

Italian 'lesbian' literature: tribades, flames and sapphists

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This talk comes out of a research project I am working on, exploring cultural representations of lesbian identities in Italy, from the 1870s to today. I'm focussing on literature, but in order to provide the context in which this literature was written, I'm also looking at some journals, newspapers, diaries, political manifestos, film and tv. It's a big project.

It was inspired by my interest in how lesbians and female same sex desire are represented in novels, and by an urge to challenge the general view that nothing much has been written in Italian about desire between women. I have already discovered that there is quite a lot out there. And I think it is important to talk about it because cultural visibility, or invisibility, can have such a big impact on social attitudes towards sexuality, particularly in a country like Italy. This is a country where same sex couples cannot register any official partnership, the LGBTQ population is not properly protected from discrimination, and the voice of homophobic institutions like the Vatican is really strong. So what's the other side of the story?

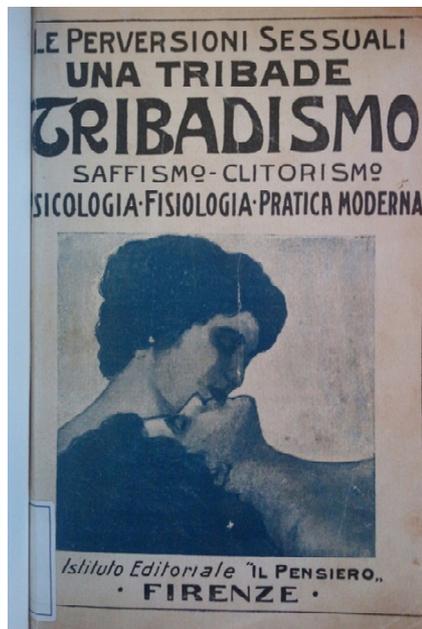
I'll start with some images:

This is from 1893. A masculine and a feminine tribade couple, as categorised by the criminologist Cesare Lombroso. Tribade is a word derived from Greek, which has been used to mean females who derive sexual pleasure without men (i.e. on their own), or females who derive sexual pleasure from each other.



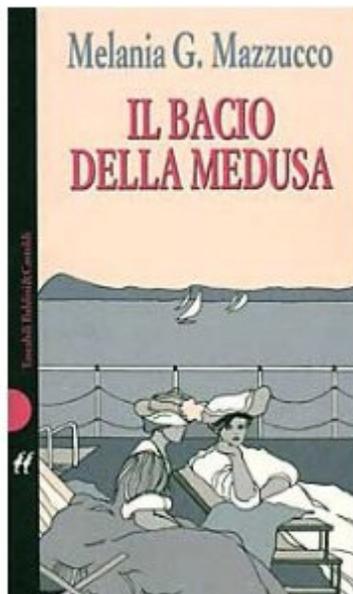
Source: Lombroso 2009, p.420

- 1) This is from 1914: another pair of tribades; or are they sapphists? Both words are in the title. Sapphists are women who follow the tradition of Sappho, the great classical poet, inspired by myths of her cult of love between women on the island of Lesbos.



Source: Anon. 1914, cover.

Here we have 2 covers of a novel by Melania Mazzucco, first published in 1996, from 2003 and 2008 respectively. The content remains the same but the image changes quite considerably, from period drama to racy lesbian sexfest. This novel is about a relationship between two women in late 19th and early 20th century Italy, an aristocratic married woman, Norma, and a serving girl, Medusa, who are separated when their relationship is discovered.



Source: Mazzucco 2003 and 2008.

And finally, coming further up to date, this is a novel published in 2006, which follows an Italian family composed of a lesbian couple and their children.



Source: Alicata, 2006.

The texts could be grouped together under the umbrella 'Italian cultural representation'. However, they are vastly different and use different vocabularies to describe love and desire between women.

