a new female subject by eliminating the symbolic image of the mother who lets herself be subjugated to the

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<sup>37</sup> Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza’s Eccentric Interruptions,” 2.

<sup>38</sup> In a companion piece to Monica Farnetti’s article, Laura Fortini aims to interpret the “mother” murders from the perspective of the absence of male homicide(s) in *L’arte della gioia*. Fortini points out that Modesta does not murder any men in the book directly, as she does women; what happens to her father after Modesta’s act of arson is unclear, and all that remains of him (and is ever mentioned about him again) is his blue jacket: “...there is not a trace of the father’s body, of which only the blue velvet jacket is found: we will never know if he is dead or not, if he escaped the fire Modesta started to remove herself from her father’s erotic desire.” (“...non vi è traccia del corpo del padre, di cui si ritrova solo la giacca di velluto azzurro: non sapremo mai se esso sia morto o meno, se sia sfuggito all’incendio provocato da Modesta anche per sottrarsi al desiderio erotico del padre.”) The absence—or elimination—of a father figure throughout the entire book is significant, according to Fortini, since Sapienza uses not only the homicide of women, but the lack of homicide of men to subvert the patriarchal symbolic order: “Because there is a homicide, this effectively requires that there be a body, a subject/object that one kills; while here we are confronted with something else, a lacking homicide because of the fact that there is nothing to kill, tradition by now, in Goliarda Sapienza’s perception [...] is without a body.” (“Perché vi sia omicidio occorre infatti che vi sia un corpo, un soggetto/oggetto che si uccide; mentre qui siamo di fronte ad altro, a un omicidio mancato per il fatto che non vi è niente da uccidere, essendo la tradizione ormai, nella percezione di Goliarda Sapienza [...] senza corpo.”) Fortini in Farnetti, ed., “‘L’arte della gioia’ e il genio dell’omicidio mancato,” *Appassionata Sapienza*, 101-126. According to Fortini, the missing male body of Modesta’s father symbolizes the erased patriarchal body in Sapienza’s work and the concomitant erasure of a male-dominated tradition. This interpretation would work well if dominant men were entirely absent from the book; however, the story begins with Modesta’s father raping her with a very literal, present body. Thus, the male-dominated tradition in *L’arte della gioia* may literally go up in smoke thanks to Modesta’s defensive arson, but it has first violated and forcefully shaped the female subject.

<sup>39</sup> As previously quoted: “Reading *The Art of Joy* it is possible to ‘feel,’ through Modesta, the fullness of being a woman and, even being present for the ‘elimination’ of three important women for her, we have not judged her crimes as bad. Because we were cheering for her.” (“Leggendo *L’arte della gioia* è possibile ‘sentire’, attraverso Modesta, la pienezza di essere donna e, pur assistendo alla ‘eliminazione’ di tre donne importanti per lei stessa, non abbiamo giudicato male i suoi crimini. Poiché facevamo il tifo per lei.”) Maenza in Providenti, ed., “*Quel sogno d’essere*,” 244.

patriarchal system: Mother Leonora has “renounced her feminine essence and has decided that Modesta’s destiny will take place within the parameters of the religious system and symbolic order.”<sup>40</sup> Likewise, even though Princess Gaia is not a part of the religious system, Maenza points out that she tries to use her authority in a way that Modesta does not approve of to prohibit the family and workers who live in the villa from leaving after the war (when the world outside the estate is no longer dangerous), thereby limiting Modesta’s freedom. This new female subject, importantly, has the freedom to *act* and, in acting, to experience full humanity and the right to the pursuit of happiness. What Maenza does not point out, however, is that in acting to maintain and protect their own power, and thus their own personal freedom (by, respectively, ruling an abbey as the Mother Superior and maintaining control over an estate during and after a time of war), Mother Leonora and Princess Gaia are actually role models for Modesta’s own path of self-creation and empowerment.

In the discussion of Modesta’s murders, Maenza introduces the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, or joy, as a way to understand (if not pardon) the matricides, arguing that Modesta experiences a feeling of joy in her decision to murder Mother Leonora. Hannah Arendt describes how, in some ancient Greek philosophy, *eudaimonia* was understood as a state of felicity reached by means of mastering necessity (and therefore obtaining freedom), through violence if necessary, particularly in the private sphere; therefore, any act of violence that leads toward freedom was a pre-political act of necessity in order to live a free life.<sup>41</sup> Maenza connects this concept to *L’arte della gioia*, arguing that in order for Modesta to reach her own state of

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<sup>40</sup> “ha rinunciato alla sua essenza femminile e ha già deciso che il destino di Modesta si svolgerà nei parametri del Sistema religioso e dell’ordine simbolico.” Ibid., 258.

<sup>41</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 30.

*eudaimonia*, she first must take these violent actions on behalf of the ultimate goal of freedom.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in Maenza's view, these murders create a new female subject and help Modesta reach the joy, or *eudaimonia*, of freedom, elucidating the importance of the novel's title, *The Art of Joy*. However, if we are to interpret these murderous acts as necessary in order to arrive at *eudaimonia*, or joy, the art of joy must then, uncomfortably, also be considered the art of murder.

While these critics rightly identify Modesta's murders as significant, symbolically necessary acts on the protagonist's path to freedom and the creation of a new autonomous female subject, less attention has been paid to a realistic interpretation of the characters, and the tension that such an interpretation creates for the reader who is both cheering for Modesta and aghast at her actions. Furthermore, the puzzling dissonance between these egregious acts and their sometimes evenhanded representation has not been fully addressed. In the next section, a close reading with attention to the specific narrative techniques used in the scenes of transgression will help us to understand how and why Sapienza destabilizes the reader's interpretive experience.

Whereas Modesta unequivocally commits these murders, a kind of detachment from them is created by the fact that she does not use direct physical violence and is actually not even present in the same room or space with the victims at the time of their deaths. The murders are not presented in specific or gory detail, and, most importantly, they all happen "off stage." While Sapienza at times uses more pointed language to describe (sometimes lesser) transgressions, the description of murder actually disappears from the narrative, creating a break

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<sup>42</sup> Maenza in Providenti, ed., "*Quel sogno d'essere*," 259. Maenza refers to Hannah Arendt's description of *eudaimonia* in *The Human Condition*: "Because all human beings are subject to necessity, they are entitled to violence toward others; violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world." Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 30. She notes that Angelo Pellegrino was the first person who mentioned this concept to her many years ago.

in the action and a distinct lacuna in the text. These murders become narrative holes, unrepresented and, therefore, linguistically uninterpretable.

