

Beyond Duality: the ‘Choreography’ of Gender in Dacia Maraini’s novels

Maria Morelli

University of Leicester

Dacia Maraini has created a body of work that questions the mechanisms of oppression and manipulation at play within the economy of a heterosexual regime. This means challenging the role of women inasmuch as they are primarily identified as wives and mothers, a challenge linked to and emerging from the questioning of the notion of the (female) body as performing certain gender roles which are, in Judith Butler’s words, ‘a legacy of sedimented acts’ (Butler, 1988).

Following this line of enquiry, in this article I will be looking at the question of female sexuality as tackled in three works by Dacia Maraini: *Donna in Guerra* (1975), *Storia di Piera* (1980) and *Lettere a Marina* (1981). I shall posit that, although at odds with the gender roles patriarchal society would expect them to fulfil, the female characters portrayed in these texts do not seem willing to embrace an exclusive sexuality either. Rather, they would appear more inclined to perform what Butler defines as a ‘process’ or a ‘becoming’ (Butler, 1988) or, in my reading, Jacques Derrida’s utopia of a ‘choreography’ of gender (Derrida and McDonald, 1982), understood as an adamant rebuttal of any essentialist, prescriptive, interpretation of gender and sexuality.

In Maraini’s narratives gender formation translates into an on-going process which—resonating with a Derridean utopia—becomes less a matter of seeking a unifying subject than of expressing the blurring of the boundaries of a single, unitary category.

‘What if we were to approach...the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating?’

—Choreographies, Jacques Derrida

An acute observer of and an active participant in Italian reality, Dacia Maraini has created a body of work that gives an insightful account of the plight of women through different epochs.¹ Hers is an opus which questions the mechanisms of oppression and manipulation at play within the economy of a heterosexual regime while promoting the idea that the re-appropriation of one’s identity begins from *within*: a new politics which starts from the body, understood as a site of agency charged with subversive potential.² But she is also, at the same time, always looking to effect change in the real world. Indeed, as she herself has pointed out in a recently published interview, in all her works, “the relationship between the person[al] and the collective—meaning

the political, not political in the sense of parties but *ethical*—those fundamental values are there” (quoted in Seger, 2011, p.29; Maraini's emphasis).

In the first instance, this means challenging the traditional role of women inasmuch as they are primarily identified as wives and mothers, a challenge linked to and emerging from the questioning of the notion of the (female) body as performing certain gender roles which are, in the words of American philosopher Judith Butler, “a legacy of sedimented acts” (Butler, 1988, p.523). Namely, they are gender scripts which, being passed down from generation to generation, women are called to constantly re-enact. Ever since the publication, in 1990, of her influential *Gender Trouble*, issues of gender, sexuality and performance have always been central in the work of Butler, whose main goal is the destabilisation of the traditional notion of the subject, aimed at exposing its performative nature. For stressing how, far from being a cause, the subject is rather a *result* of a series of Foucauldian structures of powers—“identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses, with multiple and diffuse points of origin”—, Butler's argument proves to be illuminating here (Butler, 1990, pp.viii-ix; Butler's emphasis).

Following this line of enquiry, in this article I will be looking at the question of female sexuality in three works by Dacia Maraini written between the mid-1970s and the beginning of the following decade: *Donna in guerra* (1975), *Storia di Piera* (1980) and *Lettere a Marina* (1981). My analysis will highlight the subversion of the socially prescribed gender roles allotted to women within a male-defined perspective. I will suggest that, although at odds with the gender roles patriarchal society would expect them to fulfil, the female characters portrayed in these texts do not seem willing to embrace a 'pure', exclusive sexuality either. To this end, I shall turn to the work of French feminist Monique Wittig and her formulation of a “third gender” (the lesbian) to suggest that, although radically departing from patriarchal heterosexuality and being virtually contemporaneous with the novels under scrutiny, her postulations cannot encompass Maraini's *oeuvre*.³

Wittig starts from the assumption that lesbians are not women. In order to be a woman, in her view, one ought to have a relationship of dependence with men. Thus, the category of women as we understand it is but a product of the straight (heterosexual) mind (Wittig, 1992). Indeed, and in diametrical opposition to this, Maraini's characters would appear more inclined to perform what Butler defines as a “process” or a “becoming” (Butler, 1988, p.523) or, in my reading, Jacques Derrida's utopia of a “choreography” of gender (Derrida and McDonald, 1982) which he develops in a 1982 interview whose title 'Choreographies' one might find particularly suggestive in the context of a work dealing with notions of the fixity of gender and the (de)construction of identity.

The passage where the French philosopher speculates on the implications of the erasure of socially discriminating sexual markers reads as follows: “I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this [shifting scenario] of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can

carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual', whether he be classified as 'man' or as 'woman' according to the criteria of usage" (Derrida and McDonald, 1982, p.76). In this sentence, the ontological roots of gender identity are called into question. Derrida's "choreographies" unmask and deconstruct the mechanisms of power at play in the definition of gender, namely, Butler's "sedimented acts" which are attributed to masculine or feminine bodies, in short, how subjects are created and which ones, to recall Butler again, do or do *not* matter (Butler, 1993, p.v). Similarly, in the works which constitute the object of the present study, normative gendered codes are subverted and disrupted; after all, the deconstruction of heterosexual hegemony is for Maraini first and foremost a political strategy, a tool to which she resorts in order to extricate her female characters from a rigid patriarchal frame. Gender becomes an on-going process *à la* Butler which, resonating with a Derridean utopia, encompasses polymorphous manifestations thus eluding pre-existing social scripts.