I wanted to begin with these images to show the range of issues at stake when we talk about lesbians and literature. First, who or what are lesbians? Who decides what this word means and how it is used? What issues are at stake when it is used today, and how do they differ from the issues at stake when it was used 100 years ago or more? Next, what is 'lesbian literature'? Is it by lesbians, or about lesbians, or does it have to be both? In which case who qualifies as a lesbian? I feel that rigid, exclusive categories are unhelpful when talking about something as fluid and subjective as human sexuality, so my approach has been to gather information on how love and desire between women has been represented in novels by men as well as women, and by out lesbians as well as by women whose sexuality remains undeclared. I am interested in who uses the word lesbian, and in what other words are used to describe female same-sex desire. I am interested in lesbian identity, that is individuals whose identities are bound up in their lasting desire for women; as well as in what we might call 'lesbian moments': moments of desire between women that are homoerotic, experienced by women who don't only desire women. So what I am really interested in is literature *about* lesbians, or *about* women who desire women. And just as a small clarification, I am concentrating on female characters who self-identify and are identified by as others as women; I am also looking out for more androgynous, ambiguously identified characters, and novels about trans characters, but I don't focus on them today.

What I want to do for the rest of my time is talk through some of the high points, and some of the sadly low points, of the Italian novels I am researching. I will bring in some English-language novels that represent desire between women, that were translated into Italian, or being read in Italy, and also tell you what is available in English (although I am afraid that short answer is, not much!) Because I'm covering a lot of ground, I've divided this talk into time periods, to give you a brief flavour of each one. It'll be a bit of a whistle stop tour but I hope it'll give you a sense of the range of novels out there.

1870-1900:

In this period, sexologists first began to identify, classify, and scrutinise sexual behaviours, and establish sexual identities: 'the homosexual' and the 'lesbian' came into being, alongside 'the tribade', 'the sapphist', 'the invert' and various other quite problematic categories. Sexual desires and practices that had previously been officially taboo but often unofficially tolerated, were labelled and punished. Sexologists compiled often very voyeuristic accounts of the individuals they scrutinised, which make fascinating reading, and which inspired many novelists. Literary authors at this time, who were interested in same-sex desire, were drawing on a wide range of sources. These included accounts of sexuality gathered by sexologists, but also earlier literature that referred to Lesbos and Sappho, such as Charles Baudelaire's scandalous poems about the damned women and women of Lesbos, which were published in France in 1857 in *Les fleurs du mal*.

In Italy we can see these influences in an intriguing novel from 1873, by Alfredo Oriani, called *Al di là [Beyond]*, which has just been republished in Italian. It certainly did go beyond contemporary social norms. In the novel, blond, feminine Mimi, a married woman, is seduced by the dashing, dark accomplished horsewoman Marchesa Elisa de Monero, who is an outspoken advocate of Sappho's great literary abilities. The novel culminates in the women eloping together, after a steamy explicit sex scene in a room hung with exotic draperies. We could sum this up as voyeuristic, but it is not explicitly homophobic. Other novels by male authors in this period are less positive: Enrico Butti's *L'automa [The Automaton]* from 1892, uses a lot of homophobic sexological language to condemn two women involved in a relationship as mad and monstrous.

Another important literary theme at this time is accounts of relationships between young girls in convent schools, who are called 'fiamme', 'flames'. They may kiss, cuddle, sleep in bed together, and develop strong emotional bonds, with each other, and with the nuns in the convent. These relationships appear in the work of the female writer Matilde Serao. Her novels include several love triangles between former flames and a male suitor; however, Serao's novels don't include explicit sexual interaction between women; instead they focus on love and admiration. Ultimately, in her books, the flame of same-sex passion is put out by the inevitable heterosexual relationship, but the marriages don't seem happy.

Moving forward into the 20th century:

Between 1900 and 1920 various different strands of novel can be identified: the first is novels condemning same-sex desire between women, such as Ciro Alvi's *Il culto dell'avvenire* [*The Cult of the Future*] (1901). This is a voyeuristic and homophobic novel in which Elsa and Lucia have a passionate relationship that is condemned as sensual and self-indulgent. They are eventually purified of their passion for one another by being burned to death in revolutionary fire.

