DONNA CON DONNA (WOMAN WITH WOMAN): REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE-FEMALE DESIRE IN EARLY MODERN ITALIAN LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to provide an in-depth and trans-genre analysis of depictions of love and desire between women in Italian literature between the end of the fourteenth and the first decades of the seventeenth centuries. One of its aspirations is to deconstruct and discredit the belief in the invisibility and impossibility of desire and affection between women in early modern Italian literature.

This thesis, therefore, argues that discourses on attraction and love between women are more frequent and multi-faceted than previously acknowledged. Furthermore, it demonstrates that writers use the motif of woman-woman love to provocatively engage with their audience for a variety of reasons (such as erotically titillating their voyeurism or provoking their laughter) as well as to convey a multiplicity of messages, spanning from criticism of social and religious moralism to the defence of women's dignity.

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INTRODUCTION.

INVISIBLE AND IMPOSSIBLE? LOVE AND DESIRE BETWEEN WOMEN IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

1. Introduction[1]

These days, the Italian Renaissance is undergoing a renaissance of its own. Besides official events, such as those marking the 500th anniversary of the death of beloved figures such as Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1516), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520), a plethora of cultural signals indicates a growing curiosity about what is commonly defined as the most artistically flourishing era in Italian history. Literary works, exhibitions, TV series and graphic novels delve into the lives of early modern Italian people, depicting what made them exceptional (such as their wealth, genius, beauty and exploits) as well as what made them more human and similar to us.

It is no surprise, then, that a new interest in love and desire between women in the early modern period has emerged in the arts and literature. For instance, Paul Verhoeven's forthcoming film film *Benedetta,* devoted to a same-sex female affair in a Tuscan convent, is highly anticipated.[2] Meanwhile, Simona Baldelli's novel *La vita a rovescio* (2016), based on the love story of Margherita and Caterina (cross-dressed as Giovanni), has received a good deal of media attention.[3] Although the two plots are inspired by historical early modern

[1] Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, I was not able to check some references in libraries. For the same reason, in some instances, I could only reference scholarly online essays and e-books which, unfortunately, are unpaginated.
[2] The trailer of the movie is available on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-31QJXV3iA [accessed 20 October 2021].
[3] The book has been positively received in Italy: see, for instance, Magone (2016) and Sortino (2016).

stories,[4] the exploration of *donna-con-donna* feelings and relationships (as they were sometimes called at the time) in early modern Italian culture and, in particular, literature is far from complete. This thesis, therefore, aims to provide an in-depth and trans-genre analysis of depictions of love and desire between women in Italian literature between the end of the fifteenth and the first decades of the seventeenth centuries. It also sets out to demonstrate how writers created queer spaces through a variety of literary genres to interrogate gender expectations and to map literary representations of queer experiences. Furthermore, it argues that writers use the motif of woman-woman[5] love to engage with their audience for a variety of reasons (to erotically titillate them as voyeurs, for example, or to make them laugh) as well as to convey a multiplicity of messages ranging from criticism of social and religious moralism to the defence of women's dignity.

Despite the fact that early modern society included a variety of different roles for women (from criminals to powerful rulers), fictional women involved in same-sex relationships seem to fall into a relatively limited number of categories. Most of them are *malmaritate* (unsatisfied wives) of the aristocracy and merchant classes, *malmonacate* (unhappy nuns), cross-dressed women warriors, nymphs (virgins consecrated to a deity), yet-to-be-married maidens or prostitutes. In my thesis I am particularly interested in analysing how these women are depicted in the texts, the stereotypes they convey or, vice versa, the alternative values they promote (this is especially true for proto-feminist heroines such as Maddalena Campiglia's Flori discussed in Chapter Four). My study, therefore, gives great consideration to several women authors (e.g. Campiglia, Lucrezia Marinelli and Moderata Fonte) who

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[4] Respectively, those of *Suor* Benedetta Carlini and Caterina Vizzani (discussed in this chapter).
[5] In this thesis, I will employ the words 'topos', 'motif' and 'trope' as synonyms to refer to 'a variably expressible literary commonplace' (Most and Conte, 2016). On these topics see at a minimum Freedman (1971) and Avalle (1995).

might be ascribed to what critics such as Constance Jordan (1990) and Sarah Gwyneth Ross (2009) have called proto-feminism or Renaissance feminism[6] and whose references to female-female bonds have frequently been overlooked. Proto-feminists 'did not yet argue for women's political equality, but they represented and often advocated women's intellectual equality as they contributed to the central debates of the era, especially the debate on women' (Ross, 2009, p. 3).[7]

Several key questions therefore drive my research. What forms did woman-to-woman desire take in early modern Italian literature? What function might woman-woman love have had in literature: was it an object of amusement or ridicule; or could it serve as a vehicle for transgressive messages such as proto-feminist ideas? To answer these questions, I offer some insights into the socio-cultural contexts in which my selected authors I scrutinise, and an account of the living conditions of women in those contexts. The main focus of my thesis will be, however, close readings of the texts themselves. As my thesis shows, *donna-con-donna* depictions are frequently contradictory and deliberately ironic. Hence, they should be analysed carefully, and have more attention paid to their contexts, aims and audience.

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[6] In her *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400–1650*, Virginia Cox (2008) develops some interesting thoughts about the words chosen to describe those women writers and intellectuals defending women in the *querelle des femmes*. She discusses the pros and cons of some words such as 'feminism', 'proto-feminism', 'pro-woman', 'gynephile' and 'philogynist'. Ultimately, she opts for using them as 'near synonyms', in the hope that her readership will be able to historicise what she means. In this thesis, I use the word 'proto-feminism' to underline women's ambition to render some features of the society they were living in less hostile to women.

[7] According to Sarah Gwyneth Ross (2009), proto-feminism more or less directly involved hundreds of women who made a contribution to European culture and to the re-shaping of the idea of womanhood. The proto-feminist writings produced in these decades can also be read as 'an extension and an amplification of the late medieval *querelle des femmes*' (Jordan, 1990, p. 2). It should be also recalled that early modern Italian women writers often presented similar biographical and cultural features, which massively helped them to develop their knowledge, debate with their peers and spread their writings, such as 'Un'educazione guidata dal padre o da uno zio della borghesia, una congrega di qualche tipo che introduceva agli ambienti letterari, spesso la vedovanza, la pubblicazione nella propria città e anche fuori' (Jones, 2012, pp. 123).

My starting point is the most famous episode of homoerotic women's desire in the history of Italian literature: the story of Spanish princess Fiordispina falling for Christian warrior Bradamante, described by Ludovico Ariosto in his celebrated *Orlando furioso* (1516-1532). The tale of the two heroines does not happen in a vacuum: a long literary, religious and visual tradition furnished Ariosto with a vast range of cross-dressed heroines, ambiguous woman-woman relationships and risqué episodes. In particular, Ariosto develops the story of Bradamante and Fiordispina, as told by Matteo Maria Boiardo in his *Orlando Innamorato* (1483, 3.9:3-25), and combines it with his own ideas alongside allusions to the famous Iphis episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (9:666-797), in which the maiden Iphis is transformed into a man by Isis so she can finally marry her beloved Ianthe. In the wake of such precursors, Ariosto's text is an ambiguous and intensely erotic tale.

My investigation, therefore, starts with Ariosto and Boiardo and goes on to cover approximately 150 years from the late fifteenth century to the second half of the seventeenth century. Its primary focus, however, is on the sixteenth century. For practical reasons, including the availability of materials and their physical condition (many early modern documents are unclassified, damaged or lost), I will limit my investigation to published texts. Most of them are in Italian but, in a couple of cases, I have analysed texts in dialect: *La Veniexiana* in Venetian and *Il Manganello* in a Northern-Italian dialect. I will also enrich my analysis with reference to some Latin, Greek and French sources, since they can be especially useful when considering works strongly influenced by classical models or composed for erudite readers. In this way, I will be able to provide a nuanced overview of my topic.

Using this multi-faceted material as well as drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship will help me to challenge claims of the alleged impossibility, or invisibility, of woman-woman love and desire in the period under consideration. This will also will enable me to analyse the

trope of the *amor impossibilis* as 'a trope [of the impossibility] of modern critical discourse' which had 'trouble finding portrayals of love between women in the premodern era and assumed them to be invisible because they were impossible to imagine at the time' (Giannetti, 2009, p. 77).

As early as in 1980/1981, Louis Crompton discussed 'the myth of Lesbian impunity', according to which the (alleged) 'invisibility' of female-female love would imply that it was not perceived as a threat or a crime worthy of penalty. Crompton showed that a certain number of women throughout early modern Europe were, in truth, imprisoned, tortured or killed because of their homoerotic feelings and attitudes. Some years later, in 1994, Patricia Simons wrote about 'lesbian (in)visibility in Italian Renaissance culture', focusing on the presence of homoerotic female traces in art and literature. One of the aspirations of my thesis is to add to the fledgling body of scholarship on this question, in order to further deconstruct and discredit the belief in the invisibility and impossibility of desire and affection between women in early modern Italian literature.[8] As the third section of this Introduction will explain in detail (pages 14-21), our partial knowledge of the topic is primarily a consequence of academia's intermittent interest in it rather than an objective paucity of evidence.

2. Context

As my work will show, not only did writers analysed in this thesis penned several writings featuring *donna-con-donna* love and desire, but they also depicted it in a variety of

[8] In the past, some Italianists such as Gary P. Cestaro (1997, p. 149) as well as Virginia Cox and Lisa Sampson (2004, p. 23) appeared to underestimate the presence of *donna-con-donna* representations in early modern Italian culture. Some early modern Italian writers may have contributed to this misperception since they seemingly insist on the ideas of the impossibility and invisibility of female-female relationships and feelings and make fun of them. See, for instance, Corsini's *Il torracchione desolato* discussed in Chapter 1.

ways. This is particularly striking if one considers that female homoeroticism was often associated with sodomy, which was often labelled as the 'vizio nefando' (i.e., literally, unutterable). There is a degree to which these early modern authors seemed to take pleasure in challenging a social, cultural and religious taboo, playing with the contradiction of describing with words what was supposed to be silent and silenced. Their discourses did not happen in a vacuum: a multiplicity of threads leads us to believe that traces of *donna-con-donna* affection and attraction were more present in early modern Italian culture than was previously acknowledged, although setting the historical record straight falls beyond the scope of this thesis whose interest is primarily literary.

While writers could ironically play with the trope of female-female attraction and its implications, at the same time, in Italy, relationships and sex between women were officially banned by the church and persecuted by the civil authorities in several areas. Of course, this means that such relationships were considered neither impossible nor invisible. Scriptural references, such as the *Epistle to the Romans* (1:26-32), in which Paul criticises those women who 'exchanged natural relationships for unnatural', the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (6:10) or the *First Letter to Timothy* (1:10) provided the starting point for debates instigated by Fathers of the Church such as John Chrysostom, St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. According to John Boswell (1980), in early Christian communities homoeroticism was in some cases still permitted, probably in the wake of its acceptance in ancient Roman and Greek civilisations. The process of condemnation began with St Augustine (354-430) but only with the third Lateran Council (1179) did persecution become more effective. Generally speaking, in early modern Europe, sodomy was not only considered a sin against nature but a crime as well, as Louise Crompton has shown (1980/81). More recently, Fernanda Alfieri (2011; 2012) has offered a good account of women living in Northern Italy between the end

of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries who were put on trial for cross-dressing and same-sex relationships.

In early modern Italy there were three special courts devoted to the eradication of sodomy: the *Ufficiali di notte* in Florence (Canosa, 1991; Rocke, 1996), the *Collegium Subdomitarum* in Venice (Ruggiero, 1985; Canosa, 1991; Davidson, 2002) and the *Offizio sopra l'onestà* in Lucca (Grassi, 2014). All of them were Offices of Decency and prosecuted individuals involved in homoerotic intercourse, primarily men. However, women involved in same-sex relationships were also prosecuted in several cities across Italy, as primary (e.g. records of laws and trials) and secondary sources testify. For example, in a letter from Rome dated 16th July, 1501, Agostino Vespucci wrote to Niccolò Machiavelli that a Venetian lady – perhaps a noblewoman – had been burned at the stake in Campo de' Fiori 'per havere lei pedicato una puctina di 11 in 12 anni, che la si teneva in casa' (Machiavelli, 1982, p. 37).[9]

Along with being an object of legal interest, love and desire between women was also a fascinating topic for physicians, who sought to provide medical explanations for it. Looking at the Renaissance, we can observe both the peak of the development of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine along with a real intent to further the discipline (Siraisi and Carlino, 2001). Doctors aimed to pursue a deeper knowledge of human anatomy and physiology through a multitude of means such as dissections and anatomical drawings. In this context, the real (or alleged) hermaphrodite body became one of the most intriguing subjects to be studied (Marchetti, 2001). Furthermore, in some cases, the co-existence of male and female organs in the same body was considered the cause of same-sex attraction (Barbagli, 2014, pp. 73-75).

[9] In Latin, 'pedicare' means 'to sodomise' and the word was generally used in reference to male-male sex (see for instance Catullus, 16 and Martial's epigram 9.78; on this topic see at a minimum Negri [1978]). In early modern Italian, as the 1623 *Vocabolario della Crusca* explains, 'soddomitare' is considered to be a synonym for the Latin 'pedicare'. In Vespucci's letter, it has the broader meaning of 'sex against nature'.

Despite the interest in anatomy, notions about the structure, physiology and functioning of the different organs of the female body were still confused: for instance, physicians argued about the existence and functions of the clitoris for centuries. In this respect, according to some, its non-conventional form or its hypertrophy were the cause of same-sex attraction (Barbagli, 2014, pp. 76-82). The ancient Romans had already established a relationship between what they called tribadism and what doctors considered an abnormally large clitoris: in their view, in some cases the female organ was even used as a penis in homoerotic sex (for instance, in epigram 7.67, Martial wrote that the tribade Philaenis penetrated both women and men).

Classical sources also had an impact on the representation of woman-woman desire. The humanist appreciation of classical antiquity meant, of course, that Latin and Greek sources greatly contributed to shaping early modern imagery. Within this context, the figure of the Greek poet Sappho, who lived between the end of the seventh and first half of the sixth century B.C.E., was especially noted for her poetic excellence and her desperate love for the young man Phaon.[10] However, it is not easy to establish to what extent her life, her homoerotic poetry and the legends connected to her had an impact on *donna-con-donna* representations in early modern Italy. Writers such as Boccaccio, Petrarch and Christine de Pizan praised Sappho for her intelligence, mastery and poetic accomplishments. She was also frequently included in catalogues of extraordinary women. Nonetheless, as Walter Penrose Jr states (2014), whilst the writer and her verses were celebrated, Sappho's homoeroticism was often erased for moralistic purposes. As the early humanists sought to rehabilitate womanhood from the intense misogyny of the Middle Ages, they needed Sappho as part of their project. Therefore, they simply overlooked certain aspects of her sexuality, particularly

[10] For her reputation in Europe and Italy, see respectively at a minimum DeJean (1989) as well as Andreadis (2001; 2014); and Chemello (2012) and Puggioni (2014).

her attraction to women, which could be offensive to a Christian audience: her intelligence, skills and fame were praised instead (Penrose Jr, 2014, p. 431). Yet, according to Penrose, details of Sappho's sexuality were spread by classical and early modern sources such as Ovid's *Heroides* in which Sappho is said to have 'had three *amicae* (female friends) whom she reportedly used "libidinously". She is also said to have been a tribade, "abusing" her partners by rubbing them' (Penrose Jr, 2014, p. 429).

The idea of women abusing other women was also conveyed by Martial and Juvenal, two Latin authors who were well-known during the Renaissance. In fact, they contributed to the negative representations of women attracted to other women, depicting them as lustful and aggressive animals who mated in a wild way. One can find traces of this attitude in early modern texts imbued with misogyny such as the anonymous *Manganello* that I analyse in Chapter Two. Furthermore, from a philological point of view, Marc D. Schachter (2015a; 2015b; 2017) has recently investigated the importance and the impact of early printed commentaries devoted to Martial's *Epigrams* and Juvenal's *Satires* on humanists and Renaissance Latin poets, emphasising the success of those texts in Renaissance Italy.

It was not only classical sources which made a contribution to the construction of imagery depicting queer same-sex female desire. Cultural and literary discourse from both the Middle Ages and the early modern period offered a fictional army of transvestite women, encompassing female warriors, Amazons, female monks and saints who were often involved in queer relationships. Writers revelled in drawing on this tradition of gender ambiguity, fluidity and same-sex desire because these elements offered a rich quarry of narrative sources to mine along with a variety of representations that permitted them to nuance their plots with sensuality, enrich their main narrative thread with adventures, prepare their characters for future developments and provoke laughter. In so doing, some authors showed an awareness

that the relationship between biological sex, gender and gender performativity may not be straightforward.[11] As a result, they created stories which skilfully engage with these issues and explored and interrogated the notions of gender and sex, challenging or, by contrast, embracing the literary and social expectations of their readership.

As I hope to have shown in this brief account, the socio-cultural, historical, religious and legal contexts in which the writers I analyse in this thesis lived and worked was complex. There is certainly enough evidence to suggest that same-sex love was visible in a multitude of cultural forms which may also have had an impact on literature.

3. Literature Review

In this thesis, I often opt for a queer approach both in historical and literary terms. Queer studies have, in fact, made a significant contribution to the renovation of Renaissance studies. Since the publication of Jonathan Goldberg's *Queering the Renaissance* (1994) especially, there has been an explosion of texts that question the traditional categories applied by historiography to stories, individuals and dynamics in the early modern period. In this respect, I agree with Valerie Traub (2013) when she states that rather than a queer theory which challenges all categorisations, we should practise a historicism that aims to identify how categories came to be. I believe that this approach may be of particular importance to my work in order to gain a better understanding of the consequences of the silencing of queer elements from historical and literary texts in much scholarship.

[11] Ita Mac Carthy (2007, p. 140) mentions some Renaissance writers who engaged with these topics, such as Agrippa and Mario Equicola.

The desire to fully recover historical processes, events and figures perceived as forgotten or lost has prompted several scholars to investigate the queer, gay and lesbian past.[12] In this respect, it is worth mentioning at least Heather Love's landmark *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) in which the scholar denounces what was lost in conventional (non-queer) history or was removed from it, as well as those aspects that were considered negligible, impossible or doomed to failure. As the title suggests, the scholar emphasises the pain and traumas inscribed in queer texts. These feelings are connected to the social marginalisation and the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire; significantly, both writings and feelings have been neglected for a long time.

At present, the idea that open recognition and discussion of negative emotions enhances the reconstruction, the valorisation and, as a result, the contemporary visibility of a queer past has also penetrated the field of Renaissance studies. For instance, scholarly works have begun to focus on the analysis of melancholy, pain, loss and grieving in Renaissance literature (Guy-Bray, 2002). Inspired by those reflections, in my close reading of the texts, I will pay attention to traces of similar feelings which have been largely rejected by scholarship thus far as well as to the possible social and cultural implications inscribed in the literary representations of homoerotic attraction.

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[12] By no means exhaustive, the following list attests to the wealth and geographical span of such anglophone studies: Harriette Andreadis's *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics 1550-1714* (2001); *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages* (2001) edited by Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn; the landmark *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (2002) by Valerie Traub; Sahar Amer's *Crossing Borders: Love Between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures* (2008); Leila J. Rupp's *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women* (2009); Sherry Velasco's *Lesbian in Early Modern Spain* (2011); Marianne Legault's *Narrations déviantes: l'intimité entre femmes dans l'imaginaire français du dix-septième siècle* (2008); *Same–Sex Desire in Early Modern England, 1550–1735: An Anthology of Literary Texts and Contexts* (2013), edited by Marie Helena Loughlin, and Susan Sniader Lanser's *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* (2014). Among the works referring to contexts different from the Italian one, it is worth mentioning at least Blackmore and Hutcheson (1999); Ferguson (2008) and Nardizzi, Guy-Bray and Stockton (2009). As far as the queering of early modern Italian art history is concerned, see Cestaro (2004) and Sperling (2013; 2016).

While many gaps remain, the exploration of sex and desire look promising as there is lively interest in the multi-faceted notions of sexuality, identity, love, desire and gender in the early modern period. As a result, the exploration of sex and desire in the Renaissance is becoming increasingly popular, as some excellent studies demonstrate. It is worth mentioning those by Finucci and Schwartz (1994); Talvacchia (1999; 2012); Pollaki and Hub (2018); and Murray and Terpstra (2019). As far as early modern Italian women are concerned, as Diana Robin stresses (2013, pp. 21-25), recent anglophone investigations show a 'Renaissance of gender' in a variety of fields from patronage studies to literary criticism. Evelyn Welch (2000) has provided a detailed bibliography of this research, which challenge previous scholarship.

Finally, studies which investigate the various forms of sexual transgressions in Italy, along with their links with criminality and punishments, are also of keen interest, such as those by Guido Ruggiero devoted to Venice (1985) and Allison Levy (2010). Male-to-male relationships in early modern Italy have been widely examined for at least three decades and from a variety of perspectives, from history (Canosa, 1991; Davison, 2002; Grassi, 2014; Hajek, 2015) to iconography (Saslow, 1986; Haughton, 2015). Micheal Rocke (1996) and Ruggiero (1985) have made some of the most relevant contributions. Rocke (1996, p. 6), in fact, has explored the flourishing world of male sodomy in the cradle of the Renaissance, demonstrating that 'Homosexuality was a deep-rooted and prominent feature of life in Florence, yet it also encountered vigorous opposition and was subjected to intensive persecution'. He has also shown that it is no coincidence that, in German, 'florenzen' meant 'sodomite' (p. 3). Ruggiero, for his part, has investigated licit and illicit sex in the Serenissima, including sodomy, which was regarded as both a socially disruptive practice and a serious offence against God. In *Tutta un'altra storia. L'omosessualità dall'antichità al secondo dopoguerra* (2015), journalist and pro-gay activist Giovanni Dall'Orto has attempted

to write the first, detailed history of male homosexuality in Italy while Ferguson (2016) has devoted an entire book to marriages between men at the end of the sixteenth century in Rome.

Yet, while there are detailed studies of male homoeroticism in the context of early modern Italy, there are few comparable survey studies on women in either historical or literary terms. Partial – and invaluable – case studies do exist: one of the first and, undoubtedly, most renowned is Judith Brown's *Immodest Acts: the Life of A Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (1986). Here, the historian offers a general, concise overview on the topic of female-female relationships in Europe by focusing on the trial which involved Abbess Benedetta Carlini (1590-1661) of a monastery in Pescia, Tuscany. The nun was accused of, and then condemned for, having an affair with one of her *consorelle*. Other historians have investigated further individual cases of *donna-con-donna* relationships, such as Ann E. Matter (1989), who looked at Catholic mystic Maria Domitilla Galluzzi (1595–1671); Marzio Barbagli (2015) and Clorinda Donato (2020), who studied the eight years that Caterina Vizzani (1718-1743) spent cross-dressed as Giovanni Bordoni; and Fernanda Alfieri (2011; 2012), who explored individual cases of Northern Italian women suspected of cross-dressing and same-sex relations. More recently, *Tribadi, sodomiti, invertite e invertiti, pederasti, femminelle, ermafroditi...*, edited by Umberto Grassi and Vincenzo Lagioia (2017), brings together papers delivered at an international conference by the same title held in Verona in 2015 (such as those of Alfieri, Schachter and Lirosi) and provides stimulating insights on female-female relationships. Each of these studies help to build a bigger picture of queer history in early modern Italy. My thesis hopes to add further detail to the developing picture by focusing on the ways and means by which same-sex desire between women made its way into vernacular literary texts.

In many respects, all of the works cited above have had a significant impact on my thesis. First, thanks to them, I have discovered a wealth of sources, discourses and ideas circulating in early modern Europe. Secondly, their interdisciplinary approach has prompted me to compare heterogenous materials (such as legal documents, religious treatises and pieces of art) in order to gain a more nuanced overview of my topic. This is particularly necessary in my thesis since, without a pre-existing framework of reference for the history of desire and love between women in Italy to work with, I have often had to make up for the lack of sources by reconstructing the context of my research from the beginning. Nevertheless, this thesis does not aspire to be a history handbook. Finally, the above-cited scholarly works have offered me the opportunity to familiarise myself with various approaches and methodologies, thus indirectly suggesting how to tackle the gaps in knowledge and prejudice I have often stumbled upon when engaging with Italian scholarship in particular.

From a historical and historiographical point of view, scholarship within Italian academic circles has been somewhat slower to keep pace with the critical renovation brought about by cultural studies. Scholarship in Italy often tends to neglect gender, feminist and queer studies, as several Italian and international scholars have reported (see, for instance, Pustianaz, 2010; Di Cori, 2013; Pinzuti, 2013; Ross, 2019).[13] Literary studies are not exempt from this kind of neglect. A case in point occurred in 1997, when Rinaldina Russell (1997, p. 173) pointed out that: 'There is no canon of Italian lesbian authors, nor is there an Italian lesbian literary criticism'. The view has been subsrantiated by Tommasina Gabriele (2010), who has

[13] In 2016, Tommaso Scaramella was still able to claim that 'l'impressione che potrebbe avere, a prima vista, chi studia la storia moderna è che in Italia la storia dell'omosessualità non esista' (p. 1). He went on to argue that, 'è innegabile che negli ultimi anni la produzione storiografica sul tema abbia registrato anche nel nostro paese un visibile incremento' before providing an extensive bibliography on the topic which has advanced the cause of queering Italian history a great deal.

ironically claimed ‘an apology for Lesbian visibility in Italian literary criticism’ to denounce the lack of attention devoted to the topic. As Tommaso Giartosio stresses (2004, pp. 108-128), in Italy the critical reception of a piece of homosexual literature *tout court* or literature concerning homosexual figures, desires and issues can still be perceived in a problematic way and, thus, may suffer from a lack of serious consideration or even be ghettoised.[14] Nonetheless, fortunately, nowadays there are some scholars and critics who are very interested in exploring Italian lesbian and queer literature, such as Charlotte Ross (2015), Alberica Bazzoni (2018) and Maria Morelli (2019).

Similarly, the time when ‘in Renaissance studies (...) any acknowledgment of the presence of homosexuality in a poem or play was likely to be accompanied by indignant or apologetic disavowals’ (Digangi, 2006, p. 129) has come to an end thanks to the proliferation of studies referring to European same-sex relationships, thus heralding an interdisciplinary approach to the topic in the Italian academic world. Nevertheless, several scholars still tend to neglect the presence of homoerotic love in Italian early modern literature, especially desire between women. As a result, the topic is still completely absent from several works on Italian literature or, when it is present, is usually stripped of its heterodox elements. As I will show in Chapter Four, Maddalena Campiglia offers a perfect case-study. In a couple of pastoral works, her heroine Flori falls in love with two different women and overtly defends her feelings. Despite the evidence, some Italian critics such as Mutini (1974) and De Marco

[14] In his study, Scaramella (2016) identified some of the reasons why scholarly attention devoted to same-sex love and desire in early modern Italy has been lukewarm: a tardy diffusion of cultural studies in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Italian academia is one reason; a bias against the history of sexuality resulting in few academic courses on gender studies is another contributing factor. The difficulties within Italian scholarship partially echo what international scholars have been denouncing for decades regarding the history of female queer experiences, such as ‘the historical denial of lesbianism’ (Wiesen Cook, 1979). Also, In Italy, queer studies are still debated, not to say thwarted, even by some gender studies scholars, such as Dall’Orto (2012 and 2014). In this context, the birth of the Queer Italia Network and the CIRQUE - Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca Queer - are positive innovations.

(1988) have underestimated or even denied her queer attraction, interpreting Campiglia's works within a spiritual or mystical framework.

It comes as little surprise, then, that the two most influential pieces of research examining female-female desire in early modern Italian literature have been written by scholars working in anglophone academia. These studies are *Hopeless Love: Boiardo, Ariosto, and Narratives of Queer Female Desire* by Mary-Michelle DeCoste (2009) and *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy* by Laura Giannetti (2009). These works have been of paramount importance to this thesis, since they were the first to explore *donna-con-donna* experiences between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries in Italian literature. DeCoste's analysis is centred on the episode of Bradamante and Fiordispina as told by Boiardo and Ariosto, and aims to stress the recurrence of the *topos* of queer female desire in medieval and early modern literature, as well as the modalities in which it is 'used as a de-narrativizing force in the same moments in which it is used in the creation of male narratives' (DeCoste, 2009, p. 8). It also aims to demonstrate that 'queer female desire was widely accepted and employed as a literary motif', even if not culturally totally tolerated (DeCoste, 2009, p. 12). Still, though, the scholar's account is essentially limited to a selection of comedies and some chivalric and epic poems. In particular, DeCoste focuses on underestimated texts and figures from medieval literature and culture which probably informed the character of Bradamante. This positively contributes to a better understanding of her figure in a cultural and literary perspective. The focus of DeCoste's work is not the ambiguity of Bradamante's identity and Fiordispina's sexuality but the meaning of the episode which, from her perspective, seems to be instrumental in several different aims (such as the literary competition between Boiardo and Ariosto) yet not self-sufficient when it comes to meaning. Nonetheless, De Coste's sharp analysis of literary representations of same-sex

female desire is important for my work, especially by virtue of her attention to queerness, as well as to the construction of narratives produced by male writers who tried to imagine female homoerotic feelings and behaviours.

In my thesis, I combine these insights with the feminist approach inspired by Giannetti's examination of a large number of Renaissance comedies. Following on from Joan Kelly (1979), she does not merely examine the patriarchal discourse present in the texts, but also 'the ways in which these comedies revealed signs of anxiety, preoccupation, and discussion of that discourse' (Giannetti, 2009, p. 12). Giannetti's investigation is detailed and thought-provoking, and she has laid firm foundations for further genre-specific studies. What she has discovered in her study of Renaissance comedies is that playwrights tend to repeat the same schemes and re-use the same typologies of characters again and again, often in obedience to classical sources and literary precepts. As a result, in comedies, relationships between women are usually temporary and instrumental to the re-affirmation of man-woman unions. Giannetti's useful identification of these mechanisms in comedies seems to invite similar studies of other genres and, indeed, a cross-genre study of the kind I am offering here.

Building on the work of DeCoste and Giannetti, in other words, my thesis attempts to fill a significant gap in scholarship and provide new stimuli for an articulated debate on the representation of woman-to-woman desire. I do not, of course, presume to offer an exhaustive picture but, rather, to present a rich array of cross-genre texts that testify to the range and variety of literary depictions. My close readings of these texts will be supplemented, where relevant, with close reference to various theological, legal and medical documents. The end result will be a new literary map that will enrich our current understanding of love and desire amongst early modern women.

4. Methodology

To analyse and interrogate my multi-faceted material, I have opted for a holistic approach which combines various critical and theoretical strategies. My analysis is mainly informed by queer studies, feminist studies, lesbian studies, women's studies, masculinity studies and the history of homosociality and same-sex relationships, as well as by philology, literary criticism and studies which pay special attention to the literary rendering of performative acts, such as kinaesthetic and performative studies. This complex framework provides a broad, context-dependent investigation of *donna-con-donna* literary representations. It also facilitates the critical problematisation of the traditional concepts of sexuality, gender and identity and offers my readership a philologically and historically effective reading of the texts.

As my thesis examines the modes of, and reasons for, representation of desire and love between women presented in a wide range of literary writings, a close reading of the texts is fundamental and is the key to disclosing their meanings, allusions and preoccupations. Since many of the texts I investigate do not benefit from a modern edition, philology will play a fundamental role in my research, whilst literary criticism can help me to better explore themes and focus more carefully on the scholarly *topoi* of invisibility and impossibility. Additionally, as the recent lively discussion about its nature, purposes and techniques shows (see, for example, Culler, 2002; Gurd, 2010; Nichols, 2010), philology can impel us to analyse in more detail a complex set of elements which occur when writing and interpreting a text. In fact, 'philology is where literature happens', according to Gurd (2010, p. 1). Philology can also help us to take into account the silences of authors in a more effective way (Gnoli, 2015; Mortara Garavelli, 2015): as queer female desire has always been a controversial subject, this process may be particularly successful in my case. In fact, as Ann Matter (1992, p. 3) puts it, talking about 'medieval lesbians', '[w]e will, indeed, have to learn to read the blanks' and re-

interpret the texts in the light of them. It is also the case that the very ineffability which informs the 'vizio nefando' may also be read productively, considering that silences themselves can be discursive events, as Michel Foucault (1976, pp. 38-39) suggests. Accordingly, my work seeks to analyse the different ways in which literature can express, minimise and even hide female-female desire, going beyond simplistic, heteronormative categories, including those connected to a text's linguistic and stylistic aspects.

Queer, feminist and women's studies can contribute enormously to the discussion and the problematisation of those categories. Since these disciplines have their roots in socio-constructivist ideas, they encourage an understanding of the notions of gender, sexuality and identity as products of specific social, cultural and political contexts. Accordingly, these notions can vary enormously down the centuries and from place to place. This view is in direct opposition to essentialism, which understands sexuality and sexual orientation as 'natural and innate to human beings and constant over time and space' (Murray, 1996, p. 191). If trusting in the alleged continuity of 'natural' experiences and behaviours conveys a sense of continuity and consistency which can strengthen claims for a gay, lesbian or queer past, the essentialists' aspiration is to describe identities, behaviours and experiences as transcendent and beyond the influence of culture. This runs the risk of overshadowing, or even removing, all those particular features related to socially and historically determined individuals, contexts and situations.[15] My approach in this thesis is to avoid any transcendent, essentialist accounts of same-sex desire but to examine, instead, the specificities of individual literary accounts as situated in particular historical and cultural settings.

[15] To explore debates on the essentialist and the constructivist approaches to the early modern period, see, for example, L'Estrange and More (2011, pp. 1-5).

In other words, whilst philological, historical and literary scholarship helps me to develop a rigorous methodological framework, queer studies foster a flexibility that permits me to handle the fluidity of the topic itself. The core of my work – that is, the analysis of the representation of love and desire between women in early modern Italian literature – should not therefore approached with rigid hermeneutic tools. According to the famous definition by David Halperin (1997, p. 62), in fact, 'Queer is (…) whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence'. Drawing especially on (to mention some of the most popular sources) works such as Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976-1984), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999, but firstly published in 1990) , queer studies aim to redefine and problematise discourses on gender, identity and sexuality from a historical, philosophical and political perspective. They also question what has been previously assumed by other disciplines and theories, including gender, gay, lesbian and feminist studies. In doing this, queer scholars adopt a constructivist approach, as they consider allegedly natural identities as socio-cultural constructs.

I take the same approach in my work, taking special care not to apply contemporary labels and categories to early modern subjects. Consequently, my textual analysis is primarily informed by two watershed theoretical queer works, namely Teresa De Lauretis' introductory essay (1991) to the issue of the journal *differences* devoted to the first queer studies conference, held at the University of Santa Cruz (USA) in 1991, and Judith Butler's ground-breaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990). For De Lauretis (1991, p. IV):

> 'Queer Theory' conveys a double emphasis – on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences.

Accordingly, in my thesis, I intend to discuss what socio-cultural ideas and prejudices characterise the texts I analyse, as well as to show how bias and gaps inform the modern and contemporary critical discourses on them. In so doing, as I have said, I also rely on Butler's assumption that gender is not a set of 'free-floating attributes'; rather, 'the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (1999, p. 33). In Butler's view (p. 33), 'gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing'. I, therefore, examine *how* the relationships between gender, identities and sexuality are produced, deployed and performed in literary texts. I also try to deconstruct stereotypes and dynamics which inform the literary and the critical representations of queer female desire by demonstrating the variety of queer feelings, experiences and figures.

With the aim of doing this to the highest standard, I am therefore particularly interested in a variety of schools of thought and studies which promote a deep and rich interpretation of cultural representations, able to enhance what lies behind appearances and reveal the power hierarchies in which representations were created. In my work, in fact, I do not intend to give preference to any specific model of identity or sexuality over another. Rather, I will attempt to describe and critically explain literary representations and discourses on them. To do that, I will start from Wells *et alii* (2000, p. XI)'s argument that 'while the questions we ask about the past are inevitably driven by present needs and concerns, a sense of historical perspective is best achieved (…) by recognising the otherness of the past'. This otherness has several implications, and one of these urges us to face up to the past itself and, consequently, discuss the categories we apply to it. Queer studies can therefore help me not only to debate the traditional, binary and heteronormative categories applied to discourses on

sexuality (such as male/female and homoeroticism/heteroeroticism), but also to get in touch with that 'otherness of the past' – often overlooked by historians, scholars and readers – which is informed in the texts I analyse by several different meanings and feelings.

Feminist studies can also offer a contribution to the perception of this 'otherness', since they focus on the dynamics of power that create hierarchies and inequalities on the basis of alleged differences between genders and identities. As Judith M. Bennett highlights (2006), feminism can significantly help to challenge patriarchal narratives and interpretations. Some scholars have also emphasised the instability of the category of women in history (Riley, 1988) or argued for including in historiographic discourses individuals who did not – or cannot – identify themselves in binary classifications. A significant part of the historiographical texts I have cited in my literature review falls into this category.

Furthermore, besides allowing me to closely scrutinise the texts from an original perspective, feminism can challenge hegemonic readings by virtue of paying attention to the socio-cultural construction of subjectivity, nature, sexuality, gender and its interest in the analysis of power and control structures, combined with special consideration for marginal subjects. In particular, thanks to its aversion for totalising, dominant theories, it tends to be far 'from grand theory toward an emphasis upon the historically specific' (Newton, 1988, p. 97). In doing that, feminist scholarship gives special consideration to the linguistic and stylistic levels of texts. This is especially relevant to the purposes of my thesis, as my interest in philology testifies.

For this reason, in my reading of the literary sources I examine, my work has also benefited from studies that discuss how early modern literature might shape, reinforce and convey ideas on virility and gender roles associated with masculinity, such as those of Valeria

Finucci (2003) and Courtney Quaintance (2015) which I will illustrate in more detail in Chapter 2.

At this point, it should be clear that I am working at the intersection of a multiplicity of fields in which, as I have said, I include women's and lesbian studies. These works are frequently interdisciplinary and combine several approaches. This gives more depth to the scholarly exploration of gender dynamics and processes, thus inspiring my reading of the selected literary texts. In addition to the numerous historical and historiographic studies I have previously cited, I am therefore particularly indebted to some works which have helped me reconstruct the huge variety of women, situations and conditions in early modern Italy, such as those by Duby and Perrot (1990); Matthews-Grieco and Brevaglieri (2001); Robin, Larsen, and Levin (2007); and Sanson and Lucioli (2016). I have also taken into close consideration the works of some scholars who have investigated traces of proto-feminism and women's intellectual roles in early modern Italy, thus expanding the typical all-male cultural overview of the time, such as Jordan (1990), Cox (2008) and (2011), Ross (2009). These have enabled me to pay more attention to the proto-feminist claims and reflections on women's life conditions displayed in literary works.

In order to have a better understanding of the socio-cultural context in which they were composed, fundamental to my thesis, too, are works that deal with the shadowed presence of women attracted to women in history as well as literature, such as Adrienne Rich's paper 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980), Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993) and Lilian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981). Rich (1980, p. 632) draws attention to the 'bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging

from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible'. As I have said, this bias can involve both literature and critical studies, taking the form of the *topoi* of impossibility and invisibility of queer female love. Hence, it comes as no surprise that some subjects and experiences which do not fit in with the norm or social expectations might be treated as marginal, as Castle explains. She emphasises how, in many contexts, 'The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind' (Castle, 1993, p. 2). Her presence has been 'ghosted' in so-called Western patriarchal civilization because she embodies the fear of '"women without men" – of women indifferent or resistant to male desire' (p. 5). This idea is precisely what I have found in some of the literary texts I examined. This feminine independence provokes anxiety and hatred, and therefore lesbians – or, in my case, the women involved in cases of queer female love and desire – may become invisible or little considered, while their presence and their acts are deemed unutterable.[16] Faderman's research can also help a great deal in doing this, given that she explores so-called women's 'romantic friendships' and other forms of same-sex female relationships from the Renaissance onwards. She shows that often these intense bonds, such as same-sex love, passion, affection and other heterodox feelings, are dissimulated and, therefore, rendered socially acceptable. As I will show, early modern Italian women writers in particular depicted woman-woman relationships suffused with love and desire in the form of friendship bonds.

To sum up, I am in favour of a rigorous historical, historiographical and literary research strategy that challenges ritualised statements, classifications, stereotypes and *topoi*. At the

[16] As Castle (1993, p. 5) emphasises, 'Lesbian contributions to culture have been routinely suppressed or ignored, lesbian-themed works of art censored and destroyed, and would-be apologists – like Radclyffe Hall in the 1920s – silenced and dismissed'.

same time, I do not aim to inscribe erotic and emotional experiences, characters and narratives within contemporary and heteronormative categories. This does not imply a desexualisation of texts and practices, or a fetishising of history and historiography, but a constant attention to the cultural and social signs which can reveal a wealth of information about perceptions, discourses and ideas.

This kind of work has required me to think carefully about the modalities of reading I want to apply to the texts I analyse. In this respect, I have found reflections on the reading methodologies developed by some queer scholars to resonate particularly well with my aims. First of all, Traub who, in her ground-breaking research on what she terms the 'Renaissance of lesbianism in early modern England' (2002), demonstrates that the *amor impossibilis* is not reducible to a discursive figure like the friend or the tribade, but rather functions as a thematic convention within a long literary heritage. Related to both the rhetoric of idealised love in the tradition of friendship and the convention of sex transformation in the discourse of tribadism, the *amor impossibilis* is, like them, derived from classical models and, like them, undergoes substantial transformations across the centuries. To take account of their nature and transformations, Traub opts for a reading methodology which implies 'practicing impossibilities'. This allows her to challenge the *topoi* of invisibility and impossibility, proving the existence not only of a cultural awareness of queer female desire, but also of a variety of ways to articulate this desire.

In my work, Traub's approach paves the way for a 'reading against the grain', proposed by lesbian writer and critic Cherry Smyth (2005, p. 133). This modality intends to 'wrest the homo-subtext from its cosy hetero-complacent form and make it the major discourse', and it is informed by the 'wish for inclusion by marginalised, under-represented people'. In my thesis, I frequently deal with topics and figures generally excluded from

literary canons, so Smyth's thoughts are of special importance to me. They also resonate with the ideas of one of the most active queer Italian literary critics, whom I have already cited, Tommaso Giartosio. In particular, I appreciate his *manifesto* on the placement of heterodox texts in relation to the so-called literary tradition – a centrifugal yet exciting placement:

> se molti ancora negano in blocco l'ipotesi di una 'tradizione gay' sia pure *sui generis*, altri (e qui penso soprattutto alla teoria queer (...)) diffidano dell'idea di 'classici', del 'canone', della stessa 'omosessualità', considerandole esemplificazioni brutali volte a disciplinare il rapporto con il testo. La differenza fra letteratura e canone, entro quest'ottica, è che il canone è letteratura provvista di cannoni. E la triade *omosessualità-eterosessualità-bisessualità* è una semplificazione rozza come gli identikit della polizia, che per giunta si riduce subito a una diade *norma/trasgressione* utilizzabile in mille diverse sedi (...). Di qui il progetto queer di pensare un mondo fuori canone, post-gay, privo di classici e di classici omosessuali. (Giartosio, 2017, pp. 12-13).

Thanks to this approach, the critic's attention is focused on the individual text, the individual author's voice and the individual experiences in the text, rather than on a literary system deeply affected by social expectations, commonplaces and hierarchies of values that change in time and space. As a consequence, the piece of literature is intended not as a mere reflection of the context in which it was conceived or as a tool to be used by literary critics and activists to defend their ideas, but, primarily, as an articulated expression of an irregular and, thus, fascinating beauty: 'la singola opera (...) si svincola da qualsiasi contenuto, genealogia, funzione, e brilla della sua fulgida bellezza: sempre anarchica, scorretta e mostruosa' (Giartosio, 2017, p. 13).

In conclusion, the complex theoretical framework I have described can help me understand the values conveyed by the texts I investigate, the socio-cultural contexts in which

they were created and their implications; concurrently, it allows me to grasp their unique, *queer* beauty.

5. Terminology

The terminology I use in this thesis is a consequence of my holistic theoretical approach, largely based on socio-cultural constructivism. Hence, I pay attention to how language is used in different contexts and by different characters, alongside pointing out the androcentrism of several historical records and, in some cases, of the scholarship built upon them as well. I also seek to exercise caution, especially with regard to the ways in which I define identities, behaviours and relationships.

To begin with, I will call 'women' those subjects who are biologically female or identify with the social-cultural typology of 'women'.[17] Furthermore, in line with my constructivist premises, I posit that several notions and definitions related to sex, sexuality, gender expectations and identities are socio-cultural products, belonging to a specific chronological window. As a result, I will not employ contemporary categories such as 'homosexuality' and 'lesbianism'; rather, I prefer to use expressions such as 'same-sex desire', 'desire between women' and 'homoeroticism'. In fact, the term 'homosexual' reflects the medicalisation of sexuality in the nineteenth century, as Michel Foucault explains in *La volonté de savoir* (1976) from his *Histoire de la sexualité*, and usually refers to identities more than to behaviours. Similarly, we cannot ascribe the concepts of 'gay' or 'lesbian' to early modern individuals since these words developed much later (Shi and Lei, 2020). Moreover, all the

[17] This choice may seem reductive, but since I mainly work on fictional characters and situations, I need to accommodate the perspective adopted by the writers which, in some cases, as I will show, can be very heteronormative.

above-cited labels entail an implicit binary opposition: as John Boswell stresses, classifications such as 'homosexual/heterosexual' and 'gay/straight' are conceptual creations of particular societies rather than being part of the human psyche, so, from this perspective, it would not be possible to speak of 'gay history'. Consequently, whether 'homosexuality exists only when and where people are persuaded to believe in it, "homosexual" persons will have a "history" only in those particular societies and cultures' (Boswell, 1989, p. 20, cited in Murray, 1996, p. 192).[18]

Furthermore, when studying practices and discourses on sex and affection among the early moderns, one should bear in mind that they have their own sexual vocabulary, which often differs today's. The semantic spheres connected to 'amore' and 'eros' (ἔρως, a Greek word meaning 'love', 'desire', 'pleasure') should also encourage caution, since the use of these terms may differ from ours. Hence, I use 'desire' especially in relation to the physical and/or sexual spheres, while I employ 'love' and 'affection' when I want to describe intense feelings and emotions.[19] I also take into account that, whilst a multitude of literary texts display an incredibly rich and inventive sexual metaphorical language, non-literary texts such as medical treatises, theological works or laws use much more limited (and sometimes even ambiguous)

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[18] Despite these reflections, Boswell himself, together with other scholars, opts for 'gay' and 'lesbian'. In fact, the terms can be used as umbrella words, which include all those 'whose erotic [and also emotional, as Murray underlines (1996, p. 193)] interest is predominantly directed toward their own gender' (Boswell, 1989, p. 35); moreover, their meaning is usually already well-known by the audience. This is the main reason which also prompted Richard Bruce Parkinson to opt for 'gay' (but he speaks of 'same-sex desire' in relation to ancient societies) in his broad survey, *A Little Gay History* (2013), which covers a very long period, from around 11,000 years ago to nowadays. Furthermore, some scholars adopt anachronistic words and concepts with the aim of renewing the debates and offering new critical perspectives. In this regard, one should cite the collection of essays *The Lesbian Premodern*, which has a 'deliberately provocative [title]: both anachronistic and tautological. The term "lesbian" is widely regarded as essentialist, historically redundant, and limiting', but 'the concept of heterosexuality is equally anachronistic when applied to the premodern and that heteronormativity itself must be subject to scrutiny' (Giffney, Sauer, and Watt, 2011, p. 1).

[19] In this work, I will try to define the nature of feelings and bonds as accurately as possible, bearing in mind the subjects involved and the context in which they are included. However, for practical reasons, I will sometimes employ the words 'desire', 'affection', 'attraction', and 'love' as synonyms.

verbal resources. For instance, in legal and religious texts, the term 'sodomia' might refer to several different practices, including anal sex between a man and a woman and sex between two men or two women. Moreover, one of the first issues one comes across when researching desire between women in early modern Italy is the lack of an appropriate terminology to define the individuals involved and their actions. Whilst, in the same period, the vocabulary of male homoeroticism was extremely rich and varied, [20] there were few and negatively inflected words to define a woman attracted to another woman or two women loving each other. Most of these expressions were borrowed from Latin and Greek, such as 'fricatrices' and 'tribades',[21] used in specific contexts and by a minority of erudite people in an extremely narrow selection of texts such as some theological or legal documents.

Consequently, in my research and when reporting my findings, I deal with a double difficulty. On the one hand, I have to grapple with the writers' effort to describe and present fictional characters whose feelings and behaviours were often culturally classified as unutterable or even impossible. On the other, I need to confront the struggle to understand dynamics, identities and experiences which often, as we have seen, were not well defined. Therefore, I use the word 'queer' to describe the physical and affectionate bonds between fictional women and those who self-identified or were identified as women. In fact, the word 'queer' appeared at the end of the nineteenth century and was originally a disparaging slur used to define homosexuals.[22] When the queer theoretical movement emerged at the beginning of the 1990s, the word was proudly adopted to resignify and reclaim a past marked

[20] A series of terms to define men attracted to other men was, in fact, available; most were negative, such as 'buggerone', usually used as synonym of 'sodomite'. On the origin and the development of the word, see at a minimum Trifone (2020).
[21] As Traub (2002, p. 253) recalls, '*Tribade* is a French term derived from the Greek *tribas* and *tribein*, to rub – and hence the Latin *fricatrix* and the English *rubster*'.
[22] For a concise history of the term 'queer', see Jagose (1996, pp. 1-6).

by insults, abuses and violence.[23] The very choice of adopting 'queer' is, therefore, meaningful, as it refers to naming and defining acts as non-neutral; rather, it implies and builds epistemological relations between categories and subjects. As Marco Pustianaz (2004, p. 442) says: 'Rinominarsi queer significa introdurre una differenza, anzi moltiplicare il discorso delle differenze'. Accordingly, in this respect also, queer studies can help me to keep the category of women and the bond between women as relevant today, detaching them from any essentialist claim and marking a shift from heterosexual binary boundaries.

6. Structure of the Thesis

At the beginning of my PhD, just a handful of literary texts dealing with desire and love between women were known by scholars and very few had been investigated. Since then, I have significantly expanded my corpus. In my thesis, I will thus explore more than twenty relevant texts which I have classified into two main categories – prose and drama. As a result, any section can include various literary genres, such as the epic poem, pastoral drama and novel. I do this in order to demonstrate how queer love and desire between women could be articulated in a variety of forms and had various meanings and usages. Organising my primary materials by genre also permits me to demonstrate how widely the trope of woman-to-woman love circulated in early modern Italian literature despite subsequent claims that it did not feature or was invisible. Furthermore, it allows me to do some justice to the sheer range of presentations and interpretations of woman-to-woman love and to begin to appreciate how generic conventions and expectations sometimes restricted, and sometimes liberated, authors

[23] As Heather Love (2007, p. 32) puts it, 'Rather than disavowing this history of marginality and abjection, I suggest that we embrace it, explaining the ways it continues to structure queer experiences in the present'.

keen to engage with the topic. Finally, to enrich my analysis and provide a better understanding of the context of the texts, I will occasionally engage with a variety of medical, legal, historical, and theological sources.

Some material I analyse in this thesis is potentially disturbing since it includes episodes containing references to topics such as paedophilia, incest and sexual violence, and/or violent/oppressive/derogatory language. Although these contents may be highly repugnant, I have opted to include them because they were circulating at the time, and therefore merit critical analysis as part of the discursive context.

In this first, introductory chapter, I set the scene for my research. In addition to describing my goals and methodological approach, and providing a literature review on my topic, I offer a concise overview of woman-woman relationships in early modern Italy. In Chapter One, 'Fiordispina and Bradamante: (R)Evolutions of a Love Story', I analyse the tale of Bradamante and Fiordispina as told by Boiardo and Ariosto, cross-referencing it with its nuanced literary context (usually referring to male-female relationships). As I will demonstrate, in drawing on classical sources (in particular, Lucretius's *De rerum natura* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and engaging with (the more recent) Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, Ariosto creates a sympathetic portrayal of queer female desire. Down the centuries, the Fiordispina tale has inspired several afterlives: sometimes they engage directly with Ariosto, at other times they seem to go beyond him. In this chapter, I will therefore explore some narratives that are more or less directly connected to Ariosto's 'istoria bella' of Bradamante and Fiordispina, ranging from the comic (Corsini's mock-heroic poem *Il torracchione desolato*) to the ironic and elegiac (Bruni's *Epistole eroiche*) and including supportive and proto-feminist works (Fonte's *Floridoro* and Bigolina's novel, *Urania*).

Ariosto's Fiordispina holds in common with other literary examples of woman-woman relationships several narrative devices such as cross-dressing, misplaced desires, gender ambiguity and mistaken identities. These features are particularly recurrent in the satirical texts I analyse in Chapter Two, 'Homoeroticism, Social Criticism and Sexual Education in Comic, Satirical and Hard-Core Texts'. These texts primarily (but not exclusively) concern the erotic adventures of *malmaritate* and *malmonacate*, who attempt to escape their unhappiness by practising homoerotic sex. As well as amusing their audience, comic and satirical authors used *donna-con-donna* depictions with a variety of aims. They sought to criticise values that were considered particularly important in early modern Italy, such as female chastity and marital fidelity (Agnolo Firenzuola's *Novella seconda* of the *Giornata prima* from *I Ragionamenti*), or offered a basic erotic education while making fun of the moral integrity of families and religious institutions (Aretino's *Ragionamento della Nanna e dell'Antonia* and *Dialogo della Nanna e della Pippa*; Pseudo-Aretino's *Dialogo di Giulia e Madalena;* Leti's *Seconda fenestra* from *Nuovo parlatorio delle monache*). They were also able to harshly condemn women's sexual ribaldry from a chauvinist perspective (*Il Manganello,* anonymous*)*. It is paramount to stress that comic and satirical writings were primarily addressed to a male audience, given their frequently risqué nature. Hence, relying on Quaintance's studies on 'male textuality' in Renaissance Venice, I argue that some comic or satirical texts featuring queer female desire might be used to strengthen homosocial male bonds, or to affirm the potency of virility over women's alleged incapability of finding pleasure together due to their biological 'lack' – a lack already stressed by Ricciardetto in Ariosto's poem.

In Chapter Three, '"Not the First Woman Loving a Woman": Troubling Bodies and Transvestite Desires in Comic Plays', I explore how five playwrights use this *donna-con-*

donna motif in a variety of nuanced ways. These depictions range from simple sexual innuendo (Dovizi da Bibbiena's *Calandria*) to self-aware queer desire (Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro*), and from enacted scenes of sexual intercourse and narcissistic masturbation (*La Veniexiana*, anonymous, and Gian Battista Andreini's *Amor nello specchio*) to a mock same-sex marriage (Scala's *Il finto marito*). Combined, all these works offer a taste of the range and complexity of the treatment given in comic theatre to woman-to-woman desire. Playwrights employ it to enrich and add complexity to their plots, postpone their conclusions, create suspense, provoke laughter and erotically stimulate their public. In doing this, they especially rely on some performative and kinaesthetic aspects of the theatrical experience, including titillation of the audience's voyeurism**.** Furthermore, like some satirical texts, comic plays may also use the *topos* of love between women to reinforce discourses on virility and heteronormativity, relying in particular on the notion circulating at that time of the impossibility of female same-sex love. On the other hand, nevertheless, texts such as Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro* show that, in the early modern period, *donna-con-donna* feelings and relationships might be publicly acknowledged without bias.

In Chapter Four, entitled '"Vani Amori" Among the Nymphs: Voyeurism, Narcissism and Women's Demands in Pastoral Drama', I consider four representative pastoral works, starting with the episode of the so-called *gara dei baci* extrapolated from Guarini's *Pastor fido*, probably the most influential Italian piece of pastoral literature at the time in the whole of Europe. Guarini offers his readership a queer female scene marked by sexual abundance and erotic rivalry between nymphs who compete to win over their friend Amarilli: yet, the winner is a cross-dressed man with a predatory attitude, Mirtillo. Voyeurism and celebration of virility are evident, and the scene cannot but recall Fiordispina's erotic encounter with Ricciardetto. The chance to annihilate the nymphs' desires in Guarini's text is also enhanced

by the pastoral tradition, since it often depicts these mythological women as passive figures, generally the objects of aggressive men's libidos. I will, therefore, cross-reference Guarini's narrative with pastoral works written by two proto-feminist writers who depict *donna-con-donna* love in a very different way. In Isabella Andreini's pastoral drama *Mirtilla*, the nymph Ardelia presents herself as a new Narcissus, while in both Campiglia's pastoral drama *Flori* and her eclogue *Calisa* the protagonist, the nymph Flori, defends the legitimacy of her homoerotic, chaste loves. I demonstrate that whilst Guarini creates a man-centric portrayal of same-sex female desire, Andreini and Campiglia build up sympathetic representations in which women are pro-actively engaged in pursuing their emotional as well as intellectual goals, thus becoming vehicles for proto-feminist messages.