Current criticism on the novels under consideration has focussed primarily on the theme of female identity, most notably in the analysis of *Donna in guerra*, (Tamburri, 1990; Cavallaro, 2007), or the mother-daughter bond (Dagnino, 1993), a bond that has also been read as transcending biological motherhood thus proving to be instrumental in the carving out of a space, for women, within patriarchy (Picchietti, 2002). Not a great deal of criticism has been produced that scrutinises the treatment of gender relations in Maraini.⁴ This article aims to go some way towards rectifying this imbalance by illustrating that Maraini's work underscores the restrictiveness of codified gender roles and explores possible alternatives. I shall do so by engaging in an exploration of the sexualities as depicted in her texts in order to assess their potential for subverting the heterosexual norms of patriarchy.

Frequently regarded as Maraini's most feminist text,⁵ *Donna in guerra* charts the trajectory of the extrication of the protagonist, Vannina, from the mechanisms of subjugation which are at work within the economy of a heterosexual regime. Carol Lazzaro-Weis successfully illustrates, in a few lines, the author's intent: "In *Donna in guerra*, Maraini confronts the theme of accepting responsibility for one's life, as difficult as that may be, in her depiction of the transformation of a withdrawn, dependent female who hides behind her traditional subservient role into a woman ready to accept the risks involved in taking charge of one's self" (Lazzaro-Weis, 1988, p.300). Written in the form of a diary, the story begins with an account of Vannina's monotonous daily routine while she and her husband are holidaying on a fictitious Italian island. In her relationship with Giacinto, the two characters re-enact, emblematically, the archetypal wife-husband hierarchy. Not only does the compliant Vannina not dare question Giacinto's authority, she also perceives her position of subservience as a natural consequence of her role as 'wife': "È vero", she once concedes to herself in reply to her husband's asserting her dependence upon him, "ha una forza terribile in quelle sue braccia bionde e con questa forza tiene in piedi il nostro matrimonio".⁶ For his part, Giacinto is

unable to come to terms with his wife gradually developing a stronger self-awareness. When this happens, he accuses Vannina of violating what he sees as her 'true nature' (and thus, by extension, the 'true nature' of women as a category): "Tu di natura sei buona, calma, affettuosa, paziente, remissiva; oggi invece fai la stravagante, vai contro natura".⁷ He tells her this after she has voiced her intention to join her friend Suna in a trip to Naples to investigate the condition of women working illegally at home in exchange for miserable wages. Maraini is very careful in unmasking, behind the protagonist's mock repetition of her domestic chores, the patriarchal construction of the female subject. Drawing on Derrida, Butler advocates deconstruction as a tool for recognising the mechanisms of exclusion of the phallogentric system that lead to how the female subject is constructed as such. It is Butler's assumption that "there is a matrix of gender relations that institutes and sustains the subject".⁸ Simply put, "construction is neither a subject nor its act" but "a process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface" (Butler, 1993, p.9). Thus, what remains implicit at this stage of the narration is indeed a parodic element to Vannina's actions: the protagonist performs her duties as a housewife in a compulsive manner which suggests submission to the norm. Vannina *is* what the system expects her to be. As such, her diary opens with a list of her housework tasks, which she records in a somewhat telegraphic, and obsessive, way: "Mi sono messa a sparecchiare. Ho lavato i piatti. Ho sgrassato le pentole. Ho sciacquato i bicchieri".⁹ When Vannina refuses to give her husband a child, he goes as far as to rape her while she is asleep. Giacinto, thus, emblematically comes to embody patriarchy's imposition of the institution of motherhood upon women that American critic, novelist and poet Adrienne Rich so passionately denounced in *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1976).¹⁰ But Vannina terminates her pregnancy. Following Derrida's formulation, then, Maraini's protagonist has subverted the encoding logic which would have her be a wife and a mother, but she has also (and here resides the author's political strategy) carved out her own alternative sphere to the constrictive one bestowed upon her, an "alternative relational space of sisterhood as a feminist revision and extension of the relationship between mother and daughter" (Picchiotti, 2002, p.14).

It is only thanks to the bond that she develops with emblematic female figures, that the protagonist can reconnect to a female experience and find the strength to embark on the road towards self-awareness. With the island laundress Giottina and her friend Tota, Vannina replays the mother-daughter bond. With a taste for gossip and scabrous stories, the two matrons return Vannina back to the pre-symbolic (semiotic) sphere. As has already been noted by Pauline Dagnino, the secluded and dark space of the launderette, where their relationship develops, acts like the Kristevan "chora" (2000, pp.232-245).¹¹ Pre-dating the Symbolic, the "chora" is, for French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva, the place of the mother; it knows no language but only a chaotic mix of rhythmic pulsions, needs and feelings—a blessed sense of unity with the maternal figure (1974, pp.93-94). And indeed, the erotically charged language

that Tota and Giottina create, at times seems to be a non-language. Dense with symbolism, it both attracts and repels Vannina who, through these symbolic mothers, is nevertheless initiated into female complicity. But it is only thanks to her "social sisters" (Picchiotti, 2002, p.119), that is the rebellious figure of Suna and the unconventional Rosa Colla (the latter helping Vannina through the process of undergoing an abortion) that our protagonist will find true liberation.¹² It is to the figure of Suna, Vannina's paraplegic friend, and especially to her polymorphous sexual identity,¹³ that I now wish to devote some attention.