Another strand is novels that claim to be based on fact, and are presented as extensions of sexological accounts. One example is *L'eredità di Saffo* [*Sappho's Legacy*] from 1908, signed under a pseudonym, 'Fede'. This rather explicit novel portrays same-sex desire as blasphemous, including a scene in which one girl takes another girl's virginity with the crucifix she has snatched from the convent wall. But the novel also argues for increased acceptance as different characters, including women in relationships with women, and cross-dressers, strive to convince the male protagonist of their right to sexual freedoms.

In a different vein, two novels were published in 1919, by women authors, which argue quite forcefully that relationships between women are significantly different from, and superior to heterosexual relationships; however both novels end with women returning to male partners. Sibilla Aleramo's *Il passaggio*, (*The Passage*) is an autobiographical novel based on her relationship with Lina Poletti, which lasted from around 1909-1910. Aleramo doesn't use the word lesbian but argues for women's right to enjoy a different form of sexuality and relationship in a permanent way, that endows them with a different identity to heterosexual women; however, her ideal relationship is eventually quashed by the norms of the society and the period she lives in.

Mura's *Perfidie* [*Perfidies*] also from 1919, is entirely fictional, but tells a similar story: two women (Sibilla and Nicla) elope together from Milan to the coast and live together, living their dream of a 'superior' kind of love; but they too finally return to their respective male suitors and husbands, when they realise that this kind of relationship is too difficult for them to continue in the society of the day.

1920-1945

The next two decades see very little published by women writers. In the 1920s the Fascist regime established itself in Italy. It censored expressions of homosexuality and encouraged

the image of women as mothers of the nation. However, a few dissenting texts slipped through. In 1927, Guido Stacchini published *Lesbiche* [*Lesbians*] a free adaptation of the French text by Pierre Louys published in 1894, that claimed to document the poems of Bilitis, a contemporary of Sappho. Although, of course, she never existed. She was invented by Pierre Louys, who claimed that a scroll of her poems had been found. It is hard to know what to make of the original text by Pierre Louys and the Italian translation; they allow their male authors to show off their writing skills, but they do also celebrate love between women, and hail Sappho as the first feminist.

In 1928, we find *La rivincita del maschio* [*Revenge of the Male*] by Amalia Guglielminetti. It is a tale of gambling, sex, money, drugs, jealousy and betrayal. The male is Ugo, a womaniser, who ends up involved in an orgy with 3 women, shown in the cover image:



There are explicit sex scenes between the women, who have previously had adolescent relationships as 'flames', and are now adult lovers. They have difficulty freeing themselves from Ugo and his manipulations, but eventually Nora, one of the women, finds a loaded gun and kills him. Here we have echoes of Henrik Ibsen's feminist plays, Nora in *A Doll's House* and the ending of *Hedda Gabler*. This is certainly voyeuristic, trashy fiction, but is not straightforwardly homophobic; it is ambiguous how we should read the 'lesbian' moments

and the ending is quite revolutionary. The novel was declared immoral, but the author was eventually absolved of charges of indecency.

Another novel that made it through the Fascist net of censorship was the translation of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1929. Hall's novel was of course banned in England in 1929; in Italy, it was initially considered morally offensive, but was then reprinted in 1930, 1932, 1934 and 1945, and many times since. As recent interviews with Italian women show, the *Well* was read by isolated Italian girls struggling with their sexualities, and influenced their developing awareness of their own desires and identities. It had both a positive influence—as confirmation that desire between women existed and was acted on—and negative influences, due to the events that are narrated in the novel and its largely melancholy tone.

