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Donne nate male, amicizie colpevoli e quelle profonde come una parentela. Marise Ferro's queerly desiring women.¹

Abstract: This article offers a reading of Marise Ferro's works, which have received scant critical attention, but which constitute important instances of queer representation. Focusing on a series of novels published between 1932-72, it reveals how Ferro revisited the topic of desire between women many times, perhaps more than any other Italian author in this period, despite suffering censorship during Fascism. Drawing on queer theory and work on "intimate friendships" (Vicinus), this article argues that Ferro's portrayals of same-sex love are characterized by complexity as she both challenges heteronormativity and condemns perverse desires. Her depictions of queer longing bear the imprint of bio-medical pathologizations of congenital homosexuality, but also encourage empathy, and, strikingly, while death and misery abound, her desiring protagonists are not killed off, as happens in many texts that represent non-normative sexualities. The reception of Ferro's novels is also discussed: while supported by Arnoldo Mondadori in the 1930s, early work received quite negative reviews, particularly in relation to perceived sexual degeneracy. In the few analyses published recently, there is no mention of her approach to queer sexuality. By contrast, the present article engages critically with her challenging work, and reappraises her representations of desiring women.

Keywords: Marise Ferro, queer desire, lesbianism, heteronormativity, friendship

This article contributes to the emerging critical debate on Italian cultural texts that represents female same-sex desire, which is finally gaining momentum after a persistent and problematic silence.² In an attempt to enrich hitherto "incomplete" and "damaged" understandings of cultural representation that have excluded or dismissed queerness (Sedgwick 2008: 1), I analyze a striking corpus of works published between 1932-72 by the largely forgotten author, journalist and translator Marise Ferro (1907-91).³ Ferro's writing demands analysis because she engaged quite explicitly with female same-sex desire during the 1930s when Fascist censorship was at its height (Bonsaver, 2007: 99-100). In addition, and quite uniquely, female homoeroticism is a frequently recurring topic in her novels and short stories. Although other early twentieth-century authors certainly tackled this theme in literary texts (including Sibilla Aleramo in *Il passaggio* [1919], Mura in *Perfidie* [1919], and Fausta Cialente in *Natalia* [1930]), they did so only once, probably because of negative

criticism or censorship.⁴ In contrast, Ferro depicts female same-sex desire time and again: sometimes it is a central, explicit focus; sometimes it is mentioned in one or two brief episodes; sometimes it is conveyed through an undercurrent of sensuality, or merely implied through intertextual references.

Indeed, to my knowledge, Ferro is the only Italian novelist (male or female), during the period in which she was writing, to have revisited female same-sex desire so many times. Under Fascism homosexuality was a taboo subject and was lived for the most part in secret and silence. Contrary to popular belief, it was not specifically criminalized: discussions of the 1930 Rocco penal code reveal that officials and ministers preferred not to mention it to avoid drawing attention to and potentially spreading a perceived “vice” which they argued was less prevalent in Italy than elsewhere (Benadusi, 2005: 106-115). However, hundreds of men were sent into internal exile, and some women too were prosecuted for same-sex practices, which were categorized as an offense to public morality.⁵ Moreover, any printed work deemed to offend “national sentiment” or “public morality” risked being banned. In practice any mention of homosexuality could lead to texts being placed on the list of prohibited books, as happened to Ferro’s 1934 novel *Barbara*.⁶ Yet despite this censorship and several cutting reviews, Ferro continued to explore desire between women. An analysis of Ferro’s writing shatters historically-received assumptions about the absence of cultural representation of desire between women in the Fascist and post-war periods. Moreover, a consideration of its reception has much to tell us about the evolving literary speakability of desire between women in Italy even in recent years.⁷

My discussion is informed by recent critical debates on the complexities of engaging with literary narratives from the past about non-normative sexualities. Scholars have cautioned of the dangers of applying anachronistic identity categories, like “gay” and “lesbian,” to texts written in periods when sexuality was understood and articulated

differently (Bennett, 2000: 11). Writers and characters from the past who did not conform to dominant models of sex, sexuality and gender may well have been hidden from history, making them hard to locate and unearth. Often taboo desires were secreted between the lines, and conveyed through allusion rather than explicitly stated, compounding ambiguities (Vicinus, 2004: xix). Moreover, while some texts are empowering, featuring charismatic characters who can feed into positive narratives that valorize marginalized identities and desires, many others are less-palatably steeped in shame, and characters may be complicit in their own oppression. Yet, as Love has argued, it is crucial that we remain open to and embrace these more abject and painful aspects of past queer lives, by assuming a perspective that she calls “feeling backward” (2007: 30), that is, of cultivating empathy with queer characters from the past who are cowed by shame. In her view, the analysis of stigma and failure is a vital component in any valid historical investigation of queer sexualities and can often illuminate contemporary understandings and negotiations of identity.

All these issues apply to Ferro’s works and require due consideration. First, as regards identity labels and sexual taxonomies, she does not use the word “lesbica”⁸ and was writing before the late 1970s and early 1980s when the term began to be reclaimed by lesbian-feminist activists in a positive sense as a marker of valid, political identity (Pomeranzi, 2011). Moreover, she followed literary conventions of the time by privileging common euphemisms for homosexuality over clearer terminology: for example, her characters speak of “una passione morbosa” (Ferro, 1932: 17)⁹ rather than using terms such as “saffismo” or “tribadismo” that were frequently found in medical texts, or the word “lesbica” that was used in a handful of Fascist documents.¹⁰ In addition, while some of her desiring women are only attracted to women, and categorize themselves as “different” in some way from heterosexual women, many of her protagonists are physically intimate with both men and women; others seem to have renounced sexual contact altogether, but still love and crave intimacy with other

women. Therefore, the term queer seems a more appropriate descriptor, as it opens up a horizon of non-monolithic identities and desires that disrupt binary conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality (Sedgwick, 1994: 8). Several of Ferro's characters also take on the status of the stigmatized queer, when used in one of its historical senses as a homophobic insult (Jagose, 1996: 1). These characters are aware of being cast as social and sexual pariahs by mainstream society — indeed sometimes they assume this role themselves — and they live their desires secretly, furtively, with a profound sense of shame.