Giacinto's contemptuously calling Suna "half woman", which in turn recalls the epithet "crippled" which the Neapolitan women also address her, has been positively recast by critics as the outward mark of the character's subversive gender identity (Gabriele, 2002, p.246). This is a process that, I would contend, follows the Butlerian trajectory of resignification (or "resigni-fication", as Butler writes it) of *hate speech* (Butler, 1997, p.41). Suna's defining herself as "half man half woman" complicates things even further and casts doubt on her sexual orientation. Indeed, if we agree with Wittig that lesbians are not women, then Suna—for seeing herself as a (half) woman—would be "instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality" (Wittig, 1992, p.30). For Wittig there is no such thing as being a woman, or a man, as the category of sex has been created as a consequence of patriarchal oppression and has then become an alibi for social, economic, psychological differences between two artificially constituted sexes.¹⁴ While Wittig's position, for its formulation of the "third gender"—the lesbian—might be judged as tinged with essentialism, Maraini's somewhat less radical conclusions demonstrate an equal awareness of the pitfalls deriving from a reduction of the sexes to two available possibilities. In overt opposition to this, Maraini's Suna seems to embody the subject advocated by Derrida that goes "beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bisexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing" (Derrida and McDonald, 1982, p.76).¹⁵ At the beginning of *Donna in guerra*, Suna is in love with Santino, who at the same time is in a relationship with Mafalda. Eventually, the two women will find themselves in love with each other. However, as a response to the group's coercive reaction to her and Suna's coming out, Mafalda agrees to give up living their homosexual relationship openly, her fear of losing her place in the movement quite possibly becoming a metonym of her fear to lose her place in society.

It may be hard to resist the temptation of seeing in Suna the image of the advocate feminist. She is an active member of a Marxist movement, on whose behalf she conducts a survey of the exploitation of female workers in the South of Italy and it is she who awakens Vannina from her state of passivity and subservience to her husband. And yet, upon closer examination, some inconsistencies in her character will soon come to the fore. The reader will discover that she is no less dependent on her father than Vannina is on Giacinto, although for different reasons. Suna's dependency on the paternal

figure is merely of an economic nature. Also, and for a sort of law of retaliation which can be interpreted as a note of irony on Maraini's part, she is, in turn, financially exploited, first by her male lover Santino and then by the movement itself. What is more, despite preaching liberation from restrictive gender roles and not approving of Mafalda's complicity with the homophobic views of the political group, after being expelled from this, Suna gives up not only on her lesbian lover, but also on *life*, since she commits suicide.

Suna's tragic fate leaves the reader in something of a quandary with regard to the outcome implicit in the defiance of codified sexual roles (that is, the subversion of patriarchy that she herself embodies) and calls for several considerations. I shall advance my own by returning to Wittig's theory on the figure of the 'lesbian' as a third gender transcending any form of categorisation. This is a position with which Butler herself concurs, at least inasmuch as the performative character of the same is concerned (Kirby, 2006, p.27). This idea of the subject as a *social* being, that is, deeply enmeshed into the intricacies of cultural demands is, it seems to me, very much present in Maraini's *oeuvre* where, despite presenting us with exemplary instances of transgressive sexualities (of which Suna is certainly the most notable example), the author is also equally preoccupied with making us aware of the inevitable repercussions deriving from defying the patriarchal order, thus looking into alternative, possible ways, of confronting the norm. In this connection, I agree with Virginia Picchiatti when she asserts that Maraini's texts provide a space for the investigation of those models put forward by feminist groups in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which are now referred to as "entrustment".¹⁶ Finally, I would contend that Maraini's strategy as we see it at play in the novel succeeds in promoting female solidarity as a key weapon for women within patriarchy while at the same time, and even more importantly, escaping the trap of essentialism. Not only does Vannina disentangle herself from a patriarchal net of expectations and impositions, but also, on more than one occasion, she herself displays a sexuality that goes against sexual norms. I refer here to Vannina's seduction scene with Orio, Santino's adolescent brother, which will end with the two of them having sexual intercourse and, back to Vannina's teaching memories, the attraction she feels for one of her pupils—both instances underscoring the destabilization, carried out by our female protagonist, of socially prescribed sexual behaviours.