So indirect is the narration of the first murder, in fact, that it is actually unclear whether the murder was intentional or not. At nine years old, Modesta is raped by a man claiming to be her father, an experience the narrator describes in detail, but the escape from which (via arson) is only hinted at metaphorically. During the rape, Modesta conjures up oneiric memories of being in the fields of rye around her home, the natural images initially providing a peaceful escape from the traumatic experience. The rye becomes very dry in certain seasons, subject to wildfires, and, as Modesta is raped, she recalls a specific memory of being caught in the burning field, climbing up a fig tree, and being saved by Tuzzu, the neighbor boy. These images of another traumatic experience flash through Modesta's mind as her body experiences the pain of rape, and the narrator connects the two, allowing the reader to follow the nine-year-old's thought process from the memory of white boulders (the lumps and curves of her father's body parts) in the stream bed during drought season and the dry fields of rye (his blond body and pubic hair) to fire (the pain of rape and subsequent arson):

The rocks beside me were now slowly moving. He was burning and the wispy hair, blond as a field of rye, rose from his wrists to his shoulders. The rye was on fire. When had it been? We were gathering mulberries, Mama and I, and Tina was laughing under the fig tree, when a chunk of that stationary sun high above fell, and like a fiery serpent began slithering and burning everything around it. The blond hair was burning, the poppies, the clothes that Mama had hung out to dry, Tina's skirts...the smoke from that scorched hair was choking me too.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "Le rocce vicino a me si muovevano ora lentamente. Scottava e la peluria leggera e bionda come un prato di segala saliva dai polsi alle spalle. La segala incendiava. Quando era stato? Con la mamma raccoglievamo ceusa e Tina rideva sotto l'albero di fico quando un pezzo di quel sole alto e immobile era caduto e come un serpente di fuoco aveva cominciato a scivolare bruciando tutto intorno. Bruciavano i peli biondi, i papaveri, i panni che la mamma aveva steso ad asciugare, le gonne di Tina, il fumo di quei peli bruciati soffocava anche me." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 13-14. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 16.

This memory of fire in the fields while Modesta is being raped literally and metaphorically sparks the idea that another fire would provide an escape from her rapist. During the moment of the rape, the narrative switches to third person (an effect that I examine in chapter two in connection with the influence of the theater on Sapienza's work), creating a shift in perspective from the child's viewpoint to that of a third-party witness. This has the effect of catching the reader off-guard: for an instant, one thinks that perhaps the subject has changed and Modesta is speaking about someone else, but because of the connection to the previous fire Modesta experienced, we understand quickly that "she" still refers to the child that we have been following: "The blond rye was burning and the smoky serpent was strangling her throat, she had to get away... She had to run and climb the fig tree and scream like that time ..."<sup>44</sup> Placing us outside the child's perspective allows us to see what is happening from an "objective" (for the purposes of the narrative) standpoint, but at the same time it is symptomatic of an episode of dissociation, a protective self-detachment in reaction to trauma.<sup>45</sup> In order to create this effect, Sapienza uses free indirect discourse: Modesta's thoughts and words are represented within a diegetic narrative, though without the use of quotation marks, blurring the lines between an omniscient narrator and the protagonist.<sup>46</sup> Free indirect discourse also has the effect of creating

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<sup>44</sup> "La segala bionda bruciava e il serpente di fumo strangolava la gola, doveva scappare... Doveva scappare e arrampicarsi sul fico e gridare come quella volta..." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 14. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> If one were to analyze the character of Modesta from a psychological perspective, the disassociation triggered in the moment of this childhood trauma could be read as continuing throughout the subsequent murders, causing a depersonalized or detached tone and creating lacunae or gaps in memory and narrative. There are indeed lacunae in the narrative around the moments of death: Modesta is so exhausted that she sleeps through Mother Leonora's death, only waking up after others have collected the abbess's body and when the wake is about to begin. During Gaia's death, Modesta steps out of the room and, instead of getting the pills Gaia needs from the doctor, simply waits until Gaia dies to go back in. However, Modesta is not simply a traumatized narrator who removes herself from all emotional encounters, as she develops multiple intimate relationships in her search for personal, intellectual, and sexual joy throughout the book.

<sup>46</sup> As Cesare Segre explains: "The most typical case of this ambivalence between narration and discourse is so-called free indirect discourse, identified by Bally (1912) and much used in modern narration. Free indirect discourse differs

sympathy for the protagonist.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, leading up to the moment of the arson and murders, the diegetic narration becomes infiltrated with the naïve voice of a nine-year-old, making the rape seem even more egregious:

She had to get away, but the rock had slowly rolled over on her, crushing her against the wooden planks of the big bed, and the flames were rising. [...] That man wasn't holding her under his arm, wasn't caressing her like Tuzzu did. Instead, he roughly spread her legs and stuck something hard and cutting in the hole where the pee-pee comes out. He must have taken the kitchen knife and wanted to cut her up like Mama quartered the lamb with Tuzzu's help at Easter. The blade was entering the lamb's quivering thighs – the big hand sank into the blood to divide, split apart – and she would be left there on the planks of the bed, torn to pieces.<sup>48</sup>

It is important to remind ourselves that the flames the narrator refers to relate to her memory of the previous fire she experienced, there being no fire (as of yet) in her current physical situation, though the pain and fear associated with the rape constitute a metaphorical burning. In the third-person narration we still hear the voice of the young Modesta, embedded directly in the narrative, with words that a child would use (“the hole where the pee-pee comes out”) and reasoning to try to understand this brutal act based on the limited life experiences of a child (“He must have taken the kitchen knife ... like Mama quartered the lamb”).

Although Modesta is certainly not an entirely innocent child (she has already had oral sex performed on her by Tuzzu, as she alludes to), Sapienza contrasts the innocence of the childlike

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from indirect speech because there are no *verba dicendi*; it differs from direct speech because the author of the statements is not referred to by means of a first person pronoun but by a third person pronoun and because, for the most part, the verbs used are not in the present tense.” Cesare Segre, *Introduction to the Analysis of the Literary Text*, trans. John Meddemmen (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 151-152.

<sup>47</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo eretico* (Milano: Garzanti, 1972), 87.

<sup>48</sup> “Doveva scappare, ma la roccia lentamente si era arrovesciata su di lei e la schiacciava alle tavole del letto grande e il fuoco saliva. [...] Quell'uomo non la teneva sotto l'ascella, non l'accarezzava come Tuzzu, ma le tirava le gambe e le infilava, nel buco dove esce la pipì, qualcosa di duro che tagliava. Doveva aver preso il coltello di cucina e la voleva squartare come a Pasqua la mamma squartava con l'aiuto di Tuzzu l'agnello. Entrava la lama fra le cosce tremanti dell'agnello – la mano grande affondava nel sangue per dividere, separare – e lei sarebbe rimasta lì sulle tavole del letto, a pezzi.” Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 14. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 17.

voice that is interspersed with the narrator's voice in this section and the imagery of the metaphorical sacrificial lamb with the brutality of the rape of a little girl. The protagonist realizes that if she wants to avoid continuing to be raped by her father she has to escape, but her mother and sister are locked in the bathroom to be out of the way of the father during the rape, huddled together sleeping. Modesta wants to see if they are indeed holding each other in the bathroom (the fact that her mother only embraces Tina and not Modesta is a source of resentment for her), and she leans down to try to see underneath the door. The arson and murder of her family happen in a silent flash, echoing the silence and brilliant flash of narrative that Sapienza creates:

Picking up the lamp maybe you could see through the cracks. Nothing, you couldn't see anything... I have to wake them up, I have to wake them with the lamplight... All that is needed is to set the lamp down near the door and remove the glass that protects the flame because it, like the sun, already hits me on my forehead if I don't back up, and immediately it creeps swiftly along the parched wood. It hasn't rained for months.