Drawing on the insights of queer theory, as well as on critical reflection on intimate friendships, I argue that Ferro's characters embody and experience complex, contradictory queer identities and desires. They simultaneously challenge normative views of women's sexuality, forge alternative kinship arrangements to the institution of heterosexual marriage, but also reinforce notions of same-sex sexuality as perverted, abject and degenerate. Following Vicinus' view that "more interesting and difficult questions can be asked about friendship, intimacy, sexuality and spirituality than who had what kind of identity when" (Vicinus, 2004: xxiii), I am not interested in categorizing Ferro's characters. Instead, I analyze the modalities of desire they experience and articulate, the kinds of relationships they established, and how these are interpreted by other characters. I show how the complexity of her characters' sexualities is heightened by Ferro's slippery perspective — at times veiled and ambiguous, at times deeply ambivalent — which shifts elusively from potential subversion of heteronormativity to homophobic denigration of "vizi" and "amoralità" (Ferro, 1972: 14).¹¹ Finally, I reflect on the reception of her work, both at the time of publication and more recently, and on the kind of "backward feeling" (Love) it might inspire in us today.

Desperately Seeking an Alternative to Heterosexual Marriage, or "Born That Way?"

Ferro's novels are almost all first-person narratives set in the first half of the twentieth century that follow a similar plot: they recount the life of the young, middle- to upper-class,

female protagonist, who often lives in Ferro's native Liguria, whose parents are absent or deeply unhappy, and who develops into a woman during the course of the novel, discovering her sexuality through experimentation. Often she is educated in an all girls' school, a *collegio*, and reads avidly, especially French authors who speak of love, passion, courtesans and same-sex desire. Favorite authors include Marcel Prevost and Émile Zola; Denis Diderot's *La religieuse*,¹² in which a nun seduces a novice, is read by both the protagonist of *La ragazza in giardino* (1967) and Irene in *Una lunga confessione* (1972: 14).¹³ All Ferro's protagonists experience the profound existential angst that derives largely from a failure to establish the relationship they crave, or from an awareness that they have somehow transgressed socio-cultural norms of sex and gender and are consequently othered by society.

Contrary to both Fascist discourses of women's destiny as wife and mother (De Grazia, 1992: 1), and romantic notions of wedded bliss as the source of women's happiness that were reinforced by the popular *romanzo rosa* (Arslan, 1998: 30),¹⁴ the relationship desired by Ferro's characters is emphatically not heterosexual marriage as idealized for middle- to upper-class women: a dynamic in which the beautifully turned-out wife presides over the home and the domestic staff, is attentive to all her husband's needs and finds her apotheosis in motherhood. Indeed, marriage is depicted as deeply unfulfilling and often damaging for women in both older and younger generations, as Ferro offers a feminist critique of domestic abuse, both physical and emotional. In *Disordine* (1932: 282),¹⁵ Paola feels that she is somehow deficient because she is not married like her sister Donata, but Donata soon flees her husband due to his violence. In *Trent'anni* (1941: 2-6),¹⁶ Valentina's husband made her passive and deeply unhappy and Paola's husband required her to restrain and repress her personality to such an extent that she barely recognized herself; indeed, she feels, with growing panic, that she is becoming "*incolora*."¹⁷ Thus, both women are relieved when they are widowed. In *La violenza* (1967),¹⁸ Antonia's father Piero is violent, unfaithful

and oppressive to his first and second wives as well as to his daughter. Even when the protagonists choose their male partner and do feel love for him, they are often profoundly unhappy and sexually incompatible which provokes distress, rage or leaves them feeling utterly dissatisfied. For example, in *Una lunga confessione*, Irene loves Lorenzo deeply, but he treats her with disdain and sleeps with her mother (1972: 99-100, 115-16). She then marries Ugo who loves her but she finds sexual contact with him either dissatisfying or traumatic to the extent that she pleads to be excused from sleeping in the same bed with him (1972: 144, 161-2).

As an antidote to the plethora of failed or toxic heterosexual unions, Ferro's female protagonists seek out different types of relationship, or choose to remain single. For many characters, same-sex love is their most important emotional connection and they deliberately nurture it as an alternative to heterosexual marriage, although this relationship does not always have an erotic component, and may well be distressing, unfulfilling or somehow curtailed by the demands of heteronormativity. Paola, the protagonist of Ferro's first novel, *Disordine* resists categorization and remains single. She develops a "passione precoce" for an older girl at school, but this leads nowhere and she concludes that her love is therefore "inutile" (1932: 6-7).¹⁹ Later, Paola is the object of another girl's desire, Olga, but she decides that Olga is ill, and when Olga kisses her one night she reacts with horror and feels "macchiata" (1932: 43), presumably because she has internalized the homophobic socio-cultural discourses of the period.²⁰ Paola describes her passion for women as "morbosa" (1932: 17)²¹ and seems to associate it with an inner disorder that she cannot calm or control, which causes her deep distress (1932: 92).

Paola's perceived disorder, or queerness, is ambiguously expressed. After her childhood crushes on girls and the trauma of Olga's kiss, Paola has several relationships with boys and men over the course of the novel but ultimately remains alone, breaking off her

engagement with Gianni when she realizes that she does not love him (1932: 218). She becomes involved with men because she feels that she should, despite finding them often quite stupid and lacking in empathy (1932: 162, 218). She fantasizes about becoming a different version of herself, “diversa, pronta, forte” (1932: 273),²² but, enigmatically, she does not explain what this might entail, and where it might lead her. Paola has enough self-knowledge and strength of character not to follow her sister Donata’s footsteps into an unhappy marriage; but, as emphasized by the unresolved ending of the novel, which deconstructs the traditional heterosexual romance plot as Donata flees her violent husband, she fails to establish any successful relationships. Ferro arguably invites her readers to imagine the alternatives to Paola’s predicament: sexually desirous of both women and men, conditioned to suppress homosexual attraction but disappointed by heterosexuality, what could she hope for? Differently gendered interactions between women and men? A relationship based on the passions Paola felt in her youth but dismissed as somehow dirty or degenerate?