Exclusion deriving from non-compliance with societal expectations is also the price paid by another of Maraini's characters: the controversial mother in *Storia di Piera*. Written in the form of a dialogue between the author and stage actress Piera degli Esposti, the book is a biography of sorts; in Maraini's own definition, this is "the story of a highly complex relationship between mother and daughter [...] deeply pagan [...] scabrous" (quoted in Bongarzoni, 1980). It is the chronicle of Piera's turbulent life, the sexual abuses she suffers as a child, the pulmonary illness that afflicts her and her acceptance of her mother's subversive nature. Undoubtedly the most emblematic character in the novel, the latter epitomises non-conformity to the Law of the Symbolic order, the

primordial forces of nature against culture, against patriarchal society and the influence it exerts upon women. Her unconventionality and extraneousness to convention, but also, at a metaphorical level, the clash between the Semiotic (Nature) and the Symbolic (Culture), is well exemplified by her behaving according to the cycle of the seasons: "d'estate era degli altri [...] d'inverno si chiudeva, dormiva".¹⁷ Here, the reference to the goddess Demeter, with whom the flourishing of the earth and, therefore, the cycle of the seasons is associated, is inescapable. As the Greek myth goes, when her daughter Persephone is abducted and taken to the underworld, Demeter, upon whom the fruitfulness of the earth depends, renounces her divine functions to look for her, thus bringing about winter. Even more relevant to our analysis is the revision of the myth by Italian philosopher of sexual difference Adriana Cavarero in her groundbreaking work *In Spite of Plato* (1995). In Cavarero's hands, the myth of Demeter translates into a timeless narration standing for women's power (and right) to generate, or not to generate, life; in other words, it becomes a cry for women's re-appropriation of their own body and, in turn, its disentanglement from the constraints of the institutionalised reproductive function to which it has been confined in patriarchy. Similarly, Piera's mother, like a modern Demeter, is attuned to the cycle of nature, refusing to identify with socio-cultural gender scripts. Furthermore, she loves both men and women, collects lovers and instigates her daughter's sexual initiation. Piera's mother fails to conform to the social order, exhibiting instead her unbridled sexuality or—as Kristeva would probably have it—*jouissance*.¹⁸ Culpable, in the eyes of society, and her husband, for defying the Symbolic order, she is declared mad. Marginalisation (and electroshock therapy) is the exacted price for subverting the norm. Curiously though, what others perceive as an illness, for Piera, who will always turn a deaf ear to everybody else's judgment, is just "una forza meravigliosa" that possesses all the power of attraction.¹⁹ Imperturbable when faced with people's dirty looks and scorn towards her mother, the latter acquires in her eyes a somewhat mythical dimension as a victim of society: a "persona tragica in Piera's own words."²⁰

Piera's own sexuality is far from unproblematic. At times verging on incestuous drives towards both parents (by her own admission she shares with the mother the same sexual partners out of a wish to possess her through their bodies), she is obsessed with the male organ and fantasizes having it. Her androgynous looks, as opposed to the more effeminate appearance of her brother, lead her to imagine herself in a man's body. Thus, just as has been said *à propos of* Suna in *Donna in guerra*, Piera too is "half man, half woman" and such is how her father perceives her: "Ho l'impressione che delle volte mio padre credesse di aver fatto una specie di uomo: metà uomo e metà donna".²¹

The defiance of a prescriptive sexuality in the novel is exemplified by an account Piera herself gives of her mother: "Mia madre è una persona così vasta che non saprei come definirla, ogni descrizione la limiterebbe".²² Piera's mother recalls the figure of Suna, and not just because of her ambiguous sexuality, but

also for her tragic fate of marginalisation. Lacking female support, her subversive nature cannot lead her beyond a mere critique (deconstruction) of patriarchal ideology. Her cry against non-conformity will thus remain unheard and she will spend her last days in the seclusion of a mental hospital—her punishment for defying the Symbolic order. In the same way as Vannina, who aborts the pregnancy that her husband has, quite literally, imposed on her, Piera's mother also refuses to obey a patriarchal system that requires her to be mother and wife. But unlike the protagonist of *Donna in guerra*, who will eventually manage to free herself from the confining ties of patriarchal motherhood through a series of encounters with emblematic female figures, Piera's mother will meet Suna's similar tragic fate of isolation. And it is perhaps no coincidence that both characters who subvert patriarchal sexual norms are made to die by Maraini. In this respect, what has been argued about the reasons of Suna's defeat by the patriarchal system that oppresses her, a defeat which has been seen as imputable to the lack of the support from a community of women, may also be applied to Piera's mother. However, I would like to advance an interpretation of the novels that refutes a negative reading of the same, as if, to borrow Itala T. C. Rutter's words, "explorations of new ways of being must generally end, for women today, inconclusively" (Rutter, 1990, p.570). Following on from this premise, and as will become clearer after my analysis of *Lettere a Marina*, by bringing the three works into dialogue with each other I shall put forward a positive interpretation of Maraini's message as a call for female solidarity which, however, does not renounce the possibility of "incalculable [gender] choreographies" (Derrida, 1982, p.76). Piera's description of her mother is insightful, in that it encapsulates the notion of a 'challenge'—in the sense of subversion—of the system, and is therefore consonant with an analysis of female sexuality in Maraini's work. It will thus serve the function of introducing the last of the three novels under discussion.