Tuzzu had been wrong to save Tina from the fire that time. He had been wrong. He should have saved only me. But this time he wasn't there, and even if it meant dying for fear of those flames, that smoke that was nearly choking me, I would not call for help, or scream.<sup>49</sup>

The arson and subsequent murder by a nine-year-old of her mother and sister are narrated without much affect, in an even tone. Though Modesta does offer us her childish opinion about

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<sup>49</sup> "Prendendo il lume forse dalle fessure si poteva vedere. Niente, non si vedeva niente... Le devo svegliare, con la luce della lampada le devo svegliare... Basta posare la lampada vicino alla porta e togliere il vetro che protegge la fiamma che quella, come il sole, già mi spacca la fronte se non arretro, e subito sguscia rapida sul legno secco d'arsura. Erano mesi che non pioveva.

Tuzzu aveva fatto male a salvare Tina dal fuoco, allora. Aveva fatto male, solo me doveva salvare. Ma questa volta lui non era lì, e io anche a costo di morire dalla paura per quelle fiamme, per quel fumo che quasi mi strozzava, non avrei chiamato aiuto, né gridato." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 15. Translation mine. I have chosen not to use Anne Milano Appel's translation here, as I have otherwise done throughout this dissertation when quoting *L'arte della gioia*, in order to stay as close to the original Italian as possible. This quote moves from third person in the first two sentences to first person for the remainder of the description of the murders, which is also the remainder of the chapter.

her sister Tina's previous escape from fire (and lets us conclude that she won't escape from this one—her fiercely self-centered personality showing at a very young age), the language the narrator uses to describe the exact, decision-making moment is simple and objective, absent of malice in the moment the lamp's glass was drawn, or even a clear understanding that the arson and murder were committed on purpose. Modesta even initially implies that she wants to get their attention by instead waking them up with the lamplight. The section starts with verbs in the impersonal, "si poteva" and "non si vedeva," which translate to "one could" or "you could," and "one couldn't see" or "you couldn't see." This has the effect of both separating the action from Modesta, and also linguistically pulling in another subject to enact these actions in the mind's eye. This unidentified impersonal perspective shifts the subject outside of the narrator and allows the reader a moment in the narrator's shoes. The impersonal verbs and passive voice dominate when Sapienza describes the action that causes the arson and subsequent deaths, as the narrator implies what is done with the lamp—"All that is needed..." or "It is enough to..." ("Basta...")—so as to obscure whether the action was actually done or who did it. The reader cannot be sure that the fire was set on purpose and is not even sure that a fire was set until the subsequent mention of flames. The verb tense in the Italian becomes even more stripped-down: Sapienza writes "posare" (set down) and "togliere" (remove) in the infinitive, removing the complexity, but also the detail, of conjugation. One can assume from the previous sentence that the action is being committed by the first person, but linguistically the infinitive sounds passive, or even instructive (the infinitive also being used as imperative to give commands in Italian) to another subject which, in this case, would be the only other subject present, the reader.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Anna Toscano notes Sapienza's use of the infinitive in the author's poetry as well, which she says lends it a sense of the eternal: "Each one of her lyrics presents an almost complete absence of adjectives, a predilection for infinitive verbs that lend a flavor of eternity to [her] poetry..." ("Ogni sua lirica presenta una assenza quasi totale di aggettivi,

Likewise, Sapienza effects a sort of sensory deprivation for Modesta and the reader simultaneously: the flame that quickly becomes an almost dazzlingly bright light (“like the sun”) together with the smoke occludes any visual imagery in this scene, effectively “blinding” the reader.<sup>51</sup> Finally, in order for Modesta’s escape to be successful, she must not make any noise. The last sentence of the chapter therefore opens into an auditory silence for the reader as well: the narrator states, “I would not call for help, or scream.” The chapter then ends, the narrator falling silent, until the next chapter starts, well after Modesta’s mother and sister are dead and she has now been taken in by nuns, without any conclusion drawn about how and why these murders took place on the part of the narrator or protagonist. Thus, Sapienza marshals a neutral, seemingly objective tone, a narrative lacuna (by removing the moment of death and its aftermath), the determined avoidance of melodrama, and sensory deprivation to control the narrative space in such a way as to force readers to draw their own conclusions and construct their own interpretations. Or perhaps more to the point, to *not* draw conclusions and *not* construct interpretations, leaving us in a discomfiting space somewhere between the role of actor and of observer.

This murder and its unfazed narration have significant thematic and stylistic precursors, unexplored by critics heretofore, in *Destino coatto*, a collection of Sapienza’s short stories, many indeed “micro-stories,” first published posthumously in 2002. The stories were written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Pellegrino points out that, “*Destino coatto* can be considered an incunabulum [or antecedent] of Sapienza’s literary prose; with it an attentive reader can observe

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una predilezione per verbi all’infinito che danno un sapore di eternità alla poesia...”) Toscano in Sapienza, *Ancestrale*, 185.

<sup>51</sup> Anna Toscano also notes the use of temporal markers in Sapienza’s poetry, particularly with the use of the imagery of contrast between light and dark: “The contrast [between] light/dark, visible/invisible makes a continuing demarcation of time.” (“A fare da continuo demarcatore del tempo è il contrasto luce/buio, visibile/invisibile.”) Toscano in Sapienza, *Ancestrale*, 185-186.

the linguistic development traversed before arriving at her major works...”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, in much of the book *Sapienza* seems to be testing the narrative technique of pairing neutral language with a shocking or dramatic back story that is not presented directly, so that readers must piece together a great deal on their own. This has the effect of surprising and then abandoning the reader in a place of moral ambiguity with no clear answers provided by the narrator. I believe this reflects *Sapienza*’s resistance to ideological absolutism, and her devotion in its stead to an anti-ideology of uncertainty, skepticism, and contingency.