While Paola’s queerness disturbs rather than defines her identity (Edelman, 2004: 17), the eponymous protagonist of *Barbara* (1934) is firmly placed in a category of sexual other. The only relationship she craves is a sexual union with her best friend Vittoria, which she experiences as a secret torment:

[Barbara] fu afferrata dal desiderio del bacio. “Baciare la bocca di Vittoria!” pensò in una specia di ansia vorticosa [...] il pensiero formulato le fece vergogna [...] ripiegata su se stessa, radunava le forze per non urlare la disperazione improvvisa che le si era annidata nel petto (1934: 125).²³

Barbara never confesses her feelings for Vittoria to anyone except the reader, but she knows that they are socially unacceptable and consequently feels shame, anxiety and self-loathing. She finds physical contact with men repugnant, and comes to realize that she is

“different” from other women, effectively assuming a negatively coded queer identity (1934: 241). On their holidays together in southern France, Barbara is happier than she has ever been, and feels that she has found a kind of paradise (1934: 84). However, Vittoria does not return her affection, and becomes engaged to a young man. Barbara desperately seeks to conceal her feelings for Vittoria by accepting a marriage proposal from a rich male admirer to whom she offers herself numbly (1934: 268). Yet when Vittoria tragically drowns at sea, she sets her mind grimly to the inevitable destiny that, in her view, she shares with all other “*donne nate male*” who have similar sexual instincts:²⁴ a lonely wait for death to dispatch her from her suffering (1934: 320). Here we can discern in Ferro’s prose echoes of late nineteenth-century medical theories about same-sex desire having congenital origins: for example, the influential positivist scientist Cesare Lombroso wrote of “*tribadi nate*,” women that he believed were afflicted by a congenital defect that “perverted” their sexual desire (Lombroso and Ferrero, 2009: 435).²⁵ Thus, Barbara exemplifies Faderman’s thesis that medical discourses condemning homosexuality permeated literature, resulting in homoerotic desire being often depicted as a “disease” that led to “self-loathing” (1997: 20).

Barbara’s is ostensibly a cautionary tale about the miserable existence of queers, a distinct category of sexual other. Yet alongside the bleak narrative of homosexual isolation runs a more universal story about the pain of rejection by the beloved as Barbara realizes that Vittoria does not share her feelings:

Per Vittoria sono un’amica e nulla più. Lei per me è un bisogno, una legge: in lei mi ritrovo, per lei vibro, sento e amo. Vittoria non è una donna per me, ma la mia possibilità di amare, la mia armonia, la mia pace (1934: 262).²⁶

Here, Barbara expresses her love and desire for Vittoria not just as a woman but as her ideal partner, the one person who would enable her to realize herself fully. Therefore, the impediment to their relationship developing is not specifically, or not only, socio-cultural

condemnation of same-sex desire, but the lack of reciprocity on Vittoria's part. Clearly, Barbara could potentially find another, more willing lover, and she is aware that there are other "donne nate male" like herself; but she has no queer community to support her, and so can only imagine a future of lonely isolation.

Ferro's perspective in this novel is unclear and seems to pull ambivalently in different directions. She deliberately transgresses norms of the period by writing about this topic, although her depictions of urgent desire for physical sexual contact between girls led to the novel's censorship. On one level, she seems to want to condemn same-sex desire, which is given deeply negative associations as she draws on bio-medical pathologizations and the rhetoric of social stigma. Yet by making Barbara the protagonist of the novel, she forces the reader to engage closely with her suffering, arguably creating the conditions for empathy: as Nussbaum argues, our capacity to imagine the other, including sexual others, and to empathize with them can lead to increased respect and humanity (2006). Ferro imagines Barbara's plight for us, and forces us to contemplate the tragedy of a woman whose chance of love is thwarted. The structure of the novel is also significant: like *Disordine*, it refuses to follow the standard romantic plot that heals wayward behavior through heterosexual marriage. Moreover, unlike the common narrative pattern of killing off transgressive queer characters to restore heteronormativity — as identified by Vito Russo in countless films (1987: 347-49) — Ferro gets rid of the heterosexual object of desire, while leaving the unfulfilled queer protagonist with her unsated desire bubbling on, stronger than death.²⁷

Ferro's depiction of Barbara's same-sex desire resonates with Butler's argument that gender identity is deeply inflected by a sense of melancholy, or unfinished grieving, which can lead to a sense of homosexual desire as forbidden. Butler discusses the "foreclosure of possibility which produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss" (1997: 135). In this perspective of melancholic identification, the lost

object of desire is not actually lost, but is internalized, “made coextensive with the ego itself” (Butler, 1997: 132). Barbara certainly strives to hold on to Vittoria, even beyond death, since the very idea of Vittoria and what she symbolizes seem to be crucial to Barbara’s sense of self. This is also true of other of Ferro’s protagonists, as I discuss further down.

Ferro’s next novel, *Trent’anni* recounts a friendship between two young widows, Paola and Valentina, who for a while do manage to attain a form of the peace, love and harmony that Barbara craved with Vittoria. Paola moves in with Valentina and they develop a sensual intimacy charged with homoeroticism. They sleep in the same bed and Paola enjoys the scent of Valentina’s skin and the sensation of lying close to her body (1941: 8); they share a bathroom and, while there is a modesty curtain around the bath, Paola is deeply aware of Valentina’s body as it enters the water and her hair fans out around her (1941: 48); they comfort each other, give each other a new lease of life, energy and freedom, and develop a friendship that is “profonda come una parentela” (1941: 157-58).²⁸ Their co-habitation creates a queer home environment, infused with empathy and the shared embodiment of emotions, that gives them a sense of physical well-being. Paola and Valentina’s relationship appears supportive and lasting because it is based on openness, in stark contrast to the often violent heterosexual cohabitations that Ferro describes elsewhere, and which these characters had experienced in their previous marriages.

