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The Female Life Secret? Mother, Daughter, and New Family Paradigms in Michela Murgia's *Accabadora*

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INTRODUCTION

In *Accabadora* (2009), Michela Murgia interprets motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship in a way that combines ancient archetypes and new family paradigms. The novel tackles the intricacies of the mother-daughter bond through the story of a middle-aged woman and a young girl who become mother and daughter through a voluntary rapport, independent of bloodlines. Biological and elective motherhood are presented as two distinct ties, which serve different purposes in a child's life. *Accabadora* suggests that parenthood is a temporary condition, an implication that significantly reshapes the mother-daughter relationship and its symbolic significance.

Not only does Murgia depict a daughter who is the child of several mothers, she also presents a mother whose role is not to give life, but rather to take it. *Accabadora* radically problematizes what is traditionally understood as a maternal role. In fact, along with the most obvious biological functions of giving birth and nurturing, motherhood here incorporates other social duties that are neither biological, nor necessarily linked to the care of children. Drawing upon ancient Greek mythology, psychoanalysis, feminist thought, and literary theory, I investigate how a broadened notion of motherhood and non-biological kinship reshapes the mother-daughter relationship in its contemporary literary representation.

THE NOVEL

The novel is set in a small village in Sardinia during the 1950s. The plot focuses on the unconventional mother-daughter dyad formed by the childless Bonaria and the six-year-old Maria, who is the fourth and unwanted child of a poverty-stricken widow. It all begins the day Bonaria, a widow herself, meets Maria and Anna Teresa, Maria's mother. Touched by the child's innocence and loneliness, Bonaria decides to adopt the girl as a *fillu de anima*.¹ The child willingly and happily moves in with her new family, without severing the bond with her

biological family. By choosing each other, Maria and Bonaria build a successful maternal-filial relationship.

As Maria experiences two filial roles—she is at the same time both a biological and an adopted child—similarly, Bonaria embodies two maternal functions. Bonaria performs the maternal role of nurturing by being Maria's adoptive and loving mother, but she also acts as an *accabadora*. According to Bonaria, *accabadora* means “l'ultima madre;” one who soothes the terminally ill and eventually helps them end their life if they choose to do so.² This unusual maternal function adds to the unconventionality of the family that Bonaria and Maria form. When the adult Maria learns of Bonaria's role as the *accabadora*, their dyad ruptures. Maria abruptly abandons Bonaria and moves overseas to a big city with the help of another maternal figure. Maria returns home to care for her adoptive mother only when Bonaria is near death. After witnessing Bonaria's enduring agony, the helpless Maria finally agrees to help her put an end to her life, thus taking on the role of the *accabadora*, which formerly belonged to Bonaria.

MULTIPLE BIRTHS OF A *FILLU DE ANIMA*

As Murgia explains, in Sardinian dialect *fillu de anima* is the term used for a child of Maria's status: “È così che li chiamano i bambini generati due volte, dalla povertà di una donna e dalla sterilità di un'altra” (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 3). Although Maria and Bonaria do not identify as or call themselves mother and daughter, for thirteen years their maternal-filial relationship resembles “un modo un po' meno colpevole di essere madre e figlia” (18). Unlike the child carried in the womb, who is unknown and as fortuitous as a blind date, the *fillu de anima* has been chosen through a process that allows full consciousness on both sides, the mother's and the child's.³ The fact that their relationship is based on a voluntary agreement is the key to the success of their happy *ménage*. In fact, the two share a serene awareness of the peculiar status of their mutual affection. Maria never calls Bonaria *mamma* and Bonaria only once addresses Maria as “figlia mia” (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 26). Nevertheless, they consider themselves a family. What other people see as an odd combination, “uno strano sodalizio,” is the origin of their domestic happiness, rooted in the “fragile normalità” that Bonaria has wisely built for herself and Maria over the years (17).

In spite of biology, Maria, the “frutto tardivo dell'anima di Bonaria Urrai,” becomes Bonaria's daughter by virtue of an act of love (120). Maria is aware that she has had two births, the first of which was an accidental birth with Anna Teresa, and the second, a chosen one, with Bonaria: “una sbagliata e però anche una giusta” (120). The fact that Maria, like everybody in the village, calls her adoptive mother “zia Bonaria,” should not mislead the reader about the nature of her feelings towards the two maternal figures. As the author clarifies, the terms “mother” and “daughter” signify a biological condition, as they are “termini legati al sangue.”⁴ They do not apply to a relationship such as the one between

Bonaria and Maria, but this does not detract from the solidity or depth of their relationship in any way. Simply stated, “l’essere fill’e anima è legato alla volontà.”⁵ Murgia is very precise in the choice of words referring to voluntary kinship in the novel. To take a child as a *fillu de anima* is a different way of becoming parent and child and therefore requires a different terminology.