So a small range of novels about desire between women were circulating in Italy, but these look rather thin on the ground if we think about what was happening elsewhere at this time: in the UK, aside from the *Well of Loneliness*, 1928 saw the publication of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women*. Ironically, this novel, about a group of women living on the island of *Sirene*, was inspired by Italy, by the island of Capri where Mackenzie and his wife lived after WWI. At this time Capri was a bit of a haven for homosexuals, both male and female, and theirs was an open marriage. But this type of environment didn't make it into Italian literature, as far as I can see. And the earliest Italian translation I can find of *Extraordinary Women* is from 1967, with the title *Donne pericolose* [Dangerous Women], which gives a different spin to the story.

1945-1971

Moving forward, in the post war period, again, there is very little about, and what there is, is largely quite voyeuristic or homophobic. And by male authors. For example, Vasco Pratolini's *Cronache di poveri amanti* [*A Tale of Poor Lovers*] from 1947, portrays Florence during the Fascist period. There is a 'lesbian' character, although she isn't specifically named as a lesbian, she is a former Madam known as La Signora. She is compared to Mussolini; she is bedridden, malicious and it is implied that she exploits young girls.¹ Other novels include Cesare Pavese's trilogy, *La bella estate* [*Beautiful Summer*] written between 1940-

¹ This was adapted to film by Carlo Lizzani in 1954.

49. These novels include a few lesbian subplots, but the books are pervaded with a feeling of frustration, depression, suicide and the lesbian figures are sometimes ill with sexual transmitted diseases such as syphilis.² Censorship continued to be employed during this period too: a play by Vitaliano Brancati, *La governante* [*The Governess*] (1952),³ which deals with lesbianism and prejudice in southern Italy, was censored and only performed in 1966. Given the scarcity of texts and the depressing message they contained, readers during this period had to look elsewhere. Those who could read English recall the excitement of discovering Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt/Carol* (1952), which for many was a fundamental book since it offers the possibility of a happy ending. But translations were few and far between at this time.

Moving forward, the picture becomes more positive:

The 1960s and 70s saw an explosion of feminist activism which led eventually in the late 1970s and early 1980s to lesbian feminist activism, as lesbian feminists split from the main feminist movement. There was also a little flurry of publications. To begin with, these were mostly political manifestoes, autobiographical accounts and translations of critical essays by the likes of Sheila Jeffreys, Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich etc. At this point the word lesbian begins to be used more widely by women to affirm a collective, political, sexual identity. Specific lesbian publishers were founded in Florence and Rome: Edizioni del CLI (Collegamento lesbiche italiane: Italian lesbian Network) was founded in the early 1980s in Rome, and Estro was founded in Florence in 1986. But there are still only a handful of novels; the two main themes are the impossibility of lesbian love, or lesbianism as a utopian dream. One example of impossibility is *Lettere a Marina* [*Letters to Marina*], written by the established author Dacia Maraini in 1981. It tells the story of a failed lesbian relationship, of frustration with the feminist movement, and sees the protagonist embark on an affair with a male bar tender. An example of utopia is Liana Borghi's *Tenda con vista* [*Tent with a View*], that revisits the story of 1001 nights and sees Scheherazade and other women escape to set up their own businesses, as well as women's and lesbian studies programmes.

It is in the late 1990s that we finally see a significant number of novels being published. Another lesbian publisher is founded, *Il dito e la luna*, [the Finger and the Moon].

² This was adapted to film by Michelangelo Antonioni, *Le amiche* 1955.

³ This was adapted to film by Gianni Grimaldi in 1974.

And there are many more translations as well as Italian authored novels. Jeanette Winterson's books began to be translated in 1999. There are historical novels, like Melania Mazzucco's novel *Il bacio della Medusa [Kiss of the Medusa]*⁴ about a relationship between two women in the early 20th century that condemns homophobia and alerts readers to a hidden 'lesbian;' history; there are memoirs about experiences in the 1940s and 1950s, that couldn't be told at the time: Bibi Tomasi, *Il paese del calce [The Lime Village 1999]*: is set in 1943, in Sicily. Dina falls in love with Delia, but they are cruelly separated and 'treated' by psychiatrists. There are novels set in the present too, but these also often tell of broken relationships. The message seems to be, we can talk about lesbianism now, we can retrieve a lost past, but we still can't live a happy relationship.