Yet the harmonious rhythm of their romantic friendship, is broken by the appearance of two men, Carlo and Nanni, whom the women eventually marry, thus sacrificing their special bond. This brings both excitement and great sadness, although the concluding chapters are ambiguous and almost provide an alternate ending. Ostensibly, the novel ends with the two marriages, but they do not seem enticing prospects: Paola recounts how her union with Nanni symbolizes the end of her experiences as a happy, free, young widow:

Sono finiti l'orgoglio, la sicurezza, la padronanza, anche, di me stessa [...] egli diverrà la mia prigioniera [...] mi umilierà [...] sarà la mia tomba: e incomincerò l'eternità guardandomi finire, guardando esaurirsi il mio vigore e la mia intelligenza nello sforzo continuo di amarlo (1941: 159-60).²⁹

Although she is choosing to marry Nanni, Paola mourns the loss of her intimacy with Valentina and prepares herself for a bleak future in which she is slowly but surely exhausted by the effort of loving her husband, as if against her will. Yet a few pages earlier, marriage had been posited as a temporary disruption to the women's relationship as Paola declared that Valentina loved her "meglio e più profondamente" than her fiancé, and would be there to welcome her back tenderly when the marriage inevitably faltered (1941: 151).³⁰ The homoerotic subtext in this novel is heightened by allusions to what remains unspoken between the women. For example, Paola reflects that despite her usual openness, "[Valentina] vuole ingannarmi su quello che prova per me" (1941: 115).³¹ Clues such as these encourage the reader to pay attention to the forms of self-deception that may be enacted by the protagonists, who conform to socio-cultural norms by remarrying, despite an apparent awareness that they are far happier with each other. Like idealized same-sex friendships in the nineteenth century analyzed by Vicinus, the bond between Valentina and Paola is "simultaneously more and less important" than their marriages (Vicinus 2004: xviii), depending on whether the order of importance is shaped by their inner feelings, or by external socio-cultural pressures.

Charged relationships between women again feature in *Memoria d'Irene* (1944).³² In this novel, Ferro depicts both another instance of same-sex desire experienced as shameful (echoing the plight of the protagonists in *Disordine* and *Barbara*), and a form of the sensual, sublimated eros between Paola and Valentina in *Trent'anni*. At the *collegio* attended by the protagonists of this novel, Anna and Irene, we hear about crushes between girls, "le

passionali e le impure” (1944: 45).³³ Their classmates Ina and Sonia whisper about their secret desires at night, which are described as a “peccato” (1944: 46).³⁴ When Ina dies from a respiratory illness, the girls seem to link her death to these urges (it is framed as an inevitable “castigo”³⁵), and are anxious about the fact that she died without having confessed, in a state of ‘impurity’ (1944: 47-50). Sonia and Ina love Irene “con eccesso” and a “curiosità morbida,”³⁶ and refuse to renounce their desires. However Anna also loves Irene, but in a different way: “per un’espansione al cuore alla quale era mischiata una pietà non del tutto palese a me stessa” (1944: 39-40).

In this novel Ferro differentiates between girls who seem incurably afflicted by same-sex desire — examples of “donne nate male” — and a more acceptable form of eros between women that, Anna tells us, is not physical but is “più che amore [...] fuori della sua forma umana” (1944: 197).³⁷ Anna and Irene deliberately decide to remain “immune [...] dal torbido,” to stay away from the nefarious passions driving Sonia and Ina (1944: 47).³⁸ Instead Anna devotes herself to serving Irene with “un’impareggiabile dedizione” which is chaste and secret, but which seems to make her into a passive bystander of her own life (1944: 144).³⁹ Disturbingly, when Irene drowns in a probable suicide, Anna feels both horror and joy, and declares that she has lost her friend “nella maniera migliore” since she is left “sola ad amarla, ancora, sempre, fino alla mia fine; intatta dentro di me” (1944: 196-97).⁴⁰ We might interpret this emotion as homoerotic desire that Anna has sublimated into a spiritual love out of a sense of shame. Perhaps she is glad to have lost the physical Irene since this allows her to continue loving her friend without the danger of finding herself in thrall to the level of desire that Sonia and Ina felt for Irene. The reference to being internally intact is striking since alongside notions of existential coherence it evokes virginity, the hymen and a state of non-penetration, implying that Anna has not compromised her maidenly virtue through same-sex acts but might have wished to if Irene were still present in the flesh. Alternatively, Anna’s

statement about love that goes beyond the human form, beyond the physical body, which occurs in the same paragraph (1944: 197) may simply indicate “a preference for the erotic pleasure of unfulfilled, idealized love” (Vicinus, 2004: xix). Heterosexuality was never an affective possibility for Anna, but neither was homosexual desire, since her love for Irene is defined in homophobic opposition to the physical urges that Sonia and Ina felt to touch Irene (Ferro, 1944: 40). Once again, Ferro leaves us with an erotic conundrum that recalls Butler’s argument about the foreclosure of a physical homosexual relationship, and the subsequent melancholic internalization of the love object as crucial to the protagonist’s sense of self (1997: 135).

Queer reiterations

This discussion of female same-sex relationships in Ferro’s novels reveals the recurrence of not only generic aspects of plot — a young girl growing up and negotiating sexuality — but of specific scenes, feelings and names, as though Ferro were working through ideas by elaborating variations on a theme. For example, the scene in which Olga kisses Paola in *Disordine* is echoed by Sonia and Ina’s whispered nightly confessions of taboo desire in *Memoria d’Irene*; the unattainable, heterosexual love object in *Barbara*, Vittoria, drowns, as does the unattainable heterosexual love object, Irene, in *Memoria d’Irene*. Names recur continually in Ferro’s oeuvre (Paola, Silvia, and Irene are particularly common), but with a twist: the Paola of *Disordine* remains alone, and queerly rejects heterosexual marriage; the Paola of *Trent’anni* is widowed, and develops a deeply satisfying homoerotic friendship, but then chooses to entomb herself in a marriage that bodes badly; the Irene of *Memoria d’Irene* despises the girls who flirt with her but enjoys the attention (1944: 40), marries badly, and kills both her husband and, it seems, herself, while the Irene of later novels *Una lunga confessione* (1972) and *Irene muore* (1974) only has sexual encounters with men, and lives a long, if dissatisfied life.

It appears that Ferro both wants to draw continuities between her protagonists, and to assert distinctions between them, creating a differentiated palimpsestic accumulation of narratives that has several implications: that women share a dissatisfaction with traditional forms of heterosexual relationship, which break down in a range of ways but never lead to happiness; that women are highly sexually-desirous, often in queer ways; that there are multiple, varied forms of desire, many of which include a homoerotic element; that women often enjoy same-sex romantic or erotic friendships; that desire is always unique and that there is no such thing as normal sexuality. Yet while Ferro's novels offer a queer critique of normative social organization and disturb dominant models of individual sexed and gendered identity (Edelman, 2004: 17) they do not gesture in any concrete way towards a brave new future of sexual liberation, but remain highly ambiguous, even contradictory and ambivalent. This is confirmed by two further examples of recurring references to same-sex desire.