Positive and supportive depictions of queer female love are also analysed in the final part of this thesis. In the Conclusion, 'The Never Ending "Istoria Bella"', taking inspiration from a passage from Marguerite Yourcenar's masterpiece *L'Œuvre au noir*, I reflect on two famous cases of *donna-con-donna* verse: Gaspara Stampa's sonnet *Non aspettò giamai focoso amante* for her friend Mirtilla and Forteguerri's cycle of sonnets addressed to Marguerite of Austria. I also briefly take into consideration further examples of homoerotic lyrical verses written by women, thus subverting the Petrarchan tradition which sees a woman as a mere object of the desire of the man-poet. In the final part of this chapter and, hence, of this thesis, I once more draw attention to the importance of a trans-genre examination of love and desire between women. Multiplicity and variety, I argue, are the keys to approaching the *donna-con-donna* dimension in early modern Italian literature as well as to destabilising a variety of givens and orthodoxies, such as the long-standing critical *topoi* of impossibility and invisibility. In this way, finally, I will also be able to contribute to a better understanding of early modern attitudes towards sex, gender and desire.

CHAPTER ONE.

FIORDISPINA AND BRADAMANTE: (R)EVOLUTIONS OF A LOVE STORY

1. Introduction

Almost without fail every history of literature about woman-woman relationships in the early modern period and beyond cites the story of Bradamante and Fiordispina as related in *Orlando furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto: a story of homoerotic love featuring passion, disappointment and longing. In addition to being the very first major Italian-language narrative to feature *donna-con-donna* desire, it is also one of the most influential in European literature.[24] It has also attracted specific interest in the field of visual arts.[25] Literary scholars have therefore given extensive attention to this tale: it has been investigated by experts in Ariosto and Italian studies, as well as by historians investigating women's homoerotic relationships. To highlight a few recent examples: in their renowned handbooks on Italian literature, Marco Santagata (2007, pp. 131-142) and Alberto Asor Rosa (2009, pp. 516-517) treat the tale of the two heroines as one that must be visited. Furthermore, in her transhistorical examination of love between women in literature, Emma Donoghue (2010)

[24] For its treatment in English literature, for example, see Mac Carthy (2019). In this chapter, given the limited space, I will provide only some information on the reception of my texts. Nonetheless, I see this kind of research as worthy of attention and scrutiny.

[25] It has inspired paintings such as Guido Reni's *Incontro di Bradamante e Fiordispina* (1635; Florence, Depositi delle Gallerie, inv. 1890, n. 787) and Giovanni Montini's *Bradamante e Fiordispina* (mid seventeenth century; Florence, Galleria Corsini), openly influenced by its predecessor. The episode was also the subject of frescoes, such as those attributed to Gaspar Menberger (1578) in the Sala di Fetonte of the Palazzetto della Retirata of Villa Mondragone (Monte Porzio Catone, Rome), owned by the Altemps family. On the iconographic status of the Bradamante-Fiordispina episode, see Caneparo (2014, pp. 360-362).

emphasises how Fiordispina 'insists on the undeniability of her desire for another woman' and also highlights how the conclusion of the tale, involving the substitution of two siblings (Ricciardetto/Fiordispina), was likely to be particularly influential.

In other words, Ariosto's tale is deemed vital for writers, literary critics and historians interested in woman-woman relationships. As I will show, in drawing on a variety of sources (ranging from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*), Ariosto creates a brilliant, sophisticated and sympathetic *donna-con-donna* story.[26] It will come as no surprise, then, that it is of paramount importance to my thesis. In this chapter, I will take into consideration a variety of well-established scholarship to present the episode to my readers and show its connections with romance-epic or Ariosto-inspired texts.

Furthermore, I will show that the Ariostan story of Bradamante and Fiordispina has gone on to have several afterlives over the centuries: sometimes they engage directly with Ariosto, at other times they seem to go beyond him. In the following pages, I will therefore explore a series of queer female episodes from Antonio Bruni's *Epistole eroiche,* Bartolomeo Corsini's mock-heroic poem *Il Torracchione Desolato,* Moderata Fonte's *Floridoro* and, finally, Giulia Bigolina's novel, *Urania*. Up to now these texts, directly or indirectly inspired by Ariosto, have received only infrequent investigation.

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[26] It is likely that Ariosto also draws inspiration from two fourteenth-century *cantari*, Piero da Siena's *La bella Camilla* and Antonio Pucci's *Reina d'oriente*. A *cantare* is a type of epic poem composed in Italy between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries and usually read in public spaces. 'Appreciated by all strata of society on account of their entertainment, aesthetic, and cultural potential, the *cantari* can justifiably be defined as the "mass literature" of the Italian Middle Ages' (Bendinelli Predelli, 2016). Therefore, their impact on the popular imagination and ideas cannot be underestimated. Both *La bella Camilla* and *Reina d'oriente* encompass the trope of queer female love, as well as cross-dressing, gender ambiguity, cases of mistaken identities and misplaced desires – all elements which are much appreciated by Ariosto, as the *Furioso* demonstrates. In these texts, cross-dressing and gender ambiguity are related to queer female desire in a humorous way: they embody playful provocations which Ariosto also chooses to use.

Analysing the legacy of the poet and literature's rich *donna-con-donna* genealogy is no mere philological exercise aimed at charting the course of the Ariosto episode over time; nor is it designed to evaluate or judge the impact it had on his followers. My purpose here, rather, is to broaden and enhance our understanding of the range and complexity of literary representations of love and desire between women. Of particular use in this respect is the notion of the 'lesbian continuum' theorised by Adrienne Rich. According to Rich (1980, pp. 648-649), the lesbian continuum:

> include[s] a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. (...) [it] embrace[s] many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the receiving of practical and political support (...).

Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985, pp. 2-3) provides similar insights when alluding to 'an intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations [which] links lesbianism with the other forms of women's attention to women', a 'continuum between "women loving women" and "women promoting the interests of women," extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic and political realms'.

Whilst scholarship has frequently treated woman-woman episodes as minor stories or risqué *divertissements,* without really contextualising them or putting them in dialogue with each other, I will explore them in relation to the notion of the lesbian continuum, which, in this thesis, I prefer to present in the form of a queer flow. often invisible and unstable yet persistent. I will also employ it as an extremely useful tool for framing my discussion, as well as a *fil rouge* throughout this chapter. Furthermore, the idea of a queer spectrum can

profitably resonate with Lilian Faderman's thinking on the so-called 'romantic friendships' and other forms of woman-woman relationships (1981) which have been developing from the Renaissance to the present. Faderman shows that these intense bonds are often dissimulated so that same-sex love, passion, affection and other heterodox feelings are rendered socially acceptable.[27] Such thinking can help me to look with more attention at some homosocial relationships. In so doing, nonetheless, I will endeavour not to desexualise women who desire women.

Social, cultural, religious and legal factors undoubtedly play a relevant role in shaping woman-woman bonds, which can be extremely varied. Interestingly, as Adrienne Rich (1980) remarks, the lesbian continuum can take forms such as those of mutual help, life in all-female communities, sorority and working together. In other words, it can evoke some typical elements of the romantic friendship sketched out by Faderman. Together, the two notions point towards the idea of a flexible and inclusive spectrum of literary queer experiences, which I will use as a guiding principle in this chapter. This will help me avoid the trap, and consequent anxiety, of classifying queer experiences under anachronistic and/or reductive labels; it will also allow me to contrast any over-simplification around the invisibility or impossibility of *donna-con-donna* relationships, both in literature and scholarship.

I will thus show how individual case studies cover a continuum which encompasses several forms, ranging from a sympathetic and positive attitude (Fonte and Bigolina) to one which is sympathetic but playful (Ariosto and Bruni) and, in a completely different vein, to an approach which is mocking and satirical (Corsini). Woman-woman attraction and affection

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[27] Faderman (1981, p. 16) maintains that these relations are 'relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital, since women in centuries other than ours often internalized the view of females as having little sexual passion. Thus they might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of overwhelming love and promises of eternal faithfulness, and yet see their passions as nothing more than effusions of the spirit'.

are at the core of some episodes, but writers more frequently employ them as narrative tools with which to engage with their readership, often in combination with a generous dose of gender fluidity and ambiguity, considered as a temporary means to reach a narrative goal rather than the object of thematic attention. It is frequently enabled by narrative devices such as cross-dressing, misplaced desires, mistaken identities (especially involving a set of twins, a woman and a man), disguise, androgyny, sexual ambiguity, misunderstandings and *coups de théâtre*. Writers, therefore, concern themselves with the narrative usefulness, rather than the feelings and self-identification, of gender-fluid characters. For this reason, such tales often close with reinstated heteronormativity.

It is also the case that authors such as Fonte and Bigolina can use queer love to convey notions such as the importance of women's agency and homosocial dimension, which recall the so-called proto-feminism or Renaissance feminism that we have already met in the introductory chapter. Their texts about strong bonds between women can offer new insights into proto-feminism, too.

To sum up, in analysing the episodes, I will pay attention to the evolutions and revolutions of the trope of queer female love and desire related to Fiordispina's 'istoria bella', and I will interrogate its collocations along the queer spectrum. I will thus be able to provide my readers with a rich and varied overview of the literary representations of *donna-con-donna* desire and the ways in which they were used between the end of the fifteenth and the second half of the seventeenth centuries.

2. Ariosto's Fiordispina and Her Forerunners

2.1 Hopeless Love? Boiardo's Fiordispina

The Ariostan tale of Bradamante and Fiordispina has its roots in Matteo Maria Boiardo's *L'inamoramento de Orlando* (better known as *Orlando innamorato*), a chivalric poem centred on the love of the Christian champion Orlando for the Saracen, and constantly-on-the-run, Angelica. It blends tropes and characters from the chivalric tradition (the so-called Matter of France, or the Carolingian cycle) and from the romance genre (the Matter of Britain). Boiardo began composing the poem in 1476 and published a first version in 1483, consisting of two parts and sixty cantos. The third part, which is incomplete, is made up of nine cantos which were interrupted, the author states, by the arrival of the King of France, Charles VIII, in Italy in 1494. They were definitively interrupted in that same year by Boiardo's death.

In the final canto Boiardo expresses concern about the king's descent into Italy, and it is here, too, that he interweaves the story involving Bradamante and Fiordispina (3.9.3-25) with which the poem ends. From the opening of the poem, it is clear that the former is destined to marry Ruggiero and to become one of the founders of the Este family. Yet, in the very last pages of the *Innamorato*, the heroine delights in an unexpected situation. One day, during a hunting trip in the forest, Bradamante meets Saracen princess Fiordispina, who takes her for a 'barone' (*ottava* 9:2) and immediately falls in love.[28] Amused by the misunderstanding, Bradamante pretends to be a 'cavaliero' (7:8): she refers to herself as a man, wears armour and acts like a brave knight, thus making Fiordispina 'ingannata alla vista' (11:7). In other words, Bradamante deliberately plays with her expression of gender identity.She is aware that the social perception of one's gender identity can also depend on a series of factors such as

[28] In this chapter I quote from Canova's edition (Boiardo, 2016).

clothing, physical appearance and ways of behaving, and in Butler's terms, performs masculinity consciously. She knows what 'makes' a man and wants to have fun with binary conventions.

Furthermore, along with her masculine appeal, she seems to adopt a traditional phallocentric and heteronormative perspective on *donna-con-donna* love and desire. Bradamante, in fact, believes that Fiordispina is going to be disappointed ('malcontenta': 11:6). The princess, the warrior maintains, is not going to derive any pleasure from her, since 'gratugia a gratugia poco acquista!' (11:8), thus implying that sex between women is unsatisfying. The expression is likely to allude to a similar one ('grattugia con grattugia non guadagna': 25:266-267) from Luigi Pulci's *Il Morgante* (1483), a famous comic poem that parodies epic and chivalric works. While Pulci metaphorically refers to an unproductive relationship between two similar elements, Boiardo coarsely alludes to sex between women. Moreover, Bradamante's allusion to the 'grattugia' potentially evokes the Latin notion of 'fricatrices'(literally 'women who rub against each other'), which, as we have seen in the introductory chapter, was used to disdainfully define women involved in same-sex relationships.

It is clear, then, that Bradamante wants to refer ironically to the notion – also advanced in other works – that it is impossible for a woman to give pleasure to another without the correct biological apparatus. This reading is confirmed by an allusion made by Bradamante: when Fiordispina offers her/him her heart, the warrior replies 'Questo dono è tale/ che a meritarlo non serìa bastante:/ se ben tutto mi dono, poco vale' (12:2-4). At first sight, Bradamante seems to humiliate herself before the princess: nothing of her/him can compete with the gracious present of Fiordispina's heart. Yet, in light of what Bradamante has said a few lines earlier, it is clear that she is ironically alluding to some kind of shortcoming: although she is

'tutt*o*' at Fiordispina's disposal, she will not be enough. Rather than being discouraged, however, the princess is won over by Bradamante's gallantry and cannot but exclaim: 'Piacer non ho magior, se Dio me aiute,/ che quando un forestier per me se onora' (15:5-6). Once again, Boiardo intriguingly plays with ambiguity. On the one hand, Fiordispina seems to offer her body and physical pleasure to her/him, as the expression 'per me' (that is to say, 'by means of my body') emphasises. On the other, she mentions the exquisite act of paying homage to the knight ('se onora') and the statement can, therefore, be read as evidence of her generous hospitality.[29] At the same time, her choice of her words may save her from coming over as too explicit and straightforward in expressing her desires.

With the aim of ironically highlighting the contrast between Fiordispina's ever-growing passion and the delusion she will inevitably face, Boiardo has the princess tell Bradamante: 'E non è cosa, a mia fé te prometto,/ che io non facessi per darti diletto!' (15:7-8). Fiordispina is utterly resolved to conquer Bradamante by any means: she sends her companions away so she can be alone with her/him, hoping that her beloved does not realise that s/he is walking into her 'trapola' (17:6). Nonetheless, as readers know, she is too risking deception at Bradamante's hands.

When, finally, the two are alone in an enchanting *locus amoenus* and the audience is anxiously anticipating what will happen next, Boiardo abruptly interrupts the story by saying, 'La una del'altra accesa è nel desìo:/ quel che li manca, ben sapre' dir io' (25:7-8). Once again, the notion that sex absolutely depends on a penis seems to emerge. Accordingly, the Bradamante and Fiordispina episode is littered with allusions to pain and disappointment, in

[29] The entry 'onorare' in the 1612 edition of the *Vocabolario della Crusca* reads (http://www.lessicografia.it/index.jsp): 'Fare onore, riverire'. In his edition of *Innamorato*, Andrea Canova (2016, p. 2166, n. 15.6) interprets this line as: 'che quando posso onorare uno straniero'.

addition to the reference to the useless homoerotic act of 'grattugiare'. For instance, back in *ottave* 3 and 4, Boiardo seems to anticipate the end of the love story by comparing Fiordispina to 'rugiada al sol', 'cera al foco', and a 'farfalin' too close to fire. Although all the metaphors point to the fact that the Spanish princess is bound to be harmed by the flames of her hopeless love, Boiardo does not specify when and how Fiordispina will be disappointed by Bradamante. In cutting off the episode, as well as the entirety of *Innamorato,* in such an unexpected way, he leaves his readers with a plethora of unanswered questions such as: will the Christian heroine pretend to be interested in Fiordispina? Or will Bradamante always refuse the princess? Will the warrior confess she is a woman, too? And will this heartbreak arise before or after physical contact between the two?

Scholars have provided several interpretations of Boiardo's sudden break. While some such as Charles Stanley Ross (2004, p. XXI) take into consideration a variety of factors which might have an impact on the conclusion of the poem (such as Boiardo's frail health, pressures of office or the political difficulties of the period), others seek to establish a connection between the suspension of the poem and the Fiordispina episode. According to DeCoste (2009, p. 66):

> By letting Fiordispina's erotic longing for Bradamante stand as the conclusion of his poem, by evoking queer desire at the moment of the narrative's failure while gesturing to the future conclusion of the narrative with the same breath, Boiardo expresses both defeat and optimism, both narrative failure and narrative possibilities.

While DeCoste (2009, p. 56) examines the correspondences between 'the despair of queer female longing' and 'the despair of the poet at the moment in which his creative energies have

been exhausted', I prefer to read Boiardo's interruption of Fiordispina's tale as a deliberate provocation to both his readership and his literary successors.

As I have shown, throughout the episode he employs the motif of queer female love in conjunction with some narrative strategies (such as cross-dressing, mistaken identities and misplaced desires) which are frequently paired with woman-woman desire. Through the ironic tone and subtle language he employs, Boiardo adopts a playful approach to the trope. His insistence on phallocentrism may in fact open up the possibility of its opposite, that is to say the humorous questioning of so-called deviancy. If Bradamante seems to be a spokesperson for the alleged impossibility of satisfying homoerotic love, and for the notion that sex absolutely depends on a penis, Boiardo cleverly fails to provide any definitive proof of this and makes the *donna-con-donna* desire visible in an extremely prominent position: the closing of *Innamorato*. Furthermore, he abruptly interrupts the story of Bradamante and Fiordispina at precisely the point at which something exciting is likely to happen. Interestingly, as Pio Rajna (1900, p. 965) suggests, 'certi pensieri della sorella di Rinaldo (9:11) parrebbero far prevedere una scena meno casta del solito'. Boiardo, therefore, titillates readers' curiosity and even, perhaps, their morbid interest in what two women can do together. In so doing, he opens up a space to be filled with expectations and desires. Needless to say, Ariosto accepts Boiardo's challenge and goes beyond his legacy.

2.2 Ariosto's 'Istoria Bella'

In drawing on a variety of genres ranging from those of Ovid's mythological saga and Lucretius's naturalistic poem through to *cantari* and the Renaissance epic, Ariosto blends his sources in order to build a text which can entertain as well as titillate his readership. At the

same time, he enlarges and reworks them so as to provide a sympathetic rendering of Fiordispina and Bradamante's adventures. If Ariosto recreates his gender-bending opening from Boiardo's version of the tale, he largely draws inspiration for Fiordispina's mournful monologue about how aberrant her homoerotic desire is from Ovid, overtly citing Iphis' lament in his *Metamorphoses* (Primo, 2007; DeCoste, 2009, pp. 82-83).[30] As we have seen in the introductory chapter of this thesis, Iphis is a maiden who has been brought up as a boy by her mother in order to save her life, since her father wanted a baby boy. Unaware of her wife's trick, Iphis' father betroths her to another woman, Ianthe, and, surprisingly, the two of them fall in love. The day before the wedding, Iphis desperately asks the goddess Isis for help and curses her destiny. Like Fiordispina, she maintains that love between women goes against nature and even female animals do not mate with other females: incest, zoophilia and paraphilia seem preferable to being attracted to another woman.[31] Moved by Iphis' words, merciful Isis at last turns Iphis into a man so s/he can ultimately marry Ianthe.

As I have said, Ariosto draws ample material from the mythological character's monologue. Patricia A. Parker (1979, p. 22) has noticed that an 'overwhelming sense of an excess of desire with nowhere to go' runs through *Furioso*, and this is especially manifest in the Fiordispina episode. As Mac Carthy (2019, p. 128) explains, the Italian poet 'picks up the latent, underspecified and underdetermined scenario of lesbian desire [in Ovid] which he exploits to the full'. For instance, she observes, Fiordispina suffers more harshly from

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[30] Traub (2002, pp. 276-325) comprehensively shows that Iphis' lament is also a topos in early modern English literature dealing with queer female desire.

[31] As I proceed to show, Ricciardetto's machist-like point of view has an impact on the narrative. In fact, when commenting on the lines in which Fiordispina states that Pasiphae, Mirra and Semiramis (respectively in love with a bull, her father and her son) were more fortunate than she is, Adams Groesbeck (1998, pp. 75-76) states that, for the princess, 'incest and bestiality are more imaginable than lesbianism'. As a result, 'The Fiordispina Ricciardetto creates in his anecdote absolutely requires that a woman's sexual partner have a penis. Sons, fathers, and bulls all meet that basic requirement'.

lovesickness and, in her affair with Bradamante/Ricciardetto, undergoes several twists and turns. She also experiences intimacy with Bradamante in her bed in a way which is both virginal and ardent. Despite Fiordispina seemingly berating herself for being the only woman in love with another, as we have seen, in so doing she cites the well-known story of Iphis. 'Unlike Iphis in the myth, Fiordispina seems almost to glory in her fate; despite being repeatedly told that she is in despair, we hear in her speeches more than a hint of perverse pride that nothing can "remedie" her "infection"', as the novelist and critic Emma Donoghue (2010) emphasises. Furthermore, the scholar relevantly highlights that Fiordispina claims that Nature has tied the 'knot' of queer female desire ('quel nodo/ che fece il mastro troppo diligente,/ Natura d'ogni cosa più possente.–': 37:6-8), whilst Iphis believes that her feelings are an offence against Nature. It is also worth highlighting, therefore, that when Fiordispina places herself on a spectrum of woman-woman desire, she does not recognise the existence of a genealogy but, at the same time, seems subtly pleased to be the first to discover a new, natural desire.

Accordingly, there are few works in the history of Italian literature that offer such a variety of forms of desire as the *Furioso*. Ariosto seems to revel in exploring this vast and exciting field, playing with its boundaries and investigating its consequences. Orlando's own story is a perfect example of this variety, but Fiordispina's is equally rich. Several sources ranging from the classical age to his own time nurtured Ariosto's fantasy, offering him a cast of characters, images and episodes dealing more or less directly with queer female desire.

From the *Innamorato*, not only does Ariosto inherit the Bradamante-Fiordispina tale and several narrative threads to be used in his *Furioso*, but also a love for gender ambiguity and for toying with his readership. There is a critical consensus, however, that the *Furioso* cannot remotely be deemed a mere sequel to Boiardo's interrupted poem, thanks to its overwhelming

richness of sources and invention, its impressive capacity to intrigue the reader and, last but not least, Ariosto's mastery of the art of poetry. This was the reason for the poem's exceptional success: it quickly became a best-seller, read by everyone at court, at home and in the *piazze*, as Daniel Javitch (1991) comprehensively illustrates. Furthermore, its impact on artistic and literary traditions, from the popular to the most sophisticated, cannot be underestimated, as the Sicilian puppet (*pupi*) theatre performances demonstrate.

As the title of the work suggests, it centres on the folly of Orlando, who loses his wits after discovering that Angelica is in love with another man, Medoro. Alongside this story, Ariosto develops a multitude of other narratives, more or less loosely related to the primary plot and frequently dealing with free-ranging desire. For this reason, Sergio Zatti (2015) has defined *Furioso* '[n]el canone letterario occidentale (…) la più straordinaria macchina narrativa del desiderio'.

Ariosto's Fiordispina tale is far from being a mere cog in this perfect machine, nor is it a simple retelling of Boiardo's story. On the contrary, its very position in *Furioso* testifies to its importance, since it is placed in Canto 25, with its roots in Canto 22. It thus frames the central crisis of the poem, coming just after the detailed account of Orlando's descent into madness (Cantos 23-24) after he discovers the affair between his beloved Angelica and Medoro. In Canto 22, after escaping from Atlante's castle, Bradamante and Ruggiero are finally reunited, but only for a short while. On their way, they stumble upon a mourning woman who tells the couple that a nameless young man is about to be executed by the Spanish King Marsilio, because, disguised as a woman, he spent the night with the princess (22.38-41). Although Bradamante does not know the identity of the poor man (who, in fact, is her brother Ricciardetto), Ariosto ironically tells us that she is particularly moved by his disgrace, as if the boy were her brother (22.42:1-4). Ruggiero and Bradamante, therefore, decide to help the

prisoner, but, as events unfold, are unfortunately soon separated again. Thus, in Canto 25, we find a lone Ruggiero saving the life of the mysterious boy, whom the hero has mistaken for his betrothed, thanks to their striking resemblance (20-21). Ricciardetto is, in fact, Bradamante's twin brother. He explains to Ruggiero how he has ended up at the court of King Marsilio because of his love for Marsilio's daughter, Fiordispina.

According to Ricciardetto, one day Fiordispina came across an enchanting sleeping knight in a forest. The warrior was Bradamante, wearing armour and a sword, and with her hair cut short because of a wound. Completely captivated by her, the Saracen princess invites the stranger to go hunting with her. As we have already seen, Boiardo interrupts the episode at this most exciting point. Ariosto not only continues the story; he also significantly expands its potential to embrace same-sex desire. Indeed, Ariosto skilfully develops the motif of queer female love and interlaces it more closely with cross-dressing, gender ambiguity and cases of mistaken identity. Whereas Boiardo uses those elements primarily as narrative devices to add complexity to his plot, Ariosto takes things further and subtly reveals their consequences on a plurality of interpretative levels, thus encouraging his readers to reflect on notions of sex, gender and desire.

Right from the outset of the story, therefore, Ariosto incorporates into his Fiordispina tale a generous dose of gender confusion, as well as uncontrolled sexual desire, rendering them at once explicit and latent, potential and real. Furthermore, when Bradamante and Fiordispina are finally alone, the princess' passion strongly emerges and she cannot help but reveal her burning love by means of her body language and, finally, an intense kiss. Whilst, in the *Orlando innamorato*, the Christian fighter opts for pretending to be a man and having fun with Fiordispina, Ariosto's Bradamante, by contrast, is totally bewildered and quickly

confesses herself to be a 'donzella' (31:6).[32] Yet, 'non si smorza una scintilla/ del fuoco de la donna innamorata' (32:5-6) and Fiordispina laments her sad fate. Nevertheless, that very night, the princess invites Bradamante to her castle and invites the knight into her bed. Whilst the warrior is sleeping quietly, Fiordispina cannot rest because of her burning desire and, when she finally falls asleep for a few moments, dreams about Bradamante 'cangiata in miglior sesso' (42:8). Furthermore, in order to discover whether a change in Bradamante's body has actually occurred, she touches it. Unfortunately for Fiordispina, 'ritrova pur sempre il sogno vano' (43:8), so she asks her pagan gods to make her wish come true.

The following day, Bradamante, eager to put a stop to the deplorable situation, goes back home to Montalbano. Upon her arrival, she tells her family what happened to her. While everyone seems moved by Fiordispina's sad lament (48:5-6), Ricciardetto, who has already met the Saracen maiden and has been entranced by her beauty, decides to profit from her misfortune by going to Fiordispina's court and pretending to be Bradamante. There, s/he is warmly welcomed by the princess and the two spend the night together. Ricciardetto/Bradamante then reveals s/he has been turned into a man by enchantment (as happens to Ovid's Iphis) after s/he went to the aid of a nymph assaulted by a faun. Fiordispina, confused, feels a need to verify personally if Bradamante has finally become a man: she hardly believes that her dream has come true ('Fa, Dio (disse ella), se son sogni questi,/ Ch'io dorma sempre, e mai più non mi desti': 67:7-8). In order to dissipate any doubt, they make love and Ricciardetto/Bradamante proudly proves his definitive virility in a scene where the *topos* of love as a battle is described in intense erotic detail.

[32] Here, I cite passages from Segre's edition (Ariosto, 1976).

The experiment is so successful that the couple spend a few happy months together until King Marsilio discovers the man's deceit and sentences him to death. As we have previously seen, it is Ruggiero who saves Ricciardetto's life when he is about to be burned alive,[33] because he believes that Ricciardetto is his beloved Bradamante given their striking resemblance to each other. In order to explain what is going on, Ricciardetto therefore tells his saviour about his adventures, including what has happened to Bradamante and Fiordispina. In this way, Ariosto formally redesigns, and offers an alternative conclusion to, the narrative of the two heroines which was began by Boiardo.

This conclusion, even if it seems heteronormative, cannot suppress the abundant queer desire that suffuses the whole episode, as critics stress. Ita Mac Carthy (2019, p. 128), in fact, emphasises how much the desire in the tale is 'as ambivalent as it is irrepressible. Possible and impossible, overt and covert, hetero-normative and homoerotic, satisfied and denied', testifying to Ariosto's mastery in playing with both patent and latent content. Similarly, Deanna Shemek (1998, p. 115) highlights 'the non-correspondence of conventional gender categories with the desires and capacities of human beings' represented in the tale as well as in its consequences. Valentina Denzel (2009), by contrast, develops things even further, maintaining that Ariosto's text attempts to 'confine woman-woman love within an impossible utopia' (my translation).[34] For his part, Ferroni (1982, pp. 144-145) remarks upon the implications of the unstable conclusion of the story, as 'la chiusura della vicenda (per la quale non c'è bisogno di nessuna agnizione, di nessun rientro in scena di Bradamante) non propone ricomposizioni, sintesi di contrari, ma lascia (…) un residuo di "martire" e di "dolor" non

[33] Valentina Denzel (2009) suggests that Ricciardetto/Bradamante is condemned for his/her alleged same-sex relationship, since the pyre was traditionally used for heretics and sodomites.
[34] 'réléguer l'homosexualité féminine vers une utopie de l'impossible' (Denzel, 2009).

facilmente dialettizabile'. Accordingly, as we have seen, the whole story is intentionally marked by ambiguity: Bradamante loves Ruggiero, who is attracted to Ricciardetto/Bradamante, who cross-dresses to win the heart and, even more so, the body of Fiordispina.

Several questions also remain unanswered regarding Ricciardetto's gender and sexuality, given that he is the (extremely partisan) teller of the story. Stefano Giovannuzzi (2001) has correctly identified him as featuring 'gallismo' and egocentrism, and this seems to be confirmed by many aspects of his telling of the tale of Fiordispina. For instance, in recounting his first encounter with Fiordispina, Ricciardetto tells his listeners that her embrace and kisses have 'dirizz[ato] Amor' (25.54:4), using a metaphor that could just as well allude to an erection as to the direction of his desire. Furthermore, in an attempt to affirm his heteronormativity and in describing how much he was liked by men at the court of Fiordispina when he cross-dressed as Bradamante, Ricciardetto cannot help but underline, tongue-in-cheek, that which 'sotto gonne/ si nascondesse valido e gagliardo' (56:7-8). In other words, in his telling of the story, Ricciardetto seizes the opportunity to announce his virility and purposefully contrasts anything that might threaten it, such as the fact that Fiordispina seems more interested in Bradamante than worried about her biological lack; or that his female attire at Fiordispina's castle arouses homoerotic desire in men who look at him/her 'con lascivo sguardo' (56:8). The tale, therefore, can also be 'reinterpreted as an open-ended, problematic fable about the definition of masculinity' and one could say – as Adams Groesbeck (1998, pp. 75-76) does – that it 'seriously undermines customary definition of masculine authority in the poem'.

Because the story is told from Ricciardetto's perspective, one can never truly access what Bradamante actually experiences. It is likely, too, that what one hears from him about

Fiordispina's hopes and desires is deeply influenced by his *gallismo*. Ricciardetto seems intent on marginalising, shadowing and condemning all things related to queer female desire. Thus, when it comes to homoeroticism, Fiordispina and Bradamante are respectively presented as embarrassed and confused. This resonates with what Butler suggests in *The Psychic Life of Power* about the process of naturalisation of heterosexuality. Drawing on Freud's theory of melancholia, she argues (1997, p. 139) that, since homosexuality 'happens only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal', consequently 'heterosexuality naturalizes itself by insisting on the radical otherness of homosexuality'. Significantly, in various epic-chivalric texts (including the *Furioso*), the women who show strong, queer desire are connotated as Others in several ways – geographically, morally, religiously, and so on. Usually, they come from the so-called Orient or are affiliated with it. Fiordispina, for instance, is pagan. Furthermore, with their transgressive desire, they somehow tempt virtuous, Christian heroes as well heroines, who, thus, risk the abandonment of their high moral missions. By contrast, in the tale of Bradamante and Fiordispina, Ricciardetto significantly presents himself as a fighter able to subjugate the Other, the Different.

What is more, the *topos* of love as a joust or a war has always been present in Italian literature but, in this tale, it importantly becomes more than a motif. Ricciardetto, in fact, defines making love as an 'amoroso assalto' and Fiordispina as a 'nimica' (25.68:2 and 8 respectively). He is able to triumph thanks to his virility, which he even identifies with his emblem ('e lo stendardo piantovi di botto,/ e la nimica mia mi caccio sotto': 68:7-8). What emerges is a view of man-woman sex as an act of male conquest and subjugation of women, a view that we will encounter again in this chapter. In Ricciardetto's case too, I argue that ethnography and religious affiliation play a role in his sexual *guerra santa*, but, as far as I am aware, scholars have not paid great attention to them. For instance, Jo Ann Cavallo (2013, p.

133) maintains that, besides consolidating socially appropriate gender identities, as highlighted by Finucci (1992, p. 202), in the Fiordispina tale 'the poet seeks to reinforce socially correct national and religious identities'. However, Cavallo does not investigate the modalities in which, and why, differences of religion might profoundly affect the relationship between Ricciardetto and Fiordispina.

Notwithstanding Ricciardetto's attitude, as Donoghue (2010) emphasises, 'while Fiordispina's position as the butt of Ricciardetto's joke might seem a humiliating one, the length, eloquence, and courage of her speeches express her passion for the Amazon with memorable force. More than any other heroine in her position in Renaissance literature, she insists on the undeniability of her desire for another woman'. Accordingly, we should not assume that Ricciardetto's voice is Ariosto's. The poet, in fact, enjoys presenting various and sometimes even contradictory voices in order to move, amuse or surprise his readership. It is also worth stressing that the poet subtly blends Ricciardetto's words with irony, thus reminding his readers that the man's version of the story is personal and partial: he is more interested in depicting a supportive and playful *donna-con-donna* portrayal rather than celebrating Ricciardetto's virility.[35]

[35] Interestingly, this may seem at odds with some famous verses from Ariosto's own *Satira 6* (1524-1525), addressed to Pietro Bembo (Ariosto, 1984, pp. 70-71), in which the poet complains about several 'vizii nefandi' of male humanists, including sodomy (25-33). As the literary genre of satire requires, the poem fluctuates between sarcasm, bitter irony and homophobic moralising. Thus, according to the poet, anyone who frequents humanist scholars would do better literally watching their backs ('È gran periglio / a dormir seco e volgierli la schiena'; lines 32-33) (Iannucci, 1979; Romei, 1984).

2.3 Love and Folly in Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*

If Ariosto's debt to Ovid has been largely explored by critics, his indebtedness to Lucretius is less frequently taken into consideration. In particular, and surprisingly, as far as I am aware scholars have not yet investigated the possible connections between Ariosto's Fiordispina episode and Book 4 of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) (first century B.C.E.), although this long Latin poem had a huge impact on Renaissance culture after its rediscovery by the humanist, Poggio Bracciolini in 1417.[36] Drawing on the physical theory of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, Lucretius describes the causes, processes and consequences of a myriad of natural phenomena. In particular, in Book 4, he analyses the mechanics of sense perception, thought and some bodily functions. In so doing, the poet also offers his reflections on love and its implications, including the turmoil of sexual passion, which can provoke pain and folly.[37] As we know, Ariosto is greatly interested in these topics: his Orlando is a perfect example of the disruptive power of love. His story shows the pitiful ways in which even an invincible warrior can turn, when heartbroken, into some fragile, mourning creature. What is most interesting, in my view, is not the philological correspondence between Lucretius' and Ariosto's texts, but the modality in which the latter engages with the former and transforms the ideas and the words of the Latin poet into a sophisticated means to explore queer female desire in a playful and intelligent way. In particular, I argue that Ariosto employs Lucretius as a sort of 'handbook' on the folly brought about by love and its consequences. Fiordispina experiences at first-hand the extent of the love madness illustrated by Lucretius and the remedies he suggests. By evoking the

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[36] On the attention paid to Lucretius in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries see as a minimum Brown (2010); Greenblatt (2011); Palmer (2014); Norbrook, Harrison, and Hardi (2015).
[37] Lucretius is said by St Augustine to have turned crazy and committed suicide because of a love potion. Consequently, some find in Book 4 allusions to the author's personal experience.

universality of love, pain and insanity, Ariosto thus places Fiordispina in a transhistorical and trans-genre continuum of lovers which goes beyond gender, religious and ethnic boundaries, taking in the pagan Spanish princess as well as the Christian champion Orlando.

As I have said, in Book Four Lucretius describes in detail why and how lovesickness can happen. Those wounded by love tend to get as close as possible to their lovers. As Lucretius lived in a society in which male homoeroticism was usually tolerated, he states that the lover can be 'a boy with girlish limb' (2000.4:1053), whilst Fiordispina is attracted to a woman with 'viril fattezze' (25:5).[38] In order to extinguish the flames which are burning them, Lucretius explains that lovers may kiss each other voraciously.[39] Similarly, Ariosto insists several times on the wounds caused by the flames of love in poor Fiordispina, who, in her encounter with Bradamante, contrives to kiss her/him in an attempt to diminish her pain (25:3-8). Despite the knight immediately clarifying that she is a woman and Fiordispina asserting that she is the only creature on Earth in love with another woman, the Spaniard is still enflamed by passion (32-33) since she cannot untangle the knot of Nature. This 'nodo' recalls the strong 'knots of Venus' (4:1148) one cannot easily break free from, as cited by Lucretius. As is well known, the metaphors of burning love, love wounds and the knots of Venus are common *topoi* in Latin and, recently, Italian love poetry. Ovid uses them to make his scientific description more vivid and poetic, while Ariosto employs them to embellish his

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[38] Lucretius (2007, 4:1052-1058): 'sic igitur Veneris qui telis accipit ictus,/ sive puer membris muliebribus hunc iaculatur/ seu mulier toto iactans e corpore amorem,/ unde feritur, eo tendit gestitque coire/ et iacere umorem in corpus de corpore ductum;/ namque voluptatem praesagit muta cupido./ Haec Venus est nobis (…)' ('Therefore if someone's injured by the point of Venus' dart,/ Whether a boy with girlish limbs has launched it at the heart,/Or a woman shooting the arrows of love from her entire frame –/ He seeks the source and longs to mingle with it all the same,/ To cast his fluid to another body – appetite/ Wordlessly anticipating pleasure and delight./This is what our Venus is.'). In this section, I cite passages from Stallings's edition of *De rerum natura*.
[39] 4:1086-1087: 'namque in eo spes est, unde est ardoris origo,/ restingui quoque posse ab eodem corpore flammam' ('For herein lies the hope: they think that they can quench the fire/ by means of the same body that ignited their desire').

narrative, as well as to engage with his literary context, in the process showing his mastery in developing tropes, including that of queer female desire, in a personal and original way.

I take the view that the Ferrarese poet also overtly refers to Lucretius in the most striking scene of the Fiordispina tale, the one which takes place in her bedroom. Although the two women spend the night in the same bed, the princess cannot rest peacefully because of her overwhelming, unstoppable desire for her companion. Fiordispina can only sleep for a short time, in 'quel breve sonno è tutto imaginoso' (25.42:6) and, thus, she believes she has seen Bradamante turned into a man, as she wholeheartedly wishes. The two poets imply that the view of the beloved in dreams (25.42-43) or the faint idea of a face[40] cannot actually provoke physical enjoyment, since they both easily fade. Nonetheless, both Ariosto and Lucretius claim that, in their minds, lovers tend to cultivate images of the beloved, nurturing them with faint hope. People in love are like those who, in their dreams, seek to drink, but, despite their efforts, cannot slake their thirst, as Lucretius vividly shows (4:1097-1102):

> As in a dream, when a man drinks, trying to allay
> his thirst, but gets no real liquid to douse his body's fire,
> and struggles pointlessly after mere images of water,
> and though he gulps and gulps from a gushing stream, his throat is dry,
> so Venus teases with images – (...).[41]

[40] 4:1094-1096: 'ex hominis vero facie pulchroque colore/ nil datur in corpus praeter simulacra fruendum/ tenvia; quae vento spes raptast saepe misella.' ('But of a human face's bloom and beauty, what comes in/ for the body to enjoy? Just images, flimsy and thin,/ and the wind often snatches even this scrap of hope away').
[41] 'ut bibere in somnis sitiens quom quaerit et umor/ non datur, ardorem qui membris stinguere possit,/ sed laticum simulacra petit frustraque laborat/ in medioque sitit torrenti flumine potans,/ sic in amore Venus simulacris ludit amantis'.

Lovers cannot quench their thirst for love and are tormented by hallucinations, too. Fiordispina's altered mind experiences the same pitiful condition when she tries to rest close to Bradamante. The princess longs for the knight, struck by an illness similar to one in which someone obsessively dreams of water while actually being thirsty (25.43:1-6):

> Come l'infermo acceso di gran sete,
> s'in quella ingorda voglia s'addormenta,
> nell'interrotta e turbida quiete,
> d'ogn'acqua che mai vide si ramenta;
> così a costei di far sue voglie liete
> l'imagine del sonno rappresenta.

Seeking relief, Lucretius' lovers and Ariosto's Fiordispina look for something that can appease their spirits. Having physical contact with their beloved seems a good solution; but Lucretius' lovers finally find that it is completely useless.[42] Fiordispina similarly explores Bradamante's body, looking in vain for what she desires the most, that is to say, a penis (43:5-8):

> Così a costei [: Fiordispina] di far sue voglie liete
> L'imagine del sonno rappresenta.
> Si desta; e nel destar mette la mano,
> E ritrova pur sempre il sogno vano.

[42] 4:1102-1104: '(…) nec satiare queunt spectando corpora coram/ nec manibus quicquam teneris abradere membris/ possunt errantes incerti corpore toto' ('(…) lovers can't satisfy/ the flesh however they devour each other with the eye,/ nor with hungry hands roving the body can they reap/anything from the supple limbs that they can take and keep').

Like the lover described by Lucretius, Fiordispina is deceived by the images in her dreams and can touch, but not enjoy, her partner's body. They are both involved in an *amore vano*, a hopeless love, since they cannot obtain sexual satisfaction, and their pain is accentuated by the physical closeness of their beloved. Still unsatisfied, Fiordispina is deeply saddened by Bradamante's departure after their night spent together. Given this, it comes as no surprise that, when Ricciardetto arrives at her court and pretends to be the masculinised version of her sister, showing that s/he is eager to finally give Fiordispina what she desires so much, the princess is more than happy to trust his/her words. Once again, she acts like Lucretius' lover, who sees in their beloved exactly what they wish to see, even if their flaws are also crystal-clear.[43] Fiordispina yearns to believe that Bradamante has changed her sex and therefore accepts Ricciardetto's lies as truth. In consequence the two can at last have sex together and spend months in pure delight, until the day the man is arrested for his fraud. Furthermore, despite the passionate love scenes involving Fiordispina and Ricciardetto painted by Ariosto, a sexual relationship always lacks something even when fulfilling, according to Lucretious, as lovers cannot actually melt together and (metaphorically) penetrate each other's body.[44] As

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[43] 4:1160-1169: 'nigra melichrus est, inmunda et fetida acosmos,/ caesia Palladium, nervosa et lignea dorcas,/ parvula, pumilio, chariton mia, tota merum sal,/ magna atque inmanis cataplexis plenaque honoris./ balba loqui non quit, traulizi, muta pudens est;/ at flagrans, odiosa, loquacula Lampadium fit./ ischnon eromenion tum fit, cum vivere non quit/ prae macie; rhadine verost iam mortua tussi./ at nimia et mammosa Ceres est ipsa ab Iaccho,/ simula Silena ac Saturast, labeosa philema' ('The black girl is brown sugar. A slob that doesn't bathe or clean/ is a Natural Beauty; Athena if her eyes are greyish-green./ A stringy bean-pole's a gazelle. A midget is a sprite,/ cute as a button. She's a knockout if she's giant's height./ The speech-impaired has a charming lip; if she can't talk at all/ she's shy. The sharp-tongued shrew is spunky, a little fireball./ If she's too skin-and-bones to live, she's a slip of a girl, if she/ Is sickly, she's just delicate, though half dead from TB./ Obese, with massive breasts? – a goddess of fertility!/ Snub-nosed is pert, fat lips are pouts begging to be kissed –').

[44] 4:1105-1114: 'denique cum membris conlatis flore fruuntur/ aetatis, iam cum praesagit gaudia corpus/ atque in eost Venus ut muliebria conserat arva,/ adfigunt avide corpus iunguntque salivas/ oris et inspirant pressantes dentibus ora,/ ne quiquam, quoniam nihil inde abradere possunt/ nec penetrare et abire in corpus corpore toto;/ nam facere inter dum velle et certare videntur./ usque adeo cupide in Veneris compagibus haerent,/ membra voluptatis dum vi labefacta liquescunt' ('Lastly, when their limbs are tangled, and they pluck youth 's bloom,/ and bodies have a foretaste of the pleasures that now loom,/ and Venus is about to sow the woman 's field with seed,/ they grasp each other and mix the moisture of their mouths in greed,/ and panting heavily, press teeth in lips, but all in vain –/ there's nothing of the other they can rub off and retain./ Nor can one body wholly enter the

confirmation of this, despite their passionate encounters, in the end Fiordispina and Ricciardetto are separated.

Given the similarities between the passages so far examined from *The Nature of Things* and the tale of Bradamante and Fiordispina, I submit that Ariosto re-uses some notions and images from Lucretius to go on to create passages of dialogue between the characters of Fiordispina and Orlando. Through the experiences of these characters, Ariosto displays the different types of madness that arise from excessive love, as well as different survival strategies. Luckily for Fiordispina, she does not go mad with pain like Orlando although she seriously risks doing so. The champion embodies all the worst consequences of love imagined by Lucretius. Consequently, the hero cannot save his own wits, but needs someone else to do so, the English Duke Astolfo, who will recover them from the moon (Canto 34) and then give them back to him (39). Conversely, Fiordispina is much more independent and, like Angelica, the Spanish princess is far from eager to be an object of someone else's desire: rather, she is pro-actively concerned with getting what she longs for. To sum up, once again Ariosto uses one of his literary sources, in this case Lucretius, to nurture his supportive depiction of Fiordispina and build a narrative queer space where the princess can attempt to affirm her agency in accordance with her queer wishes.

3. Fiordispina's Afterlives

It can be expected that Ariosto's tale of Bradamante and Fiordispina gained popularity among artists and writers because of a certain early modern fascination with queer female

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other and pass away –/ for it seems sometimes that this is what they struggle to essay,/ such do they clasp in the chains of Venus, greedily and tight,/ while limbs go limp, melted with the heat of their delight').

desire and love. In this section, I examine four of Bradamante and Fiordispina's most important afterlives, frequently overlooked by scholars, with a view to demonstrating how sixteenth and seventeenth-century authors relished the creative opportunities offered by Ariosto's depiction of female same-sex desire and affection to construct narratives of their own that ranged from open eroticism to close, yet ambiguous, friendship. These four writers, two men (Bartolomeo Corsini and Antonio Bruni) and two women (Moderata Fonte and Giulia Bigolina), portray different types of woman-woman relationship to fulfil an equally broad range of goals, from amusing readers at the expense of women with queer feelings to expressing serious proto-feminist sentiment.

3.1 'Una donzella in vece d'un garzone': Cross-Dressing and Queer Desire in Corsini's *Il torracchione desolato*

Entertaining the readership with a risqué story is, undoubtedly, one of the goals of *Il torracchione desolato* (c. 1660), penned by Tuscan poet, physician, writer of chronicles and translator Bartolomeo Corsini (1606-1673). The work was only published in 1768 and, like its author, is hardly remembered by scholars (Capucci, 1983 is one notable exception) and almost completely neglected by readers, with the last edition of the book being published in 1887.[45] It is a mock-heroic poem set in the Mugello (an area close to Florence) in the wake of the success of Alessandro Tassoni's *La secchia rapita*, first edited in 1621 and one the most renowned parodies of epic and chivalric poems.

[45] Although information about the reception of the *Torracchione* over the centuries is not available, the abundance of editions, as well as the relevant number of copies of the books in all regions of Italy and all kinds of public libraries, testify as to its popularity.

The ‘torracchione desolato’ is the place where princess Elisea is kept prisoner by her kidnappers. After several adventures, Count Alcidamante eventually sets her free. As the literary genre of mock poem prescribes, the volume features monsters, enchantments, battles, knights and damsels in distress, and frequently makes fun of tropes, situations and characters from the epic and chivalric tradition.

Although Corsini draws his graceful style from the chivalric tradition, in Book II, Canto 15 he offers a parodic, short, and risqué version of the Bradamante-Fiordispina tale. In this incarnation, rather than being two noble virgins playing with social and gender conventions, the two protagonists are two drunken women, Armilla – the daughter of champion Gianmaria from Milan and a valorous warrior who rejects typical feminine activities –[46] and one of her female companions. As in the *Furioso*, the scene is set at night and intimate. Nonetheless, whilst in Ariosto’s poem the nocturnal episode is imbued with subtle erotism, in the *Torracchione* an openly sexual climax is quickly reached, thus confirming that ‘La vena scurrile di comica festevolezza, tradizionale nel “genere” [mock-heroic], trasmoda talvolta verso forme di una torbida oscenità’ (Capucci, 1983).

Wine, darkness, love and physical closeness push Armilla and her friend to start gently caressing each other but they soon become aroused (15.2):

> Quando le due Donzelle, omai lascive
> fatte dal vin, dal bujo, e dall’amore,
> e dal giacere insieme; oh troppo vive
> occasioni a fugare ogni timore!
> Di toccarsi pian pian non sono schive
> a vicenda i bei membri, onde l’ardore

[46] ‘ed alla lana o al lino/ mai non piegò la valorosa mano’ (VII.69:4-5). In these pages, I refer to the 1768 edition.

che col diletto si confonde, e mesce,
sempre in loro s'avanza, e sempre cresce.

The two *donzelle* are not shy with each other and, in contrast to Fiordispina, do not spend their time asking themselves whether their desires are licit or natural: rather, they follow their instincts and enjoy what is going on. Nonetheless, from time to time, Armilla regrets that, despite the impressive similarity between her beloved, absent Battista and the woman close to her, she cannot embrace Battista himself but a mere 'donzella' (15.3):

Talor la riamata amante Armilla
dice fra se, compagna mia gentile,
per voi questo mio cuor arde, e sfavilla;
troppo all'amato mio se' tù simile,
fussi tù quell'istesso; oh che tranquilla
sorte saria la mia! Ma il fato ostile
di me si burla, e avanti (ahimè) mi pone
una Donzella in vece d'un garzone.

Like Fiordispina, Armilla does not seem fully satisfied by her sensual encounter, yet she does not reject her friend's caresses. Perfectly adhering to the typical subversions of the mock-heroic genre, Armilla and her partner signally fail to live up to expectations of women in a chivalric world: they are more and more enflamed, shameless, and explicit in showing their sexual drive. They also distance themselves from Ariosto's heroines by appearing never to interrogate themselves about what they are doing; nor does Corsini display their thoughts or emotions since he is fully focused on describing their libido.

When, while stripping her companion, Armilla discovers that she is in truth her lover Battista, her passion intensifies even more (15.4):

> Ma l'altra a cui da desiar non resta
> se non sol di goder d'Armilla appieno;
> a novelle dolcezze ogn'or s'appresta,
> baciandole il bel volto, o 'l bianco seno;
> divenuta (che più) poco modesta,
> scioglie all'avida voglia in modo il freno,
> e s'adopra sì ben, che Armilla intanto
> s'accorge d'un garzone essere accanto.

Although taken aback by the discovery, Armilla is impatient to fully enjoy the body of the man. As in the *Furioso*, the pair's lovemaking is represented as a 'dolce guerra' (15.9:1) between 'il cavalier d'amore' and 'la bella avversaria' (15.8:1-2). However, Corsini develops this further: the sexual battle between the two evokes the *topos* of love as a joust, as well as the Fiordispina- Ricciardetto episode, as well as adding new, vivid details. For instance, Corsini tells us that the battle has been intense, but Battista is neither wounded nor scarred. Although both partners seem satisfied and content at the end of the war of love, the man looks like the actual winner as he has convincingly demonstrated himself to be a 'uom di valore' (15.8:3), presumably pleasing his partner with what a woman cannot (allegedly) give her.

It is worth stressing that, once again, intimacy between a man and a woman who has experienced queer desire is presented in terms of a battle. On the one hand, as I have said, this recalls the trope of love as a passionate war. On the other, it evokes the idea of a man using his penis as a weapon of power to re-establish sexual male authority, as Ricciardetto does in recounting the Fiordispina episode. Whilst, as we have seen, Ariosto's tale weaves irony and

ambiguity into the fabric of his narrative to the extent that even Ricciardetto's self-celebratory words sound too triumphalist to be completely true, Corsini seems to be more intent upon affirming the superiority of men over women. In so doing, he might well be drawing on several tropes of the *infirimatas mulieris* in need of curing which he often references in other works, including several epigrams and poems against women (Capucci, 1983). In conclusion, his rewriting of the Fiordispina tale offers a lively portrait of two queer lovers but, by contrast with Ariosto's, it lacks any profundity and sensitiveness.

3.2 'Se maschio ti desio, donna ti trovo': Bruni's *Epistole eroiche*

Compared to *Il torracchione desolato*, the elegiac retelling of Fiordispina's story penned by Antonio Bruni (1593-1635) seems more in line with Ariosto's more sympathetic depiction of same-sex love. Bruni was a prolific writer, man of the church and friend of the most renowned poet of the Seicento, Giambattista Marino (Mutini, 1972). In line with the literary fashion for letters in verse that was widespread in Europe between the middle of the sixteenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries in the wake of Ovid's *Heroides* (and owing much to Marino's *Lettera Claretti* (1614)), Bruni authored a well-respected collection of fictional letters entitled the *Epistole eroiche*, 'un'opera estremamente fortunata che vede quindici edizioni tra il 1627 e il 1720' (Geri, 2014, p. 174).[47] As confirmation of this, in the third edition, in the section 'Al lettore', publisher Giacomo Scaglia states that 'le più illustri Accademie d'Italia' greatly appreciated the book (see Geri, 2014, p.180). Nonetheless, it is

[47] On the literary genre of heroic epistles and, particularly, on those penned by Bruni, see Savoretti (2012) and Geri (2014). Marco Filippi (c. 1521–1563) also published a work inspired both by *Furioso* and the *Heroides*, called *Lettere sopra il Furioso dell'Ariosto in ottava rima* (Venezia, 1584) (Amaduri, 2014). One of these, the *Lettera sesta*, is from Fiordispina to Ricciardetto, and recalls the man's cross-dressing. The genre of the *epistola eroica* was particularly appreciated in the seventeenth-century Italian *accademie*: see at a minimum Geri (2012, pp. 79-156).

hard to evaluate the impact of Bruni's retelling of the Fiordispina tale and, to my knowledge, up to now no-one has been able to demonstrate that it inspired any further works.

These twenty-two letters (twenty-six in the 1828 edition) were mostly written by mythological, literary or real heroines and – like most early Italian modern heroic epistles – are likely to have been inspired by Ovid's *Heroides* (*The Heroines*) and the Greek writer Aristaenetus' love letters (fifth/sixth century B.C.E.). Alongside the classical precedents, however, Bruni also includes letters written by characters from the *Furioso*: there are one from Angelica to Orlando; one from Olimpia to Bireno; and one from Fiordispina to Bradamante. Surprisingly, the last has been neglected even in scholarship that focuses on queer female desire.

In the 1627 edition I use in this chapter, every *epistola epica* consists of the letter accompanied by a dedication, *argomento*, allegory and illustration. The one to Bradamante is dedicated to writer and Marquis of Villa Lago, Giovan Battista Manso (1569-1645). The illustration depicts a woman who holds a folded sheet in her right hand and seems to be staring at the sky; next to her is a child with a pen and an inkwell in his hand. There is seemingly no direct allusion to the story of Bradamante and Fiordispina, so it is not easy to decipher this image.[48]

The *Argomento* of this letter summarises the story of the two heroines and states that the princess has written her letter after Bradamante's departure from the princess' court 'senza haver potuto dar refrigerio al suo [: Fiordispina's] male' (Bruni, 1627, p. 93). Furthermore, in

[48] Various illustrations from this edition depict a woman together with objects which recall the act of writing (such as a pen or sheets of paper) so it is plausible that Fiordispina's image alludes to this. Nonetheless, the heroine's skyward glance may be a reference to the moment in which, having discovered Bradamante's lack of penis/manhood, she scolds the Heavens for her misfortune.

the *Allegoria* which acts as a foreword to the letter, the writer underlines the negative consequences of Fiordispina's insane passion and condemns it.[49] Bruni reproaches Fiordispina for her disruptive lust, which has completely clouded her mind. As the poet highlights in the letter, not only does the princess try to justify her misery by citing mythological love stories, but she also persists in seeking some exceptional means to turn Bradamante into a man so she can finally enjoy her/his body.

In Bruni's epistle, Fiordispina mourns her sad fate, echoing Iphis's words in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* as well as Dido's, Queen of Carthage, upon her abandonment by Aeneas (Bruni, 1627, p. 99).[50] Fiordispina describes what happened between her and Bradamante, referring to the warrior as a woman and also expressing regret for Bradamante's lack of a male organ. Even the typically baroque style of the letter, marked by figures of speech and references to classical literature and mythology, fails to conceal her burning desire, which is illustrated in sensual detail (p. 102):

> Quì Amor doppia hor le risse, & hor le paci,
> ma sempre al tatto è ciò ch'io bramo ignoto,
> e ci baciamo adulterando i baci.
> Cresce à l'alme il vigore, à i corpi il moto,
> ma povero di stral, d'aste mendico
> languisce il sagittario, il campo è voto.
> E pur arsa qual fiore in colle aprico

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[49] 'Il ricordar Fiordispina à Bradamante i loro passati avvenimenti amorosi, mentre fù da lei creduta maschio, accenna quanto restino radicati nella memoria habituata à gli amori i sensi, e i moti d'amore. L'addur poi tanti esempi di Donne amanti non senza disgratie ne' fatti amorosi per far'apparir maggiore la sua miseria, non potendo conseguir il bramato intento, come quella, che s'è accorta esser Bradamante altresì Donna, porge materia, che altri s'avegga, che gli amori, principiati con lascivia sempre finiscono in ruina, e vergogna. E 'l credere poi, che, lavandosi Bradamante in varij Fonti, possa divenir maschio di Donna; ci divisa quanto l'anime ammaliate d'amore sieno facili à credere quel che sperano, ò desiderano, secondo il verso, che Virgilio lasciò scritto nell'Egloga 8. *Credimus? An qui amant ipsi sibi somnia fingunt*' (Bruni, 1627, p. 95).
[50] Her story is told in Virgil's *Aeneid* and in Letter 7 of Ovid's *Heroides*.

se maschio ti desio, donna ti trovo,
e compagna mi sei, se t'amo amico:
non men, che 'l cor, la man stupida movo,
e quai scogli di latte acerbe, e belle
sol due mamme mi son spettacol novo.
quinci de la fortuna, e de le stelle
prodighe à l'altre, & à me sola avare
e mi dolgo, e l'accuso empie, e rubelle.