There is lesbian pulp fiction. In Elena Stancanelli's *Benzina [Gasoline]*, published in 1988, one half of a lesbian couple living in Rome kills the other's mother with a spanner and then end up blowing each other up in an enormous ball of fire at the petrol station where they live. This has now been made into a film and has echoes of *Thelma and Louise*, but with an explicit lesbian main plot. Yet again, they die in the end, an all too familiar conclusion. A more ambiguous strand is the detective series by Fiorella Cagnoni, which introduces the infallible Alice Carta, who over the course of 5 novels published between 1985 and 2011, solves many crimes but also solves the riddle of her own sexuality. If the first few novels had readers guessing is she, isn't she, and reading desperately between the lines, later novels have explicit lesbian plots and subplots, including murderous lesbians that reproduce all the stereotypes of monstrosity and evil, but also Alice herself, who is droll and ever unruffled by the dramas that life throws at her.

This brings us up to the present day. The last decade has seen ever more novels and short stories published. Il dito e la luna, the publisher, now has several different series, including one for new novelists. There is an anthology of short stories about desire between women called *Principesse azure [Handsome Princesses]* begun in 2003, which is now in its 6th volume. Importantly, there is now a wider range of topics covered in literature about lesbians. There are collections of erotic fiction by women (Cutrufelli 2003), novels about adolescent lesbians coming to terms with their sexuality in a homophobic context (Silvia Nirigua, Paula Presciuttini), novels about nightclubbing and drug use (Isabella Santacroce)

⁴ Aside from evoking Medusa the Gorgon, this is the name of one of the protagonists.

There are novels about lesbian families, a new concept in Italy since as I mentioned earlier, there is no legislation on civil unions so this is not legally a 'family', or even a couple. There are novels such as *L'arte della gioia* [The Art of Joy], by Goliarda Sapienza, written in the 1960s but only published in 1998, which takes an extremely fluid approach to sexuality as the protagonist has relationships with men and women and refuses to become monogamously attached to anyone. Giacomo Pilati's 2004 novel *Minchia di re*⁵ is based on historic events—two women who married on the island of Favignana, off the Sicilian coast, in the late 19th century; the marriage was possible because the priest was forced by the family to declare that one of the women was really male, and that an error had been made in determining her sex at birth. This is a significant historical moment to revisit when civil partnerships are still not possible in Italy.

Not all of these novels use the word 'lesbian'. Some do, some don't. Some are arguing for the right of women who love women to become part of 'normal' society. Some are suggesting the opposite. Some deploy the cliché of the thriller in which we try to discover whether there is really a lesbian in this novel; others are very explicit in their depictions of sex. However, this is not new, if we think back to what was going on in the late 19th century.

The international dimension of literature about lesbians is much more pronounced today in Italy than ever. The work of Sarah Waters, Jeannette Winterson, Ali Smith, Rebecca Brown, Leslie Feinberg and Stella Duffy is translated into Italian, widely read, and some of these authors regularly visit Italy for lesbian literary festivals. Sadly, Italy doesn't quite have its own Sarah Waters or Jeannette Winterson yet, partly because of the lack of media attention to gay and lesbian issues in Italy. Programmes like the L word have made it on to late night Italian tv, and a couple of Italian mini-series and documentaries have been made that deal with lesbian identities in quite a progressive way (*I viaggi di Nina* [Nina's Travels], *Il padre delle spose* [The Father of the Brides] 2006⁶) But there is very little media attention to lesbian issues that is not connected to sex scandals. Literature then becomes a really vital space for cultural representation, on more progressive terms; it becomes a place in which

⁵ Sicilian slang for Donzella fish, which is hermaphroditic. Film by Donatella Maiorca 2009.

⁶ If you can read Italian, see details online here: <http://it-it.facebook.com/pages/I-Viaggi-di-Nina/112309340366>; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhzLp_hPuFs.

different forms of cohabitation, sexual practices, approaches to politics, life, love and the universe can be expressed.