The sixth story in the collection, which begins with “Sono nato a Padova,” or “I was born in Padua,” (the stories are not numbered or titled), provides an example. Even in the short space of the thirteen sentences that compose this micro-narrative, *Sapienza* manages to create a narrator whom we at first take at face value, but whose reliability we then begin to question. The narrator begins with a benign description of his family origins: “I was born in Padua to an upstanding family. I’m the youngest of seven brothers, all males. My father was a judge and my mother played the piano. My brothers all have degrees: one is a doctor, one a lawyer, one a professor.”<sup>53</sup> Given this straightforward and even banal beginning, we expect the narrator is most likely also some sort of professional. Indeed, the very banality and normality of the narrative voice lead us to trust him as he goes on to tell the story: “I liked to study, a lot, but at a certain point I had to count my steps, on the street, at home, at school, at friends’ houses. I have completed one million eight hundred thousand steps. A nice amount, I don’t say it’s not, but I

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<sup>52</sup> “*Destino coatto* può considerarsi un incunabolo della prosa letteraria della *Sapienza*, con esso il lettore attento può misurare il cammino linguistico percorso prima di approdare alle opere maggiori...” *Destino coatto*, v.

<sup>53</sup> “Sono nato a Padova da una famiglia molto per bene. Sono l’ultimo di sette fratelli. Tutti maschi. Mio padre era magistrato e mia madre suonava il pianoforte. I miei fratelli sono tutti laureati. Chi è medico, chi avvocato, chi professore.” Goliarda *Sapienza*, *Destino coatto* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011), 11.

don't walk much. Yesterday, for example, I only did two hundred."<sup>54</sup> With these next few sentences, as he goes on detailing the number of steps he has counted, the narrator strikes the reader as somewhat peculiar or obsessive-compulsive, but mostly, boring. However, as the story finishes, the narrator inadvertently reveals an unexpected twist: "But what can you do! It was raining and they didn't let me go out in the courtyard. And now, in a room and, even worse, a tiny room, tell me, is it possible to accumulate more than two hundred a day?"<sup>55</sup> What catches the reader off guard is both the revelation that the narrator is actually imprisoned, and the fact that he reveals it in a way that does not focus on the imprisonment, as if that were expected or normal or, at least, not part of the story he is telling. The narrator's focus instead is on the banal step-counting, even though the reader immediately zeroes in on the telling phrase, "they didn't let me go out in the courtyard," which hints at a whole other untold story (of how the narrator became imprisoned). Why is he imprisoned? Is he the one at fault or are his captors at fault (i.e., could he be a prisoner of war, or is he in a psychiatric hospital, or a prison)? By the end of the micro-story, we as readers judge the narrator "from an upstanding family" of doctors and lawyers differently than we did at the beginning, realizing that we cannot necessarily trust what he says.

This story previews Sapienza's later technique of inserting a lacuna in a narrative, a missing piece that is situated outside of the text in the form of some kind of transgressive act that has occurred off stage, in this case the reason for the narrator's incarceration or confinement. It also previews the technique of unsettling the reader, prompting us to question what we have just

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<sup>54</sup> A me piaceva studiare, molto, ma a un certo punto ho dovuto contare i miei passi, per la strada, in casa, a scuola, dagli amici. Sono arrivato a un milione e ottocentomila passi. Una bella somma, non dico di no, ma cammino poco. Ieri, per esempio, ne ho fatti solo duecento." Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> "Ma che si può fare! Pioveva e non mi hanno permesso di uscire in cortile. E ora, in una stanza e stretta per giunta, ditemi, si può accumularne più di duecento al giorno?" Ibid.

read, and forcing us to rethink and rejudge what we may have initially thought about the narrator and narrated events. It is, in short, an early exercise in depositing the reader in a space of moral irresolution and irresolvability. This is representative of Sapienza's later questioning of her own self in her autobiographies, and the forced uncertainty in *L'arte della gioia*. I argue that irresolvability becomes an affirmative position for Sapienza (not just a failure to take a position) as a stance against the ideological absolutism and the harmful consequences of fascist and communist ideologies pervasive throughout her particular childhood and in twentieth-century Italy.

Of particular interest for our purposes, on both thematic and narrative grounds, is the one-and-a-half-page story that begins with “Stava lì...” or, “She stayed there...” which constitutes a clear antecedent to the first murders that Modesta commits in *L'arte della gioia*. The story is written in the third person but is interspersed with the voice of the protagonist, granting us access to her thoughts. The scene begins with a family cooking: “She stayed there, with the sharpened knife, her mother had rubbed garlic on it so that it would sink more easily into the meat.”<sup>56</sup> We immediately recall the narrator in *L'arte della gioia* describing the butchering of lamb (“He must have taken the kitchen knife and wanted to cut her up like Mama quartered the lamb with Tuzzu's help at Easter. The blade was entering the lamb's quivering thighs...”<sup>57</sup>). The ominous image of the kitchen knife reappears: “The knife was there, covered in blood, the pieces of lamb already covered with flour, the oil was boiling, the hide on the balcony in the sun.”<sup>58</sup> The reader begins to suspect that perhaps there is more than just cooking going on after further description

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<sup>56</sup> “Stava lì, col coltello affilato, la madre ci aveva passato l'aglio perché affondasse meglio nella carne.” Sapienza, *Destino coatto*, 36.

<sup>57</sup> Doveva aver preso il coltello di cucina e la voleva squartare come a Pasqua la mamma squartava con l'aiuto di Tuzzu l'agnello. Entrava la lama fra le cosce tremanti dell'agnello...” Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 14. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> “Il coltello stava lì insanguinato, i pezzi di agnello già infarinati, l'olio bolliva, la pelle sul balcone al sole.” Sapienza, *Destino coatto*, 36.

of the knife's penetration of the meat, but the narrator only hints at what exactly took place: "And it did sink in, the blade, in the meat, without difficulty. Without difficulty into those large shoulders."<sup>59</sup> The term "shoulders" can certainly still refer to the lamb's body, but shortly thereafter, the narrator describes a father figure, much like that in *L'arte della gioia*: "'The giant' they called him. She called him 'papa' until she was twelve, and then she didn't address him anymore and with her friends said: 'The giant said'..."<sup>60</sup> The abrupt juxtaposition of the reference to "shoulders" (of a lamb or a human) with the description of the father figure suffuses the scene with a vague malevolence. The narrator does finally clarify, albeit tersely, what has happened: "They [the protagonist and her mother] hadn't said anything to each other. She had rubbed the garlic on the blade and had given it to her, then the lawyer holding the knife in his stomach had started laughing and had collapsed. A heap of clothes. An empty garment, piled on the floor, to wash."<sup>61</sup> As in *L'arte della gioia*, this protagonist connects the dead father figure with one piece of clothing: in the novel, the blue jacket, in this story, the garment heaped on the floor. There is also mention of a mother and sister, though in the short story they do not become collateral damage during the murder of the father. We also discover that the motive for the protagonist's murder of her father is the same as Modesta's: he has raped her:

"What did those men want? Because they wanted to make her say. She didn't have anything to say. She had killed him and that was it. They wanted her to say how she trembled when she saw him in the doorway, tall as the ceiling, calling her in his underwear. Or about that he had knocked and with a shoulder-shove had flung open the door. Or of that thing that knocked on her womb, now with the same fury of that voice behind the door."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Ed era affondato, la lama, nella carne, senza fatica. Senza fatica in quelle spalle grandi." *Destino coatto*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> "Il gigante lo chiamavano. Lei, fino a dodici anni, lo aveva chiamato papa, poi non lo aveva più chiamato e con le amiche diceva: 'Il gigante ha detto'..." Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> "Non si erano dette niente. Lei aveva passato l'aglio sulla lama e glielo aveva dato, poi l'avvocato tenendosi il coltello nella pancia si era messo a ridere ed era stramazato. Un mucchio di vestiti. Un vestito vuoto, ammucchiato sul pavimento, da lavare." Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> "Che volevano quegli uomini? Perché le volevano far dire. Lei non aveva niente da dire. Lo aveva ucciso e basta. Volevano che dicesse come tremava quando lo vedeva nel vano della porta, alto fino al soffitto, in mutande che la

The narrator only reveals at the end that the murderer-protagonist has been impregnated by her rapist-father. While the protagonist does not reveal any details to the police, except that she has killed him (unlike Modesta, who cunningly does not admit her murders to others in the narrative), her motives are revealed to the reader.

Beyond these thematic parallels, “Stava lì” and *L’arte della gioia* share a similar narrative approach to the representation of the murders. First of all, we are granted only glimpses of what has taken place—the bloody knife, the lamb, images of her father looming large—and the reader must “connect the dots” to figure out the full picture. The murder takes place in the lacunae or gaps in the narrative. Once again we have third person narration interspersed with free indirect discourse, which simultaneously allows for an external, limited perspective and snippets of the protagonist’s interior voice and thoughts. The sentence, “She killed him *and that was it*,” exemplifies this combination, the first phrase offering simple reportage and the second phrase suggesting the informal and subjective tone of the protagonist, who does not want to say anything else about what happened.<sup>63</sup> After the murder has taken place, the men (presumably police) question the protagonist, and, as in *L’arte della gioia*, the narrative jumps directly from the barely-reported events of the crime to police questioning, and includes nothing of the aftermath of the crime, leaving the reader with a sense of emotional and moral non-closure.

Returning to *L’arte della gioia*, the second instance of murder employs similar narrative techniques, but creates even more moral complexity and irresolution, in part because it is more carefully prepared and more explicitly motivated than the murder of Modesta’s biological

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chiamava. O di quella notte che aveva bussato e poi con una spallata aveva spalancato la porta. O di quel qualcosa che le bussava al ventre, ora con lo stesso furore di quella voce dietro la porta.” Sapienza, *Destino coatto*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> “Lo aveva ucciso *e basta*.” Italics mine. Ibid.

family, and most tellingly, because Modesta carries out the murder even though this time she is not physically in danger. Modesta develops a close relationship with Mother Leonora, the mother superior of a nearby abbey that takes her in once she is orphaned. As Modesta grows older it becomes clear that Mother Leonora will expect her to take vows and enter the sisterhood as well. Their relationship eventually grows tense because, at fifteen years old, Goliarda upsets Mother Leonora by pointing out her hypocrisy: Mother Leonora had scolded Modesta for caressing herself, but Modesta secretly observes Mother Leonora masturbating too.<sup>64</sup> This argument between the two sets off a chain of events in which Modesta tries to make amends, though she is irreparably disillusioned by the fact that Mother Leonora denies her own (sexual) nature. Additionally, Modesta finds out that Mother Leonora's last protégée became so repressed that she eventually jumped out of the window and killed herself. The convent that once seemed so vast, open, and full of new things to learn suddenly feels small; once Modesta has lost Mother Leonora's favor, all the nuns shun her: "It wasn't Mother Leonora I missed, but all the privileges and attention those women had heaped on me solely for fear of Mother Leonora. Indeed, she gave the orders."<sup>65</sup> This experience teaches Modesta the importance of being the one with power, and foreshadows (along with Mimmo the gardener referring to Modesta in this chapter with the term of endearment "principessa") the role that Modesta will take up in the coming years as an actual princess and the leader of her own estate. When Mother Leonora threatens to send Modesta to an orphanage where she will no longer have access to books or time for intellectual pursuits, Modesta cunningly commits a fake suicide, plunging

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<sup>64</sup> The fact that Sapienza writes female masturbation into her novel, not to mention by a nun, is quite remarkable and transgressive in its own way.

<sup>65</sup> "Non era madre Leonora che rimpiangevo, ma tutti i privilegi e le attenzioni che quelle donne mi avevano concesso solo per paura di madre Leonora. Infatti era lei la padrona." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 30. Translation by Anne Milano Appel. *The Art of Joy*, 41.

herself into the abbey's well. Though this has the desired effect of changing Mother Leonora's mind about sending Modesta away, she still refuses to spend time with Modesta, explaining, "My visits would only be an indulgence now that I see you are back on your feet."<sup>66</sup> It is exactly Leonora's denial of "indulgence," in effect a denial of self and sexuality, that leads Modesta to the epiphany that she hates Leonora, bringing her a subsequent joy (as in Maria Teresa Maenza's use of the term *eudaimonia*)<sup>67</sup>: "Unexpectedly, that feeling of hate—which they said was a sin—gave me a burst of joy so intense that I had to clench my fists and clamp my mouth shut to keep from singing and jumping up and down."<sup>68</sup> Modesta had forgotten her body during the months she was ostracized but now rediscovers herself through her own masturbation, her freedom and acceptance of her sexuality contrasting with Leonora's denial: "And now that I had rediscovered the intensity of my pleasure, I would never again surrender to the renunciation and humiliation that they preached so much."<sup>69</sup> Therefore, Modesta perceives her physical and mental freedom to be at stake, her sexuality and her very nature under threat by Mother Leonora.

Although Leonora is sick and may not live long anyway, Modesta does not want to take any chances; when she overhears Mimmo and Mother Leonora discussing the rusty balustrade on the roof where the nun uses her telescope, Modesta sets out that night to start sawing away at it so that the next time Mother Leonora goes up to observe the stars, she will fall. With this second murder, the narrator again uses the rather benign metaphor of fields of crops, which both acts as a refrain to the metaphor of rye fields in the first murder and, in this case, momentarily distracts

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<sup>66</sup> "Le mie visite non sarebbero che una mollezza adesso che ti vedo in piedi." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 41. Translation by Anne Milano Appel. *The Art of Joy*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> Maenza in Providenti, ed., "*Quel sogno d'essere*," 258.