There are some elements of difference between Ariosto's and Bruni's texts. Firstly, in the *Epistole eroiche* the two women seem to reciprocate their queer desire for each other and to have a passionate, intimate relationship. What is more, Bruni 'privilegia l'ambiguità e la sensualità dell'attrazione fisica' between them (Savoretti, 2012, p. 105) over Ricciardetto's *boccaccesca* story. As a result, Bruni attempts to give more space to Fiordispina's inner voice but throughout the letter she is less timid than Ariosto's Fiordispina and cannot but mischievously emphasise Bradamante's physical lack. She compares Bradamante to an archer whose quiver is empty.

Accordingly, whilst in the *Furioso* Ricciardetto metaphorically refers to himself as a soldier who plants his 'stendardo' on his woman's conquered territory, clearly alluding to sexual penetration during their extremely pleasant love joust, in Bruni's epistle Fiordispina regrets the absence of a weapon (the 'strale' or 'asta') for use in their lovemaking and depicts her own desire for battle. She reinforces her nostalgia by stating that, when she is with Bradamante, she cannot but consider: 'Anzi ho meco il mio bene, e pur no 'l godo' (Bruni, 1627, p. 104).

While in the *Furioso* Ricciardetto attempts to reassure Fiordispina of his virility (pretending he has been transformed into a man by a nymph who spread some magical water over him), Fiordispina aims to solve Bradamante's deplorable anatomical flaw by suggesting she visit some mythological places where she can finally change her sex and, thus, be able to satisfy her. The Spanish princess recommends the nymph Salmacis' fountain in Caria (a region of Western Anatolia), which was said to turn men into effeminate creatures.[51] After the metamorphosis, Bradamante will eventually be able to act like a real champion on the battlefield and Fiordispina will be more than happy to be her/his trophy (p. 106):

> Dunque torna, ò d'amor guerrier felice,
> e del campo amoroso homai riporta
> d'amoroso trofeo palma vittrice.
> (…) Poscia in questi regali alti soggiorni
> o qual ne la pacifica tenzone
> trarrem dolci le notti, e lieti i giorni.
> Pugnerem, vincerai nobil campione,
> io sarò tuo trofeo, tù mio guerrero,
> l'aversarie sian nude, il letto agone.

Once again, the erotic relationship between a man and a woman is depicted as a *tenzone*, a battle, in which the former prevails over the latter thanks to his formidable male weapon. When Bradamante finally has her/his own weapon, Fiordispina concludes, they will be able to

[51] 'Tergi, tergi le membra amiche, e pure;/ si che parte di tè vie più s'accenda,/ si che parte di tè vie più s'indure./ Indi in maschio rivolta, accioche io renda/ pago il desire, à darmi tregua, e pace/ riedi, e 'l danno primiero in parte emenda' (Bruni, 1627, pp. 105-106). According to the legend, Salmacis attempted to rape Hermaphroditus and asked the gods to be allowed to stay with him forever. They pleased her and turned the two into one androgynous creature. Hermaphroditus then cursed the water to feminise every man who bathed in it. Ovid tells Salmacis' and Hermaphroditus's story in his *Metamorphoses* (4:285-388).

make love anywhere and anytime, and she will carve their names into myrtle barks and marble, thus alluding to both Angelica and Medoro's story and pastoral custom.[52]

Again, Bruni takes the opportunity to cite Ariosto, to whom he openly admits his debt. The two poets declare the alleged impossibility of sex between women, describing the odd couple as lacking something essential. They both feign ignorance in order to push their readers towards imagining in exciting detail what is actually going on. Both Ariosto and Bruni allow their protagonists to caress each other as the desire between them grows. With subtle irony, the poets each pay special attention to Fiordispina's thoughts and feelings, employing the old *topos* of love as a battle between a man and a woman and granting her an unusually assertive – if impossible – desire.

Ariosto, Corsini and Bruni use the same trope – that of love between women – but to different degrees. As we have seen, Ariosto opts for a sympathetic rendering, whilst Corsini tends to exaggerate his heroines' sexual appetite and presents man's sexuality as aggressive. Finally, Bruni blends irony, homoeroticism, heteroeroticism and elegy to entertain his readership. He has the merit, too, of letting Fiordispina recount her own version of events, thus adding new nuances to the episode.

3.3 The Warrior and the Princess: Moderata Fonte's *Floridoro*

In telling their versions of the story, Moderata Fonte and Giulia Bigolina opt for a sympathetic point of view towards queer women, giving them prominent roles and unaccustomed agency. Both writers also present nuanced depictions of *donna-con-donna*

[52] See, for instance, the first verses of Campiglia's *Calisa*, analysed in Chapter Four.

relationships which recall the notions of the queer continuum and romantic friendship outlined in the introductory section to this chapter.

Venetian Moderata Fonte (the *nom de plume* of Modesta da Pozzo; 1555-1592) was considered one of the best women writers of her age, as well as one of the most fervent Renaissance supporters of women's claims to equality with men.[53] She has had mixed fortunes over time: if, on the one hand, her name was quite popular in the first half of the seventeenth century, on the other, she has received limited critical attention from then until recently (Cox, 1997, p. 22). Nowadays she is best known for her 'incursion into two traditionally masculine genres like the chivalric romance (…) and the literary dialogue' (Cox, 1997, p. 3) through her unfinished poem in octaves, *I Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581), and *Il merito delle donne ove chiaramente si scuopre quanto siano elle degne e più perfette de gli uomini* (written in 1592 but published posthumously in 1600).

Building on a medieval and humanist tradition, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries several works penned in Italy by both women and men writers appeared to discuss female vices and virtues in the wake of illustrious predecessors such as Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* Following the popular literary genre of *dialoghi,* il *Merito* features seven Venetian noblewomen of various ages and stages in life (virgin, wife, widow) who debate a wealth of aspects related to women's life (*giornata prima*) and culture (*giornata seconda*) in an enchanting Venetian garden in order to demonstrate the 'merito delle donne' in detail.

The fact that the *dialogo* is all-female is a novelty *per se*: according to the literary conventions of the genre, women usually stay silent, or limit themselves to confirming men's

[53] See at a minimum Cox (1997, pp. 1-22); Plastina (2011, pp. 47-50); Chemello (2016).

opinions.[54] Instead, in Fonte's elegant and encyclopaedic dialogue, not only do they offer the model of an all-female community but they also discuss a variety of topics, including women's opportunities to opt for celibacy,[55] instead of marriage and the nunnery,[56] as well as men's misdeeds against women. The writer aims not only to demonstrate that women are not naturally inferior to men. She also wants to stress that this view is unjust and a product of various socio-cultural factors, such as education, misogynist tradition and stereotypes.[57] Over and above the long list of positive *exempla* from the past to show the worth of women or the justice of female education presented in the book (notions which are both also sustained in part by the humanist tradition) , Fonte's idea that 'men's abusive postlapsarian appropriation of a position of superiority over women has warped and contaminated not only the relation God had intended to exist between the sexes, but also women's relation with the remainder of creation' (Cox, 1997, p. 12) is, therefore, exceptionally original.

Fonte anticipated some of her proto-feminist ideas in the *Floridoro* as well. This is the first, published attempt by a woman to engage with 'una materia cavalleresca originale in una forma statutaria, definita, canonizzata' (Pezzini, 2017, p. 55), and it focuses on the adventures of knight Floridoro, the founder of Venice. There is extensive scholarship on the *Floridoro* by

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[54] On this feature see at a minimum Cox (2000b). In the *Merito*, instead, the seven women 'senza aver rispetto di uomini che le notassero o l'impedissero, tra esse ragionavano di quelle cose che più loro a gusto venivano' (Fonte, 1988, p. 14). According to Chemello (2016), 'L'assenza degli uomini sottolinea la distanza delle donne dalla scena pubblica, dalla *polis* e dalla storia, consentendo loro una libertà di parola altrimenti impensabile'.
[55] For instance, Corinna, one of the participants, would like to reject marriage to devote her life to study and literature.
[56] In the *Merito*, there are two opposite factions: we have the widow Leonora, married Cornelia and virgin Corinna, who are against men, whilst newly-wed Helena, married Lucretia and unmarried Virginia support the institution of marriage.
[57] As Fonte explains (4.1-2), 'Le donne in ogni età fur da natura/ di gran giudizio e d'animo dotate,/ né men atte a mostrar con studio e cura/ senno e valor degli uomini son nate;/ e perché se comune è la figura,/ se non son le sostanze variate,/ s'hanno simile un cibo e un parlar, denno/ differente aver poi l'ardire e 'l senno?// Sempre s'è visto e vede (pur ch'alcuna/ donna v'abbia voluto il pensier porre)/ nella milizia riuscir più d'una,/ e 'l pregio e 'l grido a molti uomini torre;/ e così nelle lettere e in ciascuna/ impresa che l'uom pratica e discorre/ le donne sì buon frutto han fatto e fanno,/ che gli uomini a invidiar punto non hanno'.

now. Little attention has been paid, however, to one of its so-called minor episodes, which features the close relationship between Celsidea and Risamante (2.38-41). The latter is a maiden warrior born to the King of Armenia and her character is of particular importance. According to Sarah Ross (2007, p. 151), Risamante's particular role aims to demonstrate that 'male and female capabilities are equal and (…) differences between men's and women's social roles are therefore not "natural", but rather the result of education'[58] – a concept already discussed in the *Merito,* as we have seen.

It is no accident that in several respects Risamante recalls Bradamante. Not only is she a formidable warrior, but, also, has a female twin, Biondaura, whom Moderata depicts as very feminine, in sharp contrast to her sibling ('Pari in tutto fra lor, come al ciel piacque,/ eccetto ch'una è molle e delicata,/ e l'altra va come guerriero armata': 2.30:6-8).[59] Nevertheless, Fonte does not portrays Risamante as an extravagant, 'against-nature' character. As Valeria Finucci (1995, p. xxviii) highlights, 'La presenza femminile in ruoli insoliti, incluso quello militare, viene del resto data come normale nel testo: se non molte donne si sono affermate, Fonte mette in chiaro, è stato, in ogni caso, per motivi culturali e non biologici'. As we have seen, Fonte advocates the same idea in the *Merito*.

Although, like Bradamante, Risamante spends most of her time fighting, she is in an ambiguous position which Fonte, closely following the path traced by Ariosto, outlines while removing any overtly erotic detail from Risamante's queer story. One day, the woman warrior reaches the court of Greek King Cleandro, where his wife and his daughter Celsidea warmly

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[58] Also, as Finucci (2006, p. 10) stresses, 'Throughout Fonte shows that women writers, like their male counterparts, have no problem in using narratives of aggression, fraternal strife, and paternal backstabbing to make their heroes central to the ideologies of state formation, patriliny, and birthright that are not only crucial to plots of chivalric romances (and perhaps one main reason for their success) but also, more prosaically, indispensable to secure a prince's sponsorship and recognition'.
[59] I cite passages from Finucci's edition (Moderata Fonte, 1995).

welcome her and give her women's clothing (as Fiordispina does too). That very night, the princess is struck by the beauty of Risamante and sleeps with her (39:5-8):

> Già Celsidea così l'ama e apprezza
> che quella notte vol passar con ella,
> e così giro insieme a riposarse,
> sin che la fresca aurora in cielo apparse.

The writer provides no detail of these hours: it is up to the reader to imagine what has happened between them. Fonte only states that, in the morning, Risamante dresses up again as a knight and is supposed to leave soon, but Celsidea is so saddened by this news that she asks her guest to stay three more days. Risamante accepts. But, again, readers do not know what occurs between them, nor how they feel. When the warrior finally leaves, on the fourth day, everyone mourns her departure since she is truly beloved ('Con general dolor, tanto era grata,/ così ad amarla ogni persona mosse': 41:3-4).

In their brief comments on this episode, Julia Kisacky and Valeria Finucci (2006, p. 100, n. 13) recall the Bradamante-Fiordispina episode in *Furioso*. For them, 'No sexual implications and no *ad hominem* winks are, however, present in Fonte's rereading of this story, no matter how much Fonte uses the same vocabulary to highlight the thematic similarities'. While Ariosto offers us a mischievous account of Fiordispina's erotic wishes and the night spent together by his heroines, Fonte provides only vague information. If, on the one hand, silence can preserve the moral integrity of the potentially erotic episode as well as Fonte's reputation, on the other I hold that it may titillate (even if unintentionally) the audience's curiosity. After all, Ariosto's readers know that two women in a bed may be not exempt from lascivious desires.

As a matter of fact, according to Mihoko Suzuki (2019, p. 255), 'Fonte fashions an explicitly lesbian, mutually loving relationship between "the beautiful ladies"'; what is more, this is 'publicly recognised without a hint of censure or opprobrium'. This is an important difference between Fonte's and Ariosto's tellings of the trope of woman-woman desire. Whilst Fiordispina experiences regret, pain and a sense of shameful solitude, Risamante and Celsidea never hide their strong reciprocal feelings of affection and nor are they punished as a result of them. While the preceding literary tradition presents various fathers eager to re-establish their authority over disobedient daughters (as occurs in medieval *cantari, La bella Camilla* and *Reina d'oriente* – see Note 26), especially when they experience queer desire, Cleandro seems to approve of the bond between his daughter and her guest. In this respect, by contrast with Ariosto's tale, it should be pointed out that men do play no role in determining the nature or the future of the bond between the princess and the woman warrior (as King Marsilio and Ricciardetto do).

As a result, and uniquely, Risamante and Celsidea manage their relationship by themselves, in accordance with their own wishes. This allows the two heroines to better enjoy their intimacy, whatever it may consist of. Their affinity can fit both the queer spectrum and the homosocial framework outlined by Faderman (1981), which is based on strong bonds between women which might be nuanced with love and desire, too. The Risamante-Celsidea relationship might therefore be a friendship but, as we have seen, it also interestingly evokes in many respects the queer atmosphere of the Fiordispina episode.

If Fonte's version is undoubtedly more sober and chaste than the original, on the other hand it also provides what Ariosto does not choose to depict completely (readers do know that Bradamante ultimately marries Ruggiero, but they ignore what will happen to Fiordispina). This is the accomplishment of the alleged *vano amore* or, at least, an unusually intimate bond

between two women who are considered exceptional because of their qualities and the destiny they are going to face. In the end, in fact, Celsidea marries Floridoro and their descendants found Venice, while Risamante gives birth to the Medici lineage.[60] As usual, no matter how exceptional or enamoured the women involved are, the two must return to a heterosexual path. Nonetheless, as I have demonstrated, the tale of Risamante and Celsidea conveys a powerful, proto-feminist sense of women's self-sufficiency, pride and autonomy which Fonte has also largely deployed in the *Merito*.

3.4 A Special Friendship: Bigolina's *Urania*

As we have seen throughout this chapter, a woman's abandoning of queerness in favour of heteronormativity frequently occurs in texts concerning love and desire between women, ranging from antiquity to the Renaissance and beyond. Writings penned by women are no exception. In this respect, it is worth remembering that, in the early modern period, women writers' discretion implied fulfilling the expectations and standards thought appropriate to women in their time. Fonte and Bigolina, the two women authors analysed in this chapter, were patrician Venetians and, hence, subject to the social and moral diktats of their social class.

Still a partially unknown figure, Giulia Bigolina (c.1518- c.1569) was born into a noble Paduan family and married to lawyer, Bartolomeo Vicomercato, from Crema, Lombardy. Although she did not publish anything during her lifetime, she was appreciated by her contemporaries, such as Pietro Aretino, Bernardino Scardeone, Andrea Cittadella and Pietro

[60] It needs scarcely be said that the poem is dedicated to Francesco de' Medici, husband of Venetian Bianca Capello.

Paolo Ribera (Bigolina, 2004 and 2005a; Nissen, 2011). Her main, surviving works are the *Novella di Giulia Camposanpiero e Thesibaldo Vitaliani* and the novel *Urania* (respectively published in 1794 and in 2002)[61] which both constitute the first fiction in prose written by a woman author in Italian (Finucci, 2005, p. 1). Despite the differences in genre and contents, the two works share some similarities. They both focus on adventurous love stories in which women do not play the role of damsels in distress: rather, in order to reach their emotional goals, they are eager to travel, cross-dress, face dangers and even save their male beloved's life.

The *Novella* is set in 1337 or so, between Padua and Vienna, and features the tormented relationship of an exceptional couple, Giulia and Tesibaldo, both beautiful and wise.[62] When the maiden discovers that her husband has been accused of having an affair with Odolania, the daughter of the Austrian Emperor, she goes to Vienna in the guise of a man. Thanks to her ability with both the sword and rhetoric, she contrives to save both her husband Tesibaldo and herself from an unjust death sentence.[63]

In her short story, Bigolina demonstrates great familiarity with Italian authors, including Ariosto.[64] In her novel *Urania*, too, one can find allusions to the *Furioso* and, in particular, as I will show, to the Fiordispina tale. Dedicated to Paduan nobleman and lawyer Bartolomeo Salvatico, it has a tremendous importance since it is 'the first feminist entry into the debate on

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[61] To my knowledge, so far it has been impossible to date the writing of these works exactly. At present, three modern editions of Bigolina's works are available, i.e. Bigolina (above-mentioned 2002; 2005a) and (2004), edited by Valeria Finucci and Christopher Nissen respectively. I quote from Nissen's edition of *Urania* (2004).
[62] For an introduction to this work, see at a minimum Finucci (2005, pp. 9-15).
[63] 'vestita pur da uomo, non sì tosto vide fuori delle prigioni il suo signore tutto languido e afflitto, che subito, messa mano alla spada, cominciò quando a ferire un officiale, quando ad ammazzarne un altro, di maniera che se non venivano altri in aiuto, lei sola e abbandonata da' suoi cugini avea liberato lo innocentissimo suo consorte dalle mani di venti e più ufficiali' (Bigolina, 2005b, p. 62).
[64] Among others, as Finucci emphasises (Bigolina, 2005b, p. 71, n. 8), there are some correspondences between the extremely positive description of Ruggiero after his marriage to Bradamante (*Furioso*, 46.100) and that of Tesibaldo (Bigolina, 2005b, p. 49).

a woman's proper place – politically, culturally, and philosophically – in early modern Italian society', as Finucci remarks (2005, p. 2). It also contains what is probably the first Italian (if concise) treatise on the worth of women (Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* was written around 1592 but published only in 1600).

Its protagonist, Urania, a learned and virtuous maiden from Salerno, is depicted as a leading advocate of women, since she maintains that they are unfairly slandered and continually oppressed. Although she claims that women are not as perfect as men (at that time a frequent, rhetorical expedient), she maintains that they are almost equal and, over the centuries, have demonstrated their virtues in several fields, to the extent that 'hoggi dì tra noi non si trovino di molte donne ancora, le quali in ciascuna di cotal professioni potrebbono a molti huomini, che d'assai si tengono, far vergogna' (Bigolina, 2004, pp. 142 and 144).

Although *Urania* does not belong to the epic-chivalric genre, it was deeply influenced by that tradition and, as I have said, also by Ariosto's *Furioso*. Like a typical chivalric hero (but rather unusually for a woman), Urania goes wandering in a quest to seek a remedy for love after being disappointed and wounded by her lover, Fabio, who is now in love with Corina, a prettier but less virtuous woman than Urania. Like Camilla in Piero da Siena's *cantare* and other chivalric women characters, Urania cross-dresses as a knight in pursuit of love and takes to her travels. Unlike them, however, she does not adopt a male relative's name and identity but uses Fabio's instead.

In her adventures as a man Urania/Fabio has a certain appeal to all the women she meets on her way: they are irresistibly but chastely charmed by her beauty, kindness and virtues. But only one is ardently in love with her: Emilia, a rich, widow noblewoman from Florence who, after saving Urania/Fabio's life and spending some time with her, even asks her to become

her husband. The cross-dressed knight refuses, adding that she will only be happy to stay with her if Urania from Salerno, the woman she pretends to be in love with, has married another man. Emilia guesses that the knight is not telling her the truth and the two embark on a journey to reach Salerno together. So as to avoid scandal, however, Emilia also cross-dresses for the journey before the two women (both in drag thus) set off.

Meanwhile, in order to prove their love to Corina, both Fabio and Sicilian Menandro try to steal a wreath of roses given to the Prince of Salerno, but they eventually get arrested and sentenced to death. Since the Prince of Salerno is eager to save his friend Fabio, he states that he will spare the life of the man chosen by Corina as her husband. Surprisingly, she opts for Menandro, thus making everyone unhappy. The Prince of Salerno, therefore, gives one last hope to Fabio: he will survive only if a woman is able to kiss the Femina Selvatica, a wild woman living in his court who fiercely hates other women because she (wrongly) believes that one of them has killed her husband. Upon her arrival in Salerno, Urania/Fabio finds out what has happened to her lover and cannot but try to help him, justifying her intention by pretending that Fabio is her lover Urania's brother. Consequently, she faces up to the Femina Selvatica: not only does the creature not harm Urania/Fabio and accept her kiss, but she becomes passionately fond of her, just like the other women the knight has met so far. Nonetheless, before revealing her real identity and in the presence of the Prince, Urania/Fabio has Fabio confess that he mistreated Urania and announce that he still loves her. Thus, the story ends with four happy weddings: Fabio marries Urania, Fabio's brother Emilia, Menandro Corina and the Prince his beloved unnamed woman.

As Christopher Nissen explains (2004, pp. 39-40), Urania is an 'anti-Orlando'. Notwithstanding her descent from a long series of (male) heart-broken lovers from medieval and early modern romance and lyric tradition (which include Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain,

Tristan and Ariosto's Orlando), who sometimes behave appallingly as they go wandering, she attempts to react properly to the dilemmas confronting her and to look for a positive solution, as a virtuous woman is expected to do. It is not by accident, Nissen stresses (2004, p. 40), that in the story the Wild Woman is 'an emblem of the female "wildness" and lack of virtue [Urania] has consistently rejected within herself'.

For my purposes, I am more interested in exploring the unique bond between the heroine and Emilia than in the intriguing figure of the Wild Woman or her passion for Urania. If, at first sight, the relationship between the two seems to be simple enough (Emilia is attracted to her because she looks like a handsome and kind man), there are hints of a different story. The (apparent) friendship between a woman and man or, later, after Urania's confession, between two women, reveals instead a queer bond where love, jealousy and ambiguity play a major role.

Their relationship can undoubtedly be ascribed to the queer continuum and also encompasses features which recall the notion of passionate (yet not eroticised) friendship sketched out by Faderman (1981). Deprived of any physical or genital contact, it is primarily based on values such as loyalty, trust and affection which, in some cases, are zealously celebrated. In this respect, one episode set in the sixth and final chapter is particularly worthy of attention. Urania/Fabio and Emilia talk about the risks of kissing the Femina Selvatica as she is very violent. Emilia seeks to persuade Urania/Fabio to withdraw from the contest by telling her that she would not put her life in danger in that way even if her parents were going to die. At this point, something unexpected takes place: Urania/Fabio, who has always been described as desperately in love with Fabio, tests Emilia's affection. Thus, she asks her (Bigolina, 2004, p. 252):

> ‘Ditemi Signora Emilia vi prego di gratia, se io fosse quello, il quale come Fabio in quello istesso pericolo di morte mi ritrovasse, hor che la horribilità della faccia di questa Salvatica Femina havete veduta, tentareste voi almeno di basciarla, per farmi vostro, et salvarmi? O pure sgomentata dalla grande paura, come hora sète, mi lasciareste morire?’

When Emilia honestly replies that she does not know, but that, nonetheless, she would be more than eager to pass through hot flames or battle a swift torrent for her sake, Urania/Fabio is openly disappointed. In fact, she accuses her of lying, and not loving her enough nor sincerely, as a ‘ver[a] amante’ does (p. 254). Once more, Emilia begs her not to face the horrible creature and, as a result, Urania/Fabio replies in a very ambiguous way, alluding to her hidden female identity (p. 256):

> ‘Non vi dubitate di perdermi hoggi Signora,’ rispose la Urania, ‘che io vi assicuro che non mi perderete, che prima voi, et io saremo, come cosa conforme; et quasi l’uno all’altra simile da ciascun conosciuti; pure non mi negate ch’io possa fare per questo sol giorno tutto quello, che io ho voglia di fare.’

In using the adjective ‘conforme’, the protagonist of the novel means ‘belonging to the same biological sex’, but, obviously, Emilia cannot imagine that. These words can have a further interpretation. Urania/Fabio might intend to say that, in a short while, she will abandon her disguise and everyone will see that both she and Emilia are women, as the readers already know. Urania/Fabio is subtly alluding to the fact that, when her hidden biological identity is finally revealed, Emilia’s plans must change. Perhaps, this way, Urania/Fabio aims to vindicate the offence to Emilia’s honour that we have previously seen. Urania/Fabio succeeds in her purposes: Emilia believes that ‘conforme’ means ‘in complete accordance’ (as Nissen correctly translates it) and, thus, hopes that one day they will finally get together (‘Altro da te

non desidero (...) eccetto che ambi noi siamo da ciascuno conosciuti conformi. Il che se così sarà, non dubito che tosto non mi divenghi marito': Bigolina, 2004, p. 256).

Not even the discovery of Urania's official female identity can stop Emilia being extremely affectionate to her friend. When the Prince of Salerno proposes that Emilia marry Fabio's brother, she replies that 'pur che dalla amata sua Urania scompagnata non fosse, harrebbe fatto tutto quello che al Prencipe, et a lui [: Fabio] fosse in piacere' (p. 280). Emilia's marriage to a man looks like a surrogate for the impossible marriage to Urania.

As Finucci (2005a, p. 31) has emphasized, in portraying the relationship between the two heroines, Bigolina draws inspiration from Ariosto's Fiordispina episode but, since she was a woman, in her rewriting, she has to cleanse it of all 'erotic potential'. As a consequence,

> she constructs an affective, even utopic, but definitely companionable bond between Urania and Emilia based on chastity and compassion as a practical and civic duty. In moving away from the implied male narcissism and homoerotic implications of Ariosto's text, she reclaims the liberating importance of female autonomy and female allegiance. (Finucci, 2005a, p. 31)

The main features of the Emilia-Urania bond as well as their sense of independence cannot but recall the tale of Risamante and Celsidea. Despite their differences in style and content, the two stories have several features in common. For instance, their protagonists are two virtuous and courageous heroines who forsake life as traditional women to go wandering as men (Urania even cross-dresses). Furthermore, as I have said, they are both involved in chaste but ambiguous same-sex relationships, upon which Fonte and Bigolina seem to look supportively. In particular, Emilia's veneration for Urania recalls another feature of romantic friendships highlighted by Faderman (1981, p. 16):

> But whether or not these relationships had a genital component, the novels and diaries and correspondence of these periods consistently showed romantic friends opening their souls to each other and speaking a language that was in no way different from the language of heterosexual love: They pledged to remain 'faithful' forever, to be in 'each other's thoughts constantly, to live together and even to die together.

Urania and Emilia do the same; it is no coincidence that their relationship is the best described and most articulated one in the whole book. Yet, on the contrary, the tale of Risamante and Celsidea seems to be (too?) hurriedly sketched out and concluded by Moderata Fonte. Even in depicting certain intimate details of woman-woman bonds, Fonte and Bigolina never see anything morbid or murky in them, in contrast to other writers we meet in this thesis, starting with Corsini. Fonte and Bigolina prefer to applaud the courage, intelligence, proactive attitudes and generosity of their heroines.

Both *Floridoro* and *Urania* explore stories of homoerotic affection which blur the boundaries between homoerotic love, desire and affection. They take the form of a special, committed friendship between women, deprived of any explicit sexual involvement, even when including physical intimacy (similar to the relationships described by Faderman). Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine whether Fonte's and Bigolina's choices were a deliberate literary strategy or the consequence of an internalised social condemnation of woman-woman homoeroticism. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that women authors frequently tend to depict various kinds of homoerotic affection as intense, but not involving physical or genital contact, as I will especially demonstrate in Chapter Four as well as in the Conclusion of this thesis.

From this point of view, the Risamante-Celsidea and Urania-Emilia stories differ from the Fiordispina-Bradamante story which, as we have seen, is imbued with eroticism. Yet, from Ariosto's tale, I argue, Fonte and Bigolina draw a sense of loyalty, trust and love that transcends the sexual and biological dimensions (Fiordispina warmly welcomes Bradamante/Ricciardetto when s/he comes back to the princess's court, even if she knows that her beloved still lacks what she misses the most). In other words, any of these relationships, with their specific particularities, can be ascribed to the rich queer continuum, which ranges from the physically passionate to the disincarnate and spiritual, as we will see in Chapter Four, when analysing some pastoral works in which religion and philosophy play a conspicuous role in shaping woman-woman bonds.

4. Conclusion

The tale of Bradamante and Fiordispina as told by Ariosto offers an exquisite and cultivated depiction of *donna-con-donna* desire which, despite its tongue-in-cheek allusions, is largely sympathetic. The episode is well-built, filled with intriguing details and imbued with eroticism: all good reasons for it quickly becoming a literary model and boosting the popularity of the motif of woman-woman love. Across the centuries, therefore, writers have offered a myriad of evolutions and revolutions of Ariosto's 'istoria bella'.

Corsini and Bruni provide a reading of Ariosto's episode (and, more broadly, of *donna-con-donna* desire) which emphasises the lack of a penis and the insatiability of female lovers. Fonte and Bigolina, by contrast, take the subtext in a different direction, offering sympathetic portrayals of queer female desire and friendship. Through their independent and strong female characters, the two women writers bring out in their retellings features that are only faintly

hinted at in Ariosto and his male successors: the implicit potential for women's independence and agency; and their wish to be subjects (and not mere objects) of desire.

In addition to these four authors, several others were inspired by the Bradamante-Fiordispina episode and by the features of that rich literary tradition which Ariosto himself drew on when developing the trope of love and desire between women. The next chapters, then, will build on the analysis developed here by illustrating the enormous success of Ariosto's Fiordispina tale, and bringing them into dialogue with numerous other depictions of *donna-con-donna* love.

CHAPTER TWO.

HOMOEROTICISM, SOCIAL CRITICISM AND SEXUAL EDUCATION IN COMIC, SATIRICAL AND HARD-CORE TEXTS[65]

1. Introduction

The Renaissance is usually known as an age of beauty, harmony, and elegance. Yet it produced some of the most popular and sexually explicit texts in European literature. Do they merely aim to sensually entertain their readers or provoke their laughter? Or is there more at stake? What is the role of *donna-con-donna* desire in those texts?

In an attempt to answer these questions in the following pages, I work from the premise that several writers use powerful narrative devices we have already come across (such as cross-dressing, misplaced desires, gender ambiguity and mistaken identities) to develop narratives based on explicit female homoerotic intimacy, sarcasm, and irony.[66] The result is sexually intriguing and highly entertaining female homoerotic representations. Whilst I do not deny that some authors of early modern comic, satirical and hard-core literary texts are mostly interested in offering the kind of depictions they believe will amuse their readers, I maintain that others, such as those investigated in this chapter, may use the *donna-con-donna* motif to engage with their audience for a variety of reasons such as condemning the alleged wicked

[65] For research purposes only, this chapter contains references to sexually explicit topics such as paedophilia and incest, as well as violent and derogatory language.

[66] In reference to the early modern era, some prefer to talk about sexuality 'before sexuality' (Phillips and Reay, 2011), as our concept of it was mainly born in the nineteenth century. A similar discourse can be applied to the idea of pornography: frequently, scholars define Italian erotic literary texts as pornographic *tout court*, even when they only display ideas and behaviours concerning sex which differ from ours. Accordingly, in this chapter, I will attempt to avoid the label 'pornographic'.

nature of women or presenting female-female love as a stage in an erotic apprenticeship. They may use it also as an expression of sexual freedom in opposition to moralism and, finally, as a vehicle to parody traditional gender roles or criticise social and religious institutions. In this chapter, I therefore analyse various forms of comic and satirical texts often related to explicit sex. Most of them belong to the satire genre which was very popular in the Renaissance, from anti-courtly dialogues to poems and letters (Ugolini, 2016). The irreverent upsetting of conventions as well as the blend of comedy and social criticism unite my corpus.

In those texts, writers portray the four most socially acceptable categories of womanhood (maidens, wives, widows and nuns) as well as those who do not fit the usual classifications, such as prostitutes, prostitutes-to-be, *malmaritate* (frustrated wives) and *malmonacate* (discontented nuns, usually forced into taking vows)[67] (Filippelli, 1996-1997). They all use homoerotic sex due to boredom, curiosity or frustration, thus providing the authors with the opportunity to mock the presumption that women have to be modest, wise and pious.

Drawing on a rich early modern body of literature for and about women (Matthews-Grieco and Bravaglieri, 2001; Sanson and Lucioli, 2016), writers such as Aretino, Pseudo-Aretino and Leti offer an alternative curriculum based on sex and unorthodox thinking. Despite the fact that usually 'arousal is an ephemeral phenomenon that scarcely endures a second, critical reading' (Turner, 2003, p. 6), exploring hard-core literature can thus provide stimulating insights in a range of fields. As Turner (2003, p. 6) eloquently emphasises:

> The danger of these books for the seventeenth-century reader (…), and their interest in the twenty-first century, lies in their capacity to confuse boundaries, to introduce foreign bodies, to associate polymorphous language and sexual practice, and to organize this Babel under a libertine-hedonist

[67] In this thesis, I will also use this term to define women who are officially nuns but a long way from adhering to the practical and religious rules required by their position.

> philosophy 'contrary to good morals and Christian discipline' – in short, to form an erotic-didactic counter-discipline.

I will therefore focus on a selection of comic texts written between the first half of the sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries which have a variety of aims, and which deal with an abundance of gender and moral issues of their time channelled through representations of queer female love. Some of these works ironically express dissent against some crucial values of early modern Italy such as female chastity and marital fidelity (Agnolo Firenzuola's *Novella seconda* of the *Giornata prima* from *I Ragionamenti*), or make fun of the moral integrity of families and religious institutions while providing a programme of sex education (Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamento della Nanna e dell'Antonia* and *Dialogo della Nanna e della Pippa*; Pseudo-Aretino's *Dialogo di Giulia e Madalena*; Gregorio Leti's *Seconda fenestra* from the *Nuovo parlatorio delle Monache* dialogues), sometimes playing with traditional gender expectations. By contrast, the satirical anonymous *poemetto Il Manganello* can be intended as a harsh condemnation of women's sexual ribaldry from a chauvinist perspective. Throughout this chapter I will also supplement analysis of my primary texts with concise references to literary and non-literary sources in order to shed further light on my close reading and, in particular, on those aspects of my argument related to the authors' criticism of early modern society.

In scrutinising my primary sources, I will also take into account the audience they aspired to reach. In so doing, I will bear in mind that, as Hannah Marcus (2020, pp. 4) has emphasised,

> Censorship was a ubiquitous fact of intellectual life in early modern Europe, and it took many forms. Systems of prepublication censorship and review sprang up across Europe in an attempt to control the

> spread of political and religious ideas in the new age of mass media facilitated by the invention of moveable type. Early modern authors even exercised varying degrees of self-censorship before a book reached the stage of licensure to be printed, so as to ensure that their works would be published.

It is also the case that in the aftermath of the Counter-Reformation, several Catholic communities drew up their own lists (Indexes) of Prohibited Books, in some cases adhering to their own specific criteria.[68] It is therefore not easy to trace the reception given to early modern works across Europe. Since, too, I have only limited space in this thesis, I will restrict myself to providing only basic information about their circulation.

In conclusion, by combining queer studies with scholarship on book circulation, early modern masculinity, erotic literature and male literary exchanges, I will therefore contribute to the exploration of the relationships between explicit works dealing with queer female desire and early modern Italian society from the *Rinascimento* to the Counter-Reformation. In so doing I will trace and analyse criticisms of a social system based on flawed moral codes and rigid gender expectations, engaging especially with notions of masculinity, sexuality, gender alignment and gender expectations.

2. Desperate Housewives, Rebellious Nuns, Masters of Love Amidst Queer Female Desire and Social Criticism

The corpus analysed in this chapter includes various literary forms, specifically the comic dialogue, short story and satirical poem. They all share typical features such as sarcasm,

[68] For instance, the 1580 Parma Index is well-known for its 'certain paranoia about poetic texts' (Brundin, 2012, p. 202).

exaggeration, and invective, as well as the aim to ridicule and criticise human vices or provide an alternative interpretation of reality. As a matter of fact, satirical and sexually explicit works aim by definition to mock society, its hypocritical moralism and prudery: eroticism and, even more so, obscenity are the perfect means to reach this goal. Taken together, the writers I consider in this chapter often skilfully blend entertainment, charm, criticism, and explicit eroticism. They can, however, have a more serious purpose as well. As I show, they may employ the topos of queer female love as an effective narrative device to highlight with razor-sharp irony a series of moral and social weaknesses. They thus produce unconventional literary responses to highly sensitive social issues developed within a traditional, heteronormative environment which seeks to normalise them. It comes as no surprise, then, that the women protagonists of these texts are often endowed with an exceptional sexual appetite, but they are forced to take vows (*malmonacate*), control their sex drive or stay married to men they dislike (*malmaritate*). They are thus comically and cunningly busy with homoerotic affairs and sex to escape their suffocating roles as well as make fun of the hierarchy around them. In depicting them, authors also discuss gender roles and expectations, and offer their readers the opportunity to provocatively engage with moral, social, and religious norms in order to contest or deride them.

Despite the differences between these texts, which are sometimes remarkable, they all share what may be understood as a further configuration of the queer continuum evoked in the previous chapter. They show in fact that 'such [homoerotic] desire was not conceptualized in terms of a binary division of sexual practices such as the modern division into heterosexual and homosexual, but rather in terms of a taxonomy or continuum of erotic desire and practice' (Giannetti, 2009, pp. 91-92). Giannetti originally theorised these ideas in relation to a few early modern pieces of literature, but I argue that they hold relevance for the whole corpus I

investigate in the following pages. Giannetti continues that homoerotic desire is not represented 'as exclusive or revealing of a deeper identity' (p. 92). The female characters can thus enjoy both women's and men's bodies unproblematically, and this is particularly evident where hard-core texts are concerned.

In order to offer a better understanding of this multi-faceted material, in this chapter I will supplement my close reading informed by queer and feminist studies such as Giannetti's by also referring to various scholars who, albeit in some cases working on various eras, have investigated the relationships between gender, society, literature and imagery.

First, I will look closely at scholarship on virility in early modern Italy. Recent decades have seen an increasing interest in the study of masculinities in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy in relation to a variety of fields, from performative studies to fashion studies (see, for instance, Cavallo, 2007; Springer, 2010; Currie, 2016). They have thus contributed enormously to our understanding of how nuanced the notion of virility can be and how in many ways it can engage with culture, art and literature. I will therefore use Finucci's (2002; 2003) and Quaintance's (2015) studies on masculinity to better investigate why, and in what ways, some authors such as Firenzuola and the anonymous poet of the *Manganello* also employ female-female desire to explore social expectations of men's sexual prowess as well as male anxiety over exuberant female sexual agency. Finucci (2002, p. 7) attempts to 'investigate the performative nature of masculinity to show how problematic indeed it is for men to be virile, phallic, and active'. In so doing the scholar stresses that, like women, men were also subject to social gender expectations and, thus, pushed to adhere to 'manly masculinity', as the title of her celebrated book says. In the field of early modern Italian literature, I suggest, it is no coincidence that several male characters manifest their manliness in glaringly obvious ways, such as through physical features (e.g. a gigantic, vigorous penis)

and impressive sexual performances (intense and multiple sex activities, or the ability to conceive children) in order to face up to gender anxiety and curb queer female desire. As I will demonstrate, Fulvio, one of the protagonists of Firenzuola's *novella*, perfectly embodies these issues, which are also emphasised (not to say exaggerated) for comic purposes.

Texts can convey ideas which reinforce current ideas on masculinity in terms of content, as well as be the means of their circulation in society. In investigating erotic texts of the Venetian Renaissance, Quaintance (2015, p. 53) notes that frequently men displayed 'collective male power' as well as they consolidated 'their bonds with one another through the creation, circulation, and consumption of literary fictions of women' – what she calls 'textual masculinity'. This, of course, implies that 'the exchanges of fictional women (...) are concerned both with ideals of masculinity and with the control of women and their sexuality' (Quaintance, 2015, p. 9). Similarly, I maintain that a certain number of the texts I explore are mainly conceived for and addressed to a male audience (given their frequently risqué nature), which finds amusement, pleasure and complicity in voyeuristic depictions of female-female attraction. Texts often feature prostitutes and women gravitating in that world so that some of the writers' and readers' favourite fictional bodies are used as a binding force for the male community.

I am interested, too, in looking at how woman-woman desire in my array of texts can negotiate fictional spaces along with a male presence as well as imagery connected to masculinity. In addition to the studies on masculinity above cited, the notion of the lesbian phallus as posited by Butler (1993, pp. 51-91) will therefore be of great help as well. Going beyond the traditional psychoanalytical idea of a male organ or of a phallus which closely recalls it, Butler proposes the lesbian phallus as a symbolic and fictional device intended as 'a possible site of desire' (1993, p. 91). It is programmatically subversive, ambiguous, queer; as

Jordana Rosenberg puts it (2003, pp. 393-394), 'For the more we want to see, the more the lesbian phallus becomes a joke at the expense of the visual field altogether – a seductive image through the suggestion of which the visual itself is lampooned'.

This meeting of masculine studies with their queer and feminist counterparts will facilitate my understanding of gender, social and literary dynamics in early modern Italian texts, allowing me to offer an articulate and flexible reading of them.

Finally, James Grantham Turner's studies on erotic-didactic early modern Italian works (2003) will further enrich my analysis. In exploring 'the relationship of libertine writing with philosophy and pedagogy', Turner's research focuses in particular on 'the pedagogic performativity of erotic discourse' and surveys 'a period [i.e. the modern age] preoccupied with female intellectual and sexual education' (Phillips, 2006, p. 95). In scrutinising my corpus, I will, therefore, pay special attention to what lies beneath a scandalous surface.

In order to investigate the scenario I have drawn so far in more depth, I will first analyse the ways in which writers such as Firenzuola and the anonymous author of the *Manganello* use the *donna-con-donna* motif to explore ironically the issues of marital fidelity and female chastity. Firenzuola defends the *malmaritate* who attempt to satisfy their libido and escape boredom by seeking a homoerotic affair, whilst the nameless poet harshly criticises them for their bawdy behaviour along with little girls who undermine their innocence with scandalous and homoerotic, didactic games which hint at more mature woman-man relationships. Second, and in relation to the previous sub-section, I will look at how Aretino, Pseudo-Aretino and Leti shape a sensuous curriculum as well as attack the weakness of family and religious institutions by playfully depicting queer relationships which may involve incest, voyeurism and sexual gender play. Pseudo-Aretino and Aretino unprejudicedly portray

homoerotic sexual education respectively within the family and the convent walls. Finally, Leti focuses his attention on nuns who enjoy being passionately instructed about earthly love, praising their natural sexual instinct.

2.1 Exploring a *Malmaritata*'s Queer Desires in Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti*

The problems of married couples are some of the favourite targets for comic and satirical Italian writers of all ages, especially as far as the sexual sphere is concerned. Along with medieval lyrics devoted to women complaining about their lives as unhappy wives (Corso, 1934), a considerable tradition of comic texts involving *malmaritate* (Pullan, 2016) had been developing from the origins of Italian literature. Dante himself, in his *tenzone* with Forese Donati, portrayed the latter's wife complaining of her disappointing sexual life. *Malmaritate* abound in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (see, for instance, 3.3 and 2.8) and, as well, Matteo Bandello's *novelle* (Ugolini, 2017). Traditionally the *malmaritata* is married to an ugly, stupid, extremely jealous and/or old husband who, more or less implicitly, struggles to satisfy her physically. As a result, the unhappy wife is usually glad to stumble upon young, good-looking lovers (usually, but not necessarily, a young boy) and have adventures to spice up her routine.

Malmaritata Lavinia provides the perfect illustration of this behaviour. She is the protagonist of the *Novella seconda* of the *Giornata prima* from *I Ragionamenti* by Florentine Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543), an unfinished collection of short stories written between 1523 and 1525 (Romei, 1983; Pignatti, 1997). Dedicated to the Duchess of Camerino, Maria Caterina Cybo, the work is a self-sufficient, original piece of literature, despite often being reductively seen as a mere imitation of the *Decameron* (Firenzuola, 1971, pp. 106-119). It is

addressed to a wide audience which includes women; accordingly, Costanza, 'La Reina', is the embodiment of 'a wise and learned woman, whose reasoning is expressed in an eloquent, elegant, and cultured manner' (Sanson, 2010, p. 116).

The book features a group of six noble youths gathered together at Easter time in Pozzolatico, a small village in the Florence countryside, where they spend their time for fun in storytelling and debating. The two leading lights of the company are the Tuscan Celso, an alter ego of Firenzuola (the same device occurs in the *Decameron*), and his beloved Gostanza Amaretta from Rome. Love is one of the *brigata*'s favourite topics of conversation, so several stories hinge on romance and eroticism, and the *Novella seconda* is no exception. It was probably inspired by the *cantare Maria per Ravenna* (dating back to the end of the fifteenth century), though Firenzuola's *novella* differs in some features (Firenzuola, 1971, pp. 106, n. 1). Zanrè (2014, pp. 163-164) identifies two more sources of the *novella:* Masuccio Salernitano's tale of Madonna Francesca (*Novellino*, XII) and Boccaccio's story of Alessandro and the Abbott (*Decameron*, 2.3), both based on cross-dressing.

One of the protagonists of Firenzuola's short story is Lavinia, the frustrated wife of Cecantonio Fornari (whose name tellingly confirms that he is a 'vechio rimbambito'), with whom she lives in Tivoli, a town near Rome. While Cecantonio seems not to care about his attractive spouse, young Fulvio does. With the complicity of a friend and thanks to his androgynous appearance, therefore, he contrives to be employed by Cecantonio as a maid, Lucia. In this way he is able to be close to his beloved and waits to seize his chance to win her heart. Finally, one night, the opportunity arrives. Cecantonio is not at home, so Lavinia decides to share her bed with Lucia. Driven by her sexual appetite, the *malmaritata* starts hugging and kissing her with passion, but she soon discovers something unexpected about her companion's body (Firenzuola, 2013):

> mentre ella [Lucia] dormia, l'altra, che forse aveva in fantasia qualcuno che meglio le scoteva la polvere del pelliccione [: to have sex with] che 'l suo marito, cominciò con grandissimo disio ad abbracciarla e baciarla; e scherzando così come interviene le venne messo le mani là dove si conosce il maschio dalla femmina; e trovando che la non era donna come lei, fortemente si maravigliò, e non altrimenti tutta stupefatta tirò 'n un tratto a sé la mano che ella si avesse fatto se sotto ad un cesto di erba avesse ritrovata una serpe all'improviso. (...) dubitando che non le fusse forse paruto quello che non era, volse di nuovo metter le mani a così fatta maraviglia; e trovando quello che l'aveva trovato la prima volta, stava intra due, s'ella dormiva o s'ell'era desta; poi pensando che forse il toccare la poteva ingannare, levata la coperta del letto volse vedere cogli ochi il fatto tutto intero [the male organ].[69]

Although it is not possible to establish a direct relationship between Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti* and Ariosto's *Furioso*, this scene cannot but recall the Fiordispina tale. On the one hand, like the Spaniard, Lavinia is explicitly moved by her 'grandissimo disio' and seeks a pro-active way to satisfy her libido. In so doing she follows the path of several women from the Italian *novella* tradition, such as Boccaccio's Madonna Filippa (6.7) or the nuns he depicts in the tale of Masetto da Lamporecchio (3.1) who have a strong sexual appetite. Furthermore, Lavinia never feels guilty about betraying her husband. On the other hand, unlike Fiordispina, Lavinia never asks herself whether what she is doing goes against nature or not: she simply obeys her desire. She does not seem discouraged or worried by the fact that her partner is supposedly a woman and, therefore, she explores the latter's body with genuine curiosity, not specifically looking for a male organ.

Giannetti (2009, p. 87) reads this episode as one with exceptional value since 'it makes no reference to the rhetorical trope of impossibility'. Furthermore she stresses that, unlike

[69] Here, I cite passages from Maestri's edition (Firenzuola, 2013).

Fiordispina and Ovid's hopeless heroines (presumably, Iphis and Ianthe), 'tellingly, Lavinia wants to make love specifically with a woman', and therefore, 'is not at all happy at her discovery of a man in her bed' (p. 88). Thus, Giannetti adds, the *malmaritata* refuses 'the phallic predilections of many literary narratives and the master narrative of male-sexual superiority', because '[r]ather than evil adulterous sex with a man, Lavinia desired playful and pleasurable sex with another woman' (pp. 88-89). Domenico Zanrè (2014, p. 164) also maintains that 'Lavinia is in a state of erotic excitement precisely because she thinks that her partner is a woman (…). Thus what is being performed here is an act of genuine lesbian desire'.

If, on the one hand, it is true that, after Cecantonio's departure, Lavinia wants to 'menar Lucia a dormir seco', on the other it is not clearly stated that she is specifically excited by her maid. Instead, from the beginning of the tale, the *malmaritata* is said to look for 'qualcuno che meglio provedesse a' bisogni della sua giovaneza' [i.e. her sexual needs], 'qualcuno che meglio le scoteva la polvere del pelliccione', i.e. an unspecified person with whom to break her sexual abstinence. It is also worth stressing that, as often occurs in the texts I investigate in this thesis, androgyny can play an important role in attracting one woman to another. As his friend Menico stresses at the beginning of the tale, Fulvio, in fact, lacks some typical masculine features such as a beard,[70] which were considered relevant signs of virility in Renaissance Italy.[71] Nevertheless, Fulvio's flaws may become a free pass for him to enter Lavinia's house. Accordingly, Menico encourages Fulvio to cross-dress by telling him that his androgynous looks ('l'esser tu di pel bianco [: beardless] e sanza segno alcuno di avere a

[70] Tellingly, how to wear one is a topic discussed in conduct and etiquette manuals such as Castiglione's *Cortegiano* and della Casa's *Galateo*; see Biow (2010).
[71] On signs of masculinity and virility in Italian Renaissance see for instance Milligan and Tylus (2010), and Lacouture (2015).

metter barba di questi dieci anni e l'avere il viso femminile') will help him pass himself off as teenager Lucia. After all, 'i più, come tu sai, credono che tu sia una femina vestita da uomo' (Firenzuola, 2013). In other words, Lavinia may be fascinated by the coexistence of both male and female bodily characteristics in Fulvio.

Nevertheless, I suggest, the discovery of her partner's penis seems to add further excitement to the intimacy rather than quenching its fire. The *malmaritata* is delightfully surprised at seeing the man's 'meraviglia' and, impatient to find out who is lying next to her, she throws off the bedclothes, thus revealing Lucia's beautiful, manly body, including his 'fatto tutto intero'. Again, instead of being unhappy, Lavinia starts 'credersi che miracolosamente fusse accaduta sì gran trasmutazione acciò che la si potesse sicuramente godere gli anni della sua giovinezza', as she has long been hoping (Firenzuola, 2013). Nonetheless, with a touch of mischievousness, she pretends not to understand what is going on and, therefore, she declares 'tutta baldanzosa' that she must verify whether Lucia's transformation into a man can be put down to an evil spirit by having sex with him/her several times. Once more the account of the whole episode is clearly imbued with irony and recalls what happens in Fiordispina's bed. Whilst the princess praises Macone and other gods for turning Bradamante into a man (25.44), the Christian *malmaritata* acts as if she is afraid that Lucia might be possessed by a fiendish entity (Firenzuola, 2013):

> 'Deh, che cosa è questa che io veggio stasera con gli ochi miei? Io so pur che poco fa tu eri femmina e or ti veggio esser venuto maschio! Oh, come può essere avenuto questo? Io ho paura di non travedere, o che tu non sia un qualche malo spirito incantato che mi sia venuto inanzi questa sera in cambio de Lucia a farmi venire la mala tentazione. Per certo, per certo che egli mi convien vedere come sta questa faccenda'.

The ‘mala tentazione’ can refer to the desire felt towards Lucia and, also, to the irresistible attraction provoked by the sight of the penis. Giannetti (2009, p. 89) correctly stresses that it is Lavinia taking the initiative and leading the situation, and that she ‘actively uses [Fulvio] by placing him in a passive and feminine role’ (‘messasela sotto le fece di quelli scherzi che le volontarose giovani fanno bene spesso a questi pollastroni’: Firenzuola, 2013). Nevertheless, as I have suggested, Lavinia does not really care about Lucia’s identity: she is merely eager to obtain sexual pleasure from a partner, no matter what their biological sex is. I also suggest that Firenzuola is more interested in underlining Fulvio’s sexual prowess than in exploring Lavinia’s alleged queer desires.

As we have seen in the previous chapter (and will see again in the rest of this thesis), cross-dressed men and other characters suspected of being too effeminate (including those with an androgynous appearance, like Fulvio) are highly likely to demonstrate exceptional virility when in bed with a woman. Besides being a narrative trick to amuse readers, the display of incredible sexual skills can also be an instrument to dispel any doubt regarding allegedly compromised masculinity, warding off dangerous gender confusion. In Firenzuola’s tale, Fulvio therefore manages to have sexual intercourse at least six times in a row, whilst in other texts (mainly comedies) sexually ambiguous male figures such as Ricciardetto have penises which are portrayed as huge and/or capable of remarkable performance. This resonates with the beliefs of the time: as Raymond B. Waddington stresses (2002, p. 13), ‘Greek aesthetics valued discreetly small genitalia and a disproportionately large penis suggested monstrosity; the Renaissance, however, accepted phallic gigantism as a *summum bonum*’. These male figures attempt to remove the anxiety of presenting themselves as effeminate men within ‘Renaissance culture [which] liked to project a fully empowered and virilized image of masculinity and encouraged frequent gestures toward male self-fashioning’

(Finucci, 2003, p. 4). Accordingly, Firenzuola appears to fully endorse Fulvio's constant display of masculinity. The 'priapic' episodes featuring in Firenzuola's story as well as in other early modern Italian texts may therefore work as stabilisers of genders and social conventions, which help the plot in developing towards the reaffirmation of publicly shared values and traditional gender roles. In Firenzuola's tale, as well as constituting a narrative turning point and a means to amuse the readership, the discovery of Fulvio's penis and the consequent beginning of a heterosexual relationship shadow and, finally, bring to an end the female queer desire experienced by Lavinia, thus anticipating one of the most common resolutions used by playwrights in comedies – the interruption of a same-sex bond in favour of a man-woman one.

After ascertaining that Lucia is a man, and when the couple are fully satisfied, Lavinia and Fulvio agree to keep their affair secret. As a consequence, Fulvio continues working as Lucia: unfortunately, his cross-dressing is so credible that, one day, 'lo ardito vecchione' Cecantonio slips his fingers under Lucia's clothes and 'trovò di quelle cose che egli non andava cercando' (Firenzuola, 2013). Confused and as imperceptive as ever, he partially accepts the servant's implausible explanation: three months earlier, Lucia tells him, suddenly, while she was doing laundry, a 'soza cosa [: penis]' came out from her body for no reason. Nowadays, the idea of such a transmutation seems bizarre and far-fetched, but in the *Cinquecento* it might have sounded more plausible (and not only to the illiterate) as 'in the early modern period the stability of sexual categories was always at risk' (Finucci, 2003, p. 6). It is the case that some early modern scientists held that it was possible for a woman suddenly to become a man from physiological and anatomical causes. They looked at the human body from the perspective described by the classical Greek physician Galen, who formulated the theory based on the balance between the four humours (blood, yellow bile, black bile,

phlegm) and their qualities (hot and moist; hot and dry; cold and dry; cold and moist). When something in this delicate equilibrium is altered, the body may experience changes or illness. Merging these ideas with the Aristotelian notion that a woman is an incomplete or flawed man, it may be that '[t]he spontaneous eruption of a penis from sudden motion or increased body heat is a logical extension of the belief that women's genital anatomy is merely an inverted (and imperfect) version of men's' (Traub, 2002, p. 45).

Cecantonio is not trained in medicine and so he goes to Rome looking for an expert able to shed light on the matter and help Lucia. There he accidentally comes across a friend of Fulvio, Menico, who confirms the genuineness of Lucia's transformation (Firenzuola, 2013):

> e' gli diede assai bene ad intendere che non solamente e' gli era possibile, ma che e' gli era accaduto dell'altre volte (...) e fattosi dare un Plinio volgare, gli mostrò quello che nel settimo libro al quarto capitolo e' dica di questo fatto, e simigliantemente gli fece vedere ciò che Battista Fulgosio ne scriva nel capitolo dei miracoli (...).