Thematically related to the other two works as far as the re-appropriation of one's identity is concerned, and virtually contemporary to *Storia di Piera*,²³ *Lettere a Marina* consists of a string of unsent letters which Bianca, the first-person narrating voice, writes to her lesbian ex-lover Marina, a process which will lead the protagonist into an introspective journey. Bianca's name is reminiscent not only of a blank piece of paper waiting to be written upon but also, through a sliding metonymy of references, the idea of the body as understood by Foucault—namely, a medium where cultural values are inscribed. "Dire di me donna con una lingua maschile è una miserabile contraddizione", one of the female protagonists of *Lettere a Marina* warns us.²⁴ Such is, in Adriana Cavarero's formulation, the condition of woman, who "in this speaking her own alienation from language, [...] reproduces, in action, alienation itself" (1993, p.190). If the universal is masculine, and heterosexual, then it follows that Bianca as woman, and a lesbian, is marked off by the system twice over. Used as a tool to discuss differences between the sexes, in Maraini's literary production the narration often becomes a privileged means of self-discovery. Indeed, it might be seen as a device used by women to free

themselves from the constraints of a society modelled on a master (father, husband, son?) / slave (mother, wife, daughter?) dialectic.

Bianca is constantly reminded of the need to escape a binary system and the imposition of rigid sexual categories. This is exemplified by the recurring obsession of people surrounding her with her being 'alone': "Il giornalista mi chiede: è sola? Non capisco bene cosa vuol dire sola senza figli sola senza marito sola senza madri padre sorelle?".²⁵ In what seems to be an echo of Bianca's concerns, Butler asks why it should be that marriage or legal contracts become the basis on which health care benefits, for instance, are allocated—namely, the basis for social recognition. It is her contention that, in a society where heterosexuality is the norm, "the belief is that culture itself requires that a man and a woman produce a child". And it is this 'man' and 'woman' binarism that ought to be stressed here: in *Lettere a Marina* the woman who loves men also loves women. She is not—as Butler would have it—socially intelligible. Bodies generate (and, if we agree with Foucault, are generated by) power relations, which, in turn, translate into incarnated binary constructs. Interestingly though and in line with the above, not only is the protagonist of the novel at odds with the gender roles patriarchal society would expect her to fulfil, but she seems equally unwilling to embrace a monolithic homosexuality. Rather, she appears more inclined to perform what Butler defines as a process or a becoming, thus resisting an essentialist, prescriptive interpretation of sexuality—a position that resonates with the principle that gender is but a "free floating artifice" (Butler, 1990, p.9).

On the other hand, it is also true that the coexistence of lesbianism and bisexuality in the text remains far from unproblematic. The remark of Bianca's friend, Chantal, that "amare il corpo dell'uomo è un atto di intelligenza col nemico" is just an example.²⁶ For Chantal, the only true lesbian in the novel, to be bisexual is to negotiate with heterosexual society. The implications of such a predicament are not difficult to foresee. Indeed, one is here faced with the paradox that the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality is carried out through the perpetuation of the very same binary structure which lies at its foundations. On the contrary and if we align ourselves with Derrida, action is required to move beyond those binary dichotomies which would all, inevitably, come down to the master (man)/slave (woman) dialectics. But this does not mean privileging the feminine side of the debate either, as it would be but a repetition of the hierarchy—however reversed. In other words, the point is not displacing a dominant discourse (which we have said is recognised as marked as masculine) with its feminine counterpart. Indeed, to say that women love men, and cannot love women, is the same as to say that women love women, and cannot love men. It is only the terms of the equation that change, not the effect. This also raises a point on the ambiguity which lies in the use of language and the limitations intrinsic to language itself—namely, its undecidability. And is it not perhaps significant that, at odds as he is with the logocentrism of the Western world, Derrida has chosen dance—that is to say, a non-verbal form of

art—for his metaphor? Following on from this premise, it would be too tempting to deduce that the novel ends in a reaffirmation of heterosexuality, a view taken by Beverly Ballaro (1996, p.185) from Bianca's statement that "ho preferito il figlio per una tendenza malefica colpevole all'abbraccio con l'altro da sé il diverso".²⁷ Indeed, however ambiguous Bianca's claim is, such a view is unnecessarily simplistic. If it is true that Bianca, having given up on Marina, starts a relationship with the barman Damiano, it is also true that, towards the end of the novel, she feels an impulse to kiss his stepmother (who is also his lover). This reading finds further endorsement in a dream scene. Bianca is lying in bed and falls asleep; she starts dreaming about Damiano but soon after, between their bodies, an unidentified female figure makes an appearance, and Bianca finds herself fantasising about this unexpected presence.