<sup>68</sup> "Impensatamente quell'emozione di odio—che loro dicevano peccato—mi diede una sferzata di gioia così forte che dovetti stringere i pugni e le labbra per non mettermi a cantare e a correre." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 41. Translation by Anne Milano Appel. *The Art of Joy*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> "E ora che avevo ritrovato l'intensità del mio piacere, mai più mi sarei abbandonata alla rinuncia e all'umiliazione che loro tanto predicavano." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 42. Translation by Anne Milano Appel. *The Art of Joy*, 58.

from the harrowing nature of the act that the protagonist is committing. Once Modesta has readied the balustrade, the weather continues to be cloudy and rainy, meaning that Mother Leonora will not go up to the roof because the stars are not visible. While Mimmo is hoping that the weather clears up because otherwise, “all that good wheat and hay will be ruined if this continues,” Modesta hopes for the same thing, for a different reason: “I prayed along with Mimmo that the skies would clear, because otherwise my wheat and hay would rot as well if things went on like this.”<sup>70</sup> For her the “wheat and hay” symbolize the hard work she has undertaken over many nights to saw the balustrade in order to “reap the crop” of Mother Leonora’s death and, therefore, her own freedom, an inextricable part of which is the expression and exploration of her sexuality. This comparison is discomfiting, however, in the context of the book, as fields of grain symbolize freedom and sexuality here and earlier Modesta’s rape. Whereas with the rape, it was fire that damaged the crops, here it is rain that is threatening to make them rot. But in both cases outside forces threaten to arrest (whether by fire or rotting, rape or repression) a life form (the crop and Modesta) that is in the process of growing and developing. While in this instance, Modesta explains some of her motive for murder, that explanation falls far short of resolving the reader’s dilemma because here, as in much of Sapienza’s work, the reader is cast into a dual position, that of accomplice or abettor (insofar as we identify and root for Modesta) and that of a, most likely appalled, outside observer. Modesta avoids the funeral and burial of Mother Leonora by taking sleeping pills, and is quickly forced to pack up and move out of the abbey to a destination planned for by Mother Leonora (when she

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<sup>70</sup> “Tutto quel ben di Dio di frumento e di fieno andranno in malora se continua così.” “Con Mimmo pregavo anch’io che venisse il sereno, perché anche il mio grano sarebbe andato in malora e il fieno marcito se continuava così.” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 46. Translation by Anne Milano Appel. *The Art of Joy*, 66.

was alive). There is no narrative summary of this murder, the death, and the aftermath, and the reader is left once again without closure and without emotional or moral resolution.

Ultimately, readers of *Sapienza* are forced into an uncomfortable position of contingency and indeterminacy, a predicament that is solved by reading Modesta's murders as purely symbolic acts. By removing any moral authority from the narrating voice surrounding these acts, *Sapienza* forces readers to actively engage with the nature of lived reality as itself morally unresolved and inconclusive; we are put not only in the position of questioning, but the fundamentally human position of having our questions—even and especially about the most egregious human acts—remain unanswered.

*Sapienza*'s retreat from and refusal of moral or political absolutes, political correctness and totalizing or totalitarian systems is best understood against the backdrop of her own upbringing, both within her biological family and in the larger political and social context of her time. That environment rendered a stance of moral irresolution, no matter how destabilizing and untethered, still preferable to a position of contrived ideological certitudes. The space of ambiguity that she creates is therefore as much a protest against the counter-ideologies of atheism and communism as it is against the reigning ideologies of Catholicism, fascism and capitalism. *Sapienza*'s rejection of ideological absolutisms of any kind has the effect of leaving the reader and individual without guidance and radically exposed—or, in other words, in a place of irresolvable freedom. Let us return to Rebecca West's highly pertinent description of minimalism: "...minimalist preferences regarding philosophical thought, history, and morality do not so much lack political resonance as they challenge 'strong' political and ideological discourses by obliquely putting into doubt the foundational bases of any and all master

narratives, no matter in which realm they are deployed.”<sup>71</sup> The effect of Sapienza’s transgressive narratives is precisely to call into doubt the foundational bases of “all master narratives,” the master narratives of culture, religion, morality, literature, and society, and the master narrative of life itself.

As we contemplate the various forms of transgression in Sapienza’s work, we cannot ignore the literary transgression involved in her playing with, and in some cases, inverting, the master narrative of Italy, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.<sup>72</sup> While Sapienza creates a world where even the most mortal or cardinal of sins is not judged, determined, or resolved, Dante may well be one of the most morally determined and deterministic of writers (in the sense that he creates a whole universe—though itself not free of ambiguity—based on unyielding moral categories to which he assigns corresponding judgments). Sapienza not only alludes to “the Poet” and his magnum opus, but quotes his work throughout her novel. For example, in order to exempt herself from holding vigil for Mother Leonora, Modesta alludes to Canto V of the *Inferno* in a parodic or facetious spirit, using Dante’s genuine emotional reaction as inspiration for her own spurious one: “*E caddi come corpo morto cade*, I fell like a dead body falls, as the Poet and master of life

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<sup>71</sup> West, *Gianni Celati*, 75.

<sup>72</sup> Laura Fortini also points out Sapienza’s nod to Italian literary tradition with regard to her ninety-five chapters and 101 plot descriptions in her index in *L’arte della gioia*: “And if the ninety-five chapters that make up *L’arte della gioia* refer, with a deliberately imperfect tension, to the number 100 that the [literary] tradition reserves for the perfection that is sought after and represented by works like Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the *Decameron* itself, the number of titles corresponds instead to 101: with a variance that evidences how the novel looks to tradition with a repositioning ability that works for progressive departures, seemingly imperceptible and essentially poking fun, enough to evoke a smirking Goliarda Sapienza capable of playing hide and seek with the formal apparatus of literary tradition (with its formal apparatus and *not*, mind you, with its substance).” (“E se i novantacinque capitoli di cui si compone *L’arte della gioia* rimandano, con una tensione volutamente imperfetta, al numero 100 che la tradizione consegna alla perfezione ambita e rappresentata da opere come la *Commedia* di Dante e il *Decameron* stesso, il numero dei titoli corrisponde invece di fatto a 101: con uno scarto di evidenza come il romanzo guardi alla tradizione con una capacità di spostamento che lavora per allontanamenti progressivi, apparentemente impercettibili e sostanzialmente irridenti, tanto da evocare il sorriso di Goliarda Sapienza capace di giocare a nascondino con l’apparato formale della tradizione letteraria (col suo apparato formale e *non*, si badi, con la sua sostanza).”) Fortini in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 113. Monica Farnetti draws parallels between Dante’s inability to either condemn or absolve Francesca da Rimini in *Inferno* Canto V of the *Divine Comedy*, and the way that we as readers can neither condemn nor absolve Modesta. Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 99-100.

says.”<sup>73</sup> While Dante’s symbolic death here is prompted by his sympathetic reaction to Francesca da Rimini’s story of sin, his fall imitating Francesca’s surrender to passion, a “surrender” to passion is actually Modesta’s life goal, which she emphatically does not see as sinful—exemplifying the essential subversiveness of Sapienza’s invocations of Dante.