As you can see, there are a few surprises in terms of what was being published and when. On balance, it seems to me that there was much more being written, and more progressive texts, before 1930 than between 1930 and 1980. There was then a deafening silence, broken only by the feeble wailing of the depressed, suicidal or pathologised lesbian. Even lesbian feminist activism of the 1980s did not lead to any real increase in literary production. It was only in the late 1990s that a significant number of novels began to be published.

I entitled this talk 'Italian "lesbian" literature', but this is a label that I both want to evoke and pull apart. Like some British authors—Jeanette Winterson comes to mind—several Italian authors who are lesbians and who write about lesbians don't want to be identified as lesbian authors, or have their novels classified as lesbian novels. But given the lack of awareness of what is out there, I think it is important to trace the history of Italian literature about lesbians and women who desire women, and see what emerges. Sadly, for those of you who don't read Italian, very little has been translated.

So I hope you've found this interesting.

I want to close with a brief reading from the end of the earliest novel I mentioned, Alfredo Oriani's *Beyond*, from 1873. I want to go back to this because despite the date of its publication it has one of the most positive outcomes of all the novels mentioned. Even *Quattro*, the 2006 novel about a lesbian family that I mentioned, which is very radical in many ways claiming for acceptance of a lesbian couple and their children as a family in contemporary Italy, has a tragic outcome. The novel begins with the funeral of the lesbian couple Francesca and Martina. This novel insists on how normal the family is, and yet can't let the couple live.

What I like about *Beyond*, is the passion, but also the insistence on the fact that Elisa and Mimi are renegades from polite society, and they are both, defiantly women, at a time when sexologists were establishing the stereotype of the feminine victim corrupted by the

perverted mannish lesbian. But most of all I like their triumphant survival and escape from normative society at the end.

[NB this is my own translation].

'The bed is too small'. Elisa slid onto the rug and circling Mimi's waist with her arm she pulled her to one side so eagerly that [...] Mimi's robe fell open.

Ah! They exclaimed together. Mimi wanted to cover herself up but Elisa, swifter, undid the circle of pearls in Mimi's hair which tumbled in a magnificent wave over her breasts.

'Oh, if you could only see yourself. Oh, I love you! And you?'

A tear formed in the blue eye and slid down her cheek.

'My heart is too full'. [...] They came together, merging in a kiss.

'Always with you!'

'Always like this!'

'Always holding one another, with our souls on our lips and kissing one another. I wish to die like this.

Mimi!

Elisa!

And am I yours? Do you love me? Can you feel my heart beat? I feel like I am dying.

Oh! You don't die of joy.

Thus they spoke, looking into each other's eyes, breathing each other's breath. [...] elisa held her hair away from her face, passed an arm under her hips and lightly brushed the virginal breast with a lock of her own hair. At this gentle caress visible shivers ran through Mimi's flesh and damp flashes lit her blue eyes. Elisa ripped off her robe and bending over her breast she ran her lips feverishly over her body [...]

A lioness on top of a gazelle.

Mimi! She blushed, and passing a hand behind her head she threw the mane of hair so it covered both of them; then they came together again and took up their whispering, muted conversation. Their words were incomprehensible, they were not even words. They were...I do not know. But their heads moved, they let out cries and held each other tightly.

'A man? Murmured the Marchesa.

No, a woman.

A short time afterwards the lace curtain fell closed once more and hid the whole bed.

The next morning, Carlo [Mimy's cousin, in love with the Marchesa] ran to the palazzo with his case in his hand. The windows on the first floor were open but Elisa and Mimì were long gone.

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English translations and films available:

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- Vasco Pratolini, *A Tale of Poor Lovers* (Monthly Review Press, 1988)
- Cesare Pavese, *Among Women Only*, Owen (London 1953)

Films that should be readily available on the internet:

- *Gasoline* (Monica Lisa Stambrini 2001)
- *Purple Sea* (Donatella Maiorca 2009)