By renouncing an arbitrary resolution of the sexuality of her female protagonist, then, Maraini seems to be warning the readers against the relativity of culturally determined gender roles, reminding them instead of the infinite spectrum of permutations gender might take. The author's stance on the question of female homosexuality would seem to encourage this interpretation: "Io dico che l'eterosessualità, così come viene vissuta oggi, non è né 'normale', né 'naturale', né 'sana'" (Bellezza, 1981).²⁸ And again, on the same topic: "Diciamo [dell'omosessualità] che è deviante rispetto alla norma, ma che norma sessuale abbiamo quando scambiamo la pornografia per libertà e riduciamo i corpi a degli oggetti?" (Bonanate, 1981).²⁹

Bianca lives her sexuality in a way that is far from unproblematic for her, as exemplified by the anxiety which always accompanies, in the text, the erotic encounters with her lesbian lover (to the point of seeing the reflection of her own mother between her lover's legs) and which one critic has aptly called "decisive moments of freaking out in the text" (Ballaro, 1996, p.184). Yet, this ambivalence notwithstanding, a resolution of the protagonist's sexuality is clearly not the intention of the author. As such, all throughout the novel Bianca's "fraught sexuality" (Gabriele, 2002, p.250) remains as fluid as the sexual identities portrayed within. Bianca's sexual identity becomes a *non-identity*, one which evades any form of encoding. The very last scene would reinforce this interpretation. Her resolution not to go to bed but instead to take a late-night train to Sicily, would thus come to epitomise an adamant rebuttal of all that the "grande letto dai buoni odori di vita coniugale" signifies—namely, the constraints of marriage and of marital life as the only option for women within patriarchy.³⁰ The sentence reads as follows: "ho deciso di non andare a dormire. Non sopporto più l'odore del vecchio letto matrimoniale".³¹ Here the Italian language better conveys the opening up of a whole series of metaphorical associations linked to the image of the bed,³² which more than once appears in the novel as a reminder of the compulsory reproduction already denounced by Rich and which, through the adoption of a Marxist approach, Wittig has linked to the exploitation of the category of women by the heterosexual society (Wittig, 1982).

I would now like to briefly call for a comparison between the three works on the theme of female solidarity. My starting point is the character of Basilia, Bianca's next-door neighbour, who lends itself to a feminist reading focusing on the mother-daughter bond as a fundamental presence in women's lives. From Julia Kristeva to Luce Irigaray to Luisa Muraro (not to forget American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich), feminists have focussed on revising the role of the maternal and the recuperation of a maternal symbolic order. Their return to the mother is not "regressive, as Freudian psychoanalysis would have it, but rather progressive: it represents a defiant move forward to the recognition of both the mother as primary female figure and the role she plays in shaping a woman's life" (Picchiatti, 2002, p.76). In *Lettere a Marina*, through Basilia, Maraini prompts us to look at how beneficial the redefinition of women's bonds with their mothers (and not necessarily a biological one) might be. Bianca's neighbour, a mother of two, embodies female subjugation within a patriarchal society, quite tellingly exemplified by the macabre stories she often recounts, which tell of women as victims of a distorted societal and familial system. It is thanks to Basilia that Bianca can recuperate her past relationship with her mother, and by extension with all women, in a climactic moment when she hears Basilia sing just as, in Bianca's memory, her peasant mother would have done—thus prefiguring the re-enactment of a female oral tradition. Read in this light, Basilia massaging Bianca's shoulders while singing translates into a metaphorical act and denotes the inscription into Bianca of ancient values and beliefs which pertain to a genealogy of women, a far too long forgotten female authenticity; a chain in which Basilia is but a link. And in so doing, "Basilia helps Bianca replant her roots in the dark recesses of women's history" (Picchiatti, 2002, p.133), and retrieve her past (the story of her own self she had forgotten) which is mirrored in the protagonist being able to finally complete the novel she was striving to finish, thus, metaphorically, she re-appropriates her own voice. Bianca finds in Basilia that tenderness that Marina seems incapable to provide her, being obsessed as she is with the wish to possess her lover. And through this nurturing lovingness Bianca has also (re)discovered a bond with the figure of her mother. Because motherhood, as we perceive it in the text, not only transcends biological constraints, it also reaches out to women across generations. As such, Basilia's passing down an oral tradition to Bianca appears to be consonant with Luce Irigaray's description, in 'Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother', of the mother/daughter relationship as "an extremely explosive core in our societies", which "leads to shaking up the patriarchal order" (Irigaray, 1993, p.86).

Bianca, seen as a more mature, self-conscious version of Vannina, shows us that patriarchal libidinal economy has to be challenged from *within* the system. Indeed, *Donna in guerra* recounts the process of the consciousness-raising of the protagonist and concludes with her embarking on a journey towards self-awareness of whose outcome, however, we are given no account. Following this logic, and tracing some continuity between the two works, Bianca could rightly be seen as the 'new' Vannina as we have left her after she has freed herself from