Menico cites two illustrious authors, Pliny the Elder (23 C.E.-79 C.E.) and Battista Fregoso (1453-1504), to pretend to scientifically demonstrate the legitimacy of his friend's *trasmutazione*. In fact, in his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny states that 'Transformation of females into males is not an idle story' (7.36) and reports some witnesses of this phenomenon.[72] More recently, in his *Factorum dictorum memorabilium* (known also as *De dictis factisque memorabilibus*, 1508), the Genoan doge Fregoso chronicles the case of a certain Francesca of Salerno who changed her sex (Magnanini, 2008, p. 58). Cecantonio is persuaded by such a learned explanation to the extent that he finally believes Menico's lies. Determined to take his

[72] 'Ex feminis mutari in mares non est fabulosum'. Translation from Pliny (1938).

beffa one step further, Lucia convinces Cecantonio that androgynous people can influence the fathering of male babies (Firenzuola, 2013). Foolishly Cecantonio believes Menico and, thus, keeps Lavinia and Fulvio/Lucia in his house. The tale therefore concludes with Lavinia delivering the desired male baby and maintaining her affair.

Lavinia and Fulvio's story concerns some of the most salient worries of early modern Italian society such as gender ambiguity caused by cross-dressing, betrayal of one's husband, same-sex relationships and illegitimate offspring. This is not a coincidence: as Finucci stresses (2003, p. 30), 'The genre that lent itself most readily to an investigation of sex and generation (...) is undoubtedly the *novella*', which had an impact on Renaissance plays as well. Despite the transgressive erotic adventures of Lavinia, in the final commentary of the story the *brigata* of *Ragionamenti*'s tellers condemns only Fulvio and Menico: the first for living 'così lorda vita' (Firenzuola, 2013) and the second because he does not help his friend to improve his position. This is the sole, nuanced way in which Fulvio's cross-dressing is criticised but not a word is said about the alleged *donna-con-donna* sexual encounter it provoked. Instead Firenzuola's attention is once more focused on Fulvio's proofs of virility. As Finucci (2003, p. 3) stresses, women's decorum has been constantly monitored, whilst 'In the West, masculinity has been routinely identified with the universal' and, so, 'proper gender alignment has been more relevant to men than to women'. Fecundity is deemed as the most powerful among the signals of adherence to male parameters, the climax of virility, since 'what makes a man a man is (...) the power to make progeny for society's sake' (Finucci, 2003, p. 35). Despite Fulvio's gender slippages throughout the story, therefore, he successfully passes all the virility tests.

It is worth noting that Firenzuola's determination to exalt Fulvio's masculinity and heteronormative values implies an ambiguous attitude towards *donna-con-donna* relationships

which is also aired in various passages from the *Ragionamenti*. As I have said, the *brigata* revels in telling and hearing all about love. This is why in the introduction to the first day of the *Ragionamenti* the Reina Gostanza (the woman charged with the choice of topic for a particular day's stories) is asked about the difference between friendship and love. She replies that 'amore è fra donna e uomo comunemente, e la amicizia discorre fra donna e donna o uomo e uomo il più delle volte' (Firenzuola, 2013). Thus, *generally*, love takes place between a man and a woman, whilst, *usually*, friendship has a more homosocial vocation. However, the Reina does not sound categorical: she uses 'comunemente' and 'il più delle volte' to connote the two feelings, perhaps opening the door to other kinds of relationship.[73]

On the other hand, when Gostanza is talking about sensual and virtuous love that same day, one of the members of the *brigata*, Fioretta, asks her about the legitimacy of woman-to-woman love. In Fioretta's opinion, female homoerotic love is less problematic than woman-man's since it does not threaten womanly *onestà* (Firenzuola, 2013):

> posto che la belleza del corpo sia pur necessaria, perché non è egli più conveniente che io rivolga questo mio amore verso una bella donna, dove non potrà mai cader biasimo che verso un bello uomo, dove, a chi con torti ochi voglia riguardare, non mancherà occasione da poter mordere la mia onestà? E voi pur sapete che non solamente doviamo mancare di errore, ma di ogni suspizione de errore.

These words may allude to the *topos* of impossibility as Fioretta seems to imply that two women cannot make love. Gostanza replies to her companion's question by explaining that attraction between men and women is necessary for the continuation of the human species, so

[73] The usage of 'comunemente' with this meaning is found from the Middle Ages at least; see the entry 'comunemente' in *TLIO - Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini* (http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/).

homoeroticism goes against the law of nature.[74] Gostanza also maintains that women's homoeroticism would provoke fights between men and women.[75]

In conclusion, in the passages I have analysed, Firenzuola overtly faces up to the issue of queer female desire and, through his characters, offers different points of view on it. Nevertheless, ultimately, he appears to suggest that woman-to-woman bonds can happen but are an exception to the natural order of things. Cleverly, at the same time, in the *Novella seconda*, he also employs a homoerotic scene between women as a justification for a display of masculine power (although marked by gender ambiguity and women's powerful sexual agency), as well as to reflect on the traditional notions of marital fidelity and wives' modesty.

Nonetheless, the Tuscan's musings on *donna-con-donna* relationships as well as on the value of physical and spiritual beauty do not stop there. Some decades later, he returns to this topic and explores queer female love (at greater length and more seriously) in his treatise *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne intitolato Celso* (completed in 1541, but first published 1548), dedicated 'Alle nobili e belle donne pratesi'. A record of two fictional dialogues between Celso and four ladies from Prato (the city in which the writer chose to spend his later years), it is a sort of a sequel to his *Epistola in difesa delle donne* (1525) which Firenzuola

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[74] 'Tu hai dunque a sapere, che avendo la natura creato lo uomo e la donna d'una medesima specie, e nelle virtù e forze dello animo simili l'uno all'altro, bisognandole nello abito del corpo fargli tanto differenti, che fra loro si potesse venire a quel congiungimento, col quale essa natura aveva ordinato che si mantenesse la umana generazione, e dubitando che per qualche accidente e' non nascesse alcuna differenza tra questi due individui, che potesse ritrarli dal già detto congiungimento, per tor via così fatta occasione, ella pensò trovare un vinculo, che gli dovesse tener sempre insieme uniti e concordi: e avendo già instituito che la bellezza fusse dalla principal cose che si appetissero, diede ordine che la bellezza della donna maggior disio accendesse di se nel petto dello uomo, e più piacesse e fosse più conosciuta che quella d'un altro uomo, e quella dello uomo più diletto porgesse alle donne che agli uomini stessi' (Firenzuola, 2013).

[75] 'Avendo adunque a venire alla cognizione della bellezza dello animo per mezzo di quella del corpo, e avendo noi altre più cognizione della bellezza dello uomo, e più piacer prendendone, che di. quella della donna, egli è necessario conchiudere, che la donna debba insignorire lo uomo dello amor suo piuttosto che una altra donna. Or non vi accorgete voi, che se egli non fusse stato questo ottimo provvedimento della natura, che fra noi, e gli uomini sarebbe una perpetua guerra?' (Firenzuola, 2013).

addressed to his own misogynist friend Claudio Tolomei, who criticised Firenzuola's choice to use women as philosophical interlocutors in his *Ragionamenti* (Pignatti, 1997). In the treatise Firenzuola reflects upon what constitutes women's beauty, a much-debated topic in the Renaissance. He also investigates human nature and sexuality drawing from the *Symposium* by Plato (Eisenbichler and Murray in Firenzuola, 1992, pp. XIX-XXXV), whose work at that time was very popular also thanks to Marsilio Ficino and Baldassar Castiglione. It is no surprise, then, that Celso relates the so-called Platonic myth of the missing half. According to this, Jupiter created human beings with four arms, four legs and two heads – and then separated them into two halves, compelled to spend their lives looking for the missing part. Some of these original humans were half male and half female, others male or female in both halves. Celso applies these ideas to the age he is living in (Firenzuola, 1977, p. 734):

> Quelle che erano femine o discendono da quelle che erano femine in ogni parte, amano la bellezza l'un dell'altra, chi puramente e santamente, come la elegante Laudomia Forteguerra la illustrissima Margherita d'Austria; chi lascivamente, come Saffo la Lesbia anticamente, e ai tempi nostri a Roma la gran meretrice Cicilia Viniziana; e queste così fatte per natura schifano il tôr marito e fuggono la intrinseca conversazione di noi altri; e queste debbiamo credere che sien quelle che si fanno monache volentieri e volentieri vi stanno, che sono poche; percioché nei munisteri le piụ vi stanno per forza e vivonvi disperate.

Murray (1991, p. 208) praises this passage as 'a rare example of a discussion of female sexuality outside theological, medical, or legal literature and indeed, a very rare discussion of female homosexuality'. In fact, as I will illustrate in this thesis, a multitude of early modern writers depicted *donna-con-donna* episodes, but only a few attempted to debate the topic. Firenzuola must be credited for doing this in various texts and in a nuanced way. In particular, in the concise survey cited, Celso explores the queer female continuum as conceived at that

time, stretching from pure and chaste love to the sinful passion of prostitutes or *malmonacate*. He therefore brings together historical, or supposedly historical, figures such as the ancient Greek poet Sappho or the contemporary prostitute Cicilia Viniziana, who might have been recognized by his male readers, as Eisenbichler states (2012, p. 123). I therefore suggest that Firenzuola may have employed her as the object of a male textual exchange, to stimulate a sense of complicity with his male audience. In the above-mentioned passage, Firenzuola also mentions the Sienese poet Laudomia Forteguerri and Margaret of Austria, the natural daughter of Holy Emperor Charles V. Forteguerri and the noblewoman were said to have been in love with each other, as Alessandro Piccolomini seems to confirm in his lecture delivered in 1541 at the Accademia degli Infiammati in which he discusses *Ora te 'n va superbo, or corri altero*, one of the five sonnets devoted by the poet to Margaret (Eisenbichler, 2001). The special bond between the two must have been quite well known at the time because various authors wrote about it and treated it with respect, as I will illustrate in more detail in the Conclusion of this thesis. As Eisenbichler (2001, p. 278) stresses, in *Celso* the reference to the alleged affair between the two women is particularly charming for several reasons, including the fact that Firenzuola's treatise is 'conceived in strictly male heterosexual terms'. Nonetheless the passage 'admits to lesbian love, a concept that medieval and Renaissance thinking on the subject did not generally acknowledge or, if it did, could not conceive outside of traditional phallocentric parameters'. Furthermore 'it accepts the possibility of both "pure" and "lascivious" lesbian love, thus indicating that it could be both "good" and "bad"' (Eisenbichler, 2001, p. 278).

To conclude, in the works I have investigated, Firenzuola depicts different forms of *donna-con-donna* love and desire, particularly from a sensual (not to say sexual) perspective, yet usually with no decided bias against them. He also seems to suggest that they can involve

any kind of women and take a variety of forms, from the most brutish to the holiest. Although he tends to affirm a heteronormative order with irony, Firenzuola never employs queer female attraction as a signal of woman's moral frailty or lust. Rather, he cleverly uses it to highlight the cracks in the moral structure of families whose *malmaritate* are a perfect specimen of disintegration.

2.2. *Il Manganello* and Its Condemnation of Woman-Woman Sex

In contrast to Firenzuola, at the same time the anonymous author of the misogynistic poem *Il Manganello* expresses male anxiety over women's agency and independence. Consequently, the writer tartly condemns all kinds of female perversions, including those cultivated by discontented wives, with the aim of showing how perverse and bestial women can be.

Often attributed to Pietro Aretino because of its irreverent and indecent nature, *Il Manganello* was likely to be published in Venice around 1530 (Davidson, 1994, p. 74, n. 2). Interestingly, despite its obscene contents addressed to a supportive male community (embodied, in the text, by a certain Silvestro, the addressee), *Il Manganello* was never included in an *Index* and, thus, was widely circulated, as Ugo Rozzo (2001, p. 200) notes.[76] The *poemetto* consists of thirteen *capitoli in terza rima* imbued with corrosive, misogynistic sarcasm. As its first lines state, it is openly inspired by two lodestars of misogynistic literary works, Juvenal's sixth satire against women and Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*.

[76] According to Rozzo (2001, p. 200) this phenomenon may be explained 'perhaps owing to their evident and well-known lewdness, or perhaps in order not to "ennoble" such material by citing it in an official document and thereby also giving it publicity'.

The writer is not interested in providing a multifaceted overview of women. Instead, as Diego Zancani (1982, p. XV) underlines, 'il *Manganello,* come altre opere misogine, non sviluppa argomenti in modo logico, non vuole dire niente di nuovo, ma colleziona semplicemente quello che "si sa", tutto ciò che di negativo è stato detto sulla donna'. The poem is, therefore, a long survey of womanly vices in obscene detail. As a consequence, it encompasses the nefarious history of all-female eroticism from Medea to the contemporary, since 'femina non fu mai che non sia paza;/ femina non fu mai che non sia troia' (I.38-39).[77] Along with several other misogynist writers, therefore, the anonymous author insists on chauvinist *topoi* such as female erotic insatiability and malice. The writer also gives a bitter account of the tricks used by women to satisfy their bestial appetites. They are therefore frequently depicted as deceiving and cuckolding their husbands with any kind of creature, e.g. with slaves, other women or even animals.

To support these ideas the author reports a broad range of episodes that often took place in Northern Italy, sometimes overtly citing the names of the protagonists. Thus, we come to know that a certain Madonna Beatrice dal Farnese had an affair with two peasant women. The dynamics of their sexual encounters are meticulously described (7:22-33):

> Madona Beatrice dal Farnese
> tenea con seco do so' villanelle
> che avean bone culate e bone arnese,
> questa fregava spesso a lor la pelle,
> menandoli la figa in sul culacio
> o sulle cosse, ch'eran ritondelle,
> e tanto travasava el budelazo

[77] I quote from Zancan's edition (*Il Manganello*, 1982).

che ne venìa for lardo bolito
ch'è sufficiente a frizer un meracio,
e questo parse a lei meglior partito,
che farse travasar la castraleca
da nisun'om, dapoi morto il marito.

Whilst Firenzuola pities Lavinia for being a *malmaritata* and, therefore, describes her homoerotic appetite with a certain sympathy, the anonymous author of the *Manganello* presents Madonna Beatrice and her partners as moved by brutal animal instinct. To emphasise this the account of women's bodies is rude or even disgusting. The narrative of female-female sex in the second and the third *terzine* is particularly vivid and repulsive, mirroring the typical Latin representations of *fricatrices*, as seen in the Introduction of this thesis. The author amplifies every single detail of it with the aim of stressing the monstrous nature of the *donna-con-donna* relationship. Thus, the vagina is disparagingly called 'figa' and 'budelazo', the bottom 'culacio' (please note the pejorative forms of the nouns), while the vaginal mucus due to arousal is so abundant that looks like 'lardo bolito' in which one can fry food. Although the description of the fact is disturbing, the writer seems to tell us that Madonna Beatrice appreciates it very much, even more than having sex with a man.

The female threesome consciously removes all male partners, as is clearly stated ('e questo parse a lei meglior partito/ che farse travasar la castraleca/da nisun'om'). We can therefore postulate that the author's sarcasm arises from a sense of exclusion and defeat that perfectly marries with the nature of the poem, since this piece of literature is a long, detailed indictment of women's sexual independence and rebellion against patriarchal-driven rules. In the episode cited above and in Fiorenzuola's *Novella seconda*, both the authors describe in some detail the advances of lustful wives, eager to engage in a homoerotic affair to fulfil their

libido. The writers therefore provide their personal picture of the betrayal of the ideal of marital fidelity and women's modesty. They show that the family, rather than a safe haven or a morally infallible institution, is the place where morality capitulates, and women do not peacefully accept their role as submissive, obedient and humble wives.

As we have seen, Firenzuola is supportive of his heroine, Lavinia, who seeks someone more sexually active than her husband – and it doesn't matter if this person is a man or a woman as love and attraction have their own rules. He also plays with the widespread notion of female insatiability as well as the *topos* of woman-woman desire, and comically depicts the ways in which the queer couple make fun of social conventions. Conversely, far from exhibiting any empathy with the *malmaritate*, the poet of the *Manganello* deems women, represented as stock, negative characters, to be opportunistic and sexually voracious beings. The anonymous author sees in an all-female relationship a horrible perversion, as well as a threat to hegemonic masculinity with its heteronormative notions of family and society. In this way the writer expresses anxiety and fear of losing control over women and being overwhelmed by their brazenness. A society where women have at their disposal too much freedom is a society at risk, the storyteller seems to suggest. As Turner (2003, p. 9) warns, in analysing sexually explicit early modern texts several of their unbridled and 'autonomous "women" have been fabricated by a male author for a male readership'.

It comes as no surprise, then, when in a passage from Chapter Five the poet's chauvinist attack on women's bawdiness does not spare little girls who are alleged to have been demonstrating their corrupted nature from childhood. The chapter is dedicated to the education of prostitutes or women with exceptional sexual appetites who, according to the writer, are often solicitously instructed by their mothers. This is a recurring feature (almost a *topos*) in early modern Italian literature: as we will see later, Aretino contributes enormously

to the idea, portraying mothers, prostitutes and bawds dispensing precious advice to novices. As I have said, in the early modern period treatises about how women should conduct themselves were quite popular. The anonymous author is therefore offering the reader an alternative (and obscene) text on women's precocious and lascivious upbringing.

Chapter Five, therefore, opens with a reassuring domestic scene of two graceful little girls dancing at home but the second *terzina* abruptly destroys this lovely picture: the children, who can hardly wait to get their clothes off, have sex together and also compare their vaginas. They are not just playing: they are learning how to give and receive pleasure in order to be ready to do so with a man one day (5:1-12):

> Gentil fantine, d'oto o di diece anni,
> che stano in casa, imparano a ballare,
> che apena den saper levarsi i panni,
> se seran nele camere a fregare
> l'una con l'altra e misurarse il fico,
> e provar chi più longi po pissare.
> Levate sopra el cul fin l'ombelico
> si monta adosso e menan le culate,
> imparan per saper servir l'amico,
> e l'una in su, in giù l'altra ribatte,
> caccandosi la lingua per la bocca
> zuciandosi che par che teti late.

In some respects, this and the previous depictions of same-sex attraction evoke the tones used in Ariosto's sixth satire cited in Chapter Two. Fully adhering to the practice of satire as a genre, the *Manganello* verses are in fact imbued with sarcasm, verbal aggressiveness, harshness and homophobic moralising. Accordingly, the depiction of the children having sex

and emulating man-woman coitus is disturbingly detailed and seems to reveal a morbid (not to say paedophilic) curiosity. As I have shown, whilst Madonna Beatrice and her partners enjoy an all-female threesome which riskily excludes any male presence, the young protagonists of the lines cited above evoke another kind of triangular relationship. In this scene, instead of suppressing the male element, the children are learning how to 'servir l'amico', literally how to serve and satisfy their future male lovers - and so anticipating 'proper' – that is, man-woman – sex. In the author's view, the girls' rubbing is, therefore, not that of the Latin tribades described in Chapter One of this thesis, nor the kind we will see in other texts investigated in this chapter, such as those of Aretino's, pseudo-Aretino's and Leti's, where queer female sex is aimed at personal fulfilment. Rather, the girls' game is an obscene mimicking of a man and a woman making love, intended to precociously assimilate its fundamental acts. Although this time the *donna-con-donna* relationship is designed to train the children for their transformation into prostitutes able to please their male clients, the author takes every opportunity to depict female homoeroticism as an expression of women's brutish behaviour and a bestial appetite, reeking with moral decay. No matter their age, women's chastity is merely a utopia.

In so doing the writer relies on pernicious beliefs about women's bestiality and corrupted morality which were still current in the *Cinquecento*. I therefore suggest that the cited passages from the *Manganello* can also be profitably read in the light of Quaintance's studies of what she defines as 'textual masculinity'. Given this, I want to suggest that the author of the *Manganello* employs chauvinist imagery to enhance the comradeship of a male community which believes it is menaced by exuberant agency in girls and women. Accordingly, the anonymous author depicts a series of women who from childhood attempt to fool and deceive men in order to obtain wealth, sexual pleasure and power. The writer judges

anything that problematises male sexuality and identity harshly in order to defend the collective masculinity embodied by Silvestro. This intention seems to be confirmed by the title of the work itself: tellingly, in Italian, the term 'Manganello' can refer both to the penis and to a kind of truncheon. In other words, it is no coincidence that the title of a book which violently attacks 'il maledetto vermo' (that is, women) simultaneously evokes a weapon and the male organ. It seems to insinuate that all women's deviations (including homoerotic ones) must be punished by the community of men and heteronormativity must be restored.

2.3 Family Pleasures in the *Dialogo di Giulia e Madalena*

Despite the *Manganello* poet's efforts to circulate chauvinist ideas on the control of women's unbridled sexuality, some writers revel in comically describing the ways in which various expressions of the queer continuum can challenge the moral integrity of families and religious institutions, showing how vices such as lust are cheerfully found in them. One of these authors penned the infamous *Dialogo di Giulia e Madalena* or *Puttana errante* (before 1660),[78] a 'dialogue of courtesanal instruction (…) gathering and codifying every known sexual posture' (Turner, 2003, p. 3) primarily aimed at entertaining a male audience. Considered by Green and Karolides (2005, p. 462) as 'the first known imaginative prose work that concentrates directly and exclusively on the pleasure of sex', it was therefore '[o]ne of the staples of 17th- and then 18th-century pornography, suffering the attention of censors in various countries'. Due to its boldness the work has often been attributed to Pietro Aretino

[78] As Moulton (2013, p. 213) emphasises, 'The dialogue's date is uncertain. The earliest printed edition is from 1660, though a manuscript exists that may date from the late sixteenth century'.

(Rufi, 1987) and must be distinguished from Lorenzo Venier's *poemetto Puttana errante* (1530), which is an obscene parody of epic-chivalric narratives.

While, one may be tempted to say, in the *Manganello*, '[t]he entire ideological apparatus of patriarchy rested on [the] polarizing identification of Nature with the feminine and Culture with the masculine', so that 'whenever educational theory turns into a contest between the sexes, women's "natural impertinencies" are accused of preventing self-transformation through education, and their physiological "Sex" is assumed to imprison their souls' (Turner, 2003, p. 33), in the *Dialogo* or in Aretino's *Ragionamenti* the 'erotic-didactic nexus' (as Turner calls it) is more refined. Accordingly,

> representations of the libertine *institutrice* (the common theme of Aretino (…) and [his] successors) strain this dichotomy to the breaking point, since "Venus" becomes a complex technology of pleasures and postures rather than a 'natural' instinctive urge, and since it is the female voice (albeit ventriloquized) than transmits the knowledge and assumes the authority. (Turner, 2003, p. 133)

The protagonists of the *Dialogo*, Giulia and Madalena, are two prostitutes discussing various topics. The former embodies the *institutrice* who has become erotically skilled and prepared for sex after meticulously following a long, articulated erotic curriculum. Parodying philosophical treatises on love *à la page* in the Renaissance, Giulia attempts to instruct Maddalena starting from the forms that love can take (Aretino, 1987, p. 58):

> GIULIA: (...) o donna con donna, o uomo con uomo, o uomo con donna: donna con donna non s'usa se non ad un modo solo, omo con uomo non credo che n'abbia più, uomo poi con donna n'ha molto.[79]

[79] I quote from Galderisi's edition.

Giulia seems to consider woman-woman desire unproblematic and worthy of being equated to other typologies of sexual relationships. She alludes to the unique manner in which two women can consummate their love but, unfortunately, she does not specify it. Since Latin authors and, as we will see, the same pseudo-Aretino in the *Dialogo* have also described scenes of women titillating or rubbing their genitalia, it is plausible to imagine that the author is referring to women making love in this way.

Not only does Giulia maintain the existence of same-sex bonds, but, it is clear, they have been part of her sexual apprenticeship at home, dating back to when she was eleven and her sister Pippa sixteen.[80] At that time, they were living with some relatives, including their fifteen-year-old cousin Federico. One day, looking through a hole, Giulia saw him sat on a chair masturbating and, finally, ejaculating on the floor. Impelled by curiosity, the child talked to her sister, who took the opportunity to explain to her how women get pregnant. Under the pretext of better describing the part of the female body involved in the insemination and conception processes, Giulia recounts how Pippa 'mi misse le mani al conno [: vulva] e con il ditto mi mostrò dove [the penis] si poneva' (Aretino, 1987, p. 60). The sisters then went to the room where Federico was and, in order to show Pippa what he was doing, Giulia sat on his chair touching her own vulva.

The girl's practical class in sexual education did not end there. Soon after, pretending to illustrate how men and women make love, Pippa rubbed her genitals against her sister's (p. 60):

[80] In this respect, it is worth recalling that, according to Turner (2003, p. 35), in the *Puttana errante* one can find glimpses of what he calls the '"domestic turn", away from prostitutional trickery towards a kind of homely idyll of sex-for-sex's-sake'.

> GIULIA: (...) e io semplicetta mi concia' proprio nella propria sedia come egli stava e dissi alla Pippa: 'Egli cosi faceva'. Ed ella, alzatosi i panni davanti, mi se pose fra le cosce e misse il suo conno per mezzo il mio, e co 'l ditto mi mostrava quello che facevano gli uomini alle donne.

Despite its intensity the lesson did not appease Giulia's sexual appetite. Still excited by what she had seen and experienced, that very night Giulia was masturbating herself when she heard her aunt, widow Madonna Anna, using a glass dildo.[81] Even more aroused and curious, Giulia employed the sex toy and lost her virginity with it while her kinswoman was sleeping (pp. 59-60).

Her curiosity drove her to continue the sexual apprenticeship she was getting within her family. One night, after spying on Federico having anal sex with a man to further expand her sexual knowledge, the girl could not sleep because she wanted to experience sex with a real penis instead of a 'carotta di vetro', a dildo (p. 64). Worried and saddened, Giulia asked her aunt whether women might have pleasure without men. Like an attentive teacher, Madonna Anna did not hesitate to show her niece how (pp. 65-66):

> GIULIA: Onde ella bagiòmmi forte, stringendo il mio petto al suo. (...) Costei mi comminciò a toccar le poppe, le natiche, le coscie e bagiarmi; e poi mi fece volger con la schiena in giuso e posesi in mezzo le mie gambe e bagiandomi forte, e nel bagiarmi mi poneva alcune volte la lingua sua fra le mie labre chiedendomi la mia, e avutala teneva fra le sue labra, e succhiavala: e poi alla fine, faccendomi tenere le calcagna appresso le natiche, e il suo conno per mezzo il mio, cominciò a menare il culo e fregare conno con conno massimamente dove è quel osso di sopra, e cosi ora in fretta, ora adagio facendo diceva sentire una dolcezza grande; alla fine anch'io sentiva piacere, e fatto fine poi mi bagiava mille volte. E avanti che fusse giorno più di tre volte tornammo a questa danza, cosi passavamo poche notti nelle quali prendessimo simul piacere, dove ella m'amava e io senza misura. Allora viddi che quelli vezzi che mi

[81] On the role of the dildo in early modern Italy, see Simons (2010, pp. 77-91).

> faceva erano stati tutti a questo fine: sì che a sì fatta maniera conobbi li congiungimenti di donna con donna.

Giulia perfected her homoerotic initiation with Anna, who skilfully offered her a complete sensory experience. Their *fricatrices*-like encounter perhaps belongs to the typology illustrated by Giulia when talking about woman-woman mating. As we have seen so far in this thesis, it comes as no surprise since sex between women was often conceived as a matter of genital rubbing, whilst sexual penetration was often deemed as a male prerogative (unless women used a dildo as a penis substitute to masturbate by themselves).

Although in this case the absence of a penis is the trigger (or perhaps a clever justification) for queer female desire, the encounter between Anna and Giulia looks perfectly satisfying. Unlike the author of the *Manganello*, Pseudo-Aretino does not see in this precocious and even incestuous homoerotic initiation a sign of women's moral decay. The writer, instead, simply presents *donna-con-donna* relationships as one stage in an erotic agenda as well as a solution for appeasing sexual appetite, as 'uomini ghiotti' (as Anna calls them) do by having sex together. The account of the 'congiungimenti di donna con donna' is therefore detailed and explicit. As already stated, Giulia, Pippa and Anna's sexual acts also call to mind the women's mutual rubbing condemned by Latin authors such as Martial and Juvenal, which we have seen in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. In Pseudo Aretino's *Dialogo*, the same acts have, instead, a positive value. Furthermore, as Giulia demonstrates, sex between women is potentially fulfilling as that between a man and a woman, and it does not need to involve a man, either directly or indirectly, as in the case of a husband who cannot satisfy his wife (Firenzuola's *Novella seconda*) or the future client of a prostitute with a homoerotic training (Chapter Five from *Manganello*). Queer female love can

be *per se* fully enjoyable and legitimate. On the other hand, the fact that the women involved in queer relationships showed an overwhelming sexual appetite cannot but cast an ironic shadow on them as well as on their roles as educators.

It is, incidentally, also worth noting that, as in Firenzuola's tale, woman-woman desire and androgyny seem to go hand in hand in Pseudo-Aretino's dialogue as well. Madonna Anna is, in fact, described as a 'giovane di trentacinque anni e bellissima di corpo, e ancor sarebbe stata di volto se non che aveva troppo dell'uomo' (Aretino, 1987, p. 65). Apart from her face, no other part of Anna's body is described as masculine or abnormal, whilst Giulia and Pippa seem to be totally feminine in appearance. This said, the author does not imply that hermaphroditism plays a fundamental part in a female homoerotic relationship. Rather, I suggest, Pseudo-Aretino plays with Anna's ambiguous looking to further accentuate the transgressive atmosphere which suffuses the affair between the aunt and the niece.

In conclusion, the author presents Anna, Giulia and Pippa as three women of different ages eager to explore and enjoy sexuality whether or not it involves socially forbidden desires and acts. Their libido, by contrast with the Manganello, is also depicted as being explicit in any aspect and natural in a good way. In so doing, the writer seems to want to render *donna-con-donna* sex palatable for the audience titillating its voyeurism and morbid curiosity. If, on the one hand, dangerously, Pseudo-Aretino appears to consider incest acceptable and attempts to normalise it, on the other, perhaps one should also bear in mind that the whole book aims to provoke strong reactions in its readership.

The story of Anna, Giulia and Pippa stimulates our reflections on the narrow field of vision supplied to cloistered women as well. If, on the one hand, the episode celebrates unbridled sexuality, on the other hand, it shows a sense of claustrophobia and perversion. In

attempt to obtain immediate gratification, this closed and sexually self-sufficient community veers towards a harem-like fantasy in which men are obsolete and, nonetheless, their scopophilia is satisfied.

2.4 'Ce ne demmo insieme uno spasso': Queer Desire and Chastisement in Aretino's Dialogues

One of the most (in)famous and popular erotic texts ever written and one of the most influential pieces of writing in the field of hard-core literature, Aretino's comic dialogues, frequently known as *Ragionamenti* or *Sei giornate,* were soon banned by the Catholic Church due to their scabrous, graphically sexual content as well as the writer's political and personal tensions with the Papal Court. Nonetheless, this did not prevent them from being widely circulated.

Taking its inspiration from Lucian of Samosata's satirical *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (*Ἑταιρικοὶ διάλογοι*),[82] the work encompasses the *Ragionamento della Nanna e dell'Antonia* (1534) and its presumed sequel the *Dialogo della Nanna e della Pippa* (1536), both devoted to 'the scandalous and hilarious career of a fictional courtesan named Nanna' (Moulton, 2007, p. 496), thus parodying the pedagogical-moral dialogues which were so popular in the *Cinquecento*. In these narratives, she 'sets out a course of advanced "*puttanismo* studies" that includes a veneer of literary cultivation (Ariosto, Petrarch, Boccaccio) and training in demure refining (…) Procuring is likewise imagined as a discipline with its own "school" and doctoral programme, graduating "witches and poetesses", as well as mistress-bawds like Nanna herself' (Turner, 2013, p. 34). As a matter of fact, both dialogues recount in detail the

[82] On the relationship between Aretino and Lucian see at a minimum Fantappiè (2017).

sexual life of several women, including their initiation into woman-woman lovemaking, in order to titillate their audience (primarily men) as well as reflect ironically upon the moral frailty of social, family and religious structures. As Moulton (2013, p. 213) puts it, 'Despite its provocative licentiousness, the volume is a serious social and political examination of power and gender, as well as of the influence of market forces on traditional morality'.[83]

In the *Dialogo della Nanna e della Pippa*, Nanna teaches her adolescent daughter Pippa how to become a courtesan and deal with men (the first and second days of the tale), while in the last *giornata* they are both instructed by two wise women (a 'comare' and a 'balia') about the *ruffianeria*. The *Dialogo*, therefore, offers a richly ironic survey of the secrets of the art of the prostitute and mimics the *precettistica* manuals devoted to all kinds of subjects which were widespread during the Renaissance (Ordine, 1992). Aretino, therefore, offers his readers a comprehensive handbook of sexual education which includes masturbation and group sex, as well as heterosexual and homoerotic intercourse, including *donna-con-donna* relations. In this respect, the most intriguing episodes are found in the third day of the tale when the *comare* explains to her master explicitly and shamelessly why she arrived late for their meeting. She was completely absorbed – she admits – in intense contemplation of the alluring body of a maiden taking a bath (Aretino, 1984):

> COMARE: 'E per dirlo a la Signoria vostra, io la lavai con queste mani, con l'acqua rosa, e non con l'acqua schietta; e mentre le spurava le pocce, il petto, le reni, il collo, stupiva de la sua morbidezza e de la sua bianchezza. Il bagnuolo era tepido e il fuoco acceso, e io sono stata la colpa d'ogni male: perché nel lavarle le cosce, e le meluzze, e la cotalina, mi venni meno per la dolcitudine del piacere. Oh che

[83] On this topic, also see Fantappiè (2018, p. 208).

> carni delicate, oh che membra candide, oh che spesa non più fatta da veruno: io l'ho palpata, l'ho basciata e maneggiata per una volta, sempre parlando di voi'.[84]

Blending elegant expressions from the tradition of love language with coarseness, the *comare* frankly confesses to her friend how she felt and what she did. She was particularly intrigued by the woman's bosom, thighs, and, finally, her intimate area ('cotalina'). While caressing her body, the *comare* talked about the Signoria but this sounds like a sly, preconceived justification for touching her. For her part, the woman did not hold back and let the *comare* fondle her. Was she flattered by the idea of the Signoria desiring her? Or did she only love the *comare*'s caresses? Readers cannot be sure, but they may be excited by the sensual ambiguity that pervades the scene.

It is worth stressing that, although the *comare*'s risqué account apparently aimed to flatter and titillate the Signoria's virility, *donna-con-donna* attraction is far from depicted as subordinate to male appetite. The *comare* and her young companion controlled the Signoria by controlling the narrative and placing his fictional body (and, importantly, not his real body) between them. His desires became a mere pretext for the two women to explore their own longing together. The man, therefore, could only look at them with desire, but he was impotent. In so doing, the *comare* transformed woman-to-woman attraction into a means to exercise power:

> COMARE: Io il [: the *Signoria*] messi in volontà: e rizzandosigli il-piei-del-trespolo [: the male organ], me si lascia cadere a dosso, e diemmene una che se gli poteva dir 'arcivoi', non pur 'voi'.

[84] In this chapter I quote both Aretino's *Ragionamento* and *Dialogo* from Procaccioli's edition (1984).

This evokes one of the features of hard-core texts which Turner (2003, p. 8) identifies when stating that 'Narrative authority is gendered female, libertine mothers take command, men appear more as objects than subjects, and the phallus (…) becomes sometimes a "female slave"'. Of course, this and other similar scenarios in Aretino's *Ragionamenti* do not imply any inclination on his part towards proto-feminism. Nonetheless, in fact, 'the narrative of female didactic supremacy is undermined by the obvious fact that [a man] actually write the script' (Turner, 2003, p. 37).

It is not by chance, therefore, that instead of disgusting or quenching his sexual hunger, the titillating, ambiguous atmosphere evoked by the *comare*'s narrative aroused the *Signoria*. The woman was aware of this and, employing his voyeurism as leverage, subjugated the man ('Io il messi in volontà'): ultimately, the servant rules over her master. Aretino does not see anything wrong with two women having pleasure and playing with male desire: as Giannetti (2009, p. 90) correctly stresses, the writer treats queer female attraction as licit, 'natural and unproblematic'.

In confirmation of this, a few pages later, we find the *comare* intensely describing to the *balia* the alluring body of a new woman she was attracted to. She spotted her perfect, naked body through a hole or a crack in the wall while the woman was having sex with a man. The *comare* portrays the irresistible beauty of the maiden's face as set out by Stilnovo poets and Petrarch. She then builds the description of the woman to a climax: as it reaches its apex, the *comare* reaches the peak of her arousal:

> COMARE: (...) Ella si aveva rivolti i capegli in capo senza velo niuno, onde le sue trecce le facevano tetto a la bella fronte: i suoi occhi ardevano e ridevano sotto l'arco de l'un ciglio e de l'altro; le guance parevano propio latte spruzzato di grana di colore dolce dolce; oh il bello naso, sorella, oh il bel mento che ella aveva! Sai perché io non ti favello de la bocca e dei denti? Per non iscemare la loro riputazione

> favellandone. Un collo, Iddio, un petto, Balia, e due pocce da far corrompere i vergini e da sfratare i martiri: io mi smarrii nel vedere 'l corpo con la sua gioia per belico in mezzo; e mi perdei ne la vaghezza di quella cosa bontà de la quale si fanno tante pazzie, tante nimicizie, tante spese e tante parole; ma le cosce, le gambe, i piedi, le mani e le braccia lodino per me chi sa lodarle. E son fole le parti dinanzi: lo stupore che mi cavò fuor del sentimento, uscì da le spalle, da le reni e da l'altre sue galantarie. Io ti giuro per il mio mobile [: the genitals], e lo do a sacco, al fuoco e ai ladri e ai birri, se non mi posi nel vederlo la mano a la cotale, menandomela non altrimenti che si menino i cotali da chi non ha dove intignergli.[85]

The *comare* is not ashamed of talking overtly about her desire and her appreciation of the unexpected peepshow. Her passionate speech interweaves the poetic, elegant language she uses for describing the woman's face with the plebeian, sensual expressions reserved for the body, in which Aretino deploys his exceptional 'verbalismo onnicomprensivo' (Folena, 1997, p. 133) and thus provokes a strongly comic contrast. Woman's sensuality is said to be so powerful that it can threaten the chastity of pure men as well as feminine self-control (the *comare* could not but masturbate herself vigorously), thus provoking turmoil. The episode, in fact, does not leave the *balia* indifferent either: ultimately, she confesses she has just had an orgasm ('quella dolcezza che si sente nel sognare di avere a dosso il tuo amante': Aretino, 2002, p. 320).

Aretino presents both the *comare*'s and *balia*'s homoerotic experiences with a sense of naturalness and transgression. Indeed, the exaltation of a female body by 'a lower-class character such as the *comare* in one of [Aretino's] "whorish" dialogues (...) does not diminish

[85] Interestingly, the scene seems to recall in detail Guido Romano's painting *Two Lovers* (c. 1524, Saint Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum), portraying a man and a woman, both naked and about to have sex. They are spied with interest by an old woman, probably a servant, who is hidden behind a door.

the fact that Aretino considered the suggestion of homoerotic attraction between women credible, natural, and requiring no explanation to his audience' (Giannetti, 2009, p. 91). Indeed, Aretino aimed to demonstrate that literary skills and stylistic mastery were more important than class (after all, he was said to be the son of a prostitute). Accordingly, the *comare* status can also demonstrate that literature has the power to subvert expectations, conventions, habits and tastes in a subtle, pervasive way, before the readers realise what's happened.

Although the woman-woman scenes presented can titillate male readership who accepts the idea of women finding 'the sight of another woman's body attractive and sexually arousing' (Giannetti, 2009, p. 91), I do not believe, as Giannetti does, that 'the general vision of the dialogue remained phallocentric' (p. 91). Instead, as I have shown, I submit that Aretino depicts his heroines' sexuality and their homoerotic relationships as self-sufficient and satisfying. Moreover, rather than pointing the relevance of the phallus, it veers to its fictional erasing. This can be read, too, as a typical *flagello dei principi*'s social and moral reprimand. Again, this does not point to any affiliation of the author with proto-feminism: rather, the episodes I have analysed show the triumph of the art of *puttanismo* with its celebration of unrestrained sexuality.

Aretino also advances his intentionally provocative approach to sexuality, exalting the physicality of woman-woman's love, in the *Ragionamento*. This time the main targets of his criticism are the Church, its morally corrupt apparatus and its structural weaknesses with their potential for consequences on the life of young women. The Tuscan knew that they were often victims of family and religious institutions. As a matter of fact, a girl could become a nun in Italy, especially in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, by paying a dowry that was usually cheaper than the one requested for marriage. As a result, several women were

forced by their relatives to take vows because it was more convenient or might help the family's economic, social and dynastic strategies. Convents, in fact, could be a source of power and income (Evangelista, 2007; Zarri, 2011). For their part wealthy nuns, although few in number, could benefit from their status by continuing to live in a convent but enjoy privileges such as spending time with relatives or having expensive furniture in their rooms. Things changed dramatically after the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the subsequent Counter-Reformation. Nuns had to obey stricter rules, especially those who were supposed to live in seclusion.

Early modern writers such as Aretino (as their medieval counterparts had already done) offer several portrayals of *malmonacate*, women who were often unhappy with their position after being forced to enter a convent and were eager to rebel against the system.[86] In so doing they sometimes show that convents were not a safe place for virgins and women aspiring to heavenly salvation by painting convent life as imbued with all kinds of vice from greed to lust. These authors also depict nuns as having affairs with monks and priests and not disdaining to entice both male and female youths as well.[87] For instance, in his song *Monicella mi farei* (c. 1574), Florentine musician Cosimo Bottegari (1554-1620) ironically lists the several advantages of being a nun. One of these is having a woman lover, 'Una divota vaga e bella/ che mi desse ogni piacere/ et anch'io ne dessi a quella'.[88]

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[86] Probably the most famous early modern Italian *malmonacata* is Venetian writer Elena Cassandra (Arcangela) Tarabotti (1604-1652), forced by her father to enter a nunnery. As a consequence, in her works (eloquently entitled, for instance, *Tirannia paterna*, published in 1654, and the *Inferno monacale*, composed in1643, but published in 1990), she harshly condemns forced confinements. Tarabotti is also likely to have written the *Purgatorio delle mal maritate*, now lost.

[87] In this respect the tale of Masetto da Lamporecchio from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (3.1) offers a perfect example of an erotic relationship between several nuns and a young man, who pretends to be a deaf mute in order to live in their service and enjoy their company.

[88] The song is recorded with its music in Bottegari's autograph songbook, also known under the name of *Libro di canto e di liuto* (c. 1574). The book is now preserved at the Biblioteca Estense in Modena and labelled Modena MS C 311 (*facsimile*: Bottegari, 2006). The manuscript, MacClintock (1956) observes, was used by Bottegari to

For its part the Church was aware of the homoerotic dangers of convent life and tried to find ways to combat them. One of the most famous philosophers of that time, the Dutch theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/1469-1536), harshly criticises nuns scandalously behaving like Sappho in a short, bitter moral dialogue from his Latin *Colloquia familiaria* (1518), which can be translated as *The Marriage Hater* (*Colloquy 7*).[89] He explains in his *Usefulness of the Colloquies* (1526) (Rummel, 1996, pp. 25-26) that he alludes to the indecency of relationships between nuns in order 'to denounce those who, despite the opposition of parents, lure boys and girls into a monastery, playing upon their innocence or their superstitiousness', but Bottegari ironically sees all-female communities as an excellent opportunity for nuns to amuse themselves.

Like the musician, Aretino portrays bawdy nuns and novices with no manifest interest in spirituality but, conversely, entirely and happily engaged in all sorts of worldly delights. His Nanna is, therefore, deservedly one of the most famous transgressive nuns in the whole of early modern Italian literature as well as the young protagonist of the comic dialogue *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia fatto in Roma sotto una ficaia* (1534) in which readers can enjoy her erotic apprenticeship as well as the very start of her long, successful career as a prostitute.

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collect pieces (some of them his original creations) and to help perform them in various European cities. He worked at the Bavarian court from at least 1573 to 1575, and probably after 1579 at the Court of Francesco I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and with his brother, Ferdinand I. A recent version of *Monicella mi farei*, performed by the Italian group Cappella Artemisia under the direction of Candace Smith, is available on Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcFyS3mu27I [accessed 5 January 2021].

[89] In *The Marriage Hater* wise Eubulus warns naïve maiden Catharina about the hidden dangers of the cloister by telling her: 'There are more veils than virgins (…) there are more Sapphos among 'em for their bodies than for their brains' (Loughlin, 2014, p. 427). In the sequel to the dialogue, *The Penitent Virgin* (*Colloquy 8*), we find Catharina who, having entered and then abandoned the convent, categorically refuses to reveal to anyone what she saw and lived through. One can still perceive that the ghost of female same-sex love (although not overtly) does haunt the *Colloquia*. These philosophical dialogues appeared in the second edition of the *Colloquia*, dated 1523. See Loughlin (2014, pp. 426-429) for a concise commentary on both.

The speakers in the dialogue are two women, Nanna and Antonia, sitting under a fig tree. Nanna has a sixteen-year-old daughter, Pippa, and she cannot work out what she should do in her future life. Searching for inspiration, Nanna and Antonia talk about the former's youth for three days, thus presenting Nanna's erotic expertise in full detail. Each *giornata*, in which she respectively recounts *La vita de le monache*, of the *maritate*, and, finally, of the *puttane,* takes its name from a different period of Nanna's existence. As Raymond B. Waddington (2004, p. 22) emphasises, the *Ragionamento* 'is antithetical not only to the inspiration but to the structure of the *trattati d'amore*' and anti-Petrarchan as well. If traditionally treatises focus in ascending order on *amore bestiale*, *amore humano* and *amore divino* (see, for instance, Bembo's *Gli asolani*), Aretino reverses this structure and its meaning. Thus, the life of nuns exemplifies *amore bestiale*, whilst the life of whores alludes to *amore divino*. In Irene Fantappiè's words (2018, p. 208), therefore, the *Ragionamento* hints at 'un punto di vista fuori dalla norma che permette di smascherare le ipocrisie altrui'. Through Nanna's gaze readers can descry the deceitfulness of institutions which are supposed to preserve public morals.

It comes as no surprise, then, that on the first day Nanna describes her lascivious life among nuns, confessing that it was impossible to observe 'castità in un bordello'. Nanna relates that a room of the convent was decorated with paintings illustrating 'tutte le vie che si può chiavare'; similar images could be found on the walls of prostitutes' houses as well. The nunnery was, in other words, a real brothel, and the nunnery which hosted her was no exception. Moreover, there were a range of amusements: nuns and friars played dice, drank wine, ate delicacies and most of all constantly had sex (even all together). Within those sacred walls, Nanna received her sexual initiation and took an active part in the sensual, worldly routine of the convent.

In these pages, 'the fiction of female-female transmission [of sexual education] is compromised when Aretino inserts a male instructor', i.e. a young monk called the Baccelliere, who teaches Nanna how she can obtain pleasure from her body, 'a remarkable arrogation of knowledge to the male' (Turner, 2003, p. 34). As a real *maestro*, he also provides her lover with a short, informative book decorated with smutty scenes – a sort of *avant-la-lettre Kamasutra*. In this passage, interestingly, Aretino seems to allude to one of his most (in)famous works, *Sonetti sopra i XVI modi* or *Sonetti lussuriosi* (1524), a sort of poetic commentary on a series of erotic engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi (c.1479 - ante 1534) (1524), which were in turn inspired by erotic drawings by Giulio Pippi (known as Giulio Romano, 1499-1556) (Talvacchia, 2019). Whereas in the *Sonetti* only men and women make love, in the *Ragionamento* Aretino abolishes any boundaries. Nanna read the text with a nun: excited by the sensual images, they pleasured each other ('gli scherzi, che ci facemmo l'una a l'altra') with a glass dildo ('manico di vetro') (Aretino, 2002, pp. 91-92):

> mostratole il libretto, ce ne demmo insieme uno spasso, che ci mise in tanta voglia di provare i modi dipinti che ci fu forza consigliarsene col manico di vetro, il quale acconciossi fra le coscie la mia compagnotta sì bene, che parea il cotale di uno uomo drizzato inverso la sua tentazione, onde io gittatami là come una di quelle di ponte santa Maria [: like a prostitute], le pongo le gambe in su le spalle, ed ella ficcandomelo ora a buon modo, e ora a tristo [: both in the vagina and anus], mi fece far tosto quello che io avea a fare; ed ella arrecatasi a la foggia che mi recai io, le fu renduto da me migliaccio per torta.

The two nuns enacted their own version of the *libretto*, adapting what they had read to their desires. Moreover, to amplify their pleasure and faithfully perform what was depicted in the book (that is, sex involving a penis), they employed a glass dildo, accurately described some pages earlier as one of 'quei frutti di vetro che si fanno a Murano di Vinegia alla similitudine

del K [: penis], salvo che hanno duo sonagli che ne sarebbe orrevole ogni gran cembalo' (Aretino, 2002, p. 66).

Since Aretino was 'the prophet of this newfound tolerance of human sexuality' (Waddington, 2002, p. 11), I maintain that Nanna's *manico* has a double function. It represents both an erotic toy and a playful extension of the women's bodies, allowing them to explore the sexual potential of penetration between women and thus pioneering a whole new frontier in the erotic-didactic field. In the light of what we have previously seen, this is certainly a novelty for popular early modern imagery on women's sexuality in which penetration appeared to be a male prerogative. Rather than as a phallic object aiming to re-establish heteronormativity, I see the dildo as a 'lesbian phallus', a concept formulated by Butler in *Bodies That Matter* (1993, pp. 51-91). Butler takes as her point of departure Lacan and his notion of the phallus (especially Lacan, 1949 and 1958) as 'a signifier of lack and sexual difference', which operates in the imaginary, symbolic and real registers (Homer, 2005, pp. 53-54). Like Lacan, Butler maintains that the phallus is, in fact, 'the *symbol* of the penis', and not a real organ (Salih, 2002, p. 85). She then advances the idea and 'uncovers the masculinism of Lacan's positioning of the phallus as the privileged bodily signifier, arguing that it is possible to appropriate and recirculate the phallus so that it is no longer necessarily or intrinsically connected to the penis' (Salih, 2002, pp. 84). In other words, if a phallus is a symbolic element, it can be used by a variety of people (including those who do not have a penis) and also assume different configurations and meanings. From this perspective, a lesbian phallus can exist and, what is more, be a powerful symbolic device (Butler, 1993, p. 91; author's emphasis):

> to speak of the lesbian phallus as a possible site of desire is not to refer to an *imaginary* identification and/or desire that can be measured against a *real* one; on the contrary, it is simply to promote an

> alternative *imaginary* to a hegemonic imaginary and to show, through that assertion, the ways in which the hegemonic imaginary constitutes itself through the naturalization of an exclusionary heterosexual morphology.

Put another way, the dildo is a device which allows lesbians (and the lesbian-like) to configure a fictional and sexual queer space of their own. Unlike Giulia from Pseudo-Aretino's *Dialogo*, Nanna and her partner do not use the *manico* as a substitute for the penis and they never express regret for the lack of one. Instead, thanks to the *manico*, Nanna and her partner re-enact and give a new meaning to Aretino's *Sonetti lussuriosi* featuring only male-female couples. In a certain sense the author thus offers a queer reading of his previous work.

Similarly, I maintain, Antonia builds her own private and hedonistic queer dimension by listening to her friend's bawdy story. Nanna's account of her sexual adventures is so intense that Antonia confesses to having an orgasm during their conversation without recourse to aphrodisiac food such as the thistle or the truffle (Aretino, 2002, p. 92):

> Sai tu, Nanna, quello che interviene a me udendoti ragionare? (...) Quello che interviene ad uno che odora una medicina, che senza prenderla altrimenti va due, e tre volte del corpo. (...) Dico che mi paiono tanto veri i tuoi ragionamenti, che mi hai fatto pisciare, senza che io abbia gustato né tartufo, né cardo.[90]

[90] 'Pisciare' generally means 'to pee' but from the Middle Ages at least it may have had the meaning of 'to eject' (see the entry 'pisciare' in TLIO - Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini [http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/]). In this and other excerpts penned by Aretino and cited in this chapter, 'pisciare' may be a synonym of 'to have an orgasm'.

As we have seen there is a similar reaction in Aretino's *Dialogo* as the *balia* listens to the *comare*'s homoerotic experiences. In confirmation of this the voluptuous atmosphere evoked by Nanna seems to urge Antonia and Pippa to spend the night together ('giunte in su l'annottarsi, la Pippa fece a l'Antonia molte carezze': p. 95).

Once again Aretino succeeds in shocking his readers thanks to his explicit sexual descriptions as well as his vulgar language. The very structure of the work reveals his intention to laugh at the hypocritical moralism of the society he lives in, and he employs a cheerful, sensual view of woman-woman desire and the queer continuum to pursue his project as well. As a result, 'the persona of the satyr is much like the persona of Pietro Aretino. For both, the claim to an innocent, natural sexuality itself validates the devotion to truthfulness and hatred of corrupt human nature that motivates the satirist's activities' (Waddington, 2002, p. 114).

To sum up, both in the *Ragionamento* and *Dialogo*, Aretino holds without moralistic implications that the appeal of a young, ravishing body can naturally titillate both a man and a woman, and he posits this idea in a work which, as I have demonstrated, far from being merely scandalous, aims to be thought-provoking. As Turner (2003, p. 37) holds, in the *Ragionamenti* 'Aretino [couples] *ingegno* with sexual erudition, but under the oxymoronic label *puttanismo*; the suffix "ism" suggests a philosophical school or organized body of knowledge, but the *puttana* drags it down into the unthinkable'. In the following decades, as I will show soon, other writers such as Gregorio Leti followed Aretino's path, bringing together erotic expertise, social criticism and salacious wit.

2.5 The Secrets of a Nunnery: Leti's *Nuovo parlatorio delle Monache*

Aretino wrote his dialogues decades before the Counter-Reformation which, as well as reaffirming the superiority of the Roman Catholic Church over Protestantism, attempted to reform the habits and customs of both religious and lay people, paying particular attention to the sexual sphere. Catholics started detecting

> 'difetti e peccati individuali' là dove 'si trovavano riti e costumi profondamente radicati nella vita sociale', a 'invocare una causa "naturale" – in genere, la concupiscenza dell'uomo, oppure la debolezza della donna o altro ancora – per spiegare dei comportamenti che invece obbedivano a un preciso codice sociale', a leggere come 'disordine' ciò che in realtà era 'un ordine antico' (A. Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*). (Bonora, 2020).

Nonetheless, the attitude of the Roman Church towards specific behaviours and acts could be very ambiguous, especially vis-a-vis the body, its sexual usage and the so-called '"disordini' legati alla sessualità' (Bonora, 2020) such as prostitution, concubinage and premarital sexual intercourse.[91]

Controls on morality took various forms including the creation of *indexes* of prohibited books[92] as well as the insistence on the value of the sacrament of penance, which 'nell'Italia della Controriforma (…) (era) diventata, nel breve volgere di qualche decennio, lo strumento pastorale più diffuso ed efficiente di controllo della sessualità, principalmente di quella

[91] For instance, in this respect, Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (2013, p. 16) remark: 'While arguing that prostitutes might be saved through repentance, Catholic theologians nevertheless also argued for the abolition of brothels and the condemnation of prostitution, anxious that they might be regarded as less "righteous" than their intolerant Protestant brothers'.

[92] On the Catholic control and censorship over books in the early modern period see at a minimum Santoro (2005) and Fragnito (2012).

femminile' (Novi Chavarria, 2001, p. 188), whilst men were allowed to be more spiritually autonomous.

In this context, notwithstanding the fact that it falls a little beyond this thesis' time frame, it is worth taking into consideration Gregorio Leti's *Nuovo parlatorio delle monache* (1669). Besides showing the extent to which Aretino's lessons we have seen in the previous section were still productive in the seventeenth century, it demonstrates how a skilled author like Leti could employ the trope of women-women love within a framework of erotic education (as well as the erotic, harem-like imagery connected to all-female community) to attack one of the institutions promoted by the Counter-Reformation church, that is seclusion of nuns.

Indeed, Milanese polymath and historiographer Gregorio Leti (1630-1701) was famous as one of the most transgressive authors in early modern Europe because, like Aretino in the sixteenth century, he was a *fustigatore* (Bufacchi, 2005). It is no surprise, then, that such scandalous works as the anti-papal *Puttanismo romano* (1668) and the *Nuovo Parlatorio* often attacked the Christian church and were therefore included in the *Index*. Nonetheless, Leti's works circulated widely and were largely read (especially by a male audience), at least until the second half of the eighteenth century (Mauriello, 2020, p. 89)

The *Nuovo Parlatorio* perfectly resonates with Aretino's *Ragionamento*, and demonstrates that even during the Counter-Reformation woman-to-woman desire could be used as an obscene provocation against a corrupted yet moralistic society. A sequel to the *Parlatorio* (1650), the *Nuovo Parlatorio* offers some 'fenestre' (insights) into a convent's not particularly spiritual life. Despite his ostensible aim to urge his readers to do good, the writer also wants to stress the 'tema della naturalezza e della incoercibilità degli istinti, anche

nell'ambiente paradossale del chiostro' (Romei, 2016, p. 9).[93] These issues emerge clearly in the *Fenestra nona* (Leti, 2016, pp. 108-115) in which a nun, Beatrice, talks with her confessor. As a *malmonacata*, she complains about her destiny; in particular, she regrets not having a sexual life. In this way Leti takes the opportunity through his characters to harshly criticise monasteries and nunneries as institutions because they go against natural instincts: not only do nuns fail to live in enforced chastity, men are incredibly attracted to them precisely because of their segregation.[94] I would also argue that in the *Fenestra nona* the writer attacks the unhealthy atmosphere a confessor can create in officiating at the sacrament of penance as well as the *sollicitatio ad turpia*.[95]

Tellingly, from the start, the dialogue between Beatrice and her confessor is imbued with sexual allusions and obscene innuendos which pave the way for the core of the discussion, a risqué homoerotic and erotic-didactic scene. Beatrice confesses to the priest that she was particularly longing for a man ('quel pironcello [: the male organ] mi stava nel cuore, nell'animo e nella testa': Leti, 2016, p. 111) one night when she learned that *suor* Antonia had probably had an encounter with her, Beatrice's, male lover. So she angrily went to Antonia's room to beat her but was pleasantly surprised by what she happened to hear. It was, she says,

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[93] Relevantly, Mauriello (2020, p. 88) underscores the fact that 'sulla prospettiva tarabottiana Leti innesti quella libertina, dal risvolto misogino, mutuata da Pallavicino. La natura umana, e particolarmente quella femminile, vorace d'appetiti sessuali – asserto di partenza che avrebbe fatto rabbrividire Tarabotti –, rinchiusa tra quattro mura diventa criminosa. Tuttavia, essendo le donne prive di volontà propria, la responsabilità delle azioni scandalose non ricade su coloro che le commettono, ma su una volontà maschile violenta esplicitatasi nel momento della forzatura'.