The first is a statement made by the Irene of *Una lunga confessione*, a one-time avid reader of sensual French literature, who claims that she remains uncorrupted, so to speak, by this activity:

La pederastia, la lussuria, il lesbismo, la perversione sessuale, furono per diverse settimane il mio pasto, Ma da tanto fango non ritenevo che qualche parola, qualche periodo; erano sempre periodi, parole, che spiegavano l'amore nella sua manifestazione appassionata. Le complicazioni, i vizi, le amoralità scorrevano nella mia mente senza lasciare traccia. Cercavo solo l'amore, quello bello e felice (Ferro, 1972: 14).⁴¹

This declaration requires unpacking: for any reader of Ferro's previous novels it can only be ironic, since she has already debunked the myth of happy, uncomplicated love (indeed, this Irene, too, will only find happiness for a brief time). Moreover, Ferro has established a narrative approach that both repudiates and focuses on same-sex desire, making

it difficult to accept Irene's declaration that no trace of the apparently amoral content of her readings has lodged in her mind or fantasy. It might even be argued that dissident desire constitutes a crucial, formative element in her protagonists' sexual and emotional lives, an inevitable touchstone in their developmental process, even if they experience or perceive it as a vice, or as steeped in impossibility and melancholy. Thus, ironically, even as Irene denies the influence of her reading matter, she confirms same-sex desire as a topic for discussion and exposes Ferro's reader to it vicariously.

The second example that confirms the contradictory character of Ferro's approach to same-sex desire is the recurrence of the author George Sand in her work. In the preface to *Disordine*, by Ferro's friend Alessandro Varaldo (1932), Sand is cited in a defensive discourse that anticipates and seeks to diffuse readers' questions as to whether the author had based it on her own (sexual) experiences. Sand's argument that any attempt to seek out the truth of a work of art constitutes an attack on the author's freedom is deployed to deflect this kind of tawdry speculation. Given the homoerotic content of Ferro's novel, and Sand's reputation as having had relationships with both men and women (Hawthorne, 2003: 93), this reference seems relatively progressive; it deflects petty prying to ascertain an assumed sexual truth through the authority of a transgressive feminist icon.⁴² Later, however, in *Le romantiche* (1958), a series of biographical essays about women writers, Ferro focuses on Sand's life and seems strangely eager to assert that while some had asserted that the French novelist enjoyed an "amicizia colpevole" with the actress Marie Dorval (Ferro, 1958: 32),⁴³ in actual fact the publication of their letters proves that there was no scandal: "Delusione! Le due donne [...] si scrissero lettere del tutto normali come usa fra amiche affettuose e nulla di più. Parole di poco peso, espressioni di ammirazione e di tenerezza [...] ebbero sempre stima l'una dell'altra [...] due donne calme e sincere" (Ferro, 1958: 36).⁴⁴

Like Hawthorne (2003: 94-95), I am not interested in arguing whether Sand did or did not have a lesbian relationship with Dorval, but in how Ferro frames this relationship. Ferro is ambivalent: simultaneously disappointed and relieved by her discovery, indicating both a prurient interest and a homophobic perspective. Moreover, it seems highly disingenuous for someone who has written repeatedly of homoerotic friendships to assert that a line can be drawn neatly between affectionate, tender friendships and so-called guilty ones. This rigid perspective does not chime with kinds of loving friendship portrayed in her own novels, especially those between Paola and Valentina in *Trent'anni* and between Anna and Irene in *Memoria d'Irene*, both of which are animated by something that eludes the comprehension of the desiring friends, but is arguably quite palpable to an alert reader: a queer desire, not necessarily sexual, but which is particularly keenly felt.

Ferro's repeated engagements with female same-sex desire, and the echoes and resonances between her protagonists and their experiences indicate that far from having left no trace in her mind, the desire between women that she (like Irene) had read about in French literature continued to pique her interest. The relationships that she depicts resonate with Faderman's accounts of "romantic friendships" (1997), and Vicinus' analysis of "intimate friendships" (2004), which did not always have a sexual component, but which constituted a primary emotional bond. Ferro's protagonists clearly struggle with, and, in some cases, have internalized homonormative and homophobic discourses circulating in their socio-cultural context. This hostile discursive environment may also have influenced Ferro's choice to make some of her characters' feelings ungraspable, or beyond words, since writing in "code" was one way of protecting both them and herself from accusations of offensive sentiment: after all, "the unnamed cannot be censored" (Vicinus, 2004: xix, 234).

Aside from resonating with romantic or intimate female friendships, Ferro's portrayals of the human struggle to find love, pleasure and complicity beyond the

heteronormative family model also chime with Foucault's reflections on homosexuality and friendship. The French philosopher suggests that it is less important to think about what it means to *be* homosexual than to ask: "what relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented and multiplied and modulated?" (1997: 135). He insists that "we must escape [...] readymade formulas" (1997: 137) and explore new types of relation that resist all forms of normativity; we must believe "that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces" (1997: 140). Similarly, Ferro shows how homoerotic passion can open new avenues for women frustrated by heteronormativity. Her protagonists reject the promises of romantic fiction and normative discourse and show us that there is a potential world beyond heteronormativity, which itself is open to variation. Yet Foucault's motivation in developing new forms of relationship is pleasure (1997: 137). In contrast, Ferro's protagonists certainly imagine pleasure but rarely experience it, and she condemns their desires through repeated declarations of their perversion.

Of course, she began writing about female homoeroticism in an earlier and markedly different period to that in which Foucault was speaking. Yet, if we focus on time of writing, it is striking to chart how Ferro's language articulating female same-sex desire develops over the years, and to contrast this with the varying centrality of the theme of homoeroticism.