the constraints of conjugal life. In the same way as Vannina with the female figures she encounters along her path, Bianca proves to be receptive to the offer of allegiance from her mentor Basilia, an allegiance which she uses as a Trojan horse to oppose a phallogocentric system that wants to silence her, her condition being represented, on a metaphorical level, by her inability to finish the novel she is working on as a professional writer. Thus, unlike the mother in *Storia di Piera*, silenced by a phallogocentric system which does not recognise her, she is able to find her own voice (again, metaphorically, resuming her own story). This is a call, on Maraini's part, for the recuperation of a female genealogy that transcends biology but also, it should be borne in mind, any prescriptive interpretations of female sexuality, celebrating instead its ineffable nature. As such, the suggestive formulation of the choreography of gender which opened this article becomes the key to the reading of the sexual identities portrayed in the three novels. Gender—seen as a dance—is reminiscent of a Derridean process which reminds us of the infinite spectrum of permutations it might take. This might not provide feminism with a final answer on how to move from resistance into action, it is just the first step of the political programme which is called into question, but is a step nonetheless. It exposes a logic of exclusion and calls for the construction of alternative spaces. It suggests that neither biology nor social constructs can define such a thing as the female sexed body. Only by evading an encoding logic will it be possible to recognise and celebrate both the male *and* female sex, defined not in relation (opposition) to one another but to each of their own intrinsic specificities, which are as 'incalculable' as the choreographies of Derrida's dream.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler questions the mutual exclusivity of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Butler, 1993). This is hardly a discovery, if one considers Freud's understanding of the polymorphous nature of human desire which led him to the assumption that "a very considerable measure of latent or unconscious homosexuality can be detected in all *normal* people" (Young-Bruehl, 2002, p.265; emphasis is mine). Maraini seems in agreement with these notions on sexuality and, in what could be read as a prefiguring of Butler's concerns, in these works herein discussed, she presents heterosexuality and homosexuality as far from being mutually exclusive. By staging non-normative sexualities, Maraini provides, through her characters, a call for the understanding of gender roles as a product of rigid mechanisms of power which result in patterns of behaviour that, consolidated through time, translate into the political, social and cultural supremacy of the male over the female gender. Moreover, if we return to Butler's critique of Wittig's theories, the author can be seen as advocating for a refusal of the idea of a fixed, monolithic sexual essence—be it heterosexual or homosexual. Far from falling into the trap of an essentialist discourse, Maraini's characters, through their irreducible sexualities, could be read as opposing "radical disjunction between straight and gay [that] replicates the kind of disjunctive binarism that she herself [Wittig] characterises as the divisive philosophical gesture of the straight mind" (Butler, 1990, p.165). Finally, as for how deconstruction can help feminism move from a

mere critique of patriarchal ideology into political action, as the present analysis has sought to demonstrate, the answer in Maraini's texts would reside precisely in the relationship between women and the connection between their everyday lives and the socially codified roles they are called to perform. The author's subversive narrative calls for a revolution which starts from within (within one's body but also our mother's, symbolic or not) and it does so while challenging rigid discourses on gender and eluding the traditional hetero/homo dichotomy. Such is the message that underpins the three texts, and which is condensed in Bianca's reasoning over "a more fluid way of being sexed" (Maraini, 2008b, p.87). In short, Maraini's genealogies are less a question of seeking a unifying subject (or a "label", in Bianca's words³³) than an expression of the blurring of the boundaries of a single category in depicting, as Maraini does, continuous ways of becoming.

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¹ Maraini's literary and theatrical production dates from the Sixties to the present. Not only has she since been interested in women's position at the time of her writing, but also in earlier periods. See for example her Campiello prize winner novel *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) which, following the life of a mute duchess living in the eighteenth century (the inspiration for the character came to Maraini from a portrait of an aristocratic Sicilian ancestor of hers, Duchess Marianna Alliata Valguarnera), can be read as a *timeless* narration of the silencing of women in patriarchy. Similarly, it is worth mentioning her 1985 novel *Isolina*, based on Maraini's own investigation and reconstruction of the murder of Isolina Canuti, a young woman brutally murdered while pregnant and whose remains were found in the Adige river, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the main suspect was a member of the army and he accused the socialists of manipulating the news, the case soon acquired political implications.

² Maraini's position can be said to align itself to that of art historian and feminist Carla Lonzi—perhaps the most influential voice of Italian 'feminism of difference'. The title of Lonzi's best known pamphlet *Sputiamo su Hegel: La donna vaginale e la donna clitoridea* (Let's spit on Hegel: the clitoral and the vaginal woman) quite tellingly underscores how the body had become, for 1970s Italian feminists, a starting point for the advocacy of sexual liberation.

³ The essay 'The Straight Mind', read by Wittig in 1978 at the MLA Convention in New York City, was first published in 1980.

⁴ A notable exception is Tommasina Gabriele's illuminating study on the subversion of gender identity in *Donna in guerra* and *Lettere a Marina*, the play *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* and a crime story from the collection *Buio*: 'Chi ha ucciso Paolo Gentile?' (Gabriele 2002, pp.241-56).

⁵ This is a position with which the author herself concurs. In an interview released the same year of the publication of the novel, she stated: 'Questo è il mio romanzo più coscientemente femminista' ('This is my most conscious feminist novel', quoted in Ruffili 1975).

⁶ "It's true"; "Those blonde arms of his have an incredible strength and with this strength he supports our marriage". This and all subsequent translations are my own (Maraini, 2008a, p.142).

⁷ "By nature you are good-hearted, calm, affectionate, patient, submissive; but today you are being a freak, you are going against nature" (Maraini, 2008a, p.141).

⁸ The term 'phallogocentrism', which stems from the merging of 'logocentrism' and 'phallogocentrism', is a neologism that Derrida himself coined to designate the maleness of Western metaphysics which, being based as it is on binary pairings, contains the premise for woman's debasement.