When asked to draw her family at school, the 10-year-old Maria depicts Bonaria, whom she considers “la madre naturale,” even though she does not call her *mamma* (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 22). In this episode the adjective “naturale” functions in two different ways, which are both acceptable in the Italian language, but possess contrasting meanings. Maria’s teacher, Luciana, is so bemused by Maria’s choice to draw Bonaria that she requires a meeting with her to discuss Maria’s situation. In Maestra Luciana’s view, motherhood is the natural consequence of a biological process, and therefore she considers “la madre naturale” to be the birth mother. Young Maria, on the other hand, considers Bonaria her “madre naturale,” because it is Bonaria, and not Anna Teresa, who fulfilled the maternal duties of loving and nurturing her. As the young Maria explains to Bonaria: “Io credo che voi siete la mia famiglia. Perché noi siamo più vicine” (25). Conversely, her attitude toward Anna Teresa is quite different as it lacks any tenderness or warmth. Maria’s biological mother confesses to wishing that her daughter had never been born, exclaiming “Non l’avessi mai avuta!” Maria reacts to her mother’s aloofness “con l’incoscienza indolore di chi non è mai nato veramente” (146).

Scholars from different disciplines agree that “motherhood weaves together the biological capacities for birth, nursing, and caring and the social skills for rearing, educating, and helping the child towards physical and social growth.”⁶ Likewise, feminist understandings of motherhood highlight the biological and social aspects that are combined in the maternal role.⁷ For a long time, motherhood has been a fragmented responsibility in Italian society; the tasks of procreating, nursing, and childrearing have been carried out by multiple women, not only by the biological mother. Only in the last two centuries have the biological and social functions of motherhood begun to coincide into the same person.⁸ These two maternal functions are clearly split in the case of Maria’s mothers. While Anna Teresa carries out the bodily tasks, Bonaria performs the non-biological, social functions embodied in the maternal role.

Maria also experiences a third birth. When she discovers Bonaria’s role as the *accabadora*, Maria refuses to accept it and abandons her mother, her village, and her home. Focusing on Maria’s point of view, the narrative voice describes her flight to the big city as a new life: “un’altra vita [. . .] come se fosse niente rinascere” (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 120). Maria also perceives this event as her third birth in chronological order, and the first in which she can take an active role: “Eppure si rivelarono parole adatte [. . .] la possibilità di determinare almeno una delle sue troppe nascite, più di ogni altra spinta poteva convincere Maria a partire con tanta rapidità” (120). Each of Maria’s births require the help of a mother: she

needs Anna Teresa for her biological birth, Bonaria for her social birth, and her schoolteacher Luciana for her cultural awakening.

The Sardinian cultural context to which both the novel and its author are tied is vital in the analysis of the socio-symbolic framework underlying *Accabadora*. Some of the cultural and social elements portrayed in the novel are only found in Sardinia, where, for instance, the existence of the *fillu de anima* is well known and accepted, if not as a cultural norm, at least as a possible alternative to social distress and poverty.⁹ In the novel, only the character of Luciana is skeptical of Bonaria and Maria's relationship. She views the practice of *fillu de anima* with suspicion also because Luciana, referred to as "continentale" and "la piemontese," is not Sardinian, but Piedmontese (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 19, 22). Therefore, Luciana is a "forestiera," although she is well integrated into Sardinian society and culture (19). Having worked as the primary school teacher of the village for almost thirty years, she has gained the respect and gratitude of most villagers, thus obtaining "piena legittimazione come cittadina" (19). When Maria enters primary school, Luciana is informed of the child's status as *fillu de anima*. As the narrator comments, Luciana "aveva accettato di buon grado la strana situazione familiare [di Maria]," thanks to the cultural mediation of her Sardinian husband (20). However, her conversation with Bonaria reveals how hard it is for a non-native to understand and accept the bond between the girl and the old woman. Luciana's mistrust acts as a foil to the general acceptance of Maria's status.

Why is Luciana, seemingly the worldliest character of the novel, the only one who mistrusts the status of a *fillu de anima*? What message is Murgia trying to convey? First and foremost, as a *forestiera* Luciana represents an outsider's struggle to understand and adopt the specific traits of local culture. However, there is more. Despite the positive light with which the narrative voice describes Luciana, and perhaps precisely because of it, Luciana's attitude towards Bonaria is somewhat disturbing. Her persistent wariness of the relationship between the woman and the child stems from her lack of consideration for Maria's primary needs and happiness. Through her firm belief in traditional family structures as the only acceptable forms of parenthood, Luciana becomes an involuntary upholder of patriarchy. While Luciana's idea of