[94] The character of the Confessore clearly states that: 'Io non ho studiato gli articoli del primo fondamento, ma l'esperienza ci fa vedere chiaramente che il paese degli eretici, dove non vi sono né monache né frati e che prende moglie chi vuole, non è la metà popolato come quello de' catolici pieno di questa razza di gente alla quale viene difeso il matrimonio. E perche ciò? Perché tutti corrono all'acquisto del velo d'oro, custodito con tante guardie.' (Leti, 2016, p. 109). In this chapter I quote from Romei's edition (Leti, 2016).

[95] In canon law this is the crime of the confessor soliciting the repentant to carnal sin, an extremely delicate issue in Counter-Reformed Italy. Leti ironically criticises it in various passages of the text. For instance, when Beatrice is complaining about the absence of a *pironcello* or *pironcino* (literally, a peg), the Confessor states: 'Sorella, se il vostro confessore fosse stato con voi non sarestivo [sic] entrata in questa disperazione, perché a lui e a non a vo sarebbe stata la cura di metter nel buco il pironcino' (Leti, 2016, p. 112).

‘un piacere di sentir come l’Antonia sculacciava [la] povera novizza’ (p. 114). Furthermore, while spanking novice Elisabetta, Antonia commented on her tempting, young body (p. 114):

> ‘O che peccato che queste natichette così morbide e tenere stiano fuor dalle mani di qualche bravo marito!’ E passando poi alle mammelle gliele succhiava col dire: ‘O care poppettine, o do[l]ccissime poma, così certo l’aveva io quando ero più giovinotta’. Dalle poppe scese finalmente con la mano nel ventre e [toccò] il santuario monacale.

While caressing Elisabetta’s body, Antonia complained about the nuns’ sad fate and compared it to the happy life of married women. She, therefore, took the opportunity to explain in a practical way how wives may be sexually satisfied. For instance, she explained, ‘dove noi pisciamo acqua brutta e puzzolente, le maritate pisciano latte fertile e bianco [: ejaculate the cervical mucus]’ (p. 114). Elisabetta grew envious of marital life and said she wanted to go back home to get married. Aware of the erotic tension in the air, and perhaps also an attentive reader of Aretino’s *Ragionamenti*, Antonia replied that she could learn in the convent what married people do, with the advantage of not experiencing the pressures due to matrimonial life (‘senza quella soggezione matrimoniale un bocconcino di furto val più che cento all’aperto’: p. 114). Antonia accordingly proposed an intriguing role play to convince Elisabetta (p. 114):

> l’Antonia le disse: ‘Elisabetta, io voglio essere il vostro marito e voglio che voi siate mia moglie’. ‘E come si potrà far questo’, disse l’Elisabetta, ‘se voi non avete quella cosa che fa vela alla camicia degli uomini? So bene che i matrimoni si trattano con le parole, ma si consumano coi fatti’. ‘La buona volontà’, soggiunse Antonia, ‘val tanto che gli effetti; oltre noi prepariamo la salsa per mangiar con migliore apetitto qualche polastrino che i nostri amici ci mandano a cuocere’.

As Beatrice tells her confessor (p. 115), the couple enjoyed exploring woman-to-woman sexuality through caressing, sexual role playing and spanking for more than two hours together. Although at first the novice seemed concerned about the lack of 'quella cosa che fa vela alla camicia degli uomini' since 'i matrimoni (...) si consumano coi fatti', ultimately the expert Antonia managed to reassure her that the male organ is not necessary to obtain pleasure ('La buona volontà (...) val tanto che gli effetti'). Furthermore, Antonia suggested, their *donna-con-donna* encounter could provide them with a double carnal experience: first, they could pleasure each other and, secondly, get prepared for sex with men as well ('noi prepariamo la salsa per mangiar con migliore apetitto qualche polastrino che i nostri amici ci mandano a cuocere'). Accordingly, Antonia's homoerotic, didactic art can also be seen as a preparatory step to man-woman relationships.

Nevertheless, neither Antonia nor Elisabetta appeared to consider sex between women as less exciting or fulfilling than that involving a male organ. This is particularly interesting since in several other literary texts, from Boiardo' and Ariosto's Fiordispina tale to the comedies I will analyse in the next chapter, women involved in same-sex relations often complain about their significant other's lack of a penis and more or less explicitly bemoan the lack of a man. In the *Finestra nona* instead, thanks to their husband-and-wife role play, the two nuns break the boundaries between the biological sexes and gender roles, thus deliberately mocking the institution of marriage and a phallocentric conception of sexuality in order to fuel the erotic tension. This tension is so heightened that not only is Beatrice extremely aroused by what she voyeuristically overhears and discovers (like Giulia, the *balia,* and Antonia before her), but she also decides to emulate the *donna-con-donna* experience first-hand. Impatient to be a good *istitutrice*, she will therefore be looking for a novice to whom she can pass on what she has learnt, for the sake of knowledge, as she tells her

confessor ('me ne ritornai con fermo proposito di pigliar per me la prima novizza che verrà e fare lo stesso (...) Io lo voglio fare per zelo e per amore': p. 115).

Instead of condemning her lascivious behaviour, her confessor absolves Beatrice and even encourages her, because '[v]eramente è ben fatto d'instruire le novizze' (p. 115). This reaction is in line with the spirit of libertine thought as well as of the book itself, since it is intended to show, as Danilo Romei (2016, p. 14) stresses, that

> Anche nello spazio angusto, soffocante, coercitivo, separativo, alienante del monastero, gli organi predisposti alla natura reclamano la pienezza delle loro funzioni, così come i bisogni primordiali delle emozioni e degli affetti esigono la loro soddisfazione.

Leti overtly defends the legality of same-sex women's desire, considering it an unproblematic, natural expression of one's sexuality. At the same as the writer believes that 'tutte le religioni sono buone in quello che riguarda il fondamento; ma però [sono] per tutto delle corruzioni, de' mancamenti, e de' vitii' (Leti in Bufacchi, 2005), he rails against the false moralism of the Catholic Church by means of his highly arousing erotic depictions. The controversial author suggests that, on the one hand, it seems to tolerate any kind of infraction such as the *sollicitatio ad turpia* but, on the other, labels what in truth is a cheerful expression of worldly desire as obscene sins or against nature. Religious institutions also forget that sex in a nunnery can be encouraged by the very conditions of seclusion imposed on the sisters, as history and literature (including Aretino's *Ragionamenti*) teach.[96] Aretino and Leti show in

[96] The homoerotic episode depicted in the *Nuovo Parlatorio* was probably invented by Leti. But it sounds very plausible, especially if we compare it with an original transcript from that period. In fact, in 1626 a certain *suor* Fiorenza (belonging to the Venetian monastery of San Giuseppe) was suspected of having a same-sex relationship. As a consequence, the patriarch wanted to know whether 'essa sia mai stata trovata con suor Elena et con suor Chiara ne parlatorii et haver le cotole alzate et le mane in brachese et da chi et se si baciavano et altre simil sporchezzi' (Archivio Storico del Patriarcato di Venezia, Tiepolo [1620-1627], b. 5, cited in Mantioni, 2014, p. 91).

fact that homoeroticism may also be a way for the *malmonacate* to escape from a condition of isolation and unhappiness and therefore should not be condemned. They also seem to tell us that, given the sacred places where homoerotic experiences took place and the necessary secrecy involving them, *donna-con-donna* relationships in convents might be invisible to the majority of people but not impossible.

Commenting on the episode from the *Nuovo Parlatorio*, Danilo Romei (2016, p. 15) also notes that other Italian literary texts depict *donna-con-donna* desire but only Leti's dialogue can claim such a 'franchezza così disimpacciata'. I would also add that Pseudo-Aretino and Aretino offer extremely detailed accounts of woman-to-woman love in which, unlike in the *Manganello*, sex between women is not deemed inferior to that with men. Rather than expressing anxiety over an alleged threat to virility or regret for the loss of a phallocentric sexuality, all the texts investigated in this chapter (again, with the exception of the anonymous poem) overtly present *donna-con-donna* attraction in a variety of physical expressions. Instead of taking the form of disappointing emulations of phallocentric sexuality which are supposed to urge male readers to join forces against women (as the *Manganello* proposes), these acts are presented as steps in an erotic curriculum, a charming sex game for the participants and, presumably, an intriguing as well as thought-provoking entertainment for the audience as well.

3. Conclusions

From the first half of the sixteenth to the middle of the seventeenth centuries, comic and satirical authors explored the queer continuum in great detail. They often interweave the *topos* of woman-woman love with the popular motifs connected to the *malmaritata* and the

malmonacata, as traditionally these women use the room vacated by a male presence (a husband, a pastoral guide, a male relative…) to build a space in which they can freely play with their desires and sexuality. Accordingly, writers depict these queer lovers as autonomous, bold and impelled by a curiosity and accentuated sex drive which urge them to overturn social conventions in order to reach their goals.

Not only do Firenzuola, Aretino, Pseudo-Aretino and Leti seem to accept that women can enjoy having sex together but they also depict *donna-con-donna* love as an arousing feature of an erotic-didactic programme, rendering it extremely visible, articulate, and appealing – and not only from an erotic point of view. By employing queer homoerotic scenes these authors challenge, or even ironically reverse, social conventions based on heteronormativity. They polemically portray families and convents where women live as suffocating and hypocritically moralistic. Conversely, in the *Manganello*, female characters with an overwhelming sexual appetite who are attracted to other women are judged unfavourably and characterised as brutish. As these women are physically and emotionally autonomous, they do not need men and are therefore deemed a threat to the social heterosexual, phallocentric order. According to the anonymous author of the poem, women's acts against nature can be tolerated only if eventually they can benefit men, implying that female-female sex must be subordinate to male sexuality.

Masculinity and queer studies have facilitated my comprehension of the social anxieties connected to women's sexual independence, as well as of the seditious meanings of some queer episodes, highlighting the implications of woman-woman representations in terms of virility, gender alignment and expectations and the practice of sex and sexuality in early modern Italy. In other words, they have helped me demonstrate that satirical, comic and hard-core depictions of *donna-con-donna* desire are a serious matter.

CHAPTER THREE.

'NOT THE FIRST WOMAN LOVING A WOMAN': TROUBLING BODIES AND TRANSVESTITE DESIRES IN COMIC PLAYS

1. Introduction

A maiden masturbates in front of a mirror in which she contemplates herself. Nothing can succeed in diverting her from her burning, narcissistic passion, except the love for another woman. This might sound like the start of an avant-garde provocative theatre performance but instead it comes from a seventeenth-century play, namely Gian Battista Andreini*'s Amor nello specchio*. In fact, as I will demonstrate, early modern Italian playwrights loved exploring women's desire as well as depicting various forms of *donna-con-donna* love. In this chapter, therefore, I will look at how five playwrights (including Andreini) from the first half of the sixteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth century employed the *topos* of queer female desire, encompassing a nuanced array of woman-woman representations. In so doing, I will analyse in particular how these authors engaged with bodies and desires to explore their characters and entertain and titillate their public as well as reflect on the socio-cultural notion of the body in early modern Italy.

It is worth investigating the presence and the articulations of the *donna-con-donna* motif in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation comedy for it was one of the most representative and appreciated literary genres in early modern Italy.[97] Although classical plays which

[97] The bibliography on early modern Italian comedies is immense. I will therefore restrict myself to citing only some of the most comprehensive studies, such as Cruciani and Seragnoli (1987), Pieri (1989), Alonge and Davico Bonino (2000), Figorilli and Vianello (2018). Unfortunately, as Alexandra Coller (2017, p. 10)

inspired many Renaissance pieces of theatre did not feature female homoeroticism, early modern comedies employed the *donna-con-donna* motif with some frequency because it could cover a multiplicity of functions such as adding complexity to plots, evoking suspense, erotically titillating the audience and provoking laughter. Instead of denying woman-to-woman desire, writers therefore played with it and show that, in some measure, it could be publicly acknowledged without any prejudicial intention. This idea is particularly relevant because, as we will see, comic plays could have a large audience and a considerable impact.

Notwithstanding the abundance of *commedie* featuring the *topos* of my interest, I have selected five comedies which give a taste of its richness. In fact, they largely explore the queer continuum, encompassing simple sexual innuendo (Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *Calandria*) as well as self-aware queer desire (Alessandro Piccolomini's *Alessandro* and the above-mentioned Gian Battista Andreini's *Amor nello specchio*); they may also enact scenes of sexual intercourse (the anonymous *La Veniexiana*) or a mock same-sex marriage (Flaminio Scala's *Il finto marito*). My contention is that these writers used the *donna-con-donna* motif to establish a more intense connection with their public and their senses as well as to reflect on the role of bodies in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society.

Although the comic plays I have chosen are generally well-known and well-investigated, their *donna-con-donna* episodes have been often examined separately by individual scholars. This chapter therefore aims to put these plays together in one place and, also, to bring critics into dialogue with each other. Moreover, it aligns comedies not only with each other but also with literary representations from other genres. This comparative approach allows salient

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underlines, 'To date, studies that analyze gender in Italian Renaissance comedy are scarce, and, though useful in some respects, they tend to lack depth and/or breadth'.

features to emerge in strong relief and communicates a sense of how widespread and varied cultural interest in the topic of same sex desire was in Italian Renaissance literature. It also examines key issues in early modern drama such as cross-dressing, masculinity, femininity, female same-sex desire and narcissism, especially in relation to notions of performativity and theatrical performance.

To properly explore both the plays and the issues they raise, I will mainly employ Butler's ideas on drag. I will also consider scholarship on voyeurism, performativity, kinaesthetics and the history of performance in early modern Italy, as this will facilitate understanding of how the *Cinquecento* and *Seicento* audience (composed of both readers and spectators) might have experienced comic plays.

2. Tracing the Roots

Early modern comic plays are one of the finest examples of Renaissance love for Antiquity. Their plots are often drawn from comic Latin drama (*fabula palliata* and *togata*), which offers a satirical view of contemporary society. The Latin dramatists Plautus (c. 250-184 B.C.E.) and Terentius (second century B.C.E.) adapted stories and stock characters from the great Greek comedy tradition in order to suit the taste of the Roman audience, achieving great success.

The typical Latin *comoedia* plot springs from fights and tensions in the domestic and family context. The opening scene frequently features a negative situation, or a series of adverse situations, destined to be merrily solved by the conclusion of the play, thanks to the removal of the obstacles encountered by positive characters and, consequently, to the affirmation of their desires and values. Usually, plays feature two (or more) young

protagonists who are in love and have to confront and then defeat their elders' jealousy, foolishness or greed. In order to succeed, they employ all kinds of tricks, including cross-dressing or getting involved in cases of mistaken identities (Concolino Mancini, 1989; Pagliano, 1995).

Early modern intellectuals and playwrights such as Angelo Poliziano and Ludovico Ariosto rediscovered Plautus' and Terentius' works. As well as editing, translating and restaging some classical pieces (in Latin or Italian), they wrote original plays strongly influenced by them, producing what came to be known as the genre of *commedia erudita*. It usually combined plots and motifs from the Latin comic plays with elements from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century comic works, especially medieval *novelle* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. *Commedie erudite* were initially addressed to a select audience and performed by amateurs on special occasions in courts and palaces (Padoan, 2006; Baratto, 1977). Between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, playwrights also developed the Commedia dell'arte, which can be characterised geographically and linguistically. Its actors did not learn scripts by heart but, taking inspiration from a *canovaccio* (canvas) featuring the plot, they improvised, often in dialect or in a variety of Italian strongly influenced by dialect. Its *maschere* (characters) displayed pre-set features and had to confront several stock situations, frequently drawn from Latin *comoediae*. The first theatrical companies made their appearance alongside the birth of the Commedia dell'arte, and the social status of performers and playwrights became more articulated and fixed.

Besides being inspired by classical plots, both *commedie* and *commedie dell'arte* often encompassed references to the events of their own time and dealt with topics of special relevance to the social, religious and cultural contexts in which they were composed (such as tensions between Muslims and Christians, or concern about male infertility). Playwrights

produced an enormous and varied repertoire of comic plays in this way although, unfortunately, some (we do not know how many) have been lost.

The plays' exceptional blend of classical and medieval sources with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century issues, their vast repository of tricks and jokes and the ambiguous charm of their characters made them capable of fascinating all social and cultural strata. Audiences accordingly included all sorts of individuals, from students to nobles to so-called commoners (Pieri, 1994; Concolino Mancini Abram, 2001). Comic plays were very popular and thus performed in a multitude of contexts such as the courts, literary academies, public *piazze* and theatres.

3. Setting the Scene

Bodies are the centre of attention in this chapter, as its title suggests. Apart from being interested in the plot or in the development of the characters, playwrights usually pay special attention to bodies and what is related to them as well. Both authors and actors can, therefore, target them to express what their characters think or feel, as well as how they position themselves in the world. Readers and spectators, too, can use their bodies to get in touch with what is happening on the stage, experiencing it on a kinaesthetic level.[98]

In this chapter, I will therefore look at how the five playwrights engaged with a plurality of real, fictional and social bodies which in various ways deal with queer female desire. Although is not my intention to investigate in detail the performative aspects of plays, it is worth considering some notions, narrative devices and innovations concerning theatrical

[98] Kinaesthetics is the discipline which studies what is related to a person's awareness of the movements, the position and the perceptions of the body.

performance, gender performance and gender performativity in order to have a better understanding of early modern Italian comedies. As I have previously said, playwrights could use a rich repository of comic scenarios, motifs, allusions, narrative strategies and characters inherited from the past. They also, especially between the *Cinquecento* and the *Seicento*, introduced some novelties strongly affecting the corporality of both performers and onlookers, as I proceed to show. Tellingly, the discursive and performative representation of gender ambiguity was one of the fields most open to encompassing both traditional and new elements.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the *topos* of *donna-con-donna* love is closely related to the multi-potential narrative device of cross-dressing. This can fuel ambiguous or misplaced desires as well as provide playwrights with the chance to enrich their plots and promote a whole play's ambience of sexual promiscuity, provoking laughter and amusement. It can also help problematise rigid gender roles and challenge social boundaries concerning gender and sexuality (Cestaro, 2007, p. 1032; Giannetti, 2009, pp. 29-38). Finally, cross-dressing also allows women to do things frequently forbidden to them, as we have seen in previous chapters. As a consequence, cross-dressed women may play more proactive roles in pursuing their sentimental and erotic goals.

On early modern stages, some circumstances could amplify the strength and the effectiveness of cross-dressing. For instance, at that time, women's roles were often played by men. As a consequence, male actors could play the role of women cross-dressed as men, thus increasing the gender confusion and the related social anxiety, especially when desire between women was involved. In this respect, the provocative question Finucci poses (2003, p. 221) in reference to *La Veniexiana* may be applied to all the plays examined in this chapter: 'was this choice [of having male actors playing female parts] less threatening because roles may have

been recited rather than acted?'. It is, of course, impossible to provide a definitive answer. Nonetheless, keeping it in mind can profitably problematise our understanding of the early modern performative experience.

On the other hand, it is probable that the presence on the stage of a woman longing for another did not leave the audience untouched, as Poulsen (2005, p. 177) explains:

> Women playing female roles would lend them a greater degree of verisimilitude and, due to the mystique and controversy surrounding actresses, excitement. Both disguising and accentuating female characteristics, male dress could lend the performers a fresh range of behaviors to exploit, all new to an audience.

Women's bodies *en travesti*, challenging the social expectations usually attributed to their biological sex, could therefore add a new twist to the ambiguous atmosphere on the stage. The very presence of actresses could be perceived as new and able to evoke a thrilling disruption of boundaries, further emphasised by the proactive roles more frequently attributed to female characters than in Latin comic plays (Giannetti, 2009, p. 69).[99]

The bodies of androgynous or hermaphrodite characters, too, were able to question gender categorisations. [100] Tellingly, they abound in Italian plays.[101] As I will show, in most

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[99] As Coller (2017, p. 10, n. 3) emphasises, 'Respectable young girls of marriageable age, when listed among the *dramatis personae*, often have no speaking part. Moreover, those women who do speak in Roman comedy conform to certain patterns whereby their representations are reduced to generic "feminine speech mannerisms" even when those same stereotypes cross gender boundaries'.

[100] Technically, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, androgyny is the 'condition in which characteristics of both sexes are clearly expressed in a single individual. In biology, androgyny refers to individuals with fully developed sexual organs of both sexes, also called hermaphrodites'. In this chapter and in other parts of this thesis, I will use 'hermaphrodite' and 'androgynous' as synonyms, without any specific nuance. In early modern Italian culture, instead, 'ermafrodito' could refer both to figures surrounded by an aura of mystery and mythology (like Tiresias) and to those accused of having sexual misconduct with men and/or women (such in Dante's *Purgatorio*, 26: 'nostro peccato fu ermafrodito').

[101] Much has been published on the figure of the androgyne and the relevance of cross-dressing in Italian early modern comedy. See, respectively, at least Alonge (1978), Ferroni (1980) and Concolino Mancini (1988-89).

cases the co-existence of two biological sexes in one body is apparent (a frequent situation when two twins are involved) and represents a clever trick to hide identity, enable a character to get closer to their beloved or make fun of someone. In these cases, androgyny is therefore only presumed and temporary. Nonetheless, some characters – such as Eugenio in *Amor nello specchio* – seem never to dismiss their hermaphroditism completely, thus introducing yet more ambiguity as the plot unfolds.

Technical and performative elements could also foster gender confusion. For example, candlelight could help confuse features usually attributed to masculinity with those generally referred to femininity. This kind of illumination could also reinforce the sense of intimacy that emanated from the stage, so encouraging spectators' exciting feeling of spying on private matters.

Playwrights could, of course, combine some of the various narrative and performative elements mentioned so far, thus boosting their destabilising effects. For instance, androgynous characters could cross-dress or act as a doppelganger of their twin of the opposite sex. Authors were well aware of the impact of their devices on their public, so they employed them wisely to display with irony topics as delicate and as crucial as the disruption of gender roles, homoerotic attraction, sexual self-love, narcissism, voyeurism and social anxiety.

As a result, although the usual ending of the play prescribed the restoration of traditional gender roles as well as of heteronormativity, in some cases this does not occur completely. Accordingly, Rosalind Kerr has explained (1996, pp. 110-111), '*Commedia dell'arte* scenarios spend so much time deferring gender identity that the required two-sex-only closure often remains refreshingly arbitrary', but this idea may be profitably applied to other types of comedies as well.

The resilient aura of queerness that permeates so many Italian comic plays has, therefore, prompted scholars to pose such questions as:

> what did early modern audiences see in the cross-dressed actor/character and what was at stake–and being questioned – in this playful performance: masculinity, femininity, the category of gender, binary thinking? Can we even be sure that all spectators – male and female – saw the same thing when observing a male actor performing a female character dressed as a man? (Gvozdeva, 2017, p. 35)

It is clearly not easy to respond to these exciting questions and this chapter does not aim to provide definitive answers. Instead, it will explore the queer dramatic spaces and ruptures created more or less consciously by playwrights when they depict gender-troubling characters and queer episodes.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, one cannot forget in examining comedies the breadth of their potential audience and, as a consequence, their impact on both social and literary levels. The study of the imagery of female same-sex love and desire presented in those works therefore requires special attention and care. Despite the enormous scholarship on Italian comic plays to date, however, only a limited number of studies have been specifically dedicated to exploration of the woman-to-woman motif. Furthermore, as we will see in this chapter, several scholars limit themselves to commenting on homoerotic episodes without reading them from a broader narrative and socio-cultural perspective. Once again, therefore, my research builds particularly on DeCoste's (2009) and Giannetti's (2009) investigations, adapting some of their insights to texts that fell beyond the remit of their works while adding new perspectives as well.

In her study of queer love in epic narrative, DeCoste (2009, pp. 100-124) enriches the scope of her analysis by also focusing on a selection of plays. She rightly argues that the trope

of love between women is part of the early modern Italian literary tradition and was also widely explored by dramatists. DeCoste also emphasises that comedies overtly show a bond between domestic wealth and gender anxiety: in such a context, homoerotic female love would turn into a threat to family concerns that must be neutralised. Unfortunately, in developing her intriguing argument, she risks not giving enough consideration to other interesting aspects of woman-to-woman love in comic plays such as, as I will demonstrate, the fact that some playwrights might employ it on purpose to titillate their audience sensually or to discuss the status of the body in early modern Italian culture.

Giannetti (2009, pp. 76-112), too, highlights the presence of queer female desire in comedies. In analysing eight comic plays,[102] she rightly argues that the impossibility of woman-to-woman love has become a trope of modern critical discourse as well. Drawing from Valerie Traub's studies on queer female desire in early modern England (2002), Giannetti accordingly insists on the necessity of showing how women characters 'practice impossibility' (Giannetti, 2009, pp. 77-78). In doing this, she offers a close reading of the texts as well as an analysis informed by a combined gender studies and feminist perspective. The result is a constant attention to social and cultural gender dynamics, along with an in-depth textual analysis enriched with several references to the Renaissance context. Giannetti thus shows that playwrights could depict queer female love as 'possible (...) as a positive, even heroic motive for noble deeds' (p. 111). The scholar also stresses that same-sex love could also be perceived as less transgressive than adultery or the wish to marry a man not chosen by one's family. Moreover, she remarks that comic plays often stage strong women

[102] Although Giannetti (2009) mentions a great number of plays, she confines her examination to Ruzante's *Anconitana*, Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *Calandria*, Niccolo Secchi's *Gli inganni*, the anonymoyus *Veniexiana*, Alessandro Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro*, Luca Contile's *Cesarea Gonzaga*, Giovan Battista Della Porta's *Cintia* and, finally, Curzio Gonzaga's *Gli inganni*.

who are independent from men and patriarchal rules and use cross-dressing in order to achieve more freedom, including sexual freedom (p. 111).

Along with Giannetti, I maintain that plays can communicate that *donna-con-donna* love is real, visible and articulated, as well as display empowered and proactive women. Accordingly, this chapter confirms Giannetti's assumptions. On the other hand, I would consider the relationship between female queer desire and heroism with more caution. As we have seen in Chapter One, in fact, medieval and early modern Italian writers depicted heroines (such as Piero da Siena's Camilla or Bigolina's Urania) who, for reasons such as defending their life or preserving their virginity, travel, fight, cross the sea and do other things which at that time were usually deemed as a male prerogative. In other words, their heroic deeds are not necessarily achieved because of love for a woman. Vice versa, love for a woman does not necessarily urge them on to achieve heroic deeds. The same, I submit, applies to comic plays which present, as I will show, a vast range of characters, circumstances and purposes.

Although all the topics highlighted by DeCoste and Giannetti are extremely interesting, in this chapter I will focus on issues that they do not explore in depth such some of those mentioned above. First, I will therefore pay great attention to how writers represent characters' fictional bodies and actors' real bodies respectively as they experience and perform queer female love. I also argue that playwrights employ in particular voyeuristic and kinaesthetic means to both entertain their public and explore a range of possibilities as well as social boundaries, expectations and anxieties concerning bodies and their relation to queer or misplaced desires. In this way I will be able to offer some insights on how bodies and, in particular, queer bodies were conceived in early modern Italy and what social issues they might raise.

Nonetheless, instead of deeming them as passive objects of desire as well as of scholarly attention, I will consider fictional and real bodies as subjects enacting a range of nuanced desires as well as experiencing phenomena such as cross-dressing, masquerades, autoeroticism and voyeurism. In my close reading of texts I will, therefore, employ a multi-faceted approach which engages with multiple fields such as queer scholarship, research on voyeurism, narcissism, kinaesthetic intelligence and performance studies.

Although Paul B. Preciado's work on the taboo related to what has been dubbed the 'anal terror' (2009) will help understand how, in some circumstances, writers may test the limits of what the socio-cultural context has established as body boundaries, Butler's thoughts on performativity[103] and, in particular, on drag performers[104] (1988; 1993; 1999) will inform the whole chapter, since drag artists share several features in common with the characters presented in this chapter.

As stated in the Introduction to this thesis, Butler challenges the traditional categories of sex, gender and identity. Drawing upon the famous notion that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (Beauvoir, 1952, p. 267), a key concept from de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), the American philosopher holds that gender is not given naturally. Instead, it 'is

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[103] For her research on gender performativity, Judith Butler has been influenced by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere and her pivotal 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' (1929) as well. In this article, applying some ideas from psychoanalytical theories such as the Oedipus complex and the fear of being castrated, Riviere upholds that 'women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men' (1929, p. 303). Her point of view is extremely intriguing, and it may be applied successfully in the reading of some early modern comedies as well. Nonetheless, I do not take it into consideration in this thesis because it would require an approach informed by psychological and psychoanalytical theories, which my work does not encompass.

[104] The Center for Educational Justice & Community Engagement (2019) of Berkeley University of California define 'drag' as 'The act of dressing in gendered clothing and adopting gendered behaviors as part of a performance, most often clothing and behaviors typically not associated with your gender identity. Drag Queens perform femininity theatrically. Drag Kings perform masculinity theatrically. Drag may be performed as a political comment on gender, as parody, or simply as entertainment. Drag performance does not indicate sexuality, gender identity, or sex identity'.

the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1999, p. 43). As I stated previously in the introductory chapter of this thesis, gender, therefore, implies a performance. Drag artists, likewise, use a similar performance to destabilise both gender categories and norms. Accordingly, Butler (1999, p. 175) describes the drag artists' performance as:

> [playing] upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.

These words ring extraordinarily true when referred to the extensive use of gender-bending, transvestitism and tricks based on sexual ambiguity in comedies. As previously stated, playwrights revel in playing with, and defying, gender expectations. They depict, for instance, cross-dressed women enamoured of other (biological or assumed) women or put together peculiarities usually ascribed to masculinity and femininity in one character, the hermaphrodite. In so doing they purposely make fun of traditional, rigid norms and boundaries imposed by society, especially as far as the bodily and affective realms are concerned. Tellingly, this is also what drag artists do: they parody gender and, consequently, what is supposed to be fixed, natural, fitting with a certain biological sex. As Butler (1999, p. 175) explains,

> The notion of gender parody defended [in her book *Gender Trouble*] does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a 'figure' in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin.

As a consequence, 'subversion, parody and drag occur within a law that provides opportunities for the "staging" of the subversive identities that it simultaneously suppresses and produces' (Salih, 2002, p. 60). The playwrights presented in the following pages offer an array of drag characters who parody femininity or masculinity to justify, hide or make more socially acceptable homoerotic desires, thus exposing social concerns over the disruption of gender boundaries. For instance, in Scala's *Il finto marito*, cross-dressed servant Scaramuccia identifies with a modest woman for a few seconds, but he soon becomes shocked by this phenomenon. Characters can also use the parody of gender in a sort of masquerade simulating a woman-man relationship in which one can play with their ambiguous gender for erotic purposes, as occurs with Angela and Nena in *La Veniexiana*.

Since 'in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself' (Butler, 1999, p. 175), paying special attention in my selection of comedies to drag characters and performances can reveal a wealth of insights into gender issues, social anxiety and the notions of manhood and womanhood current in early modern Italy.

These notions often interweave with those of narcissism and voyeurism as well, as I will illustrate. In this chapter I do not use 'narcissism' in the psychological-clinical meaning of the word.[105] Instead, I employ the term referring to its common twenty-first-century meaning, 'the condition of gaining emotional or erotic gratification from self-contemplation' (*OED*). Playwrights were, of course, aware that teasing the public's curiosity (including that addressed to a woman sensually absorbed in herself) is a constitutive element of the

[105] For instance, Sigmund Freud defines the narcissistic condition as of one 'enamoured of oneself' and 'of one's own genitals'. It is a condition that is an 'indispensable stage of development' during childhood but that later requires to be overcome (Freud, 1967, p. 312; originally: November 10th, 1909). Although Freud and others have analysed the alleged bonds between narcissism and homoeroticism (see for instance Bergeret, 2002), for the reasons mentioned in Note 103 I prefer not to build my arguments upon this.

performance itself since it aims to create a bond with spectators or to provoke both emotive and physical reactions in them. Accordingly, in works such as *La Veniexiana* and *Amor nello specchio*, playwrights use all kinds of tricks to keep the audience's attention at a high level, including stimulating their voyeurism or scopophilia, that is '[s]exual pleasure derived chiefly from watching others when they are naked or engaged in sexual activity' (*OED*).

In his extensive study on the links between theatre and voyeurism (not seen as a pathology, but as 'fourth wall' in performative shows), George Rodosthenous (2015, pp. 3-4) has therefore correctly suggested that the first involves

> a voyeuristic exchange between the performer and the audience, where the performer (the object of the audience's gaze) and the audience (the voyeur of this exchange) are placed in a legalized and safe environment for that interaction.

Authors can configure this fictional or real space (such as the pages of a text or a stage) as one in which audiences can obtain pleasure from a visual imagery, especially from whether it is coded as taboo. Queer female desire can undoubtedly be included amongst the issues labelled as extremely delicate in early modern society and, therefore, even more thrilling.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers were generally able to intuit what Freud was to formalise many years later in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), that is that scopophilia is one of the basic instincts of sexuality, developing from childhood onwards – Pseudo-Aretino's Giulia spying on her cousin masturbating or having sex is a perfect example of this. Focussing on the relation between voyeurism and artistic performance, film studies scholar Laura Mulvey (1975, p. 8) has therefore maintained that

> Although the instinct is modified by other factors, in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object. At the extreme, it can

> become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.

Building upon feminism and psychoanalysis, Mulvey calls this type of vision the 'male gaze' and first applies it to her field, that is the study of cinema. Although this idea has been mainly used in reference to film studies as well as being widely discussed over the years,[106] I submit that it can help me explore the relationship between playwrights and audiences. The male gaze brings together voyeurism and narcissism, since it implies both the perception of a subject as an object of sexual arousal as well as the spectator's identification with the object of that gaze.[107] In several of the works examined here, as in other early modern plays, authors titillate the male gaze of their audience, probably composed mostly of men, with scenes intended to be visually rich and stimulating.

Writers know, too, that performances can have an impact on their public and its corporality. They are capable of provoking reactions such as excitement, disgust, curiosity and morbidity.

Accordingly, authors attempted to address their audience's kinaesthetic intelligence in various ways and for various reasons. Ellen Spolsky (1996, p. 159) has defined that notion as

> our sense of the relationship of parts of the human body to the whole, and of the patterns of bodily tension and relaxation as they are related to movement. Kinaesthetic knowledge is also our sense of the

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[106] For instance, Edward Snow (1989) has problematised the notion, trying to go beyond the recurring idea of a masculine vision as 'patriarchal, ideological, and phallocentric' (p. 30).

[107] 'The first [structure of looking], scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like. The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of ego libido. This dichotomy was crucial for Freud' (Mulvey, 1975, p. 10). These considerations can work for early modern plays as well, substituting 'on the screen' with 'on the stage' or 'on the page'.

> muscular forces that produce bodily movement and of the effect of that movement on other parts of the body and on objects within the environment.

Kinaesthetic intelligence, therefore, plays a primary role in developing empathy with the audience and creating a real bond with it. Since 'what was reborn in the Renaissance was, in part, a critical sense of the capacities and complexities of bodily movement' (Bansks and Chesters, 2018, p. 8), it is particularly interesting to apply a kinaesthetic approach to early modern works. As I will show, in fact, in some circumstances, gestures can convey more than words.

Although any text or image can contain allusions to kinaesthetic intelligence, plays have an extraordinary capacity to combine both verbal and non-verbal aspects. Comedies, in particular, can offer a privileged site of observation since a specific attention to the language of the body is one of their special features. I want, therefore, to look at the various forms in which kinesthetics can be represented in comic plays at the levels of both writing and performance, in particular when related to homoerotic desires and allusions. In this way I will attempt to overcome a huge problem with several early modern plays: the original text which includes the stage directions is, unfortunately, not available. Nevertheless, one can try to infer useful insights from the scripts themselves. To better understand the impact on audiences, one can also consider some scholars' intriguing remarks on theatrical and technical issues connected to the performance of plays as well as gender (especially as far as the empowered roles of women on stage are concerned; see, for instance, Kerr, 1996; Poulsen, 2005), such as the ones I emphasised at the beginning of this section.

4. Crossing Boundaries, Transvestiting Desires

Having defined the framework in which I will place my work, in this section I will discuss how playwrights portray the sexed body, especially in relation to queer female desire and the *topos* of impossibility. In particular I will examine the ways in which authors reflect upon the biological and socio-cultural boundaries of bodies and the expectations related to them, including those related to conformity to gender binarism. In so doing I will also show that playwrights can employ characters' bodies as a means of establishing contact with their public (whether readers or spectators).

I will therefore analyse five works arranged in chronological order of composition, starting with one of the earliest examples of the *commedia erudita* as well as one of the most influential plays of the period.

4.1 Hermaphroditism and Queer Desire in Bibbiena's *Calandria*

La Calandria by Tuscan Cardinal and diplomat Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena (1470-1520) was first performed at the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino in February 1513 and published in 1521, enjoying great popularity in the *Cinquecento* and influencing several playwrights. Undoubtedly, its success lies in both its brilliant reflection on the range of human desires and the fascination with misplaced desires it evokes, including those involving homoeroticism.

The play has caught the eye of twentieth- and twenty-first-century researchers as well, prompting an abundance of scholarship scrutinising it from a variety of perspectives and with various methodological approaches. To cite just a few among several others (such as Fossati, in Dovizi, 1967; Padoan, 1985; Fanelli, 1997 and 2018; Ferroni, 2002; Breecher, 2009, pp. 23-33; Ruffini, 2015), Luciano Bottoni (2004, pp. 104-112) analyses the popular motif of the

hermaphrodite in the play, while Finucci (2003, p. 189-223) provides a psychoanalytical reading of the work with special attention to topics such as androgyny, castration and homoeroticism. On that last point, Finucci holds that the phallocentric and, thus, penetration-based mentality which informs the play does not allow women to have pleasure together. Furthermore, she stresses that 'Love between men also gets censured in *La Calandria*, according to the principle (...) that if a person identifies with one gender, he or she must desire the other. Unlike lesbianism, however, love between men is imagined as possible and receives representation on stage' (p. 221). Likewise, in her concise analysis of the play, Giannetti (2009, pp. 85-86) stresses the importance of the *topos* of *amor impossibilis* in Bibbiena's work but, unfortunately, she does not examine it in detail.

Drawing on this rich scholarship, I will look at how the numerous tensions encoded in the *Calandra* relate to gender confusion and *donna-con-donna* attraction which problematise the ideas of gender and the sexed body. Needless to say, the character of the hermaphrodite is crucial in raising questions on gender and social anxiety. In the play, as I will show, this figure is also a powerful plot generator.

The beauty and narrative efficacy of the *Calandra* lie, too, in Bibbiena's clever blending of traditional Latin and medieval Italian sources with sixteenth-century issues. Whilst the protagonist of the play, Calandro, is named after *Decameron* character Calandrino, the plot overtly takes its inspiration from Plautus and, in particular, from his *Menaechmi*, a play based on a case of mistaken identity involving twins (Concolino Mancini Abram, 2009). Accordingly, *Calandria*'s protagonists are the twins Santilla and Lidio. Originally born in Modon, a Greek town ruled for centuries by the Republic of Venice, the two have been separated as a consequence of the Turkish conquest. Believing that Lidio has been killed, Santilla flees the city and takes on her brother's identity and name. When she finally settles in

Rome, she does not know that Lidio is safe and sound and also living in the Eternal City. Predictably, this causes misunderstandings and paves the way to queer situations.

First, merchant Perillo wants Santilla/Lidio to marry his daughter Virginia.[108] On the one hand, Santilla is seemingly not concerned about the impossibility of a same-sex marriage; on the other, she appears to be worried about the alleged negative reactions of Virginia's disappointed family when they find out the truth (II.8):

> Femina sono, e conviemmi esser marito! Si io sposo costei, subito cognescerà che io femina e non maschio sono; e, da me scornati, el padre e la madre e la figlia porriano farmi uccidere... Se paleso esser femina, io medisma a me stessa fo il danno. Tener cosí la cosa più non posso. Misera a me! ché, da uno lato, ho il precipizio; da l'altro, e' lupi.[109]

Santilla's words seem to recall Iphis's monologue that I analysed in Chapter One. Both women know that families can react to a same-sex marriage in a very hostile way. What is more important is that Santilla is not disgusted by the idea of being in a couple with a woman, nor does she feel sexually threatened by such a scenario. She is, instead, anxious because she is aware that marriage is more a family affair with social and financial implications than a union based on personal choices, romance and sexual attraction.

Unfortunately for her, *malmaritata* Fulvia, too, is well aware of that, as she has been forced to marry gullible Calandro. Nevertheless, she has managed to have a lover, Lidio, who usually visits her house cross-dressed to hide their affair, and he is so convincing as a woman that even Calandro falls for him. When Lidio begins to neglect Fulvia, she feels desperate and asks magician Ruffo for help. Determined to obtain money from the rich *malmaritata*, Ruffo

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[108] In this chapter, when I cite the name of characters, I first use their original name, followed by that referring to the new identity they adopt.
[109] All citations are from Dovizi (1967), edited by Fossati.

goes to Santilla, believing that she is Lidio, and persuades her to go into business with him. She will, therefore, meet Fulvia pretending to be Lidio 'in forma di donna'. Santilla seems amused both by the ambiguous situation and the disappointment facing Fulvia, as the *malmaritata* will soon discover that her lover lacks what she wants the most ('Al provar quel che cerca, troverrà quel che non vuole': II.4).

In order to protect her mistress and deceive Ruffo, Santilla's servant Fannio reveals to the magician that Santilla/Lidio is a hermaphrodite. As Fannio explains, hermaphrodites are endowed with 'il sesso da donna e la radice d'uomo'; nonetheless, 'questa volta, [Santilla/Lidio] userà con Fulvia solo il sesso feminile per ciò che, avendolo ella [: Fulvia] domandato in forma di donna' (III.17). The rich gender ambiguity confounds Ruffo to the extent that, ironically, he cannot even pronounce the word 'ermafrodito', using instead 'merdafiorito' or a 'barbafiorito'.[110] This joke seems to suggest that a queer body such as that of a hermaphrodite is literally unspeakable and cannot but be something to laugh at.

As expected, when Fulvia finally meets Santilla/Lidio and manages to touch her body, she is disappointed in finding that her beloved cannot satisfy her ('Misera a me, che ho quel che cercai e trovato quel che non volea!': IV.1). The experience recalls Lavinia's in Firenzuola's tale examined in Chapter Two: whilst Lavinia is delighted by the unexpected discovery of a male organ, Fulvia regrets her partner's lack of one. The latter also believes that Ruffo has turned Lidio into a woman and therefore she begs him to get him back 'Lidio (...) intero', endowed with what she misses so much (IV.2):

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[110] From a linguistic point of view, 'merdafiorito' and 'barbafiorito' are two examples of malapropism, that is 'the wrong use of one word instead of another word because they sound similar to each other, with results that are unintentionally funny', as the Cambridge Dictionary reads (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/malapropism).

> voi avete, oimè! di maschio in femina converso Lidio mio. Tutto l'ho maneggiato e tocco; né altro del solito ritrovo che la presenzia in lui. Ed io non tanto la privazion del mio diletto piango quanto el danno suo; ché, per me, privo si trova di quel che più si brama.

Bibbiena offers a comic portrayal of Fulvia, both disappointed and dismayed. As for Fiordispina, the touching and exploration of Fulvia's beloved body is crucial in order to establish her partner's gender and their chances of satisfying her. It is also worth emphasising that Fulvia deems the lack of a penis as a curse which devastates her and, even more, Lidio, since she identifies masculinity with the presence and, implicitly, the vigour of a male organ. She is interested in Lidio's 'coltel della guaina mia' more than in the person himself, as she believes that only a male organ fits (and fulfils) a woman's anatomy.[111]

Accordingly, Ruffo makes a fool of Fulvia by promising her that he will soon magically turn Santilla/Lidio back into a man. Nevertheless, he is aware that bodies are complex and, therefore, a superficial intervention cannot modify their structure (IV.2):

> Con gran ragione Amor si dipinge cieco, perché chi ama mai il ver non vede. Costei è per amor accecata sì ch'ella s'avvisa che uno spirito possa fare una persona femina e maschio a posta sua: come se altro fare non bisognasse che tagliare la radice de l'uomo e farvi un fesso, e così formare una donna; e ricucire la bocca da basso e appicciare un bischero, e così fare un maschio. Oh! oh! oh! amatoria credulità!

Ruffo has left Fulvia and, thus, this monologue seems to be addressed to the audience, seeking its complicity in laughing at the woman's naivety. Although Ruffo ridicules Fulvia for her gullibility, he too believes that one can intervene to change one's gendered body as

[111] Tellingly, both the words 'guaina' and 'vagina' come from the Latin word 'vagīna', which originally means 'sheath, case'.

one likes. From this perspective, nature is not considered the only factor able to determine bodies. Talking about Santilla/Lidio's alleged ability to change her/his sex (as a drag artist seemingly does), Ruffo therefore recommends Fannio in quite an explicit way: 'Fa che il barbafiorito usi or con Fulvia il pestello, non il mortaro' (IV.3).

Nonetheless, by chance the real Lidio manages to reach Fulvia's bedroom before his twin but, unfortunately, Calandro's siblings find the two lovers together. Fessenio, therefore, helps Santilla (whose real identity the servant has discovered shortly before) to take the place of Lidio, who flees Fulvia's house. Consequently, at the moment of truth, when Santilla/Lidio is forced to reveal her sex, 'trovato che è una fanciulla, tutti si sono rasserenati, tenendo Fulvia la più pudica donna del mondo' (V.11). Here Bibbiena seems to suggest that woman-woman relationships are not considered a sexual threat, nor a factor which can sully one's reputation. Although these considerations do not automatically label love between women as impossible, on the other hand they undoubtedly question its status and, also, the impact it can have on sexuality. The revelation of Santilla's female biological sex also encourages the resolution of the tensions: at last, she finally rejoins her beloved brother, who will marry Virginia, Santilla's betrothed.

As previously stated, bodies and what concerns them are extremely important in comedies. In *La Calandria*, they are at the very centre of the narrative: they can cross-dress, switch sex, deceive, give pleasure… They can be also perceived as regular, complete and in conformity with gender expectations or, on the contrary, transgressive, lacking in relevant parts and gender-fluid. Tellingly, most characters in the play frequently and cheerfully cross-dress in order to obtain some economic or sexual reward or to mock someone; as we have seen, Santilla even pretends to be a hermaphrodite able to change her sex when she likes for money.

Whilst DeCoste (2009, p. 106) reads the 'liminal figure of the hermaphrodite [as an] emblem of indeterminate sexual identity and of the deferral of narrative resolution', Bianca Concolino Mancini Abram (2009, pp. 20-21) suggests that the siblings' cross-dressing may be an attempt to parody the Renaissance myth of the androgyne. This observation rings true as Bibbiena's joke upon the word 'ermafrodita' seems a direct challenge to highly-praised works such as Bembo's *Asolani*, Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* and Judah Leon Abravanel's *Dialoghi* d'Amore, in which the Platonic figure of the androgyne plays a relevant philosophical role.

Nevertheless, I maintain that Bibbiena is not merely interested in mocking philosophical or literary works. Rather, I claim that he is generally fascinated by characters such as the hermaphrodite or the drag performer who transgress the borders of their identities allegedly rooted in bodies. At the same time, he often depicts these figures in a witty, even sarcastic, way for not fitting the heteronormative frame or binary bodies. For instance, Fessenio twice makes fun of men attracted to their peers for behaving and looking like women:

> FESSENIO: Voglio inferire che tu ti accommodi al viver d'oggi.
>
> POLINICO: In che modo?
>
> FESSENIO: Allo esser inimico delle donne, come è quasi ognuno in questa Corte (...). (I.2)
>
> (...)
>
> FESSENIO: Non sappiàn noi che le donne sono sì degne che oggi non è alcuno che non le vadi imitando e che volentieri, con l'animo e col corpo, femina non diventi? (I.2)

According to Paolo Fossati (1967, p. 104), Fessenio alludes here to the papal court, which, in February 1513, at the time of the first performance of the play, was going through the last days of Julius II, who had been accused several times of being attracted to men. It is also worth noting that in the same period (1513-1516) Castiglione penned the first draft of the *Libro del Cortegiano*, in which he warns against effeminacy (2.2), holding up the more virile

court of Urbino (where Castiglione worked and the *Calandria* was first performed) as an example to follow. I do not propose, of course, reading these literary texts as historical documents. Nonetheless, Fessenio's words may reveal an undeniable social anxiety towards male same-sex attraction and feminisation circulating in early modern Italy.

Despite this concern, traces of gender fluidity and sexual instability are scattered throughout the *Calandria*, allowing the audience to venture into queer spaces. As previously stated, the impact of this exploration could have been amplified by the novel presence of women on the early modern stage, especially starting from the second half of the century.[112] In reference to France (but this discourse may be applied to other places as well), Virginia Scott (2010, p. 74) reminds us that none of the sixteenth century-archives containing references to Italian actors and troupes cite women, although they had been working as actresses at least since mid-century.[113] Donna Lucrezia of Siena is known as the first professional Italian actress (in 1564, in her Roman house, she signed a contract to perform plays with some actors) but the names of many other women performers seem to have been disappeared.

Not only '[d]espite its vigorous opposition to actresses, [did] the Catholic Church [achieve] only isolated successes in banning women from Italian acting troupes' (Katritzky, 2008, p. 37), but women could be hired for international performances as well. For instance, as Virginia Scott (2010, p. 73) reminds us, '[t]he troupe that came from Florence in 1548 to perform Dovizi di Bibbiena's *La Calandra* during the festivities that accompanied the entry

[112] On early modern actresses in Italy see at least Henke (2002, pp. 85-105) and Ferrone (2014).
[113] As Henke emphasises (2002, p. 86), '[I]f professional actresses existed in the 1540s and 1550s in Italy, they were certainly far less noticeable than they became in the 1560s'.

of Henri II and Catherine de' Medici into Lyon included "the most excellent actors and actresses of Italy," brought there at "great cost and expense"'.

Female roles played by actresses could give both more realism and excitement to the whole production. This could also depend on the fact that 'Perhaps the level of decorum expected of women would elevate the bawdy to new heights; certainly the scenes of homoeroticism between them, like Santilla's dilemmas, were theatrically unprecedented', as Rachel Poulsen remarks (2005, p. 177).

As far as *La Calandria* is concerned, the audience's arousal might be also fuelled by the circumstance that Fulvia, too, is able to express her sexual desire and is determined to get what she wants. Accordingly, although *La Calandria* was influenced by literary Latin models, one of the reasons why the play goes beyond its models is the new, strong agency it gives to fictional women. Bibbiena depicts, in fact, multi-dimensional female characters and cross-dressing is one of the means he employs to explore their potential. In particular, as seen in the first chapters of this thesis, women's cross-dressing enables them to achieve more freedom of movement and autonomy and to be more sexually uninhibited. As Laura Giannetti (2009, p. 15) correctly stresses, these heroines

> express awareness that the different social roles assigned to men and women were based on a patriarchal social order much more than on any natural differences. [The women who cross-dressed] were aware that their perceived sexual identity determined their place in society, and that changing that perception, by passing as a man, allowed them to escape that inferior status and function much more aggressively and successfully than otherwise would have been possible.

In *La Calandria* as well as in the other plays I am considering, behaviours as well as clothes literally make the man: thanks to her being in drag, a cross-dressed woman is allowed, like a

man, to move, act, make decisions and express her sexual drive more openly. As Miriam Eliav-Feldon (2012, p. 162) cleverly stresses:

> Clothes, ornaments and accessories in late medieval and early modern Europe were supposed to be – to borrow of the Erving Goffman's terms – identity kits, used not only for the presentation of the self in a favourable light, but also as an official statement of identity. Needless to say, a social hierarchy regulated by strict dress codes made it all easier to assume a false identity (…).

La Calandria, then, provides its female characters with valuable 'identity kits' which, as we have seen, offer opportunities to express their desires, have new experiences and, even, trouble the very concept of identity.

Nonetheless, despite the gender ambiguity which permeates the whole play, its conclusion is traditional enough: Lidio and Santilla recover their original identities and marry Virginia and Fulvia's son respectively. This can be explained not only in relation to the triumph of heteronormativity which normally concluded plays, but also in the light of the inter-generational dynamics presented in *La Calandria.* As Anthony Ellis stresses (2016), although the foolish old man (like Calandro) is a stock character, 'ridicule of the comedic *senex* intensified in Italian erudite comedy even as writers in other genres were finding new reasons to champion old age'. He therefore reads the opposition between young Lidio and the *vecchione* in the light of the Florentine political context and, in particular, of its inter-generational disputes. Given this scenario, *La Calandria* would then allude to the struggle for younger Florentines' support between the Medici (for whom Bibbiena worked for all his life) and the *ottimati* (the older nobility). At last, Lidio

> prevails via mastery of courtly behavior, which (…) includes the ability to change his behavior as circumstances dictate. His aged nemesis, lacking this skill and underestimating its significance, loses his

> battle for young love. In the victory of young over old, (…) the play signals Bibbiena's patrons' total ideological co-optation of Florentine youth. (Ellis, 2016)

A political reading of this kind provides a compelling explanation of why the play had to end heteronormatively. Nothing could be permitted to trouble the triumph of Lidio – a symbol of youth and virile prowess. Affiliation with hermaphrodites or female homoerotic relationships would, instead, imply an emasculated alter ego unfit for the kind of political example Bibbiena was trying to mould. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the exploration of non-normative bodies and subjectivities, behaviours and relationships that the author carries on throughout the play is entirely gratuitous. The audience can also finally perceive that not all the tensions related to the gender issues that have emerged are resolved. For instance, if, on the one hand, as we have seen, the fact that Santilla and Fulvia are found together in a bedroom is not deemed sexually dangerous or a threat to Calandro's honour, on the other it plainly alludes to *donna-con-donna* intimacy, even though not necessarily involving sexuality.

4.2 Be My *Sbisao*: Queer Roleplay in *La Veniexiana*

Bibbiena never fully describes what happens or can happen between two women on a physical level, perhaps in order to arouse the audience's curiosity. Conversely, the anonymous author of the *Veniexiana* seems to revel in presenting a detailed, overt account of woman-woman intimacy.[114] Thought to have been written between the 1510s and 1530s but

[114] The title of this comedy is usually transcribed as 'La Venexiana' or 'La Veniexiana'. In this work, I opt for 'La Veniexiana' because, in the sixteenth century, Venice was usually called 'Veniexia' or 'Veniesa'. For further reasons, see Tomasin's linguistic study of the *Veniexiana* (2007). In this chapter I quote from Davico Bonino's edition (1977).

rediscovered only in 1928 by Emilio Lovarini,[115] the *Veniexiana* is considered a masterpiece of Venetian dramatic production (Padoan, 1967; Rizzi, 2003). The play is set in Venice and, as the text suggests, may have been inspired by some real events. The plot focuses on the erotic adventures of the handsome Iulio, wooed by widow Angela as well as newly-wed Valeria. It portrays, therefore, the tricks used by both women to win him over. In the end, despite Angela's presents and wealth, Iulio opts for Valeria: as usual in Latin and Renaissance plays, youths fall in love with youths and refuse the advances of their elders.

Given the domestic setting of the play and its careful account of the lives of widowed and married women, DeCoste (2009, p. 121) argues that a woman penned it. Although this hypothesis sounds undoubtedly fascinating, I suggest that the accurate description of women's life is not enough to demonstrate that it is true. And as this thesis shows, there are several other works which feature similar traits, often inherited from classical Latin *comoediae*, but were written by men. One of these recurring features is the presence of a jealous character who is usually embodied by an old male figure attracted to a maid or to his young wife who refuses to have an aged, paternal figure as a lover (and, thus, may become a *malmaritata*). In *La Veniexiana*, interestingly, it is Angela who acts like the typical 'vecchio innamorato beffato', as Firenzuola's Cecantonio is described in the untitled second tale from Day One (see Chapter Two). Whilst Cecantonio is disappointed to discover that he cannot have sex with his maid since she has a male organ, although Angela does not win over Iulio's heart, she at least succeeds in finding a (female) lover for a few hours.

[115] Mauro Bolognesi directed the movie *La Veniexiana* (1985) inspired by the play. It is available on the R.A.I. website: https://www.raiplay.it/video/2017/07/La-venexiana-3e224f0d-8bc1-4c5f-bc06-0a83011b739b.html [accessed 5 January 2021]. The homoerotic scene (23:24-27:52) is partially true to the play.