This subversive intent is apparent in Sapienza’s substitution of Dante’s former love and guide, the lady Beatrice, with her own Beatrice, her adopted sister and lover, Beatrice Brandiforti, who is named for Dante’s Beatrice, but is distinguished from the original by imperfection: “My Beatrice wasn’t perfect like the poet’s inspiration: she limped.”<sup>74</sup> She initially acts as a guide to Modesta when she moves to the villa: “Listen to Beatrice. Maybe, by following her voice—just like the poet—I could discover a way out of that jungle of silks, marble, allure and riches. She looked just like Doré’s Beatrice...”<sup>75</sup> She also acts as her lover; Beatrice teaches Modesta how to love (and make love) in a way that she has never experienced before, recalling the final lines of the *Divine Comedy* in *Paradiso*: “Surrendering to her, I left behind that inferno of qualms and bands and lava walls. The convent receded when I stared into her eyes. It collapsed behind me and I could see the stars again. Was that what paradise was: love? I didn’t know what that word meant: ‘the Love that moves the sun and the other stars’.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “E caddi come corpo morto cade, dice il poeta e maestro di vita.” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 47. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 66.

<sup>74</sup> “...la mia Beatrice non era perfetta come quella del poeta, zoppicava.” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 59. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 84. Though Dante’s Beatrice does not limp, in the first canto of *Inferno* Dante pays attention to the way his own feet move, describing the beginning of his journey following Virgil as the right initiating foot climbing up the hill, followed by the left, “halted,” “lower” foot. Martinez and Durling explain that it was said the right foot represented intellect and is always the leader, while the left foot represents will (and desire), and always lags behind, reflecting “the laming wound in man’s nature inflicted by Adam’s Fall.” See Robert M. Durling, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Volume I: Inferno* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35. Sapienza’s Beatrice both represents and disrupts this construct with her limp through her purposeful prioritization of desire.

<sup>75</sup> “Ascoltare Beatrice. Forse, seguendo la sua voce—proprio come il poeta—avrei potuto scorgere la via per uscire da quella selva di sete, marmi, sorrisi e ori. E sembrava proprio la Beatrice del Doré...” Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, 61. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 87.

<sup>76</sup> “Abbandonandomi a lei, uscivo da quell’inferno di dubbi e bende e muri di lava. Il convento s’allontanava quando la fissavo negli occhi, sprofondava dietro di me e rivedevo le stelle. Che fosse quello il paradiso, l’amore? Non

We can see here that Sapienza's use of Dante goes beyond simply quoting him, or even satirizing him, to drawing larger structural parallels between the *Divine Comedy* and the earthly version of paradise she creates (and the inferno she repudiates) on behalf of the new female subject. Part of Dante's journey is a journey to regain freedom (from sin) and, as part of that, a deeper understanding of "libero arbitrio," or free will; Modesta is also on a path to discovering her freedom and the meaning and magnitude of her free will. Structurally, Modesta must make her own journey through hell (the poverty she is born into in the mud-filled and—literally burning—desolate Sicilian countryside at the beginning of the book), purgatory (the abbey she is sent to, a garden-filled and walled space; pleasant but still punitive and restricted), and paradise (the freedom of living in her own villa and seeing the light of love as an independent, experienced woman). However, Modesta does not travel on an allegorical journey toward God. Instead of Dante's empyrean (the final destination in his journey and the light-filled residence of God) that awaits the pilgrim at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, at the end of *L'arte della gioia*, Sapienza audaciously represents Modesta's final, illuminating epiphany (so intense that ironically she imagines it is what death could be) as the love she feels in the moment of orgasm as a woman now in her sixties.

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sapevo cosa significasse quella parola: 'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle'." Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, 80. Translation by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, 114.

## CONCLUSION

Sapienza engaged in a complicated relationship with almost all “master narratives” and ideologies she encountered, and particularly the two with which she most explicitly engages in her work, communism and feminism. Her stance, at times, seems to oscillate between acceptance and repudiation. For example, Sapienza herself grew up in a communist family and she represents the protagonist of *L'arte della gioia*, Modesta, as an important player in the communist movement, but one who then becomes disillusioned with its misogynistic practices. Sapienza also refers to the “violent lie of communism” in her personal notebooks.<sup>1</sup> She makes statements that can be read as critiques of separatist Italian feminist movements<sup>2</sup> while exploring artistically and formally what the very structures of sexual difference and entrustment would look like if enacted (perhaps because she maintains that women were the major focus of her research).<sup>3</sup> In the foreword to *L'arte della gioia*, Angelo Pellegrino writes that Sapienza,

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<sup>1</sup> Sapienza particularly describes disillusionment with communism in practice when she saw how destitute Russia was during her travels there. Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 51, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Ross describes Sapienza thusly: “In her view, it seems that separatism weakens both women and men by emphasizing the differences between them. She declares that she has taken a stand against such feminists.” Ross, “Goliarda Sapienza’s Eccentric Interruptions,” 14.

<sup>3</sup> Sapienza describes, partially sarcastically, partially honestly, what the female cultural revolution should have “taught” women: “At least during the cultural revolution of women, that, as we knew, should have brought us to understand that woman is exactly – good and bad – the same as man, and if she wants to remain a beautiful woman she must increase her culture [that was] learned when she was a slave. Slavery always teaches, even during the violent lie of communism.” (“Almeno nella rivoluzione culturale delle donne, che come sapevamo ci avrebbe portato a capire che la donna è esattamente – nel bene e nel male – uguale all’uomo, e se vuole restare donna bella deve accrescere la sua cultura, imparata quando era schiava. La schiavitù insegna sempre, anche nella menzogna violenta del comunismo.”) Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 145. As quoted in chapter three of this dissertation, Sapienza describes women thusly: “Women – as you know – are my planet and my research, my only ‘(political) party’ and maybe, besides friendship, my only purpose in life.” (“Le donne – come tu sai – sono il mio pianeta e la mia ricerca, il mio

“described herself as an ideological writer, clearly doing herself an injustice.”<sup>4</sup> However, at the same time, throughout her notebooks, she consistently fights against political systems and dogma of any kind, referring to the “fucked god of ideology” and writing about how “ideology propagates cadavers.”<sup>5</sup>

What is consistent, therefore, is that Sapienza’s writing continually resists and subverts traditional ideological agendas and creates in their stead purposeful spaces of doubt. If she is an “ideological writer,” as Pellegrino states, hers is an anti-ideology of contradictions, contingency and uncertainty. The spaces and worlds she creates are inconclusive and unresolved, as everything can be reconsidered, looked at in different ways, doubted, tested, and contradicted. Sapienza reminds herself in her notebooks to “always abide by the certainties of doubt,”<sup>6</sup> and writes, “... I return to the ancient concept that nothing is true but everything is project, dream. [...] Only in doubt there is research.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Sapienza’s ideology consists of breaking down the boundaries of a black and white view of existence into a vision of the world that allows for immense grey spaces of irresolution. Although she investigates a variety of stances with regard to politics and life, her constancy lies in doubt.