Tracing the arc of Ferro's novelistic production, her articulations of female homoeroticism evolve from allusive ambiguity (Paola's "passione morbosa" (Ferro, 1932: 17) and unarticulable disorder), to explicit declarations of love and a (pathologized) distinct sexual identity (*Barbara*), to implicit, self-deceptive discourses (*Trent'anni*), to a contrast between carnal desires that are portrayed as sinful, and a same-sex love that eludes words (*Memoria d'Irene*), to a final clear but dismissive acknowledgement and condemnation of "lesbismo" (*Una lunga confessione*, 1972: 14). Ferro's later novels — *Irene muore* (1974) and *La sconosciuta* (1978) — contain no significant references to same-sex desire.⁴⁵ Thus,

the passage of time and epistemological shifts provided new terminology for sexual identity (although not until the 1970s), but did not encourage Ferro to write more openly or in a less condemnatory way about love between women. It even seems as though a narrative interest in homoeroticism was a phase she went through, but then left behind, as Irene claims of her reading interests in *Una lunga confessione*.

At the end of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) — to which Ferro's *Barbara* was compared, as I discuss below — the protagonist, Stephen Gordon, demands a queer future by making an impassioned plea to God to recognize the right of “inverts” to exist.⁴⁶ In contrast, Ferro's characters tend to sublimate same-sex desire into an ascetic, homoemotional feeling. Sadly, this is not necessarily to fashion a new hybrid form of bond, combining romantic friendship and Sapphic sexuality, a practice that Vicinus identifies in some twentieth-century queer women (2004: xviii-ix), or, as Foucault suggests, to explore new forms of relation (indeed, they often end up alone). Instead, it seems to be a result of the pervasive stigma of same-sex desire that they are neither willing nor able to overcome.

Critical Reception: from veiled homophobia to silence

Paradoxically, homoeroticism was more of a central theme in the novels written by Ferro between 1932-44, under or just after Fascism, than in later texts, even those published in the 1970s. Similarly, critics were more explicit about this aspect of her writing, both in negative and more neutral ways, in earlier periods, as opposed to in recent articles and scholarship. *Disordine* and *Barbara* were supported by Arnoldo Mondadori, their publisher, and *Disordine* won the Premio dell'Accademia Mondadori in 1932 (Cedrola, 2007: 7). Mondadori himself wrote privately to Ferro that he thought her work was promising and that he had confidence in her, but that she needed to apply herself to ensure that she continued to improve the quality of her writing.⁴⁷ In the letters conserved in the Mondadori archive, he does not mention same-sex desire, but instead praises Ferro's ability to describe the

difficulties of adolescence.⁴⁸ However, he does express disappointment at the novel *Trent'anni* and cautions Ferro that the “espressioni eccessivamente crude” that she uses may meet with hostility from the authorities.⁴⁹ Given that the published text does not present obvious examples of crudeness, Ferro may have modified the text; she also published it with Garzanti, perhaps due to Mondadori’s loss of confidence in her writing. As one might expect, newspaper reviews of the early novels in Italy were negative: writing on *Disordine* for *Il Corriere della sera* (1933) Vincenzo Bucci criticized Paola as “malata” and afflicted by “eccessività,”⁵⁰ and failed to understand why she did not get married like her sister Donata (thus revealing that he had misunderstood the ending of the novel and Ferro’s critique of domestic abuse). Raul Radice reviewed *Barbara* in *L’Ambrosiano* (1934), and affirmed that it showed potential, even though the writing was uneven, and noted that Ferro had tackled a “tema scabroso”.⁵¹ Eligio Possenti, writing in *Il Corriere della sera* (1934) was even less charitable: he saw *Barbara* as morbid, and suffering from an incurable “deformazione psichica.”⁵² While carefully avoiding specific terminology to describe the taboo of same-sex desire, these reviewers honed in on homoeroticism as closely as they dared, through veiled allusion, in order to effectively condemn it as a subject for literature.

English language reviews of the novels took a less condemnatory approach to homoeroticism, although they also mentioned the uneven quality of Ferro’s prose: Bontempo, writing in *The Modern Language Journal* in 1935 described *Barbara* as well-conceived in some aspects, but stylistically and structurally weak (1933: 593). Nevertheless, this article, an overview of Italian literature in 1935, confirms that Ferro enjoyed quite a high international profile since the only two women writers mentioned are Ferro and the 1926 Nobel Prize winner Grazia Deledda. The most positive review of *Barbara* was written by Samuel Putnam for the American literary journal *Books Abroad* (1935). Putnam insisted that Ferro “indubitably possesses a novelist’s talent”, and described the novel as an Italian *Well of*

Loneliness (1935: 209). He did not explicitly refer to same-sex desire but rather to the “true nature” of Barbara’s feelings (1935: 210). However in comparison to the Italian reviews, his comments are striking for their lack of moralistic language; and once again Ferro is in the company of important novelists with an international reputation.

This international reception may sound surprising given that the novel was banned in Italy. It appeared on the list of prohibited books in 1935, and again in 1939. It was the only one of Ferro’s novels to be censored.⁵³ However both Mondadori and Ferro intervened to attempt to have the ban revoked, with some success: Ferro met with Galeazzo Ciano, Head of Mussolini’s Press Office, and apparently struck an agreement that the novel would not be reprinted but that existing copies could continue to circulate. Mondadori wrote to Neos Dinale, the Undersecretary of State for Press and Propaganda, to confirm the meeting, and library catalogues confirm that copies in circulation were not withdrawn.⁵⁴ This confirms the inconsistency of censorship during this period, revealed once more when *Trent’anni* was seized in Udine in 1940, but not in other areas (Bonsaver, 2007: 343). Moreover, while contemporary reviews condemned the homoeroticism of Ferro’s work, they paradoxically contributed to keeping an oblique public discourse on non-normative desire alive under Fascism. In contrast, in the sparse recent scholarship on Ferro’s work, homoeroticism is not mentioned. It does not feature in entries on Ferro in literary companions, which is perhaps to be expected since they tend to be brief.⁵⁵ However it is also surprisingly missing from the only themed journal issue dedicated to Ferro, *Resine* (2007). While, of course, there are many other aspects to Ferro’s work which merit critical attention, it is strange that none of the essays even touch on the theme.