The intimate encounter takes place one night, at Angela's home. Prompted by lust, Angela enters Nena's bedroom, in which the servant seems about to sleep (I.4). Her mistress, instead, cannot rest: the burning desire for Iulio is consuming her ('Le mie carne brùsciano. Moro de doia') but – she complains – he believes that she is too old for him and, therefore, he is in love with another woman. Yet, perhaps aroused, Nena encourages Angela to confess what she longs for. The woman thus admits that she would like to embrace him, suck his lips, and put her tongue in his mouth. Surprisingly, Nena states that she can perform these passionate gestures better than Iulio ('Meio lo saverae far mi, ca esso.'). These words seem to inflame Angela who, therefore, attempts to kiss her in a very intense way:

> ANGELA: Quella bochina dolçe tegnirla per mi, cussí, sempre sempre!
>
> NENA: Stè indrìo, ché me sofoghè…
>
> ANGELA: Caro, dolçe pì che no xè el zúcaro!
>
> NENA: Vu no v'arecordè che sun dona.
>
> ANGELA: Sun morta, mi. Sudo, in aqua, tuta.

The scene is imbued with a sensuality so aggressive, almost, that Angela seems to be on the point of choking Nena in her embrace. Gestures as well as words express the erotic tension between the two, speaking to the audience's kinaesthetic intelligence. Angela carefully recounts her body's reactions due to her arousal (such as sweat, heat, heart palpitations) as well as her sexual fantasies ('Butarghe cussí le braze al colo, zicar quelle lavrine e tegnirlo streto streto', put 'la lenguina in boca'). As linguist Anna Laura Lepschy (1996) notes, scene I.4 is filled with vivid words describing passion and the physical reactions it provokes ('angonissa', 'arder', 'brusar', 'consumar', 'desiderao', 'infiammaa', 'sudar'), as well as those referring to intimacy ('boca', 'braza', 'carne', 'morder', 'peto', 'coresin', 'lavrino', 'lenguina', 'tetina'). The intimacy between the two is reinforced by diminutives such as

‘giotonzello’, ‘lavrino’, ‘tetina’, ‘caenella’ and ‘smeraldin’. Such intense descriptions, presumably, serve to tickle the senses of the audience and to give it the impression it is vividly observing the scene, as if through the keyhole of Angela’s bedroom.

Whilst in the *Calandria* Fulvia seems disappointed at being in bed with a woman, in the *Veniexiana* the same situation, instead, fuels both protagonists’ passion. Not only does same-sex attraction seem possible to them, but, also, same-sex intimacy is presented as better than that shared with a man. In this regard, as Giannetti (2009: 94) suggests, Nena seems eager to compete with Iulio and to demonstrate that her kisses are sweeter than his. As the reader can infer, Nena’s erotic surge prompts Angela to hug her tightly: her embrace surprises Nena, who abruptly stresses that she is courting a woman, perhaps to fan her mistress’ embers of passion. As a result, when Nena suggests that Angela should go to sleep, the latter asks her servant to play the role of Iulio:

> ANGELA: Voio star qua. E, se ti vul che dorma, gètame cussí le to brazze; e mi sererò gi oci e te crederò el fio.
>
> NENA: Volèu cussí?
>
> ANGELA: Sí, cara fia.
>
> NENA: Me credèu, mo?

In order to make the roleplay more real, the widow asks Nena to act like a genuine man is supposed to: roughly and without any respect for women.

> ANGELA: Cara, dolçe, sta’ cussí un poco; e po comenza a biastemar, azò che ti creda omo.
>
> NENA: No sciò zò che dir, mi.
>
> ANGELA: Biastema el corpo de Cristo, menzona le parole sporche, co fa i òmeni.
>
> NENA: Disè: che parole?
>
> ANGELA: Quelle sporcarìe che se dise in bordelo. No sastu?

NENA: Se no dormo, le dirò; ma, se dormo, non dirò gnente, mi…

ANGELA: Cara Nena, fa' un puoco el sbisào per mio amor.

Cleverly, the scene stops here, so readers do not know what will happen in Nena's bedroom. Will the roleplay take place? Will Angela finally extinguish the fire that is consuming her? Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that, according to Angela, when in bed with a woman, real men swear, use rude words and act as if they were in a brothel. Furthermore, Angela is aware that, although Nena is a woman, she can presumably behave like a 'sbisao' (which Borlenghi translates as 'sporcaccione', 'sfacciato'; 1959, p. 503), ironically adhering to early modern gender expectations on masculinity which determine and frame the gestures, attitudes and words of a specific kind a man, including those relating to intimacy.

Nena is asked to enact what in our contemporary terms may probably be defined a drag performance and, accordingly, the passage resonates with Butler's thoughts on this kind of parody of gender. The philosopher employs it as a means to show that 'the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality' (1999, p. XXIII). As previously stated, gender is enacted through performance. Some types of performances such as those of drag performers emphasise the constructed features of gender which have 'a vested interest in presenting themselves as "essential" and "natural"' (Salih, 2002, p. 65). In so doing, they underline 'the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed' and parodically reveal 'the imitative nature of all gender identities' (p. 65).

As a result, Nena's masquerade of masculinity parodies masculinity itself. It also contributes to creating an ambiguous atmosphere which the reference to the kinaesthetic dimension makes even more exciting. This implies the idea that masculinity is not simply

related to the possession of a male organ. Instead, it has to do with a series of performative acts socially labelled as masculine. In the episode under consideration here behaviour connotated as masculine is marked by aggressive sexual appetite. In evoking these particularities, the queer couple parodies acts deemed typical of virility, thus weakening their heteronormative charge.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, in contrast to what we see in other works, in *La Veniexiana* there is no hint of male anxiousness to dissipate queer female desire or affirm virility. Neither is the excitement and the pleasure that Nana and Angela feel compared to those experienced with men. The two seem simply and genuinely aware that sexual drive can be expressed in several forms, including those involving desire and cross-dressing. Furthermore, the whole scene is also full of allusions to the couple's actions (such as embracing and swearing), which give the audience the impression of being thrillingly close to the women.

Nonetheless, Nena occasionally appears to be not wholly at her ease in the face of Angela's (homo)erotic advances. The author of the play purposely makes it difficult to establish if Nena is pretending to be annoyed by Angela's sexual resourcefulness or, instead, is intrigued by the ambiguity of the scene in which she is asked to satisfy her mistress. I therefore disagree with DeCoste (2009, p. 124) when she states that two women are 'equal partners in desire'. In point of fact, no matter what her own desire may be, Nena knows that she should please Angela because she is required to obey the power hierarchy. Conversely, I share DeCoste's analysis (p. 124) when she claims that

> The scene is presented in explicit terms: it is not recounted after the fact, nor is there anyone else present to mediate or to interpret the scene for the audience. There is no resolution of the women's

> relationship as in other plays: they are not punished for their desire, and neither woman is married by the end of the play. They could quite easily continue to have encounters such as this.

DeCoste properly stresses the novelties in the depiction of queer female desire in *La Veniexiana*. In contrast to several other heroines (including most of those described in this chapter), for instance, Angela and Nena are experiencing *donna-con-donna* intimacy on purpose. The author also represents their erotic adventure on the stage in full detail. Nevertheless, despite the apparent complexity of the homoerotic scene, Borsellino (1989, p. 115) reads it just as a 'una fervorosa simulazione omosessuale' to prepare the ground for the encounter between Angela and Iulio. This interpretation hinges on the prejudice that female queer sex must be subordinated in some way to woman-man relations – a prejudice upon which we often stumble in this thesis. Giannetti, instead, (2009, p. 95) remarks upon the positive exceptionality of this episode, where 'sexual practice between women is not only openly portrayed but also dissociated from the traditional vision of women as sexually passive'.

I, too, argue that the same-sex scene is neither merely instrumental in preparing the ground for Iulio and Angela's making love nor shows any explicit link with the one involving the two. On the contrary, the encounter between Angela and Nena allows them to create an intimate space where they can freely deploy their agency and their sensuality. In other words, both women are consciously subjects of desire who employ the figure of the absent Iulio as a pretext for an erotic queer role play.

Although the exploration of Angela's and Nena's bodies and their related charge of gender instability are often accompanied by humour and irony, the playwright was likely to

know that both the voyeuristic stimulation of the (mainly male) gaze and the kinaesthetic titillation of the audience can play a relevant role in engaging with spectators.

This comes as no surprise since several early modern works display such an awareness, including Accademici Intronati di Siena's comedy *Gl'Ingannati*. Premiered in 1532, a few years after *La Veniexiana*, the play presents the young Isabella falling in love with the servant Fabio, who is in truth a woman, Lelia.[116] Once, when they are alone, Isabella kisses Lelia, unaware that two servants Crivello and Scatizza are spying on them (II.6). In observing the scene, although he is not aware that Lelia/Fabio is a woman (although the audience know this), Scatizza becomes excited and reveals that he is about to ejaculate ('Al corpo di Dio, che m'è infiata una gamba che par che la voglia recere'). One can probably see in him a sort of allegory of the male gaze as well as a projection of the real audience, titillated by the ambiguous scene, which can be enjoyed on two levels. On the first (and more explicit) one, a bold woman makes advances on a young man, whilst on the second (and subtler) one, two beautiful girls are kissing. As Lelia/Fabio accepts Isabella's tender advances, spectators voyeuristically consent to being party to Lelia's fraud.

Both the Intronati and the anonymous author of the *Veniexiana* cunningly insist on the ambiguity and eroticism which permeate their homoerotic episodes, thus offering their audiences a sort of peep show. Tellingly, the scene between Nana and Angela takes place in a bedroom and the spectators can, therefore, have the impression that they are peering through its keyhole, as happens with the *balia* in Aretino's *Dialogo della Nanna e della Pippa*. As

[116] For an analysis of *donna-con-donna* trope in the play, see DeCoste (2009, pp. 108-113). Here, I cite passages from Pieri's edition (Accademia degli Intronati, 2009).

several works analysed in this thesis demonstrate, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers often deliberately offer spectacles of homoerotic love for scopophilic purposes.

The representation of woman-woman sex is so realistic that Giannetti (2009, p. 95) reads the closing lines of the play as a serious warning to keep silent on the issue (V. *Finis*, 123, 321). She in fact maintains that the comedy might tell the story of some real people involved in *donna-con-donna* sexual practices. Giannetti, therefore, makes the claim that the play might have suffered from censorship (the *Veniexiana* disappeared from view until 1928) because usually 'male critics (...) preferred silent, passive women and happy marital endings' (Giannetti, 2009, p. 95). Although I agree with the Italianist when stating that a bias towards transgressive works (including the *Veniexiana*) might have affected their transmission down the centuries, I would challenge her perspective since she does not provide any strong proof in support of her claim. In truth, we know nothing about the success or failure of the play. The fact of its existence, however, and the care with which this scene of woman-to-woman love is staged, are strong indicators of the appeal (voyeuristic, male-gaze-titillating, scandalising…) such spectacles were likely to have in early modern Italy.

4.3. A New Iphis? Trasvestite Desires in Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro*

La Veniexiana tells us that, at that time, it was possible as well as appealing to offer us a depiction of physical love between women which is neither impossible nor deplorable. This premise can be confirmed, too, by other plays such as *L'Alessandro* (1544-1545), in which one of the heroines recognises she is not the first woman to be loving another openly and proudly. This probably comes as no surprise given that, on 6th February 1541 at the Paduan

Accademia degli Infiammati, the author of the play, Bishop Alessandro Piccolomini,[117] delivered a paper on the sonnet *Ora te 'n va superbo, or corri altero* by the Sienese poet Laudomia Forteguerri, dedicated to the alleged lover of the poet, noblewoman Margaret of Austria. I will analyse this in my last chapter. In presenting the poem as 'un'esempio [sic] di un'ardentissimo [sic] Amore, che è di tempi nostri, non tra homo o Donna no, ma tra due singularissime e divinissime Donne' (1541), he praised their bond (Eisenbichler, 2001).

It is not easy to establish how Laudomia Forteguerri's and Margaret of Austria's relationship might have influenced Piccolomini's positive depiction of *donna-con-donna* love. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the playwright shows an unusual openness towards the topic and represents it in the *Alessandro* without any specific bias. In this regard, as early as 1930, Benedetto Croce (1930, pp. 23-24) noted that 'in qualche luogo si determina la somiglianza con Pietro Aretino, ma nel modo che si è detto, senza accentuazioni perverse, come può vedersi anche nel punto scabroso in cui i travestimenti producono situazioni da amori lesbici'.

Like the *Ingannati*, *Alessandro* was composed for an Accademia, Siena's of the Intronati.[118] In this respect, it is relevant to recall, too, that even though '*Cinquecento* literary academies did not show a liberal attitude toward the female sex' (Coller, 2006, p. 223), the *Intronati* proved to be particularly attentive to their female audience. Tellingly, both the prologues composed for the *Alessandro* specifically address women. Furthermore, 'this academy's positive exploration of a female subjectivity that is not bound by the traditional patriarchal imperatives of "silence", "obedience", and "passivity", is significant and worthy of

[117] Oh him see as a minimum Samuels (1976); Piéjus et al. (2011).
[118] On Italian cultural academies in the *Cinquecento*, see Yates (1983); Testa (2015); Everson, Reidy and Sampson (2016).

note' (Coller, 2006, p. 236). Tellingly, too, it is perhaps not by chance that the character of Lucrezia in the *Alessandro* appears to be incredibly strong and firmly determined to get what she is seeking.

The comedy was performed at the Sienese Carnival in 1544 and published in 1545.[119] According to Nerida Newbigin (1985-2010), the playwright named the work after himself to demonstrate that it expresses his thoughts on love and life.[120] Arguably, he included those on homoerotic queer desire, too. Despite the wealth of ideas that the play displays, unfortunately scholars have not taken great interest in it so far, with the exception of Giannetti and a few others. In particular, Giannetti (2009, p. 99) has claimed that *Alessandr*o 'was one of the texts of the period that gave the greatest voice to female desire; in a cultural atmosphere that (…) was anxious to ignore the topic, this text seemed to desire to believe, giving voice to the possibility and the appeal of eroticism between women'. Accordingly, in the following pages, I will show that *L'Alessandro* can be used as an instrument to explore how Piccolomini discusses and undermines the trope of impossible love. If, at first, the work seems to draw upon both the 'impossible' stories of Iphis and Fiordispina, it finally develops a new and articulated version of *donna-con-donna* love.

At the core of this piece of theatre, as usual at that time, there are some young couples in a struggle with their elders for economic and sentimental reasons. Although set in Pisa in around 1540, the context is purely indicative and only partially alludes to contemporary society. As a consequence, the political causes that push the character of Aloisio to cross-dress as Lampridia are a mere literary pretext.

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[119] In these pages, I refer to Cerreta's edition (1966).
[120] In the play, the character named Alessandro is a friend and counsellor of one of the protagonists, Cornelio, but he does not play a particularly relevant part.

At the beginning of the play, Messer Vincenzio wants his son Cornelio to marry rich Lucilla, whilst Messer Fabrizio complains about having lost touch with his daughter Lucrezia, after entrusting her to his brother (I.1). He does not know that she lives in Pisa cross-dressed as Fortunio. Aloisio, too, has adopted a new identity and lives at Vincenzio's house pretending to be his niece Lampridia for safety reasons since his father was a political rebel. These multiple cross-dressings do not prevent the youths from falling in love: Aloisio loves Lucrezia, whom he has not seen for years, whilst Lucrezia is in love with Lampridia. Accordingly, thought to be a man, cross-dressed Lucrezia is encouraged by servant Niccoletta to enter Lampridia's bedroom at night, but s/he doesn't seem to be too eager to do so. Niccoletta, who does not know the truth, mocks, therefore, Lucrezia's low self-esteem in her masculinity (II.1):

> FORTUNIO: Non lo posso fare, so ben io, e basta; ooh!
>
> NICCOLETTA: (...) Perché? Voi sospirate; avete forse paura che le vostre armi non riuscissero?

As we have already seen in other texts, authors often insist on men's ability to please women sexually thanks to their 'armi'. Like several other female characters attracted to women (or to men cross-dressed as women), Lucrezia seems to believe that one woman cannot return her love (II.1):

> Oh, che vita infelice è la mia! Io son pur lo scherzo e 'l giuoco di te. Fortuna; gli altri, se ardon per amore, almen godan di quella fiamma sperando che, vinta la crudeltà de l'amante loro, ogni cosa ritorni in gioia; ma io amo con tutto 'l cuore e, se ben io vincesse con la mia servitù la durezza di Lampridia, ch'avrei fatto? Io son donna com'è lei, e rimarrebbe ingannata del caso mio.

Lucrezia is afraid that her anatomical lack may even be deemed as a trick, an *inganno*. She is in so much anguish about not being able to sexually satisfy her beloved that her sigh

expresses her preoccupation and her disappointment kinaesthetically. Niccoletta, however, reads it as evidence of fear.

Even when Lucrezia is left alone, she continues to be concerned about what will happen when she reveals to Lampridia that she is a woman and not a man (II.1):

> Or che farai, misera Lucrezia? Accetterai tu questo partito o no? S'io l'accetto, e ch'io vada da Lampridia, e che le persuada a far quanto ch'io voglio, e ch'ella conosca puoi ch'io son femina, non sarà uno scorgimento? Oltra che, scopertami poi per femina e saputosi per Pisa, mi sarà cagion di maggior pericolo.

Lucrezia appears to be worried about both Lampridia's and society's reactions. Nonetheless, on the other hand, Lucrezia is aware that she is not the first woman to be in love with another. Whilst, as we have seen, Ovid's Iphis appears to be painfully paralysed by her exceptional condition as a woman in love with another, not only does Lucrezia accept her homoerotic drive, but she even decides to sexually assault her beloved. Surprisingly, Lucrezia reveals herself to be incredibly resourceful and almost physically aggressive (II.1):

> Da l'altra parte, io arei pur un gran contento dì trovarmi seco e baciar il volto e 'l petto di sì bella donna. Io già non son la prima donna ch'amasse donna; ella m'ara per iscusata e, per mio bene, s'io ne la prego, terrà segreta la cosa, in modo che da 'l far questo non me ne può venir se non piacere. Andarò, dunque, e l'assalirò mentre che dormirà, e me scoprirò; già so ch'ella non è un aspido che non si muova a pietà di me ancor ch'io sia donna. Me n'andarò a casa e, dopo dessinare, mi metterò arditissima a questa impresa.

Piccolomini skilfully details Lucrezia's increasing self-confidence, which urges her to make her *avant-la-lettre* coming out. In the first excerpt that I have presented she takes an elegiac and melancholic tone from Ovid's Iphis as well as, probably, Ariosto's Fiordispina. Lucrezia

is, in fact, aware that an authoritative literary tradition and a set of social norms require her to be ashamed of her feelings and dismiss her unorthodox love. Nevertheless, in the second excerpt, she admits to being shamelessly inflamed by passion as her words reveal. As a consequence, Lucrezia becomes determined to assault Lampridia while she is asleep. Convincingly influenced by Niccoletta who, as Angela in *La Veniexiana* does, tends to identify virility with brutality, in taking action Lucrezia expresses kinaesthetically what masculine parameters would require of a real man – force, aggressiveness, sexual entrepreneurship. Accordingly, she claims that she wants to 'baciar il volto e 'l petto' of the beloved, 'assalir[la]' and only at the end does she plan to talk to her and obtain her pardon. Lucrezia's agency therefore seems to triumph over her fear of loving a woman and not being enough of a man to conquer Lampridia. The idea that she is not the first woman to be in love with another undoubtedly gives her strength.

Nonetheless, when Lucrezia is finally on her way to visit Lampridia, the heroine becomes concerned about what may happen. The worry of not being sexually satisfying starts haunting her again (III.2):

> S'ella mi disdice, la sua crudeltà e ingratitudine m'occiderà; e s'ella, fatta pietosa de miei dolori, si lasciarà al fin vincer come molte fanno, che farò io per far cosa che le sodisfaccia? O ella conoscerà ch'io son femina o no; se lo conoscerà, si pigliarà per iscorno tutto l'amore e tutte le dimostrazioni che io ho fatte verso di lei, e si accenderà di voglia di vendicarsi; s'ella non lo conoscerà, oh che risa, oh che beffe si farà di me, che a guisa d'un cuculo tenghi l'ali basse poco manco ch'un uom di pasta! Può esser maggiore scorno a un giovine innamorato che condursi solo con la donna sua e mancargli su 'l buono?

Once again, Lucrezia does not know what to do with her seemingly misplaced desires and fearfully muses on the possible consequences of her actions. According to Florindo Cerreta (1966, p. 42), Lucrezia is inhibited by the fact that, 'essendo donna e sentendosi fortemente

attratta da un'altra donna, sa di esporsi al ludibrio pubblico se si venisse a scoprire il suo vero sesso; e, infine, pur essendo consapevole dell'atto contro natura che "crede" di stare per compiere, è la forte somiglianza che Lampridia ha con l'amato Aloisio a farle vincere la repugnanza che prova in principio'. I argue instead that Lucrezia is more afraid of not being a skilled lover than of the social bias against same-sex love. This is why, in this passage, Piccolomini employs the kinaesthetic metaphor of the cuckoo with its folded wings, which at the time was used to refer to a 'uom di pasta', a man who cannot sexually satisfy a woman. Tellingly, Ariosto uses the same allusion, in a very similar context, in the tale of Bradamante and Fiordispina. When Bradamante realises that Fiordispina believes that she is a man, the knight thinks that it would not be honourable for a male (as Bradamante, in that moment, looks like) to accept passively the advances of a beautiful woman (25.30:5-8; 25.31:1-6):

> – Gli è meglio (dicea seco) s'io rifiuto
> questa avuta di me credenza stolta
> e s'io mi mostro femina gentile,
> che lasciar riputarmi un uomo vile. –
>
> E dicea il ver; ch'era viltade espressa,
> conveniente a un uom fatto di stucco,
> con cui sí bella donna fosse messa,
> piena di dolce e di nettareo succo,
> e tuttavia stesse a parlar con essa,
> tenendo basse l'ale come il cucco.[121]

[121] In his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* (1565), Torquato Tasso confirms the popularity of this locution when, in citing the passage from the *Furioso* mentioned above, he criticises its stylistic inappropriatness: 'Parlari, per dire il vero, troppo popolareschi sono quelli, e questi inclinati alla bassezza comica per la disonesta cosa che si rappresenta, disconvenevole sempre all'eroico'.

Whilst Bradamante is afraid of being deemed a 'uomo vile', 'fatto di stucco', physically unmoved by a charming woman (and, thus, not masculine enough), a few days later, as soon as Fiordispina kisses Ricciardetto believing that he is Bradamante, the man feels that 'saetta/ dirizzi Amor' (25.54:3-4), thus displaying his virility. I therefore suggest that, in depicting Lucrezia's contrasting feelings, Piccolomini is in close partnership with Ariosto, as they both explore the motif of impossible *donna-con-donna* love as well as the notion of masculinity and revel in playing with the ironic, obscene narrative and stylistic possibilities that woman-woman relationships offer to writers.

In the *Alessandro* episode analysed above, the reference to the Fiordispina tale appears to confirm my reading. Despite the self-confidence Lucrezia has shown shortly before, she is painfully aware that she lacks something fundamental to please a woman. She seems to identify the capacity to have sex with a woman with having sexual male reactiveness, and this cannot but harm her pride. Giannetti (2009, p. 99) also stresses that, in Lucrezia's discourses, honour is closely connected to sexual prowess and the ability to satisfy a woman rather than, as traditionally, female chastity.

I suggest, therefore, that Lucrezia's intimate system of values undergoes a transformation throughout the play. She gradually abandons ideas and behaviours socially prescribed to women (such as sexual passivity and modesty) in order to embrace a more 'masculine' attitude, which has its kinaesthetic response expressed through proactivity, erotic entrepreneurship and sexual rapacity. In the light of the above considerations, it is understandable that at first Lucrezia is concerned about not being able to satisfy a woman sexually. Nonetheless, when she ultimately recognises that her homoerotic love is licit, she gives it an opportunity to show itself. In contrast, as we have seen, several other characters from early modern Italian comic plays and, more broadly, literature who experience same-sex

desire show a less nuanced approach to the topic and in some cases believe that the embers of queer love must be extinguished rather than fuelled. In this sense, *L'Alessandro* is a novelty and Piccolomini is, in a sense, a pioneer who has also been massively inspired by Ariosto.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Lucrezia's intense sexual urges prompt her to shed (at least, for the moment) her doubts and she plans to assault Lucrezia (III.2):

> Oh, che strania fortuna è la mia! non veggio modo da riuscir da questa impresa con onore. Ma faccia Iddio. Io pur l'abbracciarò e baciarò mille volte e, chi sa, forse che Amore non abandona chi 'l serve con fede? Venuto ch'io sarò da lei, mosso a pietà di me, mi farà per un'ora diventar uomo; andar voglio, escane quel che vuole.

Whilst several other heroines we have met so far (from Iphis to Fiordispina) hope for a supernatural intervention in order to feel allowed to love a woman, Lucrezia trusts in Love as well as in her drive to win over her beloved, which is kinaesthetically portrayed as erotically pervasive ('l'abbracciarò e baciarò mille volte'). Richard Andrews (2007, p. 104) holds that she gets into her lover's bed thanks to her '"masculine" initiative'. Instead of being a modest woman as prescribed by society's norms, Lucrezia displays the virile impetuosity of a male teenager. Accordingly, she believes that her queer desire will be able to transform her into a hopeful, proactive male lover, even if only for a while. As we have seen, this transformation into 'il miglior sesso' frequently occurs in literary texts since it often prepares and introduces the reassuring heteronormative ending which can be further reinforced by the wedding of the hero or heroine to a partner belonging to the opposite biological sex. In *L'Alessandro*, instead, as we will see, Lucrezia does not magically become a man but, surprisingly, Lampridia does (as Bradamante seemingly turns into a man).

In fact, when Lucrezia finally visits Lampridia, she discovers that her partner is a man and has what she herself lacks, as Niccoletta explains in dismay (IV.5):

> Or, di lì a poco il giovinetto tornò a me e mi disse come, mentre che la dormiva, l'aveva pian pian tramenata e baciata mille volte senza destarla, e, volendole metter le mane giù a la... tu m'intendi, vi trovò una cosa la più grossa che tu vedesse mai; ond'egli, stupito, non ritrovandola femina come si pensava, senza destarla tornò a me, lamentandosi ch'io l'avevo ingannato (...). Io risposi a questo giovine che, sendo questo, si poteva andar con Dio, però che, che voleva far d'un maschio? Ma egli, più focoso e più innamorato che prima, diceva di voler andar a provar con esso sua ventura in ogni modo. Io, sdegnata che costui mi fusse riuscito una fregagnuola [: a disparaging term to define a person attracted to the same-sex], lo lasciai andar dove volse, e sto con gran travaglio di quel che n'abbia da riuscire; a me non ne può venir se non male.

Although the audience cannot directly observe the intimate scene between the two lovers, Niccoletta's account is very detailed. As Lucrezia was putting her plan into action, she stumbled upon a (big) surprise: Lampridia has what Lucrezia wanted for herself. As frequently happens when gender ambiguity is involved, the presence of an enormous or high-performing male organ dispels any doubt on gender roles and also allows the heteronormative ending to take place. Nonetheless, in the *Alessandro*, a trace of transgression still remains: in this episode, Lucrezia/Fortunio has not yet been exposed as a woman and so, in the eyes of Nicoletta, she scandalously appears to be a man who wants to test Lampridia's masculinity in person.

Despite all the fears and surprises, in the end, as expected, Lucrezia and Aloisio shed their assumed identities and decide to get married. Nonetheless, *L'Alessandro* cannot be merely labelled as a play based on the *gioco degli equivoci*, where gender norms easily triumph, helped by the fact that 'the audience already knows the real situation, and can laugh

indulgently at the character's mistake' (Andrews, 2007, p. 258, n. 60). *L'Alessandro*, instead, presents a new type of woman, embodied by Lucrezia, who is not embarrassed at recognising her homoerotic passion and is proactively involved in reaching her goals. This novel figure also seems eager to go beyond literary tradition but, at the same time, she engages with it, as I have illustrated. Accordingly, as DeCoste (2009 p. 117) stresses, '*L'Alessandro* not only represents a woman who consciously desires another woman, but it develops the thoughts and the feelings of this character to a significant degree'.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, in order to understand the complexity of Lucrezia's character, it is also important to stress how much and in what ways she seeks to conform to male expectations of manhood and sexuality. Her attitude towards virility is, in fact, ambiguous. On the one hand, sometimes she is not ashamed to be a woman in love with another and employs her body and her cross-dressing as a drag performer to challenge gender boundaries and reach her sexual goals. On the other, in other circumstances, she feels insecure because she is no longer involved in a parody of gender, but she fully embraces the values usually connected with virility and looks with sadness at the discrepancy between what her body has to offer and what she would be usually required to have as a sexually powerful male.

All in all, *L'Alessandro* offers a compelling example of an original and nuanced depiction of female homoeroticism, in which a woman (although cross-dressed) indulges in her sexual urges. Furthermore, it explores some sixteenth-century ideas on virility applied to the sexual sphere and the ways in which they can be kinaesthetically represented. Finally, it emphasises the (erotic) resourcefulness of women in love, an issue also largely dealt with in the *commedie dell'arte* Scala's *Il finto marito* and Andreini's *Amor nello specchio*, as I will now show.

4.4 One Marriage, Two Wives: Scala's *Il finto marito*

So far I have drawn attention to typical *Cinquecento* comedies significantly influenced by their Latin models but endowed with some elements of novelty, and to the same-queer female dynamics they develop. *Commedie dell'arte* are no less relevant for the purposes of this thesis since they feature some ground-breaking examples of fictional women determined to directly or indirectly employ cross-dressing to get what they want, as Scala's and Andreini's works demonstrate. Not only do their heroines challenge social and sexual norms, but they are incredibly focused on their goals, including sexual ones. On the early modern stage, this attitude to proactivity could be further emphasised by the fact that, at that time, as said, the figure of the actress was experiencing a phase of empowerment, as Poulsen has stressed (2005, p. 175):

> The rise of female performers on the popular stage in the 1560s amplified the role's transgressive potential and its erotic volatility, because the actress herself, and more specifically, the persona of the *innamorata*, or lover, was controversial and hyper-visible.

If female characters were stronger and more visible thanks to the fact that actresses embodied them in a convincing way, within this empowered frame the depiction of their homoerotic love appears to be particularly meaningful. It is therefore not too audacious to consider that both Scala and Andreini, as the influential and extremely skilled playwrights they were, employ the *donna-con-donna* motif with wit and cunning.

A friend of the Andreini family, Flaminio Scala (1522-1624) was one of the most relevant actors in the Commedia dell'arte, a company director and a playwright. He worked in Italy and in France at Medici's and Gonzaga's courts. He was also a theatrical theorist who penned *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative, ovvero la ricreazione comica, boscareccia e*

tragica (1611), in which he collected around fifty of his *canovacci* of the Commedia dell'arte (Crohn Schmitt, 2014). One of these *canovacci* inspired the renowned play *Il finto marito* (1618) (Kerr, 1996; Tessari, 2013), a real 'testamento spirituale' of Scala (Falavolti, 1982, p. 224).[122]

Whilst Giannetti (2009) and DeCoste (2009) have neglected this play in their research, interestingly, in the entry 'Lesbian and Gay Writing', in Marrone's and Puppa's *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies*, Gary P. Cestaro (2007, p. 1032) includes only *Il finto marito* among early modern plays dealing with same-sex desire, highlighting its 'layers of drag'. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, only Rosalind Kerr (1996 and 2004) has tried to provide a detailed analysis of the queer episodes featured in this comedy. Although I will extensively draw on her works, I will attempt to focus in particular on the positive value of queerness and agency when applied to the heroines of the play, the assumed groom and her bride. Accordingly, my contention is that *Il finto marito* not only provides an intriguing case of *donna-con-donna* relation, but that it expands the imagery of female-female desire too, putting a same-sex wedding (even though assumed and involving one character in male attire) on the stage. Furthermore, it also offers several fascinating insights into manhood and womanhood in the early modern period, which can be better understood through a kinaesthetic lens.

The play takes place in Rome, where the protagonist Lepido returns after being forced by his father to spend three years in France. Although he has not seen Porzia for a long time, he has continued to love her. When he finds out that she has married Licinio, he cannot therefore but despair. In truth, as he will find out only at the end of the play, Porzia's husband is her

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[122] For a concise comparison between the scenario and the text of the play, see Falavolti (1982, p. 224).

cross-dressed servant Brigida.[123] Porzia has married her to avoid her father Gervasio forcing her to become the spouse of a man she dislikes.

As tradition dictates, the cunning servant Scaramuccia is the real controller of the play. In perfectly embodying his traditional role, he aims to 'far contenti i giovani e mandare sulle forche questi vecchi arrabbiati' (IV.3), that is to say, to marry off Lepido to Porzia and Flavio to Giulia, another youthful couple. Scaramuccia, therefore, facilitates several cases of mistaken identity and cross-dressing to reach his goals, and he is the protagonist of one of them as well.

In fact, in IV.6, Porzia asks him to cross-dress and take her place in bed with Licinio (who, in truth, is Scaramuccia's wife). Although Scaramuccia initially attempts to avoid the amorous encounter, insisting on his undeniable masculinity and virility ('non ho quel che vi avanza e mi abbonda quel che vi manca'), at last, he accepts it. When he is about to enter Licinio's bedroom, he surprisingly starts thinking (V.6):

> Oh, mi pizzicano le chiappe, che segno sarà questo? (...) Che farai, Scaramuccia, anderai tu a mettere in pericolo l'onor tuo, la tua castità e il tuo pulzellaggio? Guarda quello che tu fai, perché come una donna ha perduto l'onore, non ha più che perdere. E chi vorrai tu poi che sia quell'uomo che ti pigli per moglie? Così rimarrai vedova piena d'affanni e di tribolazioni. Do', manigoldo ch'io sono, non era io entrato in pensiero d'esser una donna?[124]

Although he has disparaged the idea of cross-dressing, once transvestite Scaramuccia feels like a woman, even if only for a few seconds or minutes. His drag parody of gender has been

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[123] Marcocci (2010) and Ferguson (2016) have demonstrated that man-man weddings took place in Rome in the second half of the *Cinquecento*. It is not easy to establish if Scala might have been inspired by them for his *commedia dell'arte*.
[124] In this chapter I quote from Falavolti's edition (1982).

so convincing that he himself believes he is a woman. In this respect, it is worth stressing that he deliberately establishes a link between his female attire, the threat of being penetrated by a man (as anticipated by the rude joke, 'Oh, mi pizzicano le chiappe') and feminisation. The fear of becoming a sexual victim is so intense that it provokes a physical reaction – itching in the place where the non-consensual same-sex penetration can be consummated and encouraging homophobic laughter in the audience.

I suggest, therefore, that Paul B. Preciado's thinking may offer a stimulating reading of this passage. In his short essay *Terror Anal* ('Anal Terror'), the philosopher discusses the control over bodies and, in particular, over the anus that has been exercised in heterosexual society down the centuries. As Preciado (2009, pp. 136-137) explains, those phenomena have led to a demonisation of that bodily part (especially in men), since 'In a heterosexual man, the anus, conceived uniquely as an excreting orifice, is not an organ. It is the scar that castration has left in the body. A closed anus is the price that the body pays to the heterosexual regime in exchange for the privilege of its masculinity' (my translation).[125] In addition to feeling concerned about the possibility of having anal sex against his will, Scaramuccia experiences the socio-cultural fear that Preciado names 'anal terror' and, simultaneously, starts identifying with a woman, thus absorbing a series of notions connected with the idea of female social respectability. The text seems to suggest that as far as Scaramuccia's anus is threatened, his masculinity is under attack too.

The servant, therefore, acts like a virgin eager to preserve her chastity. It seems as if feminine modesty is here transposed onto heterosexual aversion to non-consensual anal sex.

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[125] 'En el hombre heterosexual, el ano, entendido únicamente como orificio excretor, no es un órgano. Es la cicatriz que deja en el cuerpo la castración. El ano cerrado es el precio que el cuerpo paga al régimen heterosexual por el privilegio de su masculinidad' (Preciado, 2009, pp. 136-137).

Consequently, he is worried about his sense of honour and chastity, which at that time were necessary requirements for finding a good husband. Nonetheless, as soon as Scaramuccia realises that he has taken his role of woman too seriously, he appears to fully recover his male identity and reproaches himself for his foolish thoughts.

Unlike the servant, although Brigida passes for a man for the whole length of the play, nothing in *Il finto marito* suggests that she is frightened of undergoing a process of masculinisation. Before passing for Porzia's husband, Brigida pretends to be dead in order to be able to leave her house. Like Scaramuccia, Brigida has to learn new ways of behaving, talking, living, and thus conform to social expectations of men, as she confesses at the end of the comedy ('cercando ringiovenir l'effigie e apparire uomo il più che fusse possible, stetti quivi qualche tempo e feci tanto che quasi mi trasformai in modo da non essere più riconosciuta per donna, e però come uomo me ne tornai a Roma': V.10). Nonetheless, her attitude is completely different to Scaramuccia's. Like Nena in *La Veniexiana*, she acts like a drag performer, but she seems more at ease in her role. She makes fun of gender and social conventions, and also seeks to enjoy her new role as a husband since men have more freedom, women have less.

After convincing Gervasio to finally marry Porzia to Lepido, Brigida can at last shed her assumed identity and tell the whole story. As Brigida recounts, she spent the wedding night with Porzia cheerfully. Although Brigida could not deflower her, the two women had a very pleasant time together (V.10):

> Dicolo perché, in vece di esser martire quella notte, rimase vergine e donzella; ma il contento di veder riuscito a bene il nostro disegno fu ancora tanto grande che ce la passammo allegramente in ogni modo e le carezze che ella mi fece ella stessa, che è qui presente, ve le dica per me.

In line with a normative understandings of sexuality focus on heterosexual penetrative sex, Brigida stresses that a woman remains a virgin until she gets deflowered by a man, no matter what sexual activities she is involved in. Male penetration makes the difference between a 'donzella' and a 'martire', a metaphorical 'victim' of male sexual agency. Nonetheless, Brigida is aware that two women can experience sex together and do not need a male organ to please each other. The loving actions ('le carezze') and, consequently, the kinaesthetic dimension that they evoke are more powerful than words and, perhaps, are less prone to censorship or self-censorship. Brigida's allusions may give an intriguing taste of the newly-weds' intimacy since the story of a satisfying same-sex marriage would have been perhaps too audacious for an early modern audience.

Not only do Brigida and Porzia perhaps enjoy sex together, but they seemingly never question whether their relationship is immoral, or their wedding is a complete fraud. Their union appears to be based on an unspoken agreement: they will keep pretending to be a couple until Porzia can entirely reconquer her Lepido. Furthermore, as far as the two of them are satisfied (presumably, as the text suggests, sexually as well), it is fine for them to stay together. Unlike other female characters we have met in this chapter (such as Lucrezia in Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro*), neither the single characters nor the pair ever show fear, shame or regret at what they do or at allegedly discrediting the institution of marriage. Moreover, in contrast to what happens in *La Veniexiana*, the relationship between the mistress and her servant appears to be between peers and, therefore, balanced. One does not seem to rule over the other.

Nonetheless, the good days do not last long. A sort of call of nature interferes in the couple's tender relationship, since 'la natura dell'una e dell'altra di noi pativa all'ingrosso' (V. *scena ultima*), as Brigida clarifies. They want to stop torturing their nature and come back

to their lovers. Nevertheless, as Rosalind Kerr suggests (2004, p. 112), before separating the two probably spend another night together ('LICINIO: 'Entriamo, entriamo in casa, per dar fine al tutto' PORZIA: 'Entriamo come vi piace, ché un'ora mi par mille d'abbracciar Lepido mio' III.7). Hugging and jointly entering a house are kinaesthetic signals that sex is going to be consummated (Kerr, 2004, p. 112). This theatrical choice also allows the audience to fantasise about what may happen inside the house.

Although the couple is about to split up, their acts still eloquently reveal passion and complicity. I therefore largely agree with Kerr (2004, p. 112) when she stresses the incredibly subversive core of Porzia's and Brigida's relationship:

> Even if we interpret 'la natura patisce' as a reference to Porzia's desire to have sex with her banished male lover Lepido and, hence, to return to heterosexual normalcy, we still have to recognize that the entire plot hinges on carrying out an act of supreme deception: living in a same-sex/transclass marriage in order to bring about a successful comedic overthrow of dominant patriarchal forces.

Although in early modern Italian 'natura' could indicate female genitalia (and, hence, the phrase may allude to an inner, sexual sufferance), in saying 'la natura patisce', Brigida may not be primarily or exclusively alluding to the physical and erotic dimension of the relationship with Porzia. Seconds before using the expression, she in fact praises the reciprocal pleasure the two had together. I therefore argue that, rather than complaining about the inadequacy of the woman-woman bond from a sexual point of view, Brigida intends to describe her and Porzia's real, deep feelings. Despite the fact that they have been posing as a married couple, each of them loves a man and they miss their original partners.

Moreover, I would suggest that Scala's agenda does not programmatically include criticising patriarchal values as well as power relations in the play – I would rather see that as

a possible side effect of the issues he presents. I instead hold that he firstly wants to amuse his audience and exhibit his *bravura* in exploiting the narrative thread sprung from an unusual literary device, that is the wedding between two women and its consequences. A similar union cannot but raise some questions about the traditional order of things, but, again, the main goal of the Commedia dell'arte is to showcase an uncommon and ironic portrait of society and its members, playing with their sensitivities and contradictions, rather than lecturing its audience.

It is also worth remembering that, in *Il finto marito*, Brigida and Scaramuccia are not the only ones playing with queerness and drag performance. The comedy continuously challenges social norms on gender and sexuality as several characters cross-dress and pretend to be someone else. In this respect Kerr (2004, p. 111) correctly stresses that

> The seemingly endless proliferation of false husbands of varying sexes and statuses spins dangerously out of control as disempowered sons, women, and servants show us ways to overthrow the social order by violating class, gender, professional, and other taboos that protect upper-bourgeois power and privilege.

Given this framework, it is interesting to emphasise that, in this as in the other plays scrutinised so far, not only do women such as Brigida and Porzia show a strong sense of initiative and proactively engage in pursuing their desires, but they can also be commended for that reason. For instance, servant Brigida is the real heroine of the play and even Gervasio, Porzia's father, cannot but recognise her prowess and praise her, suggesting that her story deserves to be presented by a skilled playwright ('Brigida mia, tu meriti che qualche cronachista scriva di te, e che qualche buon comico faccia una graziosa commedia di sì bello avvenimento!': V.10).

As the cunning playwright he is, Flaminio Scala probably aims to emphasise the heroines' agency and gender confusion by also exploiting some features related to the new figures of Commedia dell'arte actresses. In fact, as Rosalind Kerr (1996, p. 110) stresses in her research devoted to the role of transvestitism in three Commedia dell'arte scenarios (including *Il finto marito*'s),

> The newly empowered actress was in a position of considerable freedom to experiment with her own gender definition and to cross back and forth over the narrow confines which specified masculine and feminine characteristics.

On the early modern stage Brigida's cross-dressing, combined with female roles played by actresses, probably emphasised the strong agency of the two spouses as well her gender swings.

As we have seen, in fact, in his play Scala frequently explores gender and body boundaries. In so doing he raises some interesting questions on queer male and female sexuality, sometimes communicating them through kinaesthetic means. In this way he could both emphasise the action on stage and allude to subjects which might have been considered worthy of censure at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In comparison with other types of literary texts depicting homoerotic female desire, it is plausible to suppose that, thanks to these impressive narrative and performative peculiarities, *Il finto marito* was likely to have a certain impact on early modern audiences as well as on their *donna-con-donna* imagery.

4.5 Narcissism, Autoeroticism and Same-Sex Desire in Andreini's *Amor nello specchio*

Despite the unbridled intensity of Scala's play, there was someone who, at the same period, ventured beyond him: his colleague Gian Battista Andreini, who offers his audience in *Amor nello specchio* a highly entertaining blend of voyeurism, narcissism and homoeroticism.

As we have seen, in comic plays homoeroticism is often interlaced with the motif of sameness, as demonstrated by the abundance of twin characters or cases of mistaken identity. In *Amor nello specchio* (1622), the Commedia dell'arte masterpiece mentioned at the opening of this chapter, Gian Battista Andreini (1576-1654) offers his audience a real triumph of voyeurism and sameness, as the very title of the play seems to suggest. Andreini was one of the most talented dramatists of his generation. The child of *diva* Isabella Canali (whom we will meet again in the next chapter)[126] and playwright Francesco Andreini, who were managers of one of the most influential European dramatic companies, the Gelosi, Andreini worked in Italy and France as an actor, playwright and *capocomico*. He also founded the Fedeli company, a sort of sequel to the Gelosi. During his time in France, he wrote *Amor nello specchio* (1622), a play set in seventeenth-century Florence, marked by a 'straordinaria audacia tematica incentrata sul narcisismo della protagonista e sulla sua risoluzione in amore lesbico' (Maira and Borracci, 1997, p. 39).

'A milestone for the European stage (…) destined to languish in oblivion for centuries' (Snyder, 2009, p. 1) like the *Veneixiana, Amor nello specchio* is still one of Andreini's most studied works because of its richness and uniqueness.[127] Filled with obscene jokes,

[126] On the relationship between Isabella and Gian Battista Andreini, see at a minimum Munari (2017).
[127] The piece has inspired Salvatore Maira's film *Amor nello specchio* (1999) as well.

homoeroticism and sensuality, and endowed with stinging language as well as an exuberant *entanglement of plots,* the play ironically displays the strength of sexual conflicts and gender ambivalence in a variety of ways. Scholars have offered several readings of this play. For Salvi (2015), for instance, it alludes to the problematic relationship between the dramatist, his audience and patronage, whilst Maira (1997) has emphasised its libertine nature. Snyder (2009, p. 1) has mainly focused on the gender issues it raises such as the empowered role of women and their challenge to normative gender roles, while Ferrone (1993) and Vescovo (2004b) have stressed how it puts on the stage male fantasies of female sexuality.

Inspired by this thought-provoking scholarship, my contention is that Andreini uses the mirror as a device to explore female narcissism, autoeroticism and same-sex desire. He also plays to a great extent upon his audience's kinaesthetic intelligence. At the same time, he takes into account the potential of his heroines, Florinda and Lidia. Accordingly, he depicts them as two independent, defiant women who are not ashamed of being reciprocally in love. *Amor nello specchio*, therefore, can be read as 'the triumph of women over the early modern patriarchal system that defined and regulated sexuality and gender roles' (Snyder, 2009, p. 1). The triumph may have also been facilitated by some practical and favourable circumstances experienced by the two heroines such as the absence of male relatives watching them or their financial independence, as Snyder (p. 1) has cleverly stressed.

As stated, the play is imbued with a strong sense of sensuality. No surprise, then, that Andreini dedicated his play to François de Bassompierre (1579-1646), a French courtier and renowned libertine. In his dedication, as do several other playwrights, the author presented the genre of the *commedia* as a 'speculum vitae humanae' (mirror of human life). Furthermore, in that text, he explores the motif of the mirror extensively, ranging from myths connected to the mirror (such as those of Narcissus or Talia, the Muse of Grace) to seventeenth-century

theatrical devices which used mirrors to project images. Andreini also mentions numerous metaphorical values related to the mirror and, thus, he defines Bassompierre as a 'specchio lucidissimo di fama trasparente' (Andreini, 1997, p. 56).[128] The image of the mirror, in fact, rules over the entire play and, accordingly, Andreini employs various means (including performative ones) to emphasise its relevance on the stage from the play's very beginning.

Amor nello specchio opens with Guerindo and Lelio, both dispirited, both in love with Florinda, who is proudly 'nemica degli uomini' (I.2) and self-centred. She is so profoundly in love with herself that she overtly and erotically praises herself in front of a mirror, as we saw at the opening of this chapter. While doing this, she exclaims, pretending to talk to the god of love in the guise of a child:

> Che ami la terra il cielo, l'amante ami l'amata, e 'l tutto senta amore, io ben l'accerto; ma ch'io medesma, ma medesma amando sospiri, desiando languisca, idolatrando adori, ben questi gli ultimi sforzi della tua forza sono.

Florinda then compares herself to Narcissus. Whilst the mythological character was merely absorbed in himself, Florinda's narcissism is so intense and pervasive that she completely removes others from her reality and sexual life. As a result, during Florinda's monologue, an unspecified voice comments (I.3):

> S'ama dunque Florinda, e sì di core
> ch'entro uno specchio inamorata more;
> ch'entro bel vetro ha tutto posto il core.

[128] All citations are from Andreini (1997) edited by Maira and Borracci.

Maira and Borracci (1997, p. 31) read these lines within a philosophical framework, holding that 'Andreini non usa il narcisismo come atto estremo dell'omosessualità, ma quest'ultima è solo una nostalgia di un sentimento più alto, di una unità che non può non coinvolgere anche l'aspetto naturale. Unione di anima e corpo'.

I would, instead, suggest a more corporeal reading. The scene, in fact, seems to suggest that Florinda is masturbating herself while looking at her own figure, as Maira and Borracci have stressed (1997, p. 13). It is therefore worth noting that the pronoun and the verb alluding to masturbation ('s'ama') are cleverly located at the opening of the line, whilst the verb that refers to the complete victory of love over Florinda, and maybe to an orgasm she is experiencing, ('more') is in a remarkable position at the end of the second line.[129] The insistence on sensuality is accentuated by Andreini's linguistic and stylistic choices.

The original, complete text of *Amor nello specchio* that includes the stage directions is, unfortunately, unavailable, but the lines cited above allow the audience to imagine the homoerotic performance that is taking place on the stage. Those lines also emphasise the perfect coincidence between Florinda's autoeroticism and her narcissism: the audience looks with desire at Florinda who, totally enchanted by herself, finds pleasure in gazing at herself erotically. The mirror thus provokes voyeuristic 'instances (…) of triangulated eroticism', as Douglas Buster (1993, p. 2) defines the phenomenon in his examination of female-female eroticism on the early modern English stage, since in same-sex scenes 'the "eroticism" in female-female eroticism is produced by characters but is not necessarily for them'. Buster also suggests that this does not differ too much from pornography in our contemporary sense

[129] The whole scene reads: 'Che ami la terra il cielo, l'amante ami l'amata, e 'l tutto senta amore, io ben l'accerto; ma ch'io medesma, me medesma amando sospiri, desiando languisca, idolatrando adori, ben questi gli ultimi sforzi della tua forza sono. *S'ama dunque Florinda, e sì di core/ ch'entro uno specchio inamorata more;/ ch'entro bel vetro ha tutto posto il core*' (I.3).

of the word. All aspects of the scene described above seem, therefore, to solicitate a response from the audience fostered by kinaesthetic intelligence and mediated by a mirror.

The same mirror soon offers Andreini a further intriguing opportunity to create a game of reflections and triangulated desires. One day Florinda looks in her mirror and, thanks to some reflections, sees 'un vago giovanetto', who in reality is cross-dressed Lidia (II.6). Interestingly, Salvi (2015, p. 717) recalls that in France, where Andreini frequently worked and where *Amor nello specchio* was both staged and edited, cross-dressing was widespread, although it was considered affiliated with sodomy and, thus, illegal.

When Florinda and Lidia finally meet, Florinda is overwhelmed by love and cannot but faint in Lidia's arms. Conversely, Lidia immediately falls in love and forgets her beloved Silvio (III.1):

> Oh come al tuo cadermi nelle braccia, parmi che dal trono sia caduto Amore! Amato peso io t'amo, e s'entro il vivo d'uno specchio rimirandomi ti movesti pietosa ad amarmi, e io nello specchio di questo essangue volto gli occhi fisando tutto ti dono il cuore, né più di Silvio ho pensiero che pensi.

In early modern literary texts, as I have demonstrated so far, cross-dressing or cases of mistaken identity play an important role in provoking same-sex attraction or love. In the passage cited above, however, not only is Lidia enamoured of Florinda, but she loves her in full awareness of the fact that she is a woman. Her declaration of love for a woman is therefore unusual and powerful.

The impact is emphasised, too, by its kinaesthetic value. Expressions such as 'cadermi nelle braccia' and 'peso' give the audience the impression of a tangible love: Lidia is attracted to a real, feminine body. Furthermore, 'specchio', 'd'uno specchio rimirandomi' and 'nello specchio (...) gli occhi fisando' relate specifically to the visual dimension as well as to two *fils*

rouges running through the entire play: the role of the mirror in facilitating the inception of love and the idea of love as self-love. For Lidia, the eyes of Florinda have turned into a beautiful mirror: this wonderful view urges Lidia to love Florinda and disdain Silvio's attentions. I suggest, therefore, that Lidia's change of attitude may prompt the audience to ask itself questions such as: has Lidia fallen in love with her own reflection in Florinda's eyes? Has she developed a narcissistic self-love which excludes anyone different from the object of her love, as her beloved did in Act One Scene Three? Cleverly, Andreini fails to provide a definitive answer.

The corporal dimension of the relationship between the two has further confirmation. The account of the encounter of their bodies is, in fact, passionate (LIDIA: 'S'altro ch'un bacio non brama, sola medicina al suo male, uniamo petto a petto e bocca a bocca': III.1). Nevertheless, Florinda and Lidia do not settle for a few kisses and caresses. They contrive to spend a night together. Their (alleged) sexual encounter is not represented on the stage but is sarcastically described by the servant Bernetta, similarly to what Niccoletta does in *L'Alessandro*. Bernetta usually conveys a crude, brutal vision of sexuality and makes no exception for Florinda's erotic adventure. Thus, it comes as no surprise that in Act Four Scene Three Bernetta depicts Lidia's and Florinda's sex by highlighting its pointless nature. Her account reproduces several misogynistic stereotypes on *donna-con-donna* relationship that we have already met:

> Poverina [: Florinda], credo pur che queste due giovinette abbiano fatta insieme questa notte male, poiché si dice che la donna è come la pietra focaia, che la natura ha posto in lei tanto fuoco, che non potendo aspettar l'acciaiuolo che loro percuota, se si batteno insieme d'ogni intorno sfavillano; così averan fatte queste poverine; ma che questo fuoco sarà stato gittato al vento, poiché non ci sarà stato l'esca, il zolfanello e 'l candelotto da impiccicare.

Whilst Boiardo compares sex between women to the useless scraping of two graters, Andreini opts for an overtly erotic metaphor which is incredibly effective on both verbal and kinaesthetic levels. Florinda's and Lidia's bodies are depicted as two flints which can provoke sparks by scraping one against the other but are not able to ignite a real fire. Bernetta's words are informed by the idea that Florinda and Lidia are 'malissimo (...) accompagnate' since they lack what they are supposed to arouse, thus evoking the idea that female sexuality should be subordinate to that of males. In reality, the two have spent the night criticising men in accordance with their promises. However, the lack of sex and Bernetta's criticism do not prevent Lidia from proudly declaring her love (IV.6):

> s'io non amo lei, non amo altrui; parlo d'uomini, poiché amo così di cuore la signora Florinda che amarla più non so, né posso.

Lidia is not ashamed to confess her love for another woman in crystal-clear terms. Thus, in contrast to other heroines we have met so far (such as Iphis and Fiordispina), she does not complain about her interest in other women, her cruel destiny or something lacking in someone's body. Neither does Lidia feel the need to justify her feelings in some measure, and she never claims to be the first woman in love with another woman or, on the contrary, to be just one of many (as does Lucrezia in Piccolomini's *Alessandro)* in order to downplay her exceptional status.

Tellingly, it is also worth stressing that both Florinda and Lidia are not afraid to present their sexual preferences, even though they are not socially well accepted, such as narcissistic masturbation and homoerotic sex. Lidia reiterates her ideas and feelings even in the last act when the heteronormative order is supposed to be fully restored. Her statement looks like a proper *avant-la-lettre* coming out (V.6):

> Non ha molto ch'io, della signora Florinda invaghita, disprezzo l'amor di tutti gli uomini per provar quello d'una donna sola; la quale quanto amava sé stessa entro uno specchio, tanto s'è posta ad amar me, entro lo specchio del mio volto mirando tutto quel bello che già la faceva in se stessa contenta; e perciò abbiamo giurato ambe due di voler conservar il fior virginale col non saper d'uomini, con amarci ad ognor di vivo cuore.

Despite this declaration, Lidia's and Florinda's love story is troubled by the arrival of Lidia's assumed alter ego, that is her brother Eugenio (in fact, the character is performed by the same actress embodying Lidia). Due to the resemblance between the two, Eugenio is believed to be a hermaphrodite by the other characters. When he suspects that the 'uomo di Palazzo' Orimberto is trying to woo him, he attempts in vain to discourage that 'bestia gomorristica' with words ('non son Lidia, ma Eugenio, non donna, ma uomo': IV.5). Finally, he decides to take action. Through the eyes of a disappointed Orimberto who describes the scene, the audience sees Eugenio walking away from him to visit the place where a man can fully demonstrate his virility, the brothel (IV.5). Unequivocally, Eugenio's gesture alludes metaphorically and kinaesthetically to the virile road a real man is supposed to walk along.