As demonstrated in this dissertation, Sapienza rejects definitive life stories in favor of an “autobiography of contradictions.” Throughout her multiple autobiographical novels, she questions the reliability and truthfulness of memory, developing non-chronological narratives

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unico ‘partito’ e forse, oltre all’amicizia, il mio unico scopo nella vita.”) Pellegrino in Farnetti, ed., *Appassionata Sapienza*, 86.

<sup>4</sup> “si definiva infatti scrittrice ideologica facendosi chiaramente torto.” Pellegrino in Sapienza, *L’arte della gioia*, x. Translated by Anne Milano Appel, *The Art of Joy*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 151 and Providenti, *La porta è aperta*, 165.

<sup>6</sup> “Be careful Goliarda, always abide by the certainties of doubt...” (“Attenta Goliarda, attieniti sempre alle certezze del dubbio...”) Sapienza, *Il vizio*, 203.

<sup>7</sup> “... torno all’antica concezione che niente è vero ma tutto è progetto, sogno. [...] Solo nel dubbio c’è ricerca.” Ibid., 93.

and using techniques such as repetition in her struggle to reconstruct the past. She dismisses the idea that a definitive perspective on one's own existence is available, perhaps even that it is desirable. Her autobiographical novels not only represent the self as relational with respect to others, but at times, in the relationships she represents, she erases the boundary between self and other by morphing the two through the assimilated/assimilating self. This boundary-less, radically unconventional depiction of self constitutes her most unique contribution to twentieth century autobiography. The construction and subsequent transgression or erasure of the boundaries (in this case, of one's identity) recurs throughout Sapienza's work, both thematically and formally, and this indefinite view of a life story, both because of the non-chronology of its events and the fluctuating boundaries of the autobiographical subject, aligns with Sapienza's evocation of the impossibility of certainty and the irresolution of life.

Theater is the natural ally of this worldview, in its centralizing of competing limited perspectives (as opposed to an omniscient narrator) and its engagement with the presence of a reader/audience. I have aimed to show how Sapienza's distinctive narrative style (e.g., the abrupt shifts from first- to third-person and the absence of narrative voice) is indebted to a theatrical model of writing and oral performance. Moreover, Sapienza's narratives most often play out against the backdrop of limited physical spaces that resemble theatrical scenes and settings, as well as the physical space of the stage itself. Finally, theater, acting, and performance comprise recurring thematic elements throughout her novels and in the lives of her characters, assuming different and sometimes contradictory meanings from one book to the next. Throughout these various permutations, Sapienza ultimately makes theater a crucible for the creation, testing, and deconstruction of identity and the life story, as she does with the autobiographical form.

The spatial confinement that often forms the setting for Sapienza's works is a provocative starting point for further reflection on the effect of women's relationships within those enclosed spaces. Contrary to the historical and patriarchal vision of the private sphere as a place of deprivation, Sapienza inverts and contradicts this paradigm by limiting her characters' movement to contained, demarcated settings where there are very few or no men. The spaces she creates allow for a freedom of exploration between women and, without men in the picture, women develop unique relationships with one another that mirror the late twentieth century Italian Feminism theories and practices of sexual difference, consciousness of self, and entrustment. Sapienza's female characters then go beyond the practices of Italian Feminism to ultimately transgress social norms and boundaries in an expression of Sapienza's own personal feminism.

Finally, the present work shows the function in Sapienza's oeuvre of the often remarked-upon acts of transgression which feature so prominently in her narratives. In particular, I show that a solely metaphorical or symbolic reading of Modesta's murders in *L'arte della gioia* removes the complexity and tension from these transgressions and decreases both the moral and narrative friction that I believe Sapienza purposefully creates. While I agree with critics who identify Modesta's murders as symbolically necessary acts on the protagonist's path to freedom and the creation of a new autonomous female subject, I have shown that a simultaneously realistic interpretation of the actions generates a new reading of these transgressions. The dissonance between the terrible acts and the neutral voice through which they are narrated forces the reader into a state of moral contradiction and unresolvable tension. In so doing, Sapienza challenges the possibility of any ideological certainty or absolutism, proposing instead a kind of freedom from the tyranny of abstract ideas and absolutes.

Although Sapienza's work is finally starting to receive the critical attention it merits, there is still so much to be explored about her narrative techniques, themes, influences, and style. Among the topics and themes that call for further research, those of gender, siblings, politics, psychoanalysis, religiosity and atheism, natural imagery, and the folk culture and myths of Sicily stand out. Further investigation into Sapienza's narrative techniques, language, syntax and setting structure will also certainly provide new insights into Sapienza's skill and singularity. Among Anglophone criticism, the first English-language collection of essays on Sapienza, *Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture*, was published in June 2016 and there is a forthcoming study on Sapienza by Alberica Bazzoni, entitled *Writing for Freedom: Body, Identity and Power in Goliarda Sapienza's Narrative*, to be published in 2017 as part of the Studies in Contemporary Women's Writing book series by editor Peter Lang.

In accordance with her allegiance to all things indefinite, Sapienza also resisted the finality of critics' pronouncements about her own or any author's work. She conceives of the critic as hungering for completeness and closure, even resentful of the mutability and lability of the artist's "creative cycle" and "life cycle":

The critic is not an oracle and needs to have all of the works of an artist available in order to be able to have the final say. For this reason, the acceptance of a writer or artist starts to occur when they are almost at the end of their creative cycle and life cycle. There's also the funny thing – let me joke – that only at the moment of death does the critic feel safe: finally, one says, I can study the entire opera of that Pain-in-the-Neck and see or understand something without that Pain-in-the-Neck coming out with a new work and confusing me with some new development.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Il critico non è un oracolo e necessita di avere davanti tutta l'opera di un artista per poter dire l'ultima parola. È per questo che la maggior parte delle adesioni verso uno scrittore o pittore cominciano ad arrivare quando questi è quasi al termine del suo ciclo vitale e creativo. C'è anche la cosa divertente – lasciatemi scherzare – che solo al momento della morte il critico si sente sicuro: finalmente, si dice, mi posso studiare tutta l'opera di quella o quel

This passage reveals an important motive behind Sapienza's resistance to absolutism in any form —i.e., that she equates life with change and contingency, and perhaps only death allows for finality and completion. The critic feels “safe” only when the living, developing artist is in the ground. Despite her own death in 1996, Sapienza still eludes the “final say,” as previously unpublished works continue to be published by Angelo Pellegrino, most recently in 2016. Although I certainly cannot claim to have the “final say” either, my aim has been to deepen critical analysis of Sapienza and to reveal her technical sophistication in order to do an understudied woman writer the justice of receiving more serious critical attention than she did in her lifetime, with the hope of inspiring continued discussion and further study.

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rompiscatole e vedere di capire qualcosa senza che quello – il rompiscatole o la rompiscatole – se ne esca con un nuovo lavoro che mi confonda con qualche novità!” Ibid., 135.

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