In the issue of *Resine* to which I have just made reference, Monica Cedrola (2007: 8) notes how Ferro denounces the condition of women in society, but does not mention same-sex desire, which is surely relevant since some of Ferro’s characters sought to avoid marriage

because they were repulsed by men (Ferro, 1934: 152). Sebastiani discusses female characters and suggests that the paired protagonists, linked by strong, possessive feelings, could be considered as two complementary, often conflictual aspects of the same person (2007: 19). While this reading is certainly possible, it seems striking that Sebastiani does not even mention the fact that sometimes these so-called friends desire one another sexually.

I certainly do not wish to reduce Ferro to an author who only writes about same-sex desire: her work is variegated. Moreover, her portrayal of women's desire for men is also worthy of exploration since her protagonists are sometimes highly sexually desirous of men, challenging both socio-cultural norms and the myth, derived from Lombrosian theories, that "normal" women had no libido.⁵⁶ Yet at the same time I am struck that Ferro's transgressive depictions of desire between women —commented on, even if negatively, by her contemporaries — have not elicited any sort of critical response in recent years. Admittedly Italy still suffers from a lack of adequate legislation to protect the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual/transgender individuals (D'Ippoliti, 2011), which has an impact on the talkability of homosexuality including in the academy (Bernini, 2015). However, in a positive vein scholars have already begun to explore Italy's queer past and present in convincing ways,⁵⁷ and it is our responsibility to ensure that collective knowledge of Italian culture does not remain problematically "incomplete" (Sedgwick, 2008: 1).

Conclusions

Returning to Love's notion of "feeling backward," Ferro's protagonists embody simultaneously distressing and compelling forms of queer abjection. They are tormented and lonely, they deceive themselves about their feelings, or suppress them, and only rarely experience the joys of the homoerotic bond that they crave. Yet Ferro's contradictory perspective and her decision to repeatedly represent queer desire complicate their symbolic significance. While her protagonists are pathologized by Ferro, or condemn themselves as

perverted, they refuse to be silent. Instead they resurface continually in her works, disturbing and disrupting heteronormativity, forcing the reader to engage with the misery of women who desire women, and to see and hear their pain, as well as their occasional joy. If, on one level, the repeated associations of same-sex desire with suffering and isolation can be read as a condemnation of homosexuality and a warning to those who might wish to express their own homoerotic desires, on another, Ferro's novels can be seen to forge a literary discourse on non-normative sexualities and desire at a time when the Fascist Regime was seeking to make these topics even more unspeakable than they had been in previous decades.⁵⁸ Her portrayals are certainly less pathologizing than those of other novelists writing in the 1940s, such as Vasco Pratolini. His *Cronache di poveri amanti* (1947)⁵⁹ has been read by critics as fusing lesbian desire with Fascist abuses of power in the figure of the 'Signora' (Hainsworth, 2000: 136-7).

In addition, as my discussion shows, while Ferro's characters rarely manage to construct lasting forms of alternative relationship, we do see some instances of queer domestic dynamics: Anna and Valentina's cohabitation in *Trent'anni* is one example. Moreover, although queer relationships do not last, some of Ferro's characters are very unwilling to quell their stigmatized desire. Those who identify or are identified as sexual others do not wish to be cured of their "vice," as medical treatises suggested was possible or desirable.⁶⁰ Instead, they internalize it as a fundamental, formative aspect of themselves, albeit a melancholy one. Barbara knows she will not be happy but sets her mind to her lonely future of loving her lost friend rather than trying to heterosexualize herself; Sonia and Ina refuse to renounce their sinful desires. Strikingly, the common pattern of suppressing the transgressive queer is subverted (Russo, 1987), not only in *Barbara*, as argued above, but in *Memoria d'Irene*, as the character who is written out of the narrative is Irene, the heterosexual love object, as opposed to the queer agent of desire, Anna. Thus to some extent

Ferro leaves the door to a queer future ajar, even if the outlook is bleak. Her protagonists do not achieve what they wished for. Rather, their struggle to exist is nevertheless a crucial component in our queer cultural heritage. Even as single queers, who have often never had direct sexual contact with the women they desire, they refuse to be erased and reabsorbed by heteronormativity.

Ferro's representations of queerly desiring women deserve and demand to be seen and heard; they merit a critical response, and significantly enrich our understanding of queer female representation during late Fascism and the post-war years. Indeed, my reading of Ferro's work destabilizes, queers and enriches existing understandings of Italian women authors of this period, and of Italian literary discourses on women's sexuality and desire, since critical work on these subjects has largely excluded female homoeroticism.⁶¹ While she is hidden from history now, due to lapsing readership and lack of critical attention, Ferro's novels were quite widely read and reviewed at the time of publication. Although her queerly desiring women may be largely unknown to contemporary readers, they were much more culturally visible and debated in earlier decades. If in some ways her message is "backwards", to use Love's terminology (2007), in that it cleaves towards shame rather than pride in a dissident sexuality, her novels are certainly highly infused with profound feelings: neither failure, shame, death nor isolation can diminish "the seriousness or the intensity of the women's passions" (Faderman, 1997: 19).

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¹ "Women who were born bad, guilty friendships and those that are as deep as kinship." This and all other translations are my own.

² Recent research includes: Danna, 2004; Milletti and Passerini, 2007; Gabriele, 2013; Dalla Torre, 2014; Ross 2015. For a perceptive discussion of the lack of critical debate on 'lesbian' representation and a call for further work to be done in this area, see Gabriele, 2010.

³ Ferro published widely over a long career (including 12 novels and hundreds of short stories and articles) but has now slipped off the horizon for both readers and critics (Aspesi, 1991, Cedrola, 2007: 8). A special issue of the Ligurian journal *Resine* dedicated to Ferro contains a comprehensive bibliography. This is the only sustained critical consideration of her work.

⁴ I discuss these issues in my recent monograph (Ross 2015): for example, Cialente's novel was censored when she refused to cut the scenes depicting desire between women (Petrigiani, 1984: 83; Ross 2015: 240-41).

⁵ Many more men were prosecuted than women. See Goretti and Giartosio (2006) on men accused of pederasty, and Milletti (2007: 144) on women accused of "amori lesbici" [lesbian love].

⁶ *Barbara* was banned in 1934 and appeared on the list of prohibited books in 1935 (Bonsaver, 2007: 112).

⁷ On the evolving talkability of lesbianism and its cultural representation, see Castle (2003: 16).