Nevertheless, despite his display of manhood, Eugenio remains a particularly ambiguous character. Although Florinda and Lidia are bound to be married to Eugenio and Silvio respectively, the conclusion of Andreini's play is quite original, as Snyder (2009, pp. 28-29) correctly remarks. Whilst the ending of comic plays usually features the restoration of a patriarchal, heterosexual and binary order through the marriage of its main characters, in *Amor nello specchio* a certain ambiguous atmosphere still permeates the work. In particular, a series of elements related to Eugenio's body reveal queerness which cannot be easily contained and normalised. For instance, when Florinda naively believes that Eugenio is her beloved Lidia and sleeps with him, he confesses to be 'ermafrodito, cioè sono più uomo che

donna' (V.7). In order to confirm his words, he (seemingly) demonstrates in bed with Florinda 'con l'opera che tutt'uomo egli era'. Nonetheless, as Salvi (2015, p. 721) notes, when Bernetta alludes to the encounter between Eugenio and Florinda, she states (V.8) 'la mia padrona è rimasta colta da quell'ermafrodito che sta in parte nascost*a*' (my italics), tellingly referring to the man as a woman. Furthermore, after having sex with the virgin Florinda, Eugenio does not return to the stage because his nose is bleeding. Snyder (2009, p. 28) reads this as a metaphorical allusion to Eugenio's deflowering or, even, his emasculation. In a certain sense, his feminized body allows him to operate as a sort of substitute for Lidia in Florinda's eyes. Since Florinda cannot marry Lidia neither pretend to do what happens in Scala's *Il finto marito*. Florinda becomes the wife of the person most similar to Lidia, her brother (Snyder, 2009, p. 1).

As a consequence, as anticipated, the ending of the play therefore 'remains sexually and delightfully ambiguous despite the spectre of resolution into compulsory heterosexuality' (Wilbourne, 2009, pp. 54). In fact, the partially reassuring conclusion displaying (alleged) man-woman relationship couples cannot neutralize the huge amount of transgression that emerges throughout the play. As Marcella Salvi emphasises (2015), Andreini has amused himself in challenging expectations about theatrical conventions, as well as about gender, female transvestism and social hierarchies. In the light of the above, I submit that, in *Amor nello specchio*, not only is a same-sex pair visible, but it is also openly proud of its feelings and benefits from the playwright's protection.

Lidia and Florinda are two exceptional, vital characters, involved in an intense, consensual love story. Like several other women we have met in the previous pages, they are not afraid of showing their feelings, pursuing their goals and claiming their freedom. At the same time, Andreini employs the fascinating personality of the two heroines, Florinda's self-

love and the reciprocal attraction of the two to stimulate his audience sensually. As I have demonstrated, the device of the mirror as well as a specific attention to kinaesthetics aim to reinforce the voyeuristic and erotic innuendos of the play in which Andreini plays with the very notion of the gaze. This exceptional blend, enriched by salacious language, makes *Amor nello specchio* an incredibly provocative piece of theatre, a triumph of narcissistic sameness and viewing pleasure.

It is not by chance, as I have shown, that narcissistic and homoerotic love are interlaced with the pervasive motif of the mirror, which dominates the comedy from its dedication to the end. For instance, comedy is deemed as a mirror of human life, whilst the mirror itself can be seen as a means to get in touch with one's inner self. The mirror is also the instrument through which Florinda falls in love with herself and the two women lovers respectively see in the other a reflection of themselves. In *Amor nello specchio*, the mirror is a device that enables, or mediates, the voyeurism of the public, starting with the masturbation scene.

As if all this were not enough, we know that, in the original performance of the work, Andreini's wife, Virginia Ramponi, played Florinda, whilst his lover, Virginia Rotari, played both Lidia and Eugenio. The two women were rivals in life but worked in the same company: they shared the same first name, man and stage. Nonetheless, in *Amor nello specchio*, they were called upon to be passionate lovers (Vescovo, 2004b). Andreini could not be unaware of the queer, erotic and voyeuristic implications of this choice, as well as of the mechanisms of *mise en abyme* he thus provoked.

A masterpiece of drama as well as of ambiguity, Andreini's play finally leaves us with a question: if *Amor nello specchio* is a reflection of reality, can this mean that woman-woman relationships can occur in the real world as well?

5. Conclusions

Apart from exploring an array of depictions of the *topos* of woman-woman attraction, this chapter has demonstrated that the five plays analysed in it reveal a sense of social anxiety linked to gender confusion, as well as curiosity about the exploration of queer issues. The texts, in fact, encode multiple tensions such as emasculated masculinity versus a strong and proactive femininity; hermaphroditism versus binarism; and homoeroticism versus socially imposed heterosexuality. The chapter has demonstrated that *La Calandria* primarily plays on cross-dressing and social anxiety concerning homoerotic relationships, while *Alessandro* seems openly to recognise their liceity. *Il finto marito* pushes things further forward in its depiction of a same-sex marriage (even though involving an assumed groom) and daily life as a married couple; finally, *La Veniexiana* and *Amor nello specchio* display a more joyful as well as sexually explicit attitude towards such relationships.

In so doing, my analysis shows that writers could enter into a partnership with their predecessors, especially Ovid and Ariosto. Iphis and Fiordispina have been two fundamental models for playwrights, who drew from them some features (such as the notion of impossibility, or the fear of family reactions likely to be provoked by coming out), often adding a comic twist or accentuating their original irony.

Furthermore, in all the works examined, playwrights interrogate themselves and their public on the status of bodies in early modern Italy. Writers frequently employ characters' bodies as a means of establishing contact with their public and stimulating it as well on visual and physical levels. In so doing, by combining narrative and performative devices, authors addressed more or less overtly the audience voyeurism and kinaesthetic intelligence which may hinge on *donna-con-donna* desire. Nevertheless, although at times some heroines can be objects to gaze at and desire, they are often depicted as sharp, energetic subjects who attempt

to make their wishes come true, autonomously develop their sexuality and cultivate their relations with women in very intimate ways.

Finally, this chapter has put all the issues it raises in dialogue with the early modern Italian context and with the changes which took place in the world of comedies between the end of the sixteenth and the opening of the seventeenth centuries.

This chapter has thus investigated what lies beyond the *topos* of impossible love, conversely delving into its complexity and the impact it could have on the audience's corporeality, as well as the social boundaries it calls into question.

CHAPTER FOUR.

'VANI AMORI' AMONG THE NYMPHS: VOYEURISM, NARCISSISM AND WOMEN'S DEMANDS IN PASTORAL DRAMA

5. Introduction

One of the most beautiful residences of the mighty Gonzaga family, Palazzo Te in Mantua, is primarily known for its rich and fascinating display of erotic paintings from the Renaissance. They are the work of Giulio Romano, the painter already highlighted in Chapter Two for his scandalous visual reading of Aretino's *Modi*. In the palace which often used to host Duke Federico II Gonzaga during the Po Valley's hot summers, the painter represented sensual scenes by employing mythological figures such as those of Love and Psyche.

Apart from demonstrating exquisite and erudite taste, this recourse to classical Greek and Latin figures was helpful to ward off charges of immorality. Early modern artists as well as writers were aware that setting their scenes within a mythological scenario allowed them to present ambiguous or morally problematic characters and episodes. It therefore comes as no surprise that this 'mythological masquerade' could also involve depictions of *donna-con-donna* love. This chapter investigates how, at the end of the sixteenth century, pastoral authors explored the women-woman motif in relation to notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as gender expectations. Within this framework the figure of the nymph is crucial: writers can depict her as a simple victim of sexual male prowess, as Giovan Battista Guarini demonstrates, or instead make her more independent and able to feel complex feelings for another woman, as Maddalena Campiglia and Isabella Andreini prove.

Whilst, as we have seen, epic texts and plays featuring homoerotic female desire have received some critical attention, on the whole pastoral texts have not been subjected to such intense scrutiny. I would suggest, however, that pastoral works do indeed deserve to be analysed with care, and in particular by comparing one with another, because they can offer a privileged place for the study of woman-woman love. Not only were they popular in the early modern era and, consequently, able to have an impact on their readers' imaginations. The pastoral genre also conjures up an idyllic world fundamentally dominated by rules established by Love and Nature (rather than by humans) where homoeroticism could in consequence be more tolerated. Accordingly, several classical pastoral texts and mythological tales encompass narratives of same-sex love (involving both men and women), such as those of Narcissus or Callisto. This rich tradition undoubtedly had the potential to help early modern readers familiarise themselves with queer episodes and their transgressive potential.

In this chapter I will analyse several excerpts from four representative texts belonging to various pastoral genres which are drawn from the enormous output in this field of the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, I will examine one of the most famous and influential works of the time, Giovan Battista Guarini's *Pastor fido* (1589), in which a *gara dei baci* between nymphs becomes a pretext for displaying all the virile vigour of the protagonist Mirtillo and titillating the male gaze. I will then examine some of the first pastoral works to be penned by women, Isabella Andreini's pastoral drama *Mirtilla* (1588) along with Maddalena Campiglia's pastoral drama *Flori* (1588) and her eclogue *Calisa* (1589). In contrast to the *Pastor fido,* these texts show more sympathetic depictions of the *donna-con-donna* trope as well as of the nymphs who experience queer desire.

Much of the existing scholarship on these works is strongly informed by a philological approach. In the following pages, however, I will opt for more audacious (but not

anachronistic) interpretations of the texts which draw upon research into the status of women, and especially women writers, in early modern Italy, as well as upon queer and feminist studies.

6. The Pastoral Scene

In an attempt to define the richness of early modern pastoral works, in his treatise *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche* (1598), Angelo Ingegneri (1989, p. 25) characterises it as made up of 'ben mille pastorali che si leggono, così scritte a mano, come alla stampa'. Pastoral genres were much appreciated from the end of the fifteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth, but their roots can be traced back to Ancient Greek and Latin literature (Pieri, 1980; 1983; 1989; 1994; Riccò, 2004). As the name suggests, they are mainly based on the stories and adventures of humble humans and semi-human creatures such as shepherds, nymphs and fauns living in an idealised countryside where time does not exist. Nonetheless, pastoral language is gentle, conventional and filled with erudite references. Pastoral works often feature episodes imbued with sensuality, portraying fauns chasing nymphs and shepherds in love with other men. In this respect, the most famous example is Virgil's *Eclogues,* 2 (47-32 B.C.E.) in which the shepherd, Corydon, falls hopelessly in love with young Alexis.

Classicism's enormous impact led Renaissance writers to give birth to the *favola pastorale*, also known as *pastorale*, *favola boschereccia* or *silvestre*, a theatrical genre set in a pastoral environment and timeless dimension. It usually consists of five acts, involves bucolic

characters and can be both read and performed.[130] The *pastorale* displays recurring features such as shepherds' love laments; nostalgic longing for a lost, innocent world dating back to a Golden Age; and humankind's privileged relationship with nature. Even though the pastoral drama evokes a quasi-primitive world, it was not a literary genre for the masses. It was, in fact, created in Renaissance courts and often favoured by learned authors.

A sense of a pervasive sensuality imbues this idyllic universe, coexisting with erudite references to mythological and literary sources ranging from Homer to Petrarch. Due to the fact that it was not originally included in Aristotle's *Poetics*, there were debates in particular on the very legitimacy of pastoral drama. Nonetheless, it continued to be produced for about a century, roughly from Poliziano's *Orfeo* (1480) to Tasso's *Aminta* (1573), which, together with Guarini's *Pastor fido* (1583), was considered the most influential pastoral model of its time.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars have offered various explanations for the success of pastoral drama. For instance, Nicola Francesco Cimminino sees in the inspiration of the *favola pastorale* traces of a 'crisi ormai in atto nella società del tempo e il fallimento della vita cittadina come espressione di quella stessa società' (1980, p. 11), whilst Federico Schneider emphasises (2010, pp. 1-2) that the idea of Renaissance pastoral drama as a mere form of *divertissement* is outdated. In addition to referencing Giovanni Da Pozzo's idea (1983) of pastoral drama that 'solves potential social conflicts, restoring and celebrating the political legitimacy of the prince, and providing a valuable way to exert influence on more powerful states' (Schneider, 2010, p. 2), Schneider notes that, at the peak of its success with

[130] The *favola pastorale* must be distinguished from the later *dramma pastorale*, popular in the eighteenth century and often set to music.

Tasso's *Aminta* and Guarini's *Pastor fido*, pastoral drama also had clear moral or edifying purposes since it aimed, in particular, to present itself as a 'therapy against love-sickness' (*remedia amoris*). In other words, Renaissance readers and writers were able to discern echoes of their own (early modern) thoughts, feelings and experiences among woods, shepherds, nymphs and fauns.

Within this enchanted framework the love object *par excellence* is the nymph. She is usually a charming maiden who lives in an intimate, all-female environment, devoid of any sense of bodily embarrassment. In the wake of scholars such as Philippa Berry (1989, pp. 123-124), Patricia Simons (1994, pp. 94-109) and Valerie Traub (2002, pp. 229-275), the Italianists Virginia Cox and Lisa Sampson (2004, p. 23) have gone on to stress that 'overtones of erotic self-sufficiency, as well as female empowerment, are inherent in the traditional representations of the cult of Diana and her nymphs'. Nonetheless, some scholars still see the nymph as a passive, quasi-decorative figure which relies on a deep-rooted literary tradition. Notably, as Giorgio Agamben puts it (2007, p. 46), Boccaccio established the nymph as a 'figura per eccellenza dell'oggetto d'amore'.[131] She also became thus a 'quasi-reificazione letteraria dell'*intentio* della psicologia medievale' (p. 48).

As love objects, nymphs depend on the male gaze and can thus exist merely thanks to encounters with a man, as Agamben (pp. 44-45) suggests:

> Condannate a un'incessante, amorosa ricerca dell'uomo, le ninfe conducono sulla terra un'esistenza parallela. Create non a immagine di Dio, ma dell'uomo, esse ne costituiscono una sorta di ombra o di *imago* e, come tali, perpetuamente accompagnano e desiderano – e ne sono, a loro volta, desiderate –

[131] In point of fact, Boccaccio cited nymphs in his works several times, for instance in the *Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine* (1344-1346) and the *Corbaccio* (1365).

> ciò di cui sono immagine. E solo nell'incontro con l'uomo queste immagini inanimate acquistano un'anima, diventano veramente vive.

Whilst the nymph Amarilli depicted by Guarini fits this profile well enough, Campiglia's and Andreini's heroines provide a hugely different picture of these creatures, offering strong, assertive figures focused on the appreciation of female spiritual or physical beauty rather than being concerned with the male gaze. I therefore suggest that both Campiglia and Andreini employ the motif of same-sex attraction to convey portraits of powerful, independent women. In this way they evoke the so-called proto-feminism mentioned in previous chapters.

This chapter, too, aims to cross-reference multiple pastoral works featuring various forms of queer love, desire and affection. If some scholars have emphasised the presence of homoerotic male relationships in Latin, Greek and early modern European classical pastoral texts,[132] only a few have widened their perspective to investigate its female counterpart, especially in relation to early modern literature in which pastoral genres were *à la page*. Traub is probably the best example: in her *Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (2002), she has carefully scrutinised a number of pastoral works and the ways in which writers employed them to portray female-female love. There is no comparably sustained and systematic scholarly treatment of female homoerotic pastoral imagery as far as early modern Italian literature is concerned, although Walder-Biesanz (2016, p. 59) has highlighted the importance of the recurrence of the same-sex motif in both Andreini's and Campiglia's texts given 'how rare depictions of *donna con donna* were in any aspect of Italian Renaissance society'.

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[132] To cite just two: Silvia Ottaviano (2010) has studied Virgil's eclogue 3.79, whilst Stephen Guy-Bray (2002) has investigated loss and homoeroticism in Renaissance literature with special regard to pastoral works.

Alberto Beniscelli (2007, p. 402) claims that the motif of love between women in early modern Italian pastoral dramas is widespread and well-researched, but he merely cites Carla Chiara Perrone's investigation (1996). This consists, in reality, in a long and erudite introduction to a modern edition of Campiglia's *Calisa,* informed by a strong philological perspective, which includes an analysis of the *donna-con-donna* motif in both the *Flori* and the *Calisa* (Perrone, 1996, pp. 43-59). Perrone mainly reads the motif as a route to God and as a challenge to the social, intellectual and sexual status imposed on women.

Furthermore, the philological scholarship devoted up to now to the texts I have selected has mainly focused on such topics as their connections with classical and early modern sources and with some philosophical currents (principally Neoplatonism) and spiritual desires. In this chapter, these studies will help me in decoding pastoral literary conventions as well as motifs.

I will integrate this with research more concerned with the status of women and, in particular, of women writers in early modern Italy, as well as with the demands and gender issues they highlight in their texts. In this chapter I am in fact particularly interested in exploring issues related to sexuality, gender, male anxiety and queer negative feelings as depicted in the four works I will analyse. The queer continuum they deploy is stimulating in the extreme, encompassing as it does a delicate and lyrical display of *donna-con-donna* devotion veined with mourning and pride (Campiglia's *Flori* and *Calisa*); narcissistic, troubled homoerotic love (Andreini's *Mirtilla*); and cheerful and innocent sensuality between women as observed by a male gaze (Guarini's *Il pastor fido*). I will look especially at the ways in which Guarini employs woman-woman relationships to celebrate virility to the detriment of homoerotic female desire. I will also focus my attention on the great importance that Campiglia and Andreini give to *donna-donna* bonds in the light of reflections (more or

less explicit) on the status of women. Instead of condemning or criticising homoerotic loves, both the female writers portrayed their queer heroines with sympathy and endowed them with a strong sense of independence.

My reading of the texts, therefore, attentively considers feminist and queer studies as well as scholarship on women intellectuals and writers. It covers topics ranging from the early modern proto-feminism cited above to the eroticisation of female homoeroticism and the employment of woman-woman desire as a device to undermine its legitimacy. Some of this research was specifically conceived with reference to the early modern period (such as Cox and Sampson, 2004; Ross, 2009; Walder-Biesanz, 2016), whilst other focus on twentieth and twenty-first century phenomena (for instance, Cottingham, 1996; Butler, 1999; Love, 2007) which have many traits in common with those in my textual corpus. Nonetheless, this should not be seen as an anachronistic reading. It is, rather, an attempt to investigate well-known texts from an unusual but productive perspective while bearing in mind their literary, historical and cultural peculiarities.

7. The Sweetest Kiss: Cross-Dressing and Voyeurism in the *Gara Dei Baci* from Guarini's *Pastor fido*

Nephew to poet and humanist Guarino Veronese, Giovan Battista Guarino or Guarini (1538-1612) studied law and, perhaps, philosophy at the University of Padua (Selmi, 2003). While serving for many years as right-hand man to the Este family, he continued to cultivate an interest in literature which, after Tasso's departure, earned him appointment as official poet to the court. Guarini also worked for the Grand Duke of Tuscany and the Duke of Urbino. Despite his intense diplomatic duties, he is mostly famous for his masterpiece, the

tragicommedia pastorale Pastor fido. He started writing it in 1580, perhaps as a challenge to his friend and rival Tasso's *Aminta* (1573), but the work was only finally published after much revision in 1589 (dated Venice, 1590) and then first performed at the Carnival of Crema in 1595-1596.

Although popular in its time, the *Pastor fido* was harshly criticised in 1587 by the Professor of Rhetorics in Padua, Giasone de Nores, who condemned the genre of *tragicommedia* invented by Guarini (and, therefore, not found in Aristotle's *Poetics*) by defining it a 'mostruoso e disproporzionato componimento' (*Guarini,* 1933). Guarini responded in various ways, including with the publication of the *Compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1602). He laid claim to the importance of the freedom of the artist (from Aristotle as well as from other models). Despite the censures it attracted, *Pastor fido* had a massive influence on early modern literary works (Perella, 1973) and, therefore, its impact on audiences cannot be underestimated.

Tellingly, however, Italian scholarship seems to pay only limited attention to the queer elements in *Pastor fido*, skating over the *gara dei baci* episode involving a cohort of nymphs tenderly kissing. For instance, in her detailed and erudite commentary (1999), Elisabetta Selmi fails to mention any possible homoerotic implications although she does allude to the general sensuality of the scene. By contrast, as I will show, anglophone researchers have displayed more interest in the *donna-con-donna* episode, probably because of the impact of the *Pastor fido* on English literature and its representations of woman-woman love (see, for instance, Traub, 2002, p. 1).

Set in Arcadia, the *Pastor fido* is mainly focused on young shepherd Mirtillo, who is in love with the nymph, Amarilli. He first met her in Greece as an adolescent, as he tells the

older shepherd Ergasto at the opening of Scene One, Act Two. The whole of Act Two is filled with literary references, ranging from classical authors (such as Ovid, Theocritus and Heliodor) to more recent ones (such as Petrarch and Tasso), thus serving to create an erudite as well as graceful text. Nevertheless, this Act is also imbued with irony given that it puts on stage transvestism, tricks and misunderstandings in line with Guarini's intention of presenting the *Pastor fido* as a sort of sixteenth century-*commedia degli equivoci* (Guarini, 1999, pp. 331) to amuse his readership.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that one day Mirtillo attempts to approach Amarilli in female attire. In so doing, he profits from his youth as well as his pubescent appeal (II.1:97-106):

> ella delle sue gonne femminili
> vagamente m'adorna,
> e d'innestato crin cinge le tempie.
> Poi le 'ntreccia, e le 'nfiora,
> e l'arco, e la faretra
> al fianco mi sospende,
> e m'insegna a mentir parole, e sguardi,
> e sembianti nel volto, in cui non era
> di lanugine ancora
> pur un vestigio solo.[133]

[133] All quotations are from Guarini (1999), edited by Selmi.

Like several other male characters from plays as well as comic texts we have already come across, Mirtillo employs some of his androgynous features (such as a lack of facial hair and his generally delicate appearance) to pass himself off as a woman.

He is also mindful that wearing women's clothes or displaying a feminine hairstyle are not enough to practise gender-bending in a fully convincing way. He therefore adheres to social expectations on femininity and behaves as a woman was supposed to. Once more, the early modern literary phenomenon of transvestitism resonates with what Butler (1999, p. 174) would have to say, centuries later, about drag performers:

> If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.

Mirtillo's parody of gender is layered. On the one hand, it aims to amuse the *Pastor fido*'s readers and reconnect with a long comic tradition of cross-dressed men. On the other, however, it evokes in an erudite and tongue-in-cheek way the cross-dressing or the gender ambiguity of some famous mythological heroes such as Heracles, Theseus or Achilles. For instance, in one episode the latter disguised himself as a girl at Scyros in order to avoid a war in which he would have been killed (Bullough and Bullough, 1993, esp. pp. 30-31).

As we have seen, Mirtillo's reason for cross-dressing is far less noble. Nonetheless, he is so convincing as a woman that he finally succeeds in getting close to Amarilli and her group of nymphs. Games in honour of Zeus are about to take place but are only open to men so a nymph close to Amarilli suggests the group should organise a competition of their own in which participants have to deploy the weapons they usually employ to win over men, i.e.

kisses. The proposal is enthusiastically welcomed and, accordingly, the maidens start kissing each other with abandon (Guarini, 1999: II.1:129-143):

> proviam oggi tra noi così da scherzo
> noi le nostr'armi, come
> contra gli uomini allor, che ne sie tempo,
> l'userem da dovero.
> Bacianne, e si contenda
> tra noi di baci; e quella, che d'ogn'altra
> baciatrice più scaltra
> li saprà dar più saporiti, e cari,
> n'avra per sua vittoria
> questa bella ghirlanda.
> Risero tutte alla proposta, e tutte
> subito s'accordaro;
> e si sfidavan molte, e molte ancora,
> senza che dato lor fosse alcun segno,
> facean guerra confusa.

Mirtillo carefully reports the scene to Ergasto and, in so doing, the innocent play becomes a scene of great sensuality. It is in this way that the shepherd focuses the male gaze and, as a result, titillates the voyeurism of both his friend and the audience. By exploiting this narrative *escamotage*, outwardly with the justification of showing how a group of virgin nymphs test out feminine seductive wiles, Guarini offers his readership a risqué show suffused with abundant sexuality and erotic rivalry.

Predictably, Amarilli, with her beautiful mouth, is elected queen in this 'guerra confusa', and is given the task of choosing the best at kissing. Guessing what is going to happen,

Ergasto interrupts Mirtillo to express his male complicity and indirectly praises his friend's clever trick of 'cangiarsi in ninfa' (II.1:161-163). All of the girls in fact (including Mirtillo) come forward to kiss Amarilli in a kind of procession that accentuates the eroticism of the scene (II.1:166-170):

> (…) andava
> ciascheduna per sorte
> a far della sua bocca, e de' suoi baci
> prova con quel bellissimo, e divino
> paragon di dolcezza (…).

In these verses Mirtillo becomes the medium between the audience (embodied by Ergasto) and an all-pervasive atmosphere of same-sex female sensuality. As a result, the litany of cultural, literary and linguistic references to Petrarch, Theocritus and other learned authors cannot conceal this scene's transgressive inputs. Accordingly, the passage has been criticised for its pervasive sensuality, as Elisabetta Selmi reminds us (Selmi in Guarini, 1999, p. 336, n. to lines 151-160).

It is interesting to add that, as I have previously stated, in traditional imagery (including that of the early modern era), nymphs display a series of features which make them a perfect object of desire. They live as virgins in all-female community, naked or almost naked, without weapons. They can be easy victims of the sexual appetite of a faun or a satyr (see, for instance, Agostino Carracci's engravings inspired by the topic, such as the series *Le lascivie,* or single works such as *Il satiro scandagliatore*, c. 1590-1595). Nymphs' bodies, too, can become surfaces onto which artists from all ages, as well as their audiences, can project their fantasises, as demonstrated by Agostino Carracci's *Amor Vincit Omnia* (1590-1595) and,

later, French painter Paul Avril's scene involving Sappho and water creatures (who resemble to nymphs and mermaids) from *De figuris Veneris* (1906).

In consequence, the lines from the *gara dei baci* also illustrate a male process of eroticisation of women's homoeroticism, a process nowadays tellingly common in pornography as well as in artistic and cultural products with a strong emphasis on scopophilia. Feminist scholars have long denounced this phenomenon in several fields (see, for instance, the crucial Mulvey, 1975, text cited in the previous chapter), stressing how it is that queer female desire can become a pretext for men's arousal. I propose, therefore, to read Guarini's lines in the light of the thinking of the feminist artist and art critic Laura Cottingham, who has focused on studying representations of desire between women in our contemporary cultural industry. In criticising the lesbian chic era of the 1990s, for instance, she has stated that 'such representations [of female homoeroticism] literally act out a simple disappearance ritual whereby a "lesbian" is presented and then eliminated: that is, made into a heterosexual female and/or otherwise expunged' (Cottingham, 1996, p. 3).

It is telling that these words also seem to resonate with what happens in the *Pastor fido*. When at last Amarilli tastes Mirtillo's kisses, she immediately recognises, and in so doing ratifies, their excellence. Even if, in talking to Ergasto, the boy shepherd admits to being almost killed by the overwhelming sweetness of his beloved's kisses, thus referring to a well-known *topos*, he appears to be the real winner of the game. The dialogue with Ergasto confirms this impression. In line with Guarini's 'concetto predatorio della sensualità' (Selmi in Guarini, 1999, p. 337, n. to lines 188-192), the cross-dressed man's kisses are defined a 'furto avventuroso' (Guarini, 1999, II.1:188), as Mirtillo himself confirms ('inganno […] e furto', l:205). Nonetheless, they are worthy of being celebrated by a male companion, Ergasto.

As we have previously seen, male sexual entrepreneurship towards women involved in queer relationships to one extent or another is often marked as both aggressive and subtle, as the passage cited above underscores. If, in the *Furioso*, Ricciardetto employs metaphors from the language of war to describe to another man his lovemaking with Fiordispina, Mirtillo labels an act in which one might suppose he would be tender (such as kissing his beloved) as a theft and a deception.

His victory in the *gara dei baci*, the text seems to suggest, is twofold. First, although at the time a beard was considered a typical signal of virility and Mirtillo's face is hairless, he compensates for his androgynous looks with a display of sexual prowess which is fully masculine. In this way, any anxiety about his manhood can be disposed of. Secondly, not only do women's wiles appear to be more inoffensive than expected, but Mirtillo proves he can employ them in his favour and be the foxiest kisser of them all ('baciatrice più scaltra', II.1:135). Although the text does not clearly state as much, it is easily understood (as we have seen several times in previous chapters) that manifestations of *donna-con-donna* love are often more or less implicitly considered unsatisfying. Consequently, when women finally make actual contact with their lovers' manhood, they can do nothing but happily opt for it, abandoning their homoerotic desires. Guarini's *Pastor fido* is no exception in this regard.

I submit nevertheless that the virility of Mirtillo's performance, as well as the references to traditional gendered models (such as that proposed by Petrarch), cannot dissipate the aura of ambiguity which permeates the whole episode, nor can they succeed in completely restoring a heteronormative order. Some elements of the kissing war can, in fact, urge the reader to pose such thought-provoking questions as: would Amarilli have appreciated Mirtillo's advances if she knew that he was a man? Could the circumstance that Mirtillo passes so easily as a woman cast some doubt on his virility? And more: if women can find

their pleasure without men, as the *gara dei baci* proves, are men sexually unnecessary? Can this prompt anxiety in the male audience?

Some feminist scholars, in addition, have queried the alleged return to heteronormativity which informs the scene. For instance, in her study on female homoeroticism in early modern drama, Denise A. Walen (2005, p. 125) has portrayed the context of Act Two, Scene One in terms of a 'pastoral orgy of same-sex eroticism', in which '[t]he scene suggests that women eagerly find sensual pleasure in homoerotic activities even as it asserts a heterosexual standard over the homoerotic reverie of the described action'.[134] Traub (2005, pp. 1-3) has emphasised the popularity and circulation of Guarini's story as an inspiration in the field of art, which has not simply, and always, ratified the centrality of male-female sexuality and the superiority of men.

In the light of all of the above, I would suggest that on the one hand, if, as I have previously stated, Mirtillo seems to be the winner of the kissing competition and, thus, female-female sensual acts have proved to be insufficiently rewarding, on the other woman-woman expressions of tenderness and sensuality have a subtle but persistent appeal which undermines the heterosexual order, at least to some extent. As I will show soon, the fascination of *donna-con-donna* love is fully, and less ambiguously, explored by Andreini and Campiglia who, in contrast with Guarini, do not deactivate latent homoerotic potential in an attempt to celebrate virility. On the contrary, their narratives focus on these queer loves. They also present models of nymphs who are more independent from men as well as from the male

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[134] Walen (2005, p. 105) has seen a further episode of the *Pastor fido* depicting same-sex feelings, in Act Two, Scene Five, in which Corisca attempts to gain the trust of her enemy, Amarilli, by resorting to a sort of homoerotic 'assault' and sweet words ('O più degli occhi miei, più de la vita/ A me cara Amarilli, e dove vai'). In particular, in Walen's classification of female characters involved in homoerotic relationships, Corisca is labelled as one of those who employ their sexual appeal or affection to manipulate other women.

gaze. Tellingly, both Andreini and Campiglia were two exceptional intellectuals who personally challenged gender boundaries and social expectations in order to speak out clearly and loudly.

8. 'Avvampo e ardo di me stessa': Narcissistic Desire and Female Agency in Isabella Andreini's *Mirtilla*

Better known by her husband's family name of Andreini, Isabella Canali (1562-1604) was a key figure in one of the most relevant and acclaimed theatrical companies in the entire early modern period; the wife of one of the most important theatrical directors (Francesco Andreini); and the mother of one of the most appreciated Baroque playwrights (Giovan Battista Andreini). She was also an absolute star on the European cultural stage between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Guccini, 2004; Perocco, 2004). She was, therefore, one of the first real divas, as Rosalind Kerr has demonstrated (2015a; 2015b).[135] Neither was she afraid of challenging gender boundaries. As Alexia Ferracuti (2014, p. 128) reminds us,

> Sexual ambiguity surfaces as but one mode of expressing Isabella's versatility: in Scala's *favole* [: *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*], she cross-dresses on no fewer than thirteen occasions, making her talent for transvestite roles something the author decidedly intended to signal to posterity.

Due to the fact that the first Commedia dell'arte actresses were surrounded by a halo of transgression and irregularity, as we have seen in the previous chapter, women performers such as Isabella Andreini attempted to present themselves also as virtuous spouses, mothers

[135] As Stefano Mazzoni (2004, p. 95) recalls, 'Fu lei la fondatrice di una metafora memorabile – "l'attrice come Diva" – destinata a duratura fortuna'.

and poets (Pieri, 1989, p. 201). Andreini perfectly succeeded (Manfio, 2014): she was largely acclaimed during her life and even after her premature death due to complications in childbirth.[136]

Nevertheless, even today, there is still much to be investigated about her role as a writer.[137] *Mirtilla* (1588) was Andreini's first edited work and was well-received (Vazzoler, 1992; Ross, 2009, p. 215). It is often seen as deeply influenced by Tasso's *Aminta*. It was performed and reprinted several times, as well as translated into French. The *Rime* and *Lettere* published some years later also earned Andreini much praise.

In addition to being an exceptional actress, a talented writer and a beloved wife, Andreini could also be considered to some extent a defender of women.[138] Tellingly, like Campiglia's *Flori*, *Mirtilla* has a dedication to a noblewoman, Lavinia della Rovere, Marquess of Vasto. The text is a declaration of Andreini's strong desire to win literary fame but, as usual for women writers, she pretends she cannot succeed.[139]

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[136] On Isabella Andreini's self-promoting strategies see Cedrati (2009) and Kerr (2015b). It is also worth keeping in mind Perocco's warning (2007, p. 21) about the maternity of Isabella Andreini's texts, especially after her death: 'Sarebbe indubbiamente più semplice, per uno studioso moderno, attribuire ad Isabella e solo a lei, tutte le opere che sotto il suo nome sono state edite; ma le lettere dedicatorie ed introduttive di Francesco Andreini, il marito che le era stato accanto, professionalmente ed umanamente, tutta la vita, alle opere edite *post mortem*, possono e devono gettare dei sospetti sulla totale paternità di tutta la produzione di una donna giunta, in un altro campo, ad una notevole fama'.

[137] Suffice it to recall that, to date, a complete edition of her *Rime* is still not available.

[138] I will restrict myself to recalling a letter that Andreini wrote to the (doubtful) father of a baby girl which may be read in light of those ideas. There the writer describes the female as the 'perfettissimo sesso' (1612, p. 19r) and offers a catalogue of excellent women which includes real and mythological figures, such as Sappho and Camilla. In so doing, Andreini linked up with a tradition stretching from Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* to her own time.

[139] In the *Mirtilla*, Andreini (1995, p. 33) holds that 'Io cominciai quasi da scherzo (…) ad attendere agli studi della poesia e di tanto diletto gli trovai, ch'io non ho mai più potuto da sì fatti trattenimenti rimanermi'. As Ross (2009, p. 215) recalls, in fact, 'Isabella Andreini's ambitions extended well past the parameters of the stage. She possessed an avid desire for intellectual development, which was satisfied within her professional and household contexts, as well as her epistolary exchange'.

It is, therefore, an excellent introduction to a work which celebrates women's entrepreneurship and agency in several respects. Accordingly, Maria Luisa Doglio (1995, p. 15) stresses that 'Se le parole degli uomini inducono ad amori felici, i gesti delle donne consentono di realizzarli', whilst Nicla Riverso (2017, pp. 21-22) claims that the play 'focuses on the intelligence, determination, feelings and morality of its female characters in a way never before explored by male writers'. Finally, Finucci (2007, p. 39) emphasises the delicate balance created by Andreini. If, on the one hand, the writer follows stylistic and thematic conventions, as well as 'lavished (...) even more artificiality to conform to public expectations', on the other she 'shows forcefully how much the presence of women as playwrights and actresses ultimately was changing the scene'. Andreini's heroines have to confront male aggressivity and grossness but, ultimately, they can succeed since 'women can surmount the pains of unrequited love by constructing a world of togetherness and sharing' (Finucci, 2007, p. 39).

Despite its innovative and, I would go so far as to say, proto-feminist message, on a thematic level, as expected, the *favola* plot features multiple, and sometimes unlucky, love stories happening between shepherds and nymphs as classical gods observe and influence their actions. As is often the case in pastoral plays, in the *Prologue* Venere and her son Amore discuss the characters who will be on stage. Amore intends to punish those who despise him or have a hard heart and, therefore, he penalises Ardelia's cruelty by making her fall in love with herself: 'e l'altra avvampi/ per sua pena maggior di se medesma' (Andreini, 1995, *Prologue*:158-159).[140] As a result, although the shepherd, Uranio, loves Ardelia intensely, not only does she not seem to reciprocate his feelings but, in Act Four, Scene Four (notably, right

[140] All quotations are from Doglio's edition (Andreini, 1995).

at the end of the Act), she even goes so far as to fall in love with herself while looking at her reflection in a spring where she has gone to slake her thirst. As we will see soon, the situation cannot but bring to mind the opening scene of *Amor nello specchio* which I analysed in the previous chapter and in which Florinda first falls in love with her own image in a mirror and, later, with the person she sees reflected in it.

At first, Ardelia does not recognise herself, so she fervently praises the anonymous, charming nymph whom she sees in the water (IV.4:2509-2515), proclaiming her 'mia dea' (2515). The mysterious nymph replicates Ardelia's gestures and, in consequence, the latter discerns in this behaviour signals of her *benevolenza*. Nevertheless, although the nymph has a 'celeste beltà', Ardelia feels a burning desire which is far from being purely spiritual (IV.4:2527-2529):

> [...] sento già ne l'alma acceso
> un focoso desio di possedere
> la celeste beltà ch'indarno io miro

Ardelia's passion is so intense that it risks overwhelming and killing her ('Onda [: the spring] tu sei/ nata per cagionare la morte mia': 2525-2526), especially since her 'cortese diva' (2522) seems not to reciprocate her love. It takes some time, in fact, before the nymph realises that she is looking at her own image. This only comes about when Ardelia attempts in vain to touch the woman's hand. As a consequence, Ardelia first feels excited, then disappointed and desperate, in a climax of pain and pleasure (2554-2564):

> ella stende la mano, o me felice,
> or sì ch'io son contenta,
> vieni, vieni mia speme,

o mio vano pensiero,
amo un'ombra e un'ombra invan desio.
O piagge, o colli, o boschi, o selve, o valli
vedeste mai, udiste mai che ninfa
provasse più di me dolente sorte?
O dura acerba sorte,
avvampo e ardo di me stessa e sola
posseder bramo quel che più posseggo.

When at last Ardelia finds out that she is in love with herself, she is plunged into despair. Her love is, therefore, said to be vain and hopeless. As we have seen in Chapter One, the same thing happens in the episode of Bradamante and Fiordispina in the *Furioso*, in which love cannot be consummated either. Moreover, like the Spanish princess in Ariosto's masterpiece, Ardelia's words call to mind Iphis' lamentation. Tellingly, Ardelia and Iphis share various traits. As women in love with a woman, they both think that they are experiencing an exceptional status which conflicts with the so-called natural order. Nonetheless, this does not weaken their passion. It is also worth stressing that, to some extent, Ardelia and Iphis are in love with their alter ego. While the first is overtly attracted to her own reflection in the water, the latter, as Ovid (*Met.* IX:718-721) states, longs for a maiden with whom she has much in common. As in the myth of Narcissus, the subject of desire coincides with its object and this, therefore, makes the love impossible.[141]

Nevertheless, whilst Iphis is anguished by the thought that her marriage with Ianthe will be pointless as well as disappointing for both their families, Ardelia does not seem to be

[141] The comparison between Iphis and Narcissus comes from Scaccuto (2015/2016, p. 39).

particularly concerned about the social implications of her desire. Instead, her desperation stems from the awareness that there is a harsh contrast between the possession of what she wants, her own body and beauty, and the impossibility of entirely fulfilling her carnal homoerotic desire (IV.4:2576-2578):

> troppo a quest'occhi piacciono gli occhi miei,
> e 'l proprio viso e 'l proprio seno e troppo,
> ah finalmente, a me medesma piaccio

Ardelia's situation is paradoxical and, as a result, she gives voice to the desires tearing her apart by continuously interweaving allusions to the water, the medium as well as the procurer of her love, as well as to the fire that is consuming her.[142] In this way Andreini creates a powerful visual and ideological contrast. As I have stated, the whole episode is marked by contraposition: war and peace, water and fire, closeness and impossibility painfully coexist in Ardelia. Tellingly, she identifies herself with Narcissus ('ho rinovato/ di Narciso infelice il crudo scempio': 2601-2602) and, for this reason, she closes the scene by evoking death, the very same fate that he suffered.

Nevertheless, as expected, in the final act of the *Mirtilla*, Ardelia admits that she behaved badly to Uranio, who at last becomes her husband. Seemingly, therefore, a new, hetero-

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[142] See for instance: 'tutt'avvampar mi sento' (2539); 'tu, che in mezzo a l'acqua accendi il foco' (2544); 'io porto meco/ incendio tal che l'onda ove egli nacque/ estinguer no 'l potria' (2598-2600). Both the Petrarchan imagery and the stylistic contraposition between fire and ice recall those used in *Madrigal III* from Andreini's *Rime* where one may find traces of homoerotic tension, Amanda Powell maintains (2011, p. 159-160). The madrigal, in fact, reads: 'Se non temprate un poco/ madonna il mio gran foco con quel gielo,/ che'n voi nascose il Cielo,/ o se picciola dramma/ non riceuete in voi/ de la mia immensa fiamma/ temo, che Morte haurà di noi la palma,/ di voi per troppo ghiaccio, e di mi poi/ perche foco souerchio hò dentro à l'alma.' There, Andreini describes the lover's misery and, in particular, the physical and emotional consequences of an unbridled passion, by resorting to the vocabulary of fire and ice in combination with death. Nonetheless, as we will see in the *Conclusion* of this thesis, it is hard to establish whether the poem refers to a homoerotic attraction. It only proves with certainty that typical Petrarchan language could be profitably used in various literary contexts.

normalised happy life is waiting for her. Nonetheless, as Walder-Biesanz notably stresses (2016, p. 58), 'Ardelia's passion for herself is never fully reversed'. As the scholar explains, not only does Uranio encourage her to love herself through him,[143] but at the end of the play she wishes the water mirror to be 'specchio sien sempre à le più belle Ninfe' (V.8:3240). Is this a way to foster queer ambiguity once more?

As I have attempted to make clear so far, Ardelia is a complex character. For this reason, scholars have provided various readings of her story. For instance, Riverso (2017, p. 36) sees in Ardelia's feminine version of Narcissus 'the danger of self-love and individualism'. What is more, Andreini attempted through her character to challenge Neoplatonic philosophical thought which posits a connection between the external and the inner perfection of women. Accordingly, the playwright 'shows that physical beauty is not a manifestation of an inner beauty and, moreover, beauty is not always synonymous with happiness and success; in Ardelia's case, beauty turns against her, negatively influencing her thinking and judgment' (Riverso, 2017, p. 37). Kerr (2015b, p. 123) also reflects on the value of Ardelia's beauty and in the episode at the spring sees a certain comic self-mockery as well as a scene which 'also stands as an interrogation of female beauty being more than a lure for male desire'.

To understand the change of perspective promoted by Isabella Andreini in the spring scene, it is worth matching her text with two episodes from famous works, Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* and Giovan Battista Andreini's *Amor nello specchio*, the first of which preceded her and the second of which came after her.

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[143] 'Se vuoi godere/ di te medesma, ama il tuo fido Uranio;/ però che essendo ei per virtù d'amore/ in te cangiato, vita mia, ne segue/ che me godendo, goderai te stessa' (V.5:2859–2863).

In fact she took inspiration from *Aminta*, Act One, Scene Two, in which Dafne tells Tirsi about seeing Silvia (who is loved by Aminta) looking at herself in the water and being gratified by her own beauty.[144] Tellingly, Tasso (via Dafne) employs the nymph's tale to accuse her of being vain and 'to argue that Aminta must be more active in his pursuit of Silvia' (Walder-Biesanz, 2016, p. 57). Walder-Biesanz also maintains that Ardelia's situation is even more different because in the *Mirtilla* 'vanity is elevated to autoeroticism'. Nevertheless, the scholar contends (2016, p. 58) that, rather than being sterile, Ardelia's self-directed love enables her to be more autonomous and proactive:

> Her Arcadia does not eliminate the male gaze entirely – that would be at odds with a celebration of heterosexual sensual love – but it pokes fun at its excesses. Andreini also alters Tasso's reflection scene by giving her protagonist agency and self-awareness.

To put it another way, in Isabella Andreini's spring scene there is more at stake than mere vanity or self-absorption: also there are women's entrepreneurship, self-confidence and independence. Giovan Battista Andreini was aware of this and, for this reason, *Amor nello specchio* shows 'his creative indebtedness to the performative artistry of his prolific mother', as Alexia Ferracuti (2014, p. 127) has convincingly demonstrated.

As we have seen, in both Andreinis' texts, a female character falls passionately in love with her own image after seeing it reflected object (in the surface of water and a mirror), and

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[144] '(...) e spesso / or prendeva un ligustro, or una rosa,/ e l'accostava al bel candido collo,/ a le guancie vermiglie, e de' colori/ fea paragone; e poi, sì come lieta/ de la vittoria, lampeggiava un riso/ che parea che dicesse: "Io pur vi vinco,/ né porto voi per ornamento mio,/ ma porto voi sol per vergogna vostra,/ perché si veggia quanto mi cedete"./ Ma mentre ella s'ornava e vagheggiava,/ rivolse gli occhi a caso, e si fu accorta/ ch'io di lei m'era accorta, e vergognando/ rizzosi tosto, e i fior lasciò cadere./ In tanto io più ridea del suo rossore,/ ella più s'arrossia del riso mio./ Ma perché accolta una parte de' crini/ e l'altra aveva sparsa, una o due volte/ con gli occhi al fonte consiglier ricorse,/ e si mirò quasi di furto, pure/ temendo ch'io nel suo guatar guatassi;/ ed incolta si vide, e si compiacque/ perché bella si vide ancor che incolta' (Tasso, 1963, 1.2: 863-885).

her passion is tangible, rooted in a bodily sensuality, as the language of the episodes reveals. Whilst the narcissistic scene described by Isabella is suffused with eroticism, Giovan Battista on the contrary presents a heroine totally absorbed in contemplation of her own beauty - to such an extent that she even masturbates in front of the mirror. Furthermore, while Ardelia seems to be embarrassed by her feelings (but, in the end, does not regret them), Florinda is not ashamed of her sexual drive or of her disdain for men.

Both *Amor nello specchio* and *Mirtilla* engage with the audience's gaze. In the first, as I have previously stated, onlookers can contemplate the perfect connection between Florinda's autoeroticism and her narcissism, whilst in the second the sensuality is subtler. Ardelia in fact performs a monologue that is, in reality, a silent dialogue with her audience in which she describes in detail the intense reactions occurring in her soul and body as she admires the silhouette she sees of the beautiful maiden. It is therefore plausible to imagine that, when Ardelia finally discovers herself to be that charming woman, the audience is also surprised.

Nevertheless, rather than merely catching the onlookers' eye as seems to happen in *Amor nello specchio*, I would argue that Isabella was more interested in conveying a stratified message and affirming herself as a skilled playwright, not afraid to put on stage a sympathetic, transgressive typology of woman. Accordingly, by means of the character of Ardelia as well as her adventures at the spring, Isabella provided her audience with an articulated view of feminine (even erotic) proactivity. Although the *Mirtilla* formally aims to extol traditional marriage, it simultaneously presents female characters (such as Ardelia) who are more ready than usual to demonstrate their resolve, decide whom they will love and, consequently, express their agency.

As a consequence, Andreini modified the pastoral tradition in some particulars to make it fit better with her unconventional ideas on women. This why, as Doglio (1995, p. 10) remarks, before falling in love with herself, Ardelia lives as a virgin who enjoys her freedom from love. In so doing, she acts like a 'donna che attua di proposito una scelta di vita tradizionalmente riferita all'uomo'. I would therefore submit that it is probably not fortuitous that the object of Ardelia's first love should be herself. She has always attempted to be independent from men. In a sense, by desiring herself, she succeeds in embracing total freedom. Furthermore, in loving with burning, carnal passion a being who in contrast seems imbued with beauty and spirituality, I suggest that Ardelia may literally be joining with her own better half. In other words, the nymph could be ironically alluding to the Platonic myth of the missing half we have previously met in this thesis.

At the same time, though, this does not imply that hurt and despair have no place in Ardelia's story. In the allusion to the myth of Narcissus, Doglio (1995, p. 14) sees 'una nota voluttuosa, sottilmente ambigua, di un'audacia sconcertante. L'amore di Ardelia appare come una passione fatale che accende i sensi [...] e insieme come un destino crudele [...]'. This provokes an 'atmosfera di turbamento, di passione lesbica, di amore impossibile e doloroso'. My reading of Ardelia's reactions to the discovery of the real identity of her beloved is, therefore, twofold. On the one hand, I agree with scholars such as Riverso (2017) who have emphasised the metaphorical value of the episode. I hold that Andreini wanted to provide a layered reading of the story, which can thus be interpreted as a warning against vanity, a demand for women's independence and a *variazione sul tema* of *donna-con-donna* impossibility filled with literary allusions as well as an ironic reflection on such an erudite topic as Neoplatonic disputes on the body and soul. For Andreini, this could undoubtedly contribute to the moulding of herself as the exceptionally talented and versatile writer she

aspired to be. Nonetheless, on the other hand, I would further submit that Ardelia's monologue also reveals traces of Heather Love's theories on the negative emotions and experiences inscribed in queer texts such as pain, trauma and marginalisation. Throughout this thesis we have noted several times that 'Same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss' (Love, 2007, p. 21). Ardelia seems unable to come to terms with her overwhelming feelings. Alongside several other heroines, she appears to renounce her homoerotic desire quite mechanically when she meets her future husband, Uranio, and he urges her to redeem herself from her sin of presumption. Her accusation of pain and shame disappears but, as far as the audience is concerned, there is an ambiguity in which traces of it still linger on.

As we will soon see, Campiglia also tellingly offers several opportunities for reflection on ideas of Love from an early modern perspective which encompass bereavement, stigmatisation and mourning. Nonetheless, Campiglia's heroine, Flori, confronts them with pride, ambition and poetic strength.

9. 'Donna Amo Donna, Anzi L'Adoro': Homoerotic Loves and Women's Demands in Campiglia's *Flori* and *Calisa*

Whilst Isabella Andreini was a well-known character in Italian cultural circles between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as a much appreciated performer and writer, noblewoman Maddalena Campiglia (1553-1595) remains in some respects a more elusive figure.[145] So far, scholars have reconstructed only in part her life, her cultural world and her

[145] Some parts of this section draw upon my articles on Campiglia published in 2013 and 2014. I wholeheartedly thank Maria Clotilde Mosconi and her nephew Jacopo Pesiri for sharing with me Mosconi's 'Maddalena

ideas.[146] Nonetheless, it is plausible to suppose that she was a well-read gentlewoman and several elements from her biography seem to indicate that she had her place in such literary and cultural circles as the Accademia Olimpica of Vicenza. In 1576 she married nobleman Dionisio Colzè (in a union that might have been forced upon her by her family), but the relationship seems to have broken down for reasons that remain unclear. However, the union was probably unhappy given that she herself defined it 'antico giogo indegno' (Campiglia in Perrone, 1996, p. 216). Furthermore, although as far as we know she never formally took vows, some scholars such as Rumor (1897) have suggested that she was a nun. She was instead probably affiliated with a group of *dimesse*, pious women who lived in communities without being formally part of a religious order. As Diana Sartori (1994, p. 59) correctly states, 'Quella falsa pista della monacazione è però indicativa dell'esistenza di una difficoltà a inquadrare la figura di Maddalena riportandola ad una delle tradizionali categorie di iscrizione delle donne in base alla condizione civile: da maritare, maritata, vedova'.

Interestingly, there are aspects of Campiglia's life story which allow us to speculate that she experienced homosocial or homoerotic relationships with women first-hand. Other than the fact that Bernardo Morsolin (1882) alludes to a certain Campiglia's 'amore soverchio e diciamo pure sregolato a non si sa quale amica morta nel fiore degli anni e della bellezza' which was brought to an end by prayer, Campiglia was probably particularly attached to a woman poet, known by the pseudonym of Aquila Lanza. Carlo Cenini (2017, p. 86) has identified some verses in *pavano*[147] dedicated to Campiglia and written by poet and painter

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Campiglia. Saggio letterario biografico - critico', a thesis discussed at the Facoltà di Magistero of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy, during the World War II, in 1941-42.

[146] Among the most detailed and convincing studies of Campiglia can be included: Sartori (1994), Chemello (2003), Cox and Sampson (2004), Ultsch (2005a; 2005b) and Bossier (2007; 2009; 2010).

[147] *Pavano* ('padovano') was a dialect spoken in the Paduan countryside. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, *letteratura pavana* was particularly popular and included a vast output of more or less playful texts in verse as well as in prose (Lovarini, 1935; 1965).

Giovan Battista Maganza (known also as Magagnò), *In morte de Donna Aquilia Lanza alla Segnora Madalena Campigia* (*Rime IV*, 1583), which testify to the strong bond between the two.[148] Finally, it is worth noting that Campiglia asked to be buried close to Abbess Giulia Cisotta in the church of Santa Maria in Araceli, Vicenza.

It is telling that strong bonds between women are one of the main threads in Campiglia's literary output, as I will show, starting with her first edited work, *Discorso sopra l'Annonciatione della Beata Vergine, e la Incarnatione del S. N. Giesu Christo* (1585). This dialogue in the form of a treatise was published after the break-up with Colzè and, we may presume, it was in this way that Campiglia sought to promote herself as a learned, pious author, as was prescribed to women writers at that time.

With the ostensible justification of praising the Virgin, the author recounts Mary's life and offers a nuanced and vibrant portrait of her. Tellingly, Campiglia posits the *Madonna* at the centre of an active female community. In so doing, as Eleonora Carinci (2013, p. 362) has stressed, in common with other early modern Italian writers she employs the image of Mary to emphasise the role of 'una donna eccezionale e potente, le cui virtù non erano lette in chiave necessariamente passiva'.

Accordingly, in the *Discorso*, women's independence is one of Campiglia's main focuses. For this reason, as Lori J. Ultsch explains (2005b, p. 353), the writer lays out a claim for a 'denunciation of contemporary marriage practices and valorization of virginity'. Campiglia especially bemoans the sad fate of married women who are so disgusted by their union that they end up hating themselves. As a result, Campiglia (1585, p. 23) argues that

[148] Grateful thanks to Carlo Cenini for his kindness and the material he has generously shared with me.

preserving one's virginity, as Mary did, allows women a life that is more in accordance with their desires:

> O eccellentissima donna, Vergine sopra tutte le Vergini, saggia, & felice, adorna di fregi cosi sublimi, & risplendenti. Non cinta ti veggo di catena di ferro grave, & pesante, come le maritate, che sotto l'insopportabil peso del matrimonio in modo sono gravate, ch'in dispetto di lor medesme tal'hor ne vengono, & bene spesso odiano quest'aria, che le spira d'intorno: Ne meno di collane d'argento fino, & terso ti miro adorna ò Sacra Regina mia, qual ne va altero il stato vedovile, ma di purissimo oro freggiata ti scorgo qual il merto della Verginità tua ricerca.[149]

Through detailed and impressive imagery, Campiglia depicts married women as overwhelmed by their marital status in contrast to widows and virgins (that is, women without a man by their side) who can enjoy larger freedom. For Perrone (1996, p. 38), therefore, one can find the origins of Campiglia's refusal to be submissive to men in the *Discorso*, in which the writer 'celebra lo stato verginale come quello di somma perfezione spirituale'.

Just like Mary, Flori, the nymph heroine of Campiglia's pastoral work, lives surrounded by a cohort of women and values her virginity highly. The first of these pastoral works is the eponymous *Flori* (1588), which appears to have been admired by Campiglia's contemporaries, including Tasso.[150] Campiglia was particularly fond of this *pastorale*. In its two dedicatory epistles, she asks noblewoman Isabella Pallavicino Lupi (perhaps her patron)

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[149] All quotations from Campiglia's *Discorso* come from the transcription of it I made for my MA thesis devoted to Campiglia, based on the edition copy available at the Biblioteca Alessandrina (Rome, Italy), as the book has never been re-published.

[150] In a letter addressed to Campiglia, the poet wrote: 'Io non poteva credere, che alcuno sentisse piacere d'esser vinto; ma leggendo la Favola Pastorale di V. S. con tanto diletto, ho conosciuto d'esser superato, e che niun vincitore si rallegrò più della propria vittoria; ma l'esser superato con tutti gli altri accresce il mio piacere, e la gloria di V. Sig. La ringrazio dunque, che m'abbia voluto far degno del suo dono, quasi di consolazione al cinto. E le bacio la mano. Di Roma il 12 d'Agosto del 1589' (Tasso, 1738, letter 506, p. 318). Unfortunately, to my knowledge, there is no information available about possible performances of both *Flori* and *Calisa*.

and writer Curzio Gonzaga to put under their protection her 'rozzo parto' (2004, pp. 44 and 48) given that 'non […] posso dar cosa più cara di questa mia figlia'.[151] Interestingly, the relevance of intellectual success in a woman's life is one of the main topics of the *Flori* and Campiglia probably wanted to highlight this notion from the very beginning of her work.[152]

As is usual in pastoral texts, in the *Flori* several minor plots interweave with the main storyline, which explores the story of Flori, a nymph who jealously guards her material and spiritual freedom and is a poet who aspires to glory. As Cox and Sampson convincingly argue (2004, p. 2), in recounting Flori's adventures, 'Campiglia exploits the conventional pastoral type of the nymph vowed to chastity in the service of Diana to explore the dilemmas of a woman whose intellectual and affective impulses conflict with existing social values'. Accordingly, as the play opens Flori is seen behaving insanely after the death of her friend Amaranta, whom she venerated with the purest of love. Nevertheless, the community in which she lives requires Flori to take part in a ceremony which will help her recover from her 'vano amore' (III.5).[153] This is also the intention of the god Amore who, as in the *Mirtilla*, intends to tame the rebellious nymph ('[...] folle/ se 'n va per altro amor estinto e vano […]./ Vanamente piangendo ella dispose/ dopo la morte d'Amaranta, ninfa/ sua cara sì, di non amar più mai./ Al mio colpo fia vano il suo disegno': *Prologue*:59-71).

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[151] Adriana Chemello (2003, p. 97) has read these allusions with an accent on Campiglia's spirituality: 'Dalla fecondità biologica alla fecondità simbolica della poesia. Nella "vita di perfezione" che ricerca appagamento nell'amore divino, la potenza generatrice di marca femminile può realizzarsi attraverso il parto dell'intelletto. Nel mettere al mondo Flori, Campiglia sfugge al destino biologico femminile trovando una appagante realizzazione nell'autotelicità della parola poetica'.

[152] Tellingly, various scholars such as Mutini (1974), and Cox and Sampson (2009: 320, Notes 69 and 73) have conjectured that Flori could be identified with Campiglia herself, and the other characters from the pastoral play with personalities from the personal, cultural and literary circles that the writer would have been part of. All quotations from the *Flori* come from Cox' and Sampon's edition (Campiglia, 2009).

[153] It must be said that shepherd Androgeo is involved in the healing ritual as well, since he loves Flori too much. I therefore read the ceremony as a sort of rite of passage in which the eccentric members of the community are asked to redeem themselves and conform to its expectations.

It is only after (seemingly) defeating her queer feelings that Flori is thus finally ready to re-enter the traditional heteronormative order and have shepherd Alessi as her partner. From its very beginning Flori's and Alessi's relationship is absolutely unique, as the *Prologue* of the play clearly states, defining them as a 'coppia […] unqua veduta' (61). As a votary of Diana, Flori is obliged to live as a virgin and firmly intends to do so. Alessi accepts this decision wholeheartedly since they both want their union to be founded on equality and chastity, as Mary and Joseph notably appear to do in Campiglia's *Discorso*. Thanks to this exceptional sharing of purposes with Alessi, Flori will be able to cultivate her spiritual and intellectual interests instead of taking care of their offspring, as she tells her friend Licori (V.3:90-92):

> Sian nostri figli le cose create
> dal divino nostro pelegrino ingegno,
> né serva ad uomo angelica fattura.

It is not only that Flori strongly aspires to pursue her path as a writer (overtly emulating Vittoria Colonna, incidentally),[154] She also refuses the traditional roles of mother and partner subordinate to a man. Furthermore, it is worth noting that one of the main sources of inspiration for Flori's poetic output lies in Amaranta: her 'candido, vero affetto santo' has inspired her to something that even the best of poets would not be able to emulate (III.5:146-150). This is certainly a novelty given women's conventional role in Italian lyric tradition as a

[154] 'O quante volte ella dicea, "Licori,/ tenta meco poggiar per quel sentiero/ ove donna immortal sola sen gìo/ VITTORIOSA e DIVA tra mai quante/ del sesso nostro fur chiare e illustri./ Ben sallo il Mincio e 'l Tebro,/ ch'arrestaro il lor corso al dolce canto/di lei, che vinse a prova/ i più degni pastor di quell'etate"' (I.1:104-112). On the fortune of Vittoria Colonna in the Renaissance, see at least Brundin (2008) and Brundin, Crivelli. and Sapegno (2016).

muse. As we will see in the *Conclusion* to this thesis, instances in which a female poet exalts a fellow woman are less frequent.

Nonetheless, there are those in the pastoral community in which Flori lives (including her friend, Licori) who reproach her for cultivating a 'vano amore' and, thus, 'vaneggiare'.[155] This expression, of course, evokes Fiordispina's 'vano amore' conceived for Bradamante. As we have seen, in the *Furioso* the phrase alludes to the impossibility of consummating love. In line with Cox and Sampson (2004, p. 25), I submit that, by contrast, in Campiglia's pastoral drama characters can employ 'vano amore' with two different meanings. On the one hand, some members of the group to which Flori belongs use it as a synonym for excessive and thus impossible love. On the other, Flori and others employ it in a different way. She is aware that she has aimed at something impossible ('l'impossibil dietro') but has no intention of referring by this to the *topos* of impossibility and its articulations that we have met several times in this thesis. Nor does she see herself as mad for being fond of a woman. As Flori confesses after the ceremony, she is very proud of her love for Amaranta as well as of what it has led to in poetry. Nonetheless, the nymph also recognises that she has experienced overwhelming feelings for a lady even though she has passed away,[156] in conflict with the laws of Nature (III.5:138-160; my italics):

> Ma a che dubbiar? Amai purtroppo, è vero,

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[155] I will restrict myself to a couple of examples from Licori: 'Deh mal aggia quegli/ ch'introdusse giamai tra queste selve/ questi fra ninfe vani amori e ciancie' (I.5:158-160); 'Ma se a nodo giugal pensi, lasciamo/ (od a vano altro amor) di più parlarne' (V.2:58-59).

[156] Other passages from the *Flori* seem to confirm this hypothesis. For instance, shepherd Serrano is in love with Flori and he is aware that she is focused on Amaranta so he states, thinking that his efforts will probably be pointless: 'Il pensar che sarebbon tratte al vento/ le mie parole, e ogn'opra con costei,/ ch'a vano amor con questa ninfa morta/ attendeva, sprezzando ogni pastore […]' (I.4:103-106). Silvano also expresses a similar concept: 'Questa è Flori/ quella ninfa che va per Amaranta/ morta sì addolorata; o ch'è ben pazza/ se dietro a morta e femina si strugge' (I.6:39-42). Please note the enjambement including the play on words 'Amaranta/ morta' which seems to emphasise Amaranta's status.

e viva e morta la più chiara ninfa,
per grazia e per virtù, ch'unqua Diana
seguisse in selva o 'n prato.
né già con brame più d'affetto calde
alcun amante il suo pregiato oggetto
seguì, né meno in terra
cosa mortal fu mai più riverita;
ma così pure, e così oneste, furo
le voglie mie, che stanchi e mille e mille
dei più degni scrittor verrebon prima
che adombrar pur potessero una parte
del mio candido, vero affetto santo.
Ma quanto fida ed altretanto pazza
(lassa) ben fui, che a *l'impossibil dietro*
(di me stessa nimica), incontro al cielo
ho pugnato finora, non mirando
che s'a morte ella cesse, e di natura
tali sono le leggi, che chi nasce
a tal necessità soggetto nasce,
dovea quetar il duolo
al voler di chi 'l mondo a un cenno regge.
ora non più cordogli, non più folle.

Tellingly, whilst in one of Campiglia's literary models, Tasso's *Aminta*, the nymph Silvia is described as 'pazzarella' because she does not want to bow to love and have children, in conflict with the natural order of things,[157] Flori is, instead, undoubtedly a victim of love.

[157] 'DAFNE: Vorrai dunque pur, Silvia,/ dai piaceri di Venere lontana/ menarne tu questa tua giovinezza?/ Né 'l dolce nome di madre udirai,/ né intorno ti vedrai vezzosamente/ scherzar i figli pargoletti? Ah, cangia,/ cangia,

Although it is true that she refuses to love men, her adoration for Amaranta has totally engulfed her. Even after the ceremony, Flori does not disavow her love for her since she does not think that her feelings were immoral or inappropriate. On the contrary, she firmly holds that they inspired her excellent verses which the best poets cannot rival.[158]

Even when Licori attempts to convince her to opt for the 'common uso' (that is, the traditional union between a man and a woman), Flori fiercely defends her ideas and pushes through her opposition to customs which she evaluates in a negative way (Ultsch, 2005b, p. 358).[159] As we have seen, she accepts Alessi only because he agrees to establish a perfectly balanced union, in which the man fully supports her ambitions and her views. I would like to emphasise this aspect since, within the framework of the Italian literary tradition, the female figure often tends to be treated more as an object shaped by the male gaze than a subject with her own agency, or more as a muse than a poet. It is for this reason that I do not agree with Schneider (2010, p. 129, n. 39) when he holds that in *Flori*, as well as in *Mirtilla*, 'besides a "transgendered" Petrarchan erotic initiation, one continues to find a classic Petrarchan lover such as, for example, the character Alessi'.

In the same vein, I would like to offer an alternative reading to that proposed by Roberto Gigliucci. The scholar (2004, p. 52) sees the relationship between Flori and Alessi as an

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prego, consiglio,/ pazzarella che sei.// SILVIA: Altri segua i diletti de l'amore,/ se pur v'è ne l'amor alcun diletto:/ me questa vita giova, e 'l mio trastullo/ è la cura de l'arco e de gli strali;/ seguir le fere fugaci, e le forti/ atterrar combattendo; e, se non mancano/ saette a la faretra, o fere al bosco,/ non tem'io che a me manchino diporti' (Tasso, 1952:92-107).

[158] In this respect, it would be of great interest to explore some implications of Flori's stance but, unfortunately, the purposes as well as the material limitations of this thesis do not allow for this. For instance, as is well-known, Vittoria Colonna devoted part of her *Rime* to her dead husband Ferdinando Francesco d'Avalos. In her tenacious love for Amaranta, could Flori be attempting to emulate her poetic model?

[159] See for instance: 'Esser posso felice senza il fine/ che gli amanti del volgo invoglia e prende' (V.1:84-85) and 'Già da la sciocca plebe io m'allontano/ che in cosa vil compiace il gusto (...)' (V.1:108-116).

'amore honesto e spirituale, fondato su una concezione aristocratica e saffico-platonica dell'eros e dell'esistenza'. Notably, from Gigliucci's perspective (p. 52),

> Flori risulta un'estremizzazione dell'amore cortese–petrarchista, in quanto l'autoreferenzialità narcissica svela in lei la sostanza omofila, che è evidentemente cara alla Campiglia. La non carnalità dell'amore, del resto inevitabile autocensura d'autrice, rende ancora più aspro e arduo il progetto di vita di Flori, che brama risiedere nell'impossibile, portando fin quasi all'esasperazione sublime la condizione dell'amante prigioniero e autoimprigionantesi. Flori radicalizza la verticalità, rifiutando l'orizzontalità pragmatica e gioiosa delle altre coppie.[160]

As I have attempted to demonstrate earlier, Flori's longing for the unattainable does not lie in the alleged impossibility of queer love or in its inability to physically satisfy the woman involved. It is problematic, too, to establish with certainty whether Campiglia might have censored some aspects linked to sexuality.[161] There are no certain proofs of this. Finally, in contrast to Ardelia in Andreini's *Mirtilla*, I submit that it is not clear which elements from Flori's story may allude to some form of narcissistic love.

Both Gigliucci (2004) and Schneider (2010) can be set within that consistent portion of scholarship on Campiglia which mainly focuses on philological and linguistic issues. Its contribution is relevant since it helps to contextualise the texts, assimilate their links with

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[160] What is more, although Gigliucci alludes to gender studies-oriented research on the *Flori*, he does not take them into consideration, but simply restricts himself to mentioning Perrone's introduction to her edition of the *Calisa* (1996).

[161] Nonetheless, it is worth bearing in mind that, as Cox and Sampson (2004, p. 19) have rightly stressed, 'the particular solemnity of tone of the *Flori* may reflect Campiglia's situation as a "respectable" woman tentatively experimenting with secular fiction. Certainly, a sharp difference may be registered in this respect between Campiglia's *Flori* and Isabella Andreini's *Mirtilla* (...). As an actress, Andreini was less strictly bound by decorum than was a member of the civic elite like Campiglia, while, as a married woman in a supportive marriage, she had less to fear than Campiglia from malicious tongues. Perhaps partly in consequence, the *Mirtilla* is significantly less "grave" than the *Flori* and more sensual and carefree in tone'. A similar notion is also emphasised by Riccò (2004, pp. 328-329, n. 5).

ancient and contemporary sources and shed light on the relationships between writers and intellectuals. These researchers have therefore emphasised those aspects of Campiglia's works which would most resonate with the cultural and spiritual framework of early modern Italy. As a result, several of them – such as Gigliucci and Schneider cited above – have failed to pay particular attention to the meaning of *donna-con-donna* love or to its implications in Campiglia's texts. In so doing, as we have already seen, they have emphasised the dimensions of Campiglia's work particularly related to Neoplatonism, Petrarchism and adherence to a Counter-Reformation spirituality. As a result, for instance, Rumor (1897, p. 15) has claimed that '[Campiglia] visse contenta nel silenzio della sua cella, che sopra ogni altra cosa valse a destare nella sua anima contemplativa quei nobili sentimenti, che infiorano e spargono di una soave fragranza tutti i suoi scritti'. De Marco (1988, p. 11), too, has highlighted 'l'aspetto squisitamente religioso che permea buona parte dei suoi scritti', whereas Riccò (2004, pp. 328-329, n. 5) reads the *Flori* as a story featuring 'una doppia follia amorosa (…) per di più di origine saffica nella ninfa Flori (anche se infine ricondotta all'ordine naturale per volontà di Amore-Prologo)'. Perrone (1996, pp. 43-45) sees, instead, in Flori's relationships with Amaranta and Alessi allusions to an array of *auctoritates*, from Sappho to Andrea Cappellano, including Dante, Petrarch, Ficino and St Augustin. Perrone (1996, p. 46) has also proposed a layered reading of woman-woman love in *Flori*: it would allude to Sappho, the most excellent of women poets and a model for Campiglia herself, [162] as well as to a step in a

[162] 'L'amore fra donne, inoltre, che vanta l'illustre precedente della poesia saffica, appare perfettamente in linea con l'ammirazione ideologico-letteraria per il mondo antico greco e romano che caratterizza l'età rinascimentale. (…) Non meraviglia, quindi, che nella nostra tradizione letteraria ella [: Saffo] simboleggi l'eccellenza e l'eccezionalità della donna che scrive in poesia, e che nella sua poesia si riconosca una gentildonna di raffinata educazione letteraria come la Campiglia, rivisitandola secondo il fondamentale canone umanistico-rinascimentale dell'imitazione e riconoscendola quale *auctoritas* indiscussa: proprio in quanto *auctoritas* femminile, ella può meglio di ogni altra legittimare la sua [: of Campiglia] pretesa a un posto al sole nel panorama delle lettere. Da qui la scelta dell'amore fra donne, che nei circoli femminili greci era un rapporto elevato, nobilitante e quindi atto a essere caricato di sovrasensi filosofici; da qui, anche, l'artificio letterario della vicenda d'amore realmente vissuta' (Perrone, 1996, pp. 44-45).

spiritual path from sin to the discovery of 'amore cristiano come amore intellettuale'. For Perrone (1996, p. 59), *donna-con-donna* love would also be a 'mezzo di eversione dello *status quo* sessuale, sociale ed intellettuale, raggiungendo l'acme nella *Calisa*'.

Like Perrone, other researchers (such as Ultsch, 2005a and 2005b; Carinci, 2013) have looked at Flori's story and the particular bond between Flori and Amaranta from a perspective more informed by feminist scholarship and women's studies, stressing the importance of the heroine's independence from men as well as Flori's attempts to challenge the boundaries usually imposed on women. As a result, Ultsch (2005a, p. 80, n. 15) has claimed that Flori can be healed thanks to an 'unprecedented, "androgynous" form of marriage that mediates between patriarchal society's rules and Flori's virginal desires', whilst Cox and Sampson (2004, pp. 24-26) have convincingly discussed the legitimacy and the limits of various interpretations of *donna-con-donna* love in *Flori*, while also warning against moralising and oversimplifying readings. They have therefore suggested paying attention to the ambiguities of the text and in the character of Flori. They have also emphasised the connection between independence from men, longing for poetic glory and the closeness of the nymph's relationship with her dead friend.

As this chapter demonstrates, to a large extent I concur with the thinking of Ultsch, Cox and Sampson. Nonetheless, I would like, too, to stress the resonance of some traits of the *Flori* with Love's theories (2007) that I have previously cited , on the links between queer and negative emotions as well as experiences. As Love demonstrates, over the centuries 'impossible' queer desire has often been associated with trauma, social stigma, marginalisation, sense of loss, bereavement and madness - and literary texts can hint at such enormous pain.

Flori, too, has to confront many of these emotions and experiences. Tellingly, because of her irregular feelings, she has to undergo a ritual to be purified from her love and re-enter her pastoral community. As Cox and Sampson (2004, p.16) explain, the ceremony displays macabre traits:

> An altar is prepared over the tomb of the dead nymph, Amaranta, and the event is marked by prayers, ritual processions, and propitiatory gifts, recalling funeral rituals in Sannazaro's Arcadia. Just before the ceremony itself, the mysterious foreign shepherd Alessi appears, as the god of Love had promised in the prologue. From this point, there is a distinct shift in tone. The predominantly melancholic mood, the morbid insistence on death, and dramatic representations of madness are dispelled and replaced by an atmosphere of hope and marvel, and by the promise of transcendence.[163]

It is telling that Flori is asked to renounce her insane passion at the very place where her beloved is buried: in a certain sense, I suggest that she is being asked to metaphorically entomb her transgressive love with Amaranta's corpse and start a new, hetero-normalised life with Alessi. Nevertheless, I would argue that in the *Calisa* (1589), the pastoral drama which follows the *Flori*, the heroine makes out the case for her heterodox feelings.

Calisa is an eclogue published on the occasion of the marriage between Giovan Paolo (Lico, in the pastoral world), the son of Isabella Lupi Pallavicini (that is, Calisa as well as the dedicatee of *Flori*), and Beatrice (Bice) degli Obizzi (Perrone, 1996). Nonetheless, like the *Discorso*, this work seems to express some critical or, at least, not particularly positive, ideas on marriage as an institution.

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[163] Perrone (1996, p. 38) has stressed that both Campiglia and Flori would have won over their homoerotic love 'per l'efficacia della preghiera e del sacrificio' (Morsolin, 1882, p. 39). Although, as we have seen, we are mindful that Campiglia certainly had some significant relationships with women, the current state of research makes it impossible to determine whether those or other bonds may have also had homoerotic connotations as Campiglia attempted to 'normalise' them.

Once more, Flori is the protagonist of the work but Alessi is no longer with her, perhaps as he has gone back to his homeland (Ultsch, 2005a, p. 88).[164] Tellingly, apart from a poetic celebration of the wedding between Lico and Bice, the eclogue includes a debate between Flori and the shepherd, Edreo, on the legitimacy of female-female love. Edreo attacks the nymph because she is again engaged in 'vanamente amando' (Campiglia, 1996:5) a woman, i.e. Calisa.[165] The man is perhaps an *alter ego* of the writer Muzio Manfredi (1535-1609).[166] As Cox and Sampson note (2004, pp. 24 and 27), Manfredi (in Campiglia, 1588, p. 76v) in fact wrote *Di bella Ninfa duo diversi amori*, a sonnet included in the first edition of the *Flori* that negatively comments on the homoerotic feelings of the nymph:

> Ma s'in te provi gli amorosi ardori
> O' s'altri per te n'have il petto ardente,
> Sai che Donna per Donna, alfin non sente
> Quel, che sentì, per AMARANTA FLORI.
> E però saggia ritornata; ALESSI
> Ama, felice aventuroso essempio
> Di chi contrasta à la Natura, amando.
> E di te, nova MUSA, honori espressi
> Tal ben l'insegni. Or chi sarà tant'empio,
> Che non essalti il nome tuo cantando?

Apart from applauding Campiglia's talent, Manfredi also takes the opportunity to criticise Flori's feelings for Amaranta and the madness they provoked since they are against nature.

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[164] Some lines from *Calisa* could, in fact, allude to Alessi's escape: 'Deh, caro Alessi mio, ove or ti stai?/ ché intorno qual solea sonar s 'udrebbe/ dolce al tuo canto ogni pendice e colle'(lines163-165). These words seem to prophetically resonate with those pronounced by Flori in the pastoral drama, when she asks herself, before her wedding: 'Poi chi m'assicura ch'io rivegga/ oimè, cara Licori,/ il mio straniero e fuggitivo amante?'(V.1:1-3).
[165] Here, I cite passages from Perrone's edition (Campiglia, 1996).
[166] On Manfredi see at least Pignatti (2007).

Accordingly, in the *Calisa*, Campiglia (1996:92-100) puts words in Edreo's mouth that recall Manfredi's:

> Veggio ch'a piaga ben antica in somma
> medica man pietosa nulla giova.
> Volea pur dolcemente ir lusingando,
> Fiori, del tuo pensier le cieche voglie,
> com'altre volte ho ancor tentato, e invano,
> esveller dal tuo cor quella radice
> d'amor nata pur dianzi inutilmente,
> chiaro mostrando a te ch'erri soverchio
> donna amando pur donna essendo, ahi folle!

Although the relationship between Calisa and Flori is pure, as the nymph stresses (for instance, in verses 84-85), Edreo highlights its pointless and insane nature, and even alludes to Flori's 'calda brama' (81) that animates it. In response, not only does Flori defend the virtue of her feelings, uncommon as they may be, but she also proudly announces her fragility before love (104-117):

> So che donna amo donna, ahi, ch'anzi adoro
> ninfa umile una dea celeste in terra,
> ma INFERMO gusto al suo peggior s'appiglia,
> né dritto sceme occhio ch'è infermo; e poi
> CHI pon freno agli amanti, o dà lor legge?
> Già cieca son d'amor, già vinta giace
> la ragion, né 'l discorso ha in me piu loco.
> Nel tempio del mio cor l'alma CALISA
> mio NUME è fatta et idol mio sovrano,

a cui già offerto ho le potenze e i sensi
e da lui preso ogni decretto e legge.
Com'ella vuole e vuole Amor mi reggo,
né a me piu giova libertade o pace
di quel che dare a me sia loro in grado.

Unlike Iphis or the other female characters we have met so far, Flori does not condemn herself for loving another woman, nor does she regard herself as a challenge to nature. Instead, she overtly claims the right to be fully subject to the power of Love, and, thus, to worship the woman to whom she is bonded as a goddess or a queen. This time, I would suggest, the heroine seems at last able to fully embrace her 'backward feelings' (Love, 2007) and employ them to plot her path forward by herself. She thus displays strong self-awareness, independence and agency as well as mastery of rhetoric.

As a result, Edreo surrenders to Flori's debating skills and admits that she is quite right to love a woman. Furthermore, the shepherd is so moved by her arguments that he wishes her 'strano (…) amor' to triumph (Campiglia, 1996:124-125):

Dunque, ama, Flori, e spera: un giorno forse,
benché strano è 'l tuo amor, ne corrai frutto.

Once more, as in the previous *favola pastorale,* Flori proves to be independent, eloquent and absolutely determined to protect her feelings as well as her lyric inspiration. In the eclogue Flori's relationship with poetry and her determination to engage with the boundaries imposed on women in the literary field are even more intense. For this reason, Cox and Sampson (2004, p. 24) have particularly stressed that:

> in her idealized portrayal of her relationship with her female patron in the *Calisa*, [Campiglia] does appear to be adumbrating the notion of a more autonomous and less dependent female-authored literature, in which the erotic self-sufficiency of a love discourse that places women in the roles of both subject and object figures the discursive self-sufficiency of a text both created by and addressed to a woman.

In the *Calisa*, as well in the *Flori*, the representations of the woman lover and her beloved conveyed by Flori are therefore very different from others we have met in this thesis: they aim neither to amuse the audience nor to titillate its voyeurism. Instead, they appear to be more concerned with the poetic success of both Flori and Campiglia (whose personalities, as I observe in Note 152, could perhaps overlap).

Accordingly, in discussing various interpretations of the eclogue and its meanings, Cox (2011, pp. 116-117) has focused her attention in particular on certain elements. They include the allusions in the *Calisa* to an alleged poetic body of work by Campiglia devoted to Isabella Lupi Pallavicini (which, unfortunately has not come down to us) and, as shown by some of the verse in praise of the *favola pastorale* (including Muzio Manfredi's that I have previously analysed), 'the insouciant manner in which Campiglia negotiates the scandal that her depiction of female-female desire in *Flori* appears to have occasioned in her literary circle' (2011, p. 116).

To sum up, if, at the end of the sixteenth century, in some literary circles the motif of *donna-con-donna* love was still taboo even when chastely presented (especially when treated by a woman writer), Campiglia transformed it into an instrument with which she was able to carve out new literary spaces for pursuing her goals.

10. Conclusions

As an idyllic, inaccessible female community, uncontaminated by the presence of men, a community of nymphs (like a nunnery) is an imaginary place into which readers can project their own erotic fantasies.[167] As we have seen, Guarini does precisely this in the *Pastoral fido*: the scene of the kissing contest seems based on a voyeuristic male gaze given that it offers greedy readers an opportunity to spy on a number of nymphs engaged in a passionate, sensual game dominated by sexual ambiguity. No surprise, then, that in the end Mirtillo appears to triumph over the maidens thanks to his masculinity. Looked at the other way round, women seem to have a marginal role in the *gara dei baci*: in fact, they resemble mere props in a masquerade dominated by the erotic egocentrism of the narrator. Nonetheless, as I have shown, this is not enough to dissipate the queerness and male anxiety suffusing the episode.

Andreini and Campiglia propose completely different stories, each of them in her own voice and with her own attitude and goals. Their heroines are not nymphs serving as recipients of male desire. They are instead self-confident, independent and eager to explore their desires and feelings, not necessarily with a man by their side. Ardelia serves as the object and the subject of her desire: her narcissistic love is, thus, a powerful mechanism to increase her self-awareness and agency. Flori, too, in both of Campiglia's works, employs her love for Amaranta and Calisa to empower herself, carry on her spiritual path, refine her poetry and achieve her intellectual ambitions. If, on the one hand, both *Mirtilla* and *Flori* offer seemingly reassuring heteronormative endings, they also, on the other, to some extent exalt queer loves. In particular, in both her pastoral works and particularly in the *Calisa*, Campiglia

[167] In this respect, it evokes the modern Orientalist treatment of the harem (see, for instance, Ali, 2015), which was notably often considered a place where female homoerotic sex was widespread.

challenges the stigma, the marginalisation and the charge of madness with which the motif of impossible *donna-con-donna* love has been often associated down the centuries.

Accordingly, as I have tried to show in this chapter, Flori and Ardelia are not afraid of subverting literary and social conventions to defend their proto-feminist ideas. As a result, the self-affirming force and will they radiate are exceptional. Similarly, *Mirtilla*, *Flori* and *Calisa* are extraordinary for their literary value: they are erudite pieces of literature as well as thought provoking. As we have seen in Chapter One, Moderata Fonte and Giulia Bigolina have also displayed in their queer representations a similarly sympathetic and positive attitude towards their characters. They have also emphasised the importance of women's agency and homosocial dimension.

In conclusion, I submit that my research can, therefore, help emphasise how the exploration of the *donna-con-donna* motif was able to provide women writers such as Campiglia and Andreini with unusual, new spaces in which to deploy their poetic skills as well as their progressive ideas on the role and intellectual ambitions of women. As a result, I suggest, it can also contribute to reshaping the traditional literary canon which often marginalises early modern women writers.

CONCLUSION.

THE NEVER-ENDING 'ISTORIA BELLA'

1. Margaret of Austria in the Abyss

Petite, dressed in black, austere, respected: this is how Margaret of Austria (1480-1530), the Governor of the Habsburg Netherlands, appears to Zeno, the philosopher and alchemist protagonist of Marguerite Yourcenar's masterpiece *L'Œuvre au noir* (1968), better known in English as *The Abyss*. Zeno meets her on the occasion of the Treaty of Cambrai in 1529, the so-called Peace of the Ladies, which Margaret concluded with Louise of Savoy with the aim of putting an end to one phase of the wars between the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and French King Francis I. Although he looks with respect at Margaret, Zeno cannot but recall the rumours that he has heard about her. In order to discredit her, Margaret's enemies have claimed that she loves women. Nevertheless, they also believe that it is better for a woman to love another woman in a virile way than for a man to love a man and risk effeminacy (Yourcenar, 1976, p. 45). She is also said to be so anguished by the loss of her husband Philibert, who died several years earlier, that nothing can soothe her pain, including love of God, her cherished parrot L'Amant Vert or her affection for 'le doux visage de sa tendre compagne, Madame Laodamie' (Yourcenar, 1976, p. 45), the sweet face of her tender friend Laodomia, whose identity is not specified in the novel.

Yourcenar explains that she included a series of fictional elements in the novel's version of events. Others are real, she claims, such as Marguerite's love for her parrot and the attachment to Madame Laodamie (Yourcenar, 1976, p. 376). The writer adds, too, that she draws information on the relationship between the two women (as well as the statement on

donna-con-donna love mentioned above) from chronicler Brantôme. Brantôme, for his part, reports in *Les Dame Galantes*[168] that he had read about the chaste love between Margaret of Austria and Madame Laodamie in Firenzuola's *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne intitolato Celso*. His friend, Louis-Bérender du Gaust, however, claimed that their relationship was not, in fact, chaste at all (Brantôme, 1990, p. 127).

Yourcenar's portrait of Margaret of Austria is, of course, confused. She has conflated the figure we have encountered a number of times in this thesis – Margaret of Austria (1522-1586) – with her aunt, also called Margaret of Austria (1480-1530). The elder Margaret was one of the women involved in the treaty of Cambrai while the younger was the wife of Alessandro de' Medici and, after his assassination, of Ottavio Farnese of Parma, making her the duchess of Parma and Piacenza. She was later to become Governor of the Netherlands (like her aunt) as well. We have encountered this Margaret as a friend of the Sienese noblewoman, Laudomia Forteguerri, who devoted to her a cycle of sonnets laced with affection and respect. These sonnets were, as we have seen, praised by contemporaries including Brantôme, Firenzuola and Alessandro Piccolomini. While Italian admirers claimed the two women celebrated a close friendship and loved each other 'puramente e santamente' (Firenzuola, 1977, p. 734), the Frenchman (as we have seen) suggested they had a sexual relationship as well. Appraisals such as these testify to sixteenth-century interest in love between women, but no existing documents can clarify the precise nature of that love. Exactly what passed between the two continues to elude us.

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[168] A collection of risqué episodes about women at the French court, *Les Dames Galantes* was written between 1583 and 1614 but published posthumously in 1665.

Clearly, Yourcenar's aim is not to resolve doubts about Margaret's sexuality and her relationship with Laodamia. What she does offer, however, is a vision of an early modern noblewoman who loves both men and women and of a same-sex friendship in which sexual innocence and innuendo can coexist.[169] It is, of course, a fictional vision and not an historical document. However, the story draws attention to the writing of Laudomia Forteguerri and, indeed, of similar poets, like Gaspara Stampa, whose lyric poetry expresses deep if sexually ambiguous sentiments for other women. *L'Œuvre au noir* also offers this thesis conclusion a *fil rouge* that enables me to tie together some of the threads I have investigated during the course of this thesis.

2. Margaret of Austria in Laudomia's Lyric Verse

Margaret of Austria's 'Madame Laudamie' was the Sienese noblewoman Laudomia Forteguerri (1515-1555?).[170] Hailed by Konrad Eisenbichler (2012, p. 163) as quite possibly 'the first "lesbian" poet in the Italian vernacular tradition', Laudomia was actually married twice and the mother of three children. These facts, as well as a justified resistance to the excessive biographism that tends to hamper much analysis of early modern women's writing, encourage scholars to contextualise and nuance her self-avowed attachment to Margaret.[171]

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[169] As Emma Herdman (2011, p. 215) highlights, 'At the heart of the list [of things which cannot comfort Margaret after the death of her husband] the tender companionship of Madame Laodamie is rendered implicitly sexual both in the light of the earlier allegations, and in the context of finding a substitute for Philibert's love: the relationship may fail to compensate for Philibert's loss, but as a source of comfort it is equal to the love of God'.
[170] Laudomia Forteguerri who was proactively engaged in the cultural life of her hometown (Zarrilli, 1997; Eisenbichler, 2012, pp. 101-163) seems to have disappeared off the historical record in 1555. Indeed, for centuries her biography has featured numerous lacunae.
[171] Cox (2008, p. 314, n. 182) upholds that Eisenbichler 'overstresses lesbianism as a context' in Forteguerri. Some historians such as Zarrilli (1997) have defined the bond between Laudomia Forteguerri and Margaret of Austria in terms of friendship. Finally, Eisenbichler (2012, p. 136) himself invites us also to 'take into account [Laudomia Forteguerri]'s family politics and aspirations and not discount the possibilities that her works were motivated by more than just love for another person'.

The fact remains, however, that the only surviving poems penned by Forteguerri are six encomiastic sonnets composed to extol the virtues of two ladies: Alda Torella Lunata and Margaret of Austria.[172] These sonnets declare an unapologetic depth of affection and admiration for its addressees.

Rather than proffer a twenty-first century reading of these poems, it is worth looking to a sixteenth-century reader to see how these love sonnets written by a woman and addressed to a woman were originally received. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Alessandro Piccolomini – Forteguerri's friend and admirer – devoted a public lecture at the Accademia degli Infiammati of Padua in 1541 to the analysis and praise of her most famous sonnet for Margaret, *Or ten' vai superbo, or corri altiero*.[173] Noteworthy in this lecture is his entirely positive appraisal of the intimacy between the two women. Whether this is physical or emotional intimacy seems of no concern to the commentator; such bonds of friendship and loyalty deserve celebration no matter what their precise nature.

The lecture was published later that year with the title *Lettura*. In it, Piccolomini reported on the women's first meeting (probably in Siena in 1533) when 'subito di ardentissime fiamme d'Amore, l'una de l'altra si accese, di che manifestissimo segno fù, che più uolte da

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[172] The sonnet for Alda Torella Lunata reads: 'Il maggior don, che Dio e la natura/ Donasse a Noi mortal per abbellire/ Il mondo, e farlo d'ogni ben gioire,/ È della signora Alda la fattura.// Chi può veder l'angelica figura,/ Beato essere in tutto può ben dire,/ Chi può le saggie sue parole udire,/ Null'altro mai, che lei sentir procura.// Deh perché a me non è tanto concesso/ Da la mia sorte ria, dal fier destino,/ Ch'io veder possa l'angelico volto?// Ma sia che vuole, io pur nel petto impresso/Porto per relazion quel suo divino/ Aspetto; e questo mai non mi fia tolto' (Forteguerri in Maranini, 2010, p. 268). The first line recalls two Dantean loci, *Monarchia* I.XII.6 ('Maximum donum humanae naturae a Deo collatum') and *Paradiso* V:19-21 ('il maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando, e a la sua bontade / più conformato, e quel ch'e' più apprezza'), in which the Tuscan poet states that 'libero arbitrio' is the greatest divine gift to humankind. Forteguerri, too, depicted Alda as the most sublime offering by both Nature and God. In commenting on the poem, Anna Maranini (2008, p. 269) holds rightly that Forteguerri 'eccede nella esagerazione della lode' and that Alda Torella herself tended, too, to overuse hyperboles in her sonnets, since this custom was a 'vizio dell'epoca'.

[173] This very circumstance is exceptional since it was 'the first time a woman's poetry had been discussed publicly at a meeting of a learned academy' (Einsenbichler, 2012, p. 115).

poi con ambasciate si uisitarono' (Piccolomini, 1541, cit. in Eisenbichler, 2012, p. 310, n. 33).[174] Piccolomini also extolled the two women's love, pointing out that the passage of time and the distance between them did not affect their feelings for each other. Instead, when they met again, presumably in 1539, 'felicemente i dolcissimi loro Amori rinnouarono, & oggi più che mai, con auisi e da questa parte e da quella caldamente conseruano' (Piccolomini, 1541, in Eisenbichler, 2012, p. 310, n. 35). The celebratory poems included in the *Lettura* and written by various male poets (such as Emanuele Grimaldi and Benedetto Varchi) also applauded the relationship between the two women.[175] This is extremely interesting if compared with a partially similar work, Campiglia's *Flori*, since, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Muzio Manfredi's celebratory poem seems to criticise the *donna-con-donna* love that the pastoral drama features. Perhaps Manfredi and Piccolomini simply held different views on same-sex love. Or perhaps it was more the case that Piccolomini's strong affection for Forteguerri and his respect for Margaret of Austria's high rank discouraged any critique of the couple.[176] It is possible, too, that the quality of Forteguerri's poetry deserved Piccolomini's unequivocal praise, irrespective of its addressee.

Although her sonnets are imbued with erudition, they prove to be well-balanced and gracious. In *Or ten' vai superbo, or corri altiero,* Forteguerri addresses the River Tiber and illustrates Margaret's flourishing impact on the nature that surrounds her. In *Felice pianta, in ciel tanto gradita* Forteguerri asks her 'diva, d'Austria Margherita' for a portrait of herself

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[174] Diane Robin (2007, p. 150) claims that this kind of language was currently used and, thus, it is 'not necessarily meant to be taken as a sexual advance'.
[175] Eisenbichler (2012, p. 117) maintains that, in his sonnet to Forteguerri included in the volume, Piccolomini exalted the homoerotic relationship since 'by loving Margaret, Laudomia [would] come to appreciate the love that he, Alessandro, [bore] for her'. The scholar also argues (2012, pp. 119-121) that Varchi's poem might be read as a call for help, since he was interested in men and eager to find a way to sublimate his desire, as Forteguerri successfully did.
[176] Nonetheless, on other occasions, as Eisenbichler recalls (2012, pp. 123-128), Margaret of Austria was suspected of sexual misconduct.

since the poetess has given her 'del petto […] un pegno', that is the poem itself. *Or trionfante e più che mai superba* describes how fortunate Rome was to be hosting Margaret for some time. *A che il tuo Febo col mio Sol contende* states that Margaret is the real sun,[177] while in *Lasso, che 'l mio bel Sole i santi rai*, Forteguerri laments the painful absence of her *dea*. By employing a traditional cliché which sees women as weak beings, she also asks her beloved for mercy since 'non è impresa gloriosa/ Abbattere una del femineo sesso' (lines 13-14).[178] The poet, in other words, could have deserved Piccolomini's praise for a range of justifiable reasons, not least her learning and sheer poetic skill.

Indeed, Forteguerri does draw ideas, images and stylistic features from traditional Italian lyric poetry only to employ them with rare mastery. What is more, she expresses her feelings in a balanced and exquisite manner. Even when pining over the absence of her beloved, she maintains a dignified composure. Such dignity permits Piccolomini to champion her and ignore base considerations of the details behind the words. Even Eisenbichler (2012, p. 133) admits that 'though the images in Laudomia's sonnets for Margaret are clear, what is not clear is the depth of the emotion behind them'. Indeed, the beauty of this cycle of sonnets lies precisely in its queer resistance to an over-simple or biographical reading. It represents so much more than the factual questions to which it gives rise, including the question of the precise nature of her relationship with Margaret of Austria.

Lyric verse by sixteenth-century women was not always so discrete. If Laudomia Forteguerri employed elegant verses to evoke her feelings for Margaret of Austria, Gaspara

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[177] As Robert J. Rodini (1996, p. 70) emphasises with special regard to Vittoria Colonna and Chiara Matraini, 'the male object is frequently a sun around which the "io" moves in a satellite configuration'. In this case, Margaret is the sun which attracts her lover Laudomia and, at the same time, enlightens what surrounds her.
[178] For a detailed discussion of the sonnets, see at least Robin (2007, pp. 151-158) and Eisenbichler (2012, pp. 114-136).

Stampa portrayed what appears to be a tormented passion for her friend Mirtilla in her *capitolo ternario* entitled *Non aspettò giamai focoso amante* (*Rime*, 296).[179] Vittoria Colonna, meanwhile, was open about her ardent desire for her husband and relentless grief at his passing. Laudomia's sonnets, by contrast, chose not to categorise her feelings but to celebrate that most-prized gift in early modern culture of genuine intimacy without revealing too much about its shape or form. Laudomia's sonnets to Margaret belie the invisibility and impossibility of *donna-con-donna* bonds in the early modern period. It is right, therefore, that the last early modern word in this thesis should go to her.

3. Legacies

In her 1960s novel, Yourcenar presents the love of a woman – and not just of any old woman, but a high-ranking, ruling aristocrat and widow – for other women as natural and unproblematic. I hope to have done something similar in this thesis, highlighting those aspects within several early modern texts that present the topos of queer female love and desire. Across a range of genres, I have sought to show how early modern authors used the topos in a variety of ways and for a multiplicity of purposes, from amusing audiences and titillating their senses to complicating plots and creating suspense. Some, such as Pietro Aretino and Gregorio Leti, depicted very risqué episodes taking place in convents in order to rail against the false moralism of the Catholic church, whereas others, like Maddalena Campiglia and Giulia Bigolina, portrayed wise and learned maidens involved in tender same-sex relationships to demonstrate how much women can live fulfilling lives independently of men.

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[179] A *capitolo ternario* is a poetic form which originates from the structure of the *Divina Commedia*'s *canto* (called *capitolum* by Dante), based on *terzine* (sections of three lines). On Stampa see at least Falkeid and Feng (2015); Farnetti (2017); Lalli (2019). On the relationship between Stampa and Mirtilla, see Capodivacca (2015).

All in all, writers displayed a spread of attitudes towards queer female desire, ranging from sympathy – as in Ariosto – to resentment – as in the chauvinist author who penned the *Manganello* with its *donna-con-donna* scenes that purport to expose the existential corruption of women.

The female protagonists of the texts I have examined hail from a variety of social categories: they include children, nuns, girls of marriageable age, nymphs, *malmaritate* and prostitutes as well as princesses like Fiordispina or warriors like Risamante from *Floridoro*. In some cases, they are virgins while others have or have had a male partner. They make love, in turn, to various sorts of women from servants, novices and mistresses to siblings and friends. Several comedies feature women cross-dressed as men or men cross-dressed as women and a host of complicated partnerships enabled by the gender confusion while there are even instances of women falling in love with themselves, as Isabella and Giovan Battista Andreini illustrate.

What I have wanted to demonstrate is that same-sex love, affection and desire took a variety of forms in early modern Italian literature, that it was both explicit and implicit, and that it expressed itself in titillating foreplay, full-blown sex, scopophilia, cross-dressing, role playing, erotic talk, narcissism and drag performances, as well as in subtle compliments and elegant amorous verse. Furthermore, as Faderman (1981) has shown, the friendly gestures and words contained in some of these texts sought ostensibly to conceal – but actually revealed – socially transgressive loves in order to render them more acceptable.

The woman-loving women in the texts I have analysed express an equally diverse range of reactions to same-sex love from shame, pain and desperation (for example, Lucrezia from Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro*) to false modesty (Lavinia in Firenzuola's *Novella seconda*); and

from pride (see Flori in Campiglia's *Calisa*) to arousal (the nun Beatrice in Leti's *Nuovo Parlatorio delle monache*). Some express curiosity and excitement as their homoerotic experiences help them come to terms with their sexuality (Giulia and Pippa in Pseudo-Aretino's *Dialogo di Giulia e Madalena* are two prime examples), while others revel in the freedom of homoerotic desire (as does Ardelia from Isabella Andreini's *La Mirtilla*).

Several such literary characters have to confront bias and prejudice surrounding the impossibility of woman-woman love from their authors or other characters. Some come to feel that same-sex love breaks the laws of nature and that it transgresses social boundaries. Many regret their lack of a penis, or their partner's lack, revealing the phallocentric conception of sexuality that prevailed in early modern Italy. In such cases, as we have seen, a man is often brought in to dispel any doubt and, with his gigantic or vigorous anatomy, he corrects any irregular *donna-con-donna* desires. Indeed, the real interest in many texts featuring love between women is not same-sex love itself but masculinity and its vulnerabilities. The masculinity of male characters in queer tales is often under threat. To win the heart of women or to reach other goals, they often have to compete with women (as happens in Guarini's *gara dei baci*), cross-dress or behave like women or even run the risk of over-identifying with them (as does Scaramuccia in Scala's *Il finto marito*). Love between women in such cases permits men, therefore, to reassert their masculinity, to dissipate social anxieties over gender roles and expectations, and to re-establish a heteronormative order.

If masculinity is often a chief concern in the texts I've explored, gender divisions and sexuality more broadly are also common topics of interest. Early modern Italian texts abound with androgynous figures whose gender and sexuality remain ambiguous. Through such subversive, non-conforming figures, feelings and experiences, some of the texts discussed challenge and explore the multiple tensions surrounding heteronormativity, authority and

moralism. As such, they offer subtle and nuanced insights into early modern attitudes towards sex, gender, bodies, relationships and desires. The gender and sexual fluidity expressed in many of the characters and texts I have studied offers a vision of human identity that is more complex and less binary than our own.

Far from invisible, impossible or non-existent, then, episodes of same-sex love between women abound in early modern Italian literature and form a rich and nuanced narrative. At their worst, early modern authors chastise and poke fun at queer women. At their best, they portray them sympathetically and permit woman-loving women to spearhead serious investigations into masculinity, femininity and the spectrum of gendered behaviours and sexual preferences. Yourcenar's *L'Œuvre au noir* seems to suggest that we might wish to preserve this image of love and desire on a spectrum, and to celebrate the ambiguities surrounding the early modern queer rather than attempting to resolve them. My research has reached a similar conclusion. Rather than become mired in the futile quest of labelling *donna-con-donna* love, it has found greater value in exploring the early modern queer as an 'open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8). Scholarly readings of early modern literary texts stand to benefit enormously from such an approach.

That is not to suggest, of course, that early modern attitudes to sexuality and sexual preference were wholly enlightened. In her novel, Yourcenar stressed the hostility and bigotry experienced by people who transgressed gender boundaries in sixteenth-century Europe. In her text, a woman making love to another was susceptible to reproach if tolerable, while a man doing the same to a man risked compromising his manhood and even breaking the law. The implication seems to be that the relative invisibility of same-sex love between women in

literature was more a case of censorship and of omission than of non-existence. On the flip-side of such suppression comes hearsay, calumny and rumour. Yourcenar's story of Margaret and Laudomia takes account of all these things. And these are phenomena that I, too, have found in the early modern texts gathered here. Viewed in the round, references to same-sex desire range from hints, nods and winks through sympathetic if humorous portrayals to parody and satire and lean, ultimately, towards the negative and critical. After gathering in one place all such representations of queer love, we would do well to assess and evaluate the negative emotional and existential baggage evidenced in these texts, as Heather Love (2007) and Ann Cvetkovich (2003) have already done. While literary texts (such as the ones I have brought together here) cannot be taken as historical sources, they can still be read for the traces of broader, real-world attitudes they reflect and perhaps even engender. My aim here has not been, however, to judge these texts centuries after the event, but to encourage further literary analysis and archival research with a view both to forming a clearer picture of the past and to shining a brighter light on the present. As we rethink our history and our historiography, we learn to see more clearly our present, its customs, habits and prejudices. Traub (2002, p. 32) wished that her book on Renaissance lesbianism would help to:

> keep open the question of the relationship of present identities to past cultural formations –assuming neither that we will find in the past a mirror image of ourselves nor that the past is so utterly alien that we will find nothing usable in its fragmentary traces.

My hope is that this thesis will encourage a similar openness to past-present relations.

4. Future Directions.

Apart from Laudomia Forteguerri, other women poets dedicated verses to a woman which might perhaps have involved queer feelings.[180] Gaspara Stampa, mentioned above, dedicated passionate lines to her beloved Mirtilla, Fiammetta Soderini addressed *Febo nell'ocean tuffato avendo* (1571) to Virginia Fieschi, while Laura Battiferri wrote five sonnets published in her *Primo Libro delle Opere Toscane* (1560) for noblewomen Lucrezia de' Soderini and Ortensia Colonna in which one can find 'impreviste tenerezze d'accento e accorati fremiti d'amore' (Montanari, 2005, p. 20).[181] Musician and poet Tarquinia Molzaly has been said to have written 'no romantic poetry that we can unequivocally assume to be directed to a man' (Riley, 1980, p. 99, n. 10),[182] whilst Maddalena Casulana,[183] 'the first female composer in western music history to have her music published' (Schubert, 2018, p.

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[180] As far as one knows, husbands and male partners were not always at the centre of their poetic interests: these women primarily wrote poetry for their pleasure, to maintain relationships (with male and female friends, colleagues, patrons), to seek for sponsorship, to look for poetic glory.

[181] Also known as Laura Battiferra or Battiferri degli Ammannati (1523-1589), she was a much appreciated poet (Girardi, 1970; Rabitti, 1994; Battiferri degli Ammannati, 2006, Kirkham, 2007). She travelled across Italy with her second husband Bartolomeo Ammannati, Florentine architect and sculptor, and was in contact with several writers and intellectuals, such as Bernardo Tasso and Annibal Caro. *Così come in un forte animo altero* and *Di fredda speme e calda tema cinta* are addressed to Lucrezia de' Soderini, whilst *Qui tanto, ahi lassa, a me negletta e schiva*, *Nasce la vita mia dal mio morire*, and *In riso e 'n pianto, fra paura e spene* were written for Ortensia Colonna. In particular, when commenting on *Nasce la vita mia dal mio morire* for Ortensia Colonna, Montanari (2005, pp. 20-21) stresses the intriguing emotions that run throughout the text: 'Non sappiamo se al di sotto di quella sottile schermaglia di sospiri e di disperazioni si celi un autentico tormento amoroso della poetessa, o se essa nasca da un atteggiamento di puro gioco compositivo. Non ci pare comunque che altri nel Cinquecento abbiano raggiunto l'intonazione così dolcemente e gradevolmente ambigua che è in questo sonetto, dove non sai mai se tutto sia vero o falso, ma il fascino di quella supposta condizione (qualunque la si giudichi) si converte tutto nella delizia di una forma che si costruisce e si snoda in una mirabile armonia compositiva'.

[182] Tarquinia Molza (1542-1617) was a talented poet, musician, composer and singer (Catelli, 2011). She worked for the Este court in Ferrara as a performer and lady-in-waiting to Margherita Gonzaga, Alfonso II's third wife. She also actively took part in the Concerto delle Dame, an exceptional women's ensemble (Stras, 2018). In 1589, upon the discovery of her affair with the composer Jacques de Wert, Molza came back to Modena, where her house became a cultural hub. In 1600, she was 'the one and only woman that had ever been granted honorary Roman citizenship' (Jaffe, 2002, p. 311). For a discussion on homoeroticism in Molza, see at least Riley (1980) and Jaffe (2002).

[183] A much appreciated professional musician, Tuscan Maddalena Casulana (or Vicentina) (c. 1540-?) worked in Northern Italy as a music teacher, composer and performer. She supposedly got married and took the family name Mezari or De Mezari. After her marriage she kept working, but information on her activities is very scarce, only covering her life up to 1591. What she did after that date, when or where she died remain unknown. On her life and work, see at least Newcomb (1986, pp. 106-108), Thomasin (2002), Bolcato (2010), Schubert (2018) and Perocco (2019).

47), appears to have written 'most of [her] poems [addressing] passion for a woman, sometimes with erotic imagery of the female body' (Mockus, 2000, p. 515). While these authors have been retrieved from obscurity and justifiably celebrated in recent decades, there is still much that can be said about them from a queer studies perspective.[184] Though my thesis is unable for reasons of word-length and time to do them full justice, I hope it has shown the value of queer studies to the study of early modern texts and paved the way for just such a study in the future.

Queer studies approaches to early modern literature permit us to embrace ambiguity and engage in non-binary readings in ways that are historically senstitive. Reflecting on women's poetry from a queer perspective, as Love (2009) has argued, can also prompt us to reflect on the difficulty of knowing when to just stop conjecturing about the 'gory details' of the past and accept uncertainty and ambiguity as part of what happened. Queer studies can also encourage us to rethink a spectrum of homoerotic and homosocial relationships and forms of intimacy, a continuum in which women were actively involved (as mothers, wives, companions, friends, intellectuals…) and which could encompass love, affection, friendship and patronage as well as sex and spiritual affinity. Furthermore, I would suggest that queer studies can contribute to problematise the status of women poets since, as Thomasin LaMay (2002, p. 43) has originally stressed in reference to Maddalena Casulana, 'in a popular culture that saw exceptionally talented women as having lost their biological roles as women […] in that binary theoretical system, they were in some sense men, or at the very least man-*like'*. Women authors were, in fact, certainly cognizant of the fact that they had to confront several

[184] These and other women writers have been the object of important study since the 1970s when Joan Kelly Gadol asked the question 'Did Women have a Renaissance?'. Seminal studies in the recovery and championing of their work include (to name just a few): Brundin (2008); Cox (2008; 2011; 2013); Brundin, Crivelli and Sapegno (2016); Farnetti (2017).

secular prejudices, such as those regarding female intellectual activities, and consequently develop strategies which might involve the queer.

The Forteguerri case study above, as well as the episode from *L'Œuvre au noir*, prompt us to discuss the substance and the limits of the traditional literary canon which, as stated in the introduction of this thesis, has frequently given only a liminal place to some women writers and some specific motifs (including that of *donna-con-donna* love and desire).[185] Exploring the literary representations of *donna-con-donna* love and desire with a special emphasis on a queer framework does not imply an anachronistic reading of the texts. Instead, it involves delving into the historical, socio-cultural and intellectual complexity of writers, as well as of sources and motifs. It entails recognising that there was a lively, productive and sometimes even problematic exchange between society and literature.

My parting hope is that this thesis will encourage new research in the history of woman-woman relationships and further analyses of its presence not only in literature but in other branches of the arts. Painting and visual culture, in particular, provide rich pickings for future research, often testifying to an early modern fascination with the *donna-con-donna* motif. Intriguing, homoerotic artworks devoted to the myth of Diana and Callisto abound.[186] Think of Titian's painting (1556-1559), to quote just one. Popular, too, are images of nymphs bathing, such as Parmigianino's fresco *Saletta di Diana e Atteone* in the Rocca di San Vitale

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[185] As Laura Giannetti emphasises, 'modern scholars (...) can *learn* about the existence of love and erotic desire between women in the Renaissance, even if it means reading beyond a canon that largely ignored works that discussed such themes' (Giannetti, 2009, pp. 110-111; Giannetti's italics).

[186] According to the legend, the nymph Calisto was seduced by Jupiter in the guise of Diana. One day, whilst bathing, the nymphs discovered Calisto's pregnancy and Diana banned her. Calisto's child was named Arcas. Calisto's story was first told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (II:401-530) (Colpo, 2011) and inspired several early modern painters such as Palma il Vecchio and Titian, thus testifying to the circulation of the motif of female same-sex love among artists. For a survey of these works, see the list offered in *Iconos*, a website devoted to the artistic imagery evoked by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and edited by the Cattedra di Iconografia e Iconologia, Dipartimento di Storia dell'arte e spettacolo, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Sapienza Università di Roma: http://www.iconos.it/le-metamorfosi-di-ovidio/libro-ii/giove-callisto-diana/immagini/ [accessed 5 January 2021].

(Fontanellato, Parma, 1522-1524), and works illustrating the episode of Bradamante and Fiordispina, like the paintings by Guido Reni (1632-1635) and Cornelio De Witte (1577-1589). The *gara dei baci* by Battista Guarini's *Pastor fido*, too, inspired visual representations such as Anton van Dyck's *Gara dei Baci con Amarilli e Mirtillo* (1630). It is also worth mentioning that several paintings featuring the allegorical biblical figures of Peace and Justice together are often depicted as two beautiful women hugging and kissing (Costarelli, 2018).[187] This representation is firmly based on the verse, 'Righteousness and Peace kiss each other' from *Psalm* (85:10), which artists and patrons may or may not have taken more literally in their work.[188]

The musical field, too, deserves careful examination from a feminist queer studies perspective. In Chapter Two, I cite Ludovico Bottegari's song *Monicella mi farei* (c. 1574), in which the idea of same-sex relationships between nuns is considered exciting. It would be extremely interesting to explore the works of early modern women musicians such as Francesca Caccini (1587–1641?) and Isabella Leonarda (1620–1704) who, according to Martha Mockus (2000, p. 515), 'invite lesbian interpretations'.

The excerpt from *L'Œuvre au noir* prompts us, of course, to look with more attention at the afterlives of real and fictional early modern women who may have experienced *donna-con-donna* feelings. They can reveal a wealth of information about past and present notions of gender, sexuality, identity and morality. In the introduction to this thesis, I mentioned Paul Verhoeven's forthcoming film *Benedetta*, which promises to be a risqué version of the story of abbess Benedetta Carlini related by Judith Brown in *Immodest Acts*, and Simona Baldelli's

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[187] My thanks to Paolo Pegoraro for this suggestion.
[188] See, for example, the *Allegoria della Pace e della Giustizia che si baciano*, attributed to Giuseppe Nuvolone (1630-1649).

novel *La vita a rovescio*. It is also worth recalling at least the afterlives of Bradamante and Fiordispina as told by Sir John Harington (1560–1612) and John Gay (1685–1732) (Mac Carthy, 2019), or Francesco Lanza's *favola ariostesca Fiordispina* (1928) which discusses in comic and dramatic accents the dynamics between Fiordispina and Bradamante (Somma, 2019). In analysing all these works it would be interesting, too, to ask oneself questions such as: what meanings do authors, directors and playwrights give to early modern queer stories? What elements of the texts do they emphasise, censor or modify according to their taste or to common social currency?

A skilled and accomplished writer, Marguerite Yourcenar graciously enabled her readers to feel all the complexity and the *fascino* of early modern woman-woman stories. In a far more modest way, my thesis has also tried to stimulate interest in the *donna-con-donna* motif and to contribute to the discussion and problematisation of gender, sexuality and identity in the early modern Italian context. In so doing, I have attempted to offer convincing reflections on, and answers to, questions that have long engaged scholars. And I hope that these claims, in turn, lead to further debate about queer love and desire between women in early modern Italian literature as well as on the 'istorie belle' they have inspired.

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