⁹ "I started to clear the table. I did the dishes. I scoured the saucepans. I rinsed the glasses" (Maraini, 2008a, p.4).

¹⁰ Butler 1993, p.8. Having made clear the distinction between motherhood as a 'potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children' and the 'institution' that secures male control over it, in the introduction to her work Rich contends: 'this book is not an attack on the family or on mothering except as defined and restricted under patriarchy' (Rich 1976, pp.13-14).

¹¹ This is also the position implicit in Virginia Picchietti's argument: 'the return to the maternal realm Tota and Giottina represent can actually lead to the re-evaluation of the pre-Oedipal mutuality in the daughter's life' (Picchietti, 2002, p.119).

¹² The importance of the concept of 'sisterhood' in this and other works by Maraini, and, specifically in connection with *Donna in guerra*, the instrumental role of the characters of Suna and Rosa Colla in Vannina's liberation, have been aptly discussed by Picchietti (Picchietti 2002, pp.105-137).

¹³ My choice of the adjective 'polymorphous' applied to the character's unclassifiable sexuality is in agreement with Tommasina Gabriele's views on the restrictiveness implicit in the term 'bisexual' (as in any other term attempting at defining sexual identity). The critic distances herself from what she sees as the limitations intrinsic to the notion of an immutable, fixed gender identity and, in her study of *Donna in guerra*, she applies her conclusions mainly to the analysis of Suna's sexuality (Gabriele 2002, pp.241-56).

¹⁴ Wittig indeed makes it clear that 'this mark', namely sexual difference, 'does not predate oppression' but is rather the logical *outcome* of the same (Wittig 1992, p.11; my emphasis).

¹⁵ With reference to this point, it ought to be mentioned that other characters in *Donna in guerra* blur gender boundaries. One example, and this time a male one, is Vannina's husband, who will end up developing a (on his part) morbid relationship with the much younger Santino, with whom Giacinto willingly spends most of his time fishing and whose presence (and absence) dictates Giacinto's mood. Although their bond never acquires openly homosexual connotations, it nevertheless goes beyond fatherly love, acquiring instead, I would contend, a *queer* twinge.

¹⁶ Picchiotti, 2002. The practice of 'affidamento', developed within the Milanese feminist group 'Libreria delle Donne', sees a woman (usually the less experienced and younger one) relying upon another woman, who will act as her mentor. A bond of (symbolic) motherhood-sisterhood, which transcends the biological sphere, is thus established. For a more detailed account of this practice, see Luisa Muraro's influential *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Muraro 1991, 2006).

¹⁷ "In the summer she belonged to others [...] in winter she would lock herself away, sleep" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.22).

¹⁸ First used by Lacan during his seminar of 1953-4 in relation to Hegel and his master-slave dialectic, the term has been largely reappropriated by French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva among others. In particular, Kristeva sees '*jouissance*' as a form of specifically feminine pleasure associated with the semiotic flow and the maternal 'chora'. For a more detailed exploration of the polysemy of the word, see Introduction 3 by the editors of the volume in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron where *jouissance* is defined in the following terms: 'This pleasure, when attributed to a woman, is considered to be of a different order from the pleasure that is represented within the male libidinal economy often described in terms of the capitalist gain and profit motive. Women's *jouissance* carries with it the notion of fluidity, diffusion, duration. It is a kind of potlatch in the world of orgasms, a giving, expending, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure' [p.36, n. 8].

¹⁹ "A wonderful force" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.108).

²⁰ "A tragic person" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.15).

²¹ "I have the impression that at times my father thought he had made a sort of man: half man and half woman" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.37).

²² "My mother is a so complex person that I would not know how to define her, any definition would limit her" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.108).

²³ *Storia di Piera* was published in 1981, after Maraini had been working on it for four years.

²⁴ "Speaking about myself with a masculine tongue is a miserable contradiction" (Maraini, 2008b, p.39).

²⁵ "The newspaper vendor asks me 'are you alone'? I do not quite understand what it means alone without children alone without husband alone without mothers fathers sisters?" (Maraini 2008b, p.39).

²⁶ "To love the male body is a sign of connivance with the enemy" (Maraini, 2002b, p.22).

²⁷ "I turned to my son, yielding to a baleful and guilty inclination to the other sex, the different other" (Maraini, 2008b, pp.114-115).

²⁸ "I say that heterosexuality as we live it today is neither 'normal' nor 'natural' nor 'sane'".

²⁹ "We say [of homosexuality] that it is deviant with respect to the norm, but what sexual norm do we have when we take pornography for freedom and reduce bodies to objects?"

³⁰ "Big bed with its good smells of conjugal life" (Maraini, 2008b, p.21).

³¹ "I decided not to go to bed. I can't stand the smell of the old double bed any more" (Maraini, 2008b, p.203).

³² In the text we find 'letto matrimoniale' ('double bed'), which in English literally translates with the less used, and far more evocative, 'conjugal bed'.

³³ "Eppure ci deve essere un modo più ricco e fluido di essere sessuati senza cacciarsi dentro un destino da etichetta" ('still, there must be a richer and more fluid way of being sexed without stuffing oneself into a label-like destiny') (Maraini 2008b, p.87).