⁸ 'lesbian'.

⁹ "a morbid passion".

¹⁰ Vicinus notes that by the 1890s the word "morbid" was a well-known shorthand for homosexuality (2004: xxii). This was the case in both Italian and English language publications. The terms "saffismo" [Sapphism] and "tribadism" [tribadism] were widely used in medical publications from the late nineteenth century, to indicate women who were sexually-attracted to other women, for example in the work of Lombroso (Lombroso and Ferrero, 2009). On Fascist documents containing the word "lesbica" [lesbian] see Milletti (2007: 154). As

regards other literary texts, novels by Mura and Aleramo published in 1919 that represented desire between women also avoided using any explicit linguistic markers of sexual identity (Ross 2015: 185).

¹¹ “vices”, “amoral acts”.

¹² “The Nun”.

¹³ “The Girl in the Garden”; “A Long Confession”.

¹⁴ Literally “pink novel” or romance fiction.

¹⁵ “Disorder”.

¹⁶ “Thirty”. This novel was first published in 1940.

¹⁷ “colourless”. Cedrola suggests that this novel is based on Ferro’s own experiences in her marriage to Guido Piovene (2007: 11-12).

¹⁸ “Violence”.

¹⁹ “precocious passion”; “useless”. I discuss both *Disordine* and *Barbara* in my recent monograph (Ross 2015: 247-57).

²⁰ “stained”. Elena Biagini has documented how same-sex desire between women was silenced or was a source of shame during the 1930s (2007: 122-25).

²¹ “morbid”.

²² “different, ready, strong”.

²³ “She was seized by a desire to kiss. ‘Kiss Vittoria’s mouth!’ she thought in a kind of giddy anxiety [...] the thought made her ashamed [...] bent double, she gathered her strength in order not to shout out the sudden desperation that had knotted itself in her chest”.

²⁴ “women who are born bad”.

²⁵ “born tribades”.

²⁶ “For Vittoria I am a friend and nothing more. For me, she is a need, a law: in her I find myself, for her I vibrate, feel and love. Vittoria is not a woman for me, but my possibility of loving, my harmony, my peace”.

²⁷ The tendency to kill off, so to speak, the queer character is apparent in Italian texts, including Vitaliano Brancati’s *La governante* [The Governess] (1952), in which the French au pair Caterina commits suicide out of shame for her sexuality.

²⁸ “as deep as kinship”.

²⁹ “Gone are pride, security and my self-determination too [...] he will become my prison [...] he will humiliate me [...] he will be my tomb: and I will begin eternity watching myself expire, watching my energy and intelligence drain away in the continual effort of loving him”.

³⁰ “better and more deeply”.

³¹ “Valentina wants to deceive me about her feelings for me”.

³² “Memories of Irene”.

³³ “the passionate and the impure girls”.

³⁴ “sin”.

³⁵ “punishment”.

³⁶ “to excess”; “morbid curiosity”.

³⁷ “more than love [...] beyond its human form”.

³⁸ “immune from turbid goings on”.

³⁹ “an incomparable dedication”.

⁴⁰ “in the best way”; “alone to love her, still, always, until my end; intact within myself”.

⁴¹ “Pederasty, luxury, lesbianism and sexual perversion were my nourishment for several weeks. But out of all that mud I only retained a few words, a few sentences; they were always words and sentences that described passionate love. Complications, vice and amorality all passed through my mind without leaving a trace. I was just looking for beautiful, happy love.”

⁴² While Ferro did not write the preface, it is possible that she and Varaldo conferred about the content.

⁴³ “guilty friendship”.

⁴⁴ “Disappointment! The two women wrote each other utterly normal letters as women do who are affectionate friends and nothing more [...] light words, expressions of admiration and tenderness [...] they always esteemed each other [...] two calm and sincere women”.

⁴⁵ *Irene muore* is a sequel to *Una lunga confessione*, and recounts Irene’s life after WWII. *La sconosciuta* tells the story of a young woman whose parents’ marriage dissolves, and the evolving relationship between mother and daughter. It also explores the younger protagonist’s growing bond with a female friend of her mother’s who offers an alternative model of femininity.

⁴⁶ Ferro might have read this either in English or Italian; it was translated in 1930.

⁴⁷ Letter dated 20 March 1933, available in the Archivio della fondazione Mondadori, Milan: Fondo Arnoldo Mondadori, Marise Ferro (AFM).

⁴⁸ Letter dated 20 November 1937 (AFM).

⁴⁹ “excessively crude expressions”. Letter dated 29 September 1939 (AFM).

⁵⁰ “ill”; “excessiveness”.

⁵¹ “scabrous topic”.

⁵² “mental deformity”.

⁵³ The lists of prohibited books can be consulted at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome: MI, DAGR, DGPS Massime S4/A ,b.219.

⁵⁴ Letter from Mondadori to Dinale dated 20 December 1934 (AFM). See also Bonsaver (2007: 112).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Lombardi (1980), Mafai (1993).

⁵⁶ See Lombroso and Ferrero (2009: 102). One example of a highly desirous woman is the Irene of *Una lunga confessione*.

⁵⁷ Aside from the research cited in note 2 above, see, for example, Duncan (2006), Cestaro (2004).

⁵⁸ On discourses of desire between women in Italy between 1860 and the 1930s, see xxx 2015.

⁵⁹ “A Tale of Poor Lovers”.

⁶⁰ Late nineteenth-century Italian medical publications on female same-sex practices usually advocated surveillance, and keeping girls who had not already succumbed to ‘vice’ away from the temptations of women-only environments, like schools, where it was apparently rife (Obici and Marchesini, 1905: 313-16, 321). Some scientists, like Lombroso, also intervened surgically on patients’ bodies, cauterizing their clitorises, for example (see Lombroso 1885: 220 and Beccalossi 2012: 119, 135). In the 1920s medical specialists (like Ferdinando De Napoli, 1923: 242-4) continued to suggest, problematically, that homosexuality should be cured.

⁶¹ As Gabriele has pointed out (2010), studies of Italian women writers, including Sharon Wood and Letizia Panizza’s *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy* (2000) and Marina Zancan’s *Il doppio itinerario della scrittura* (1998) are almost entirely silent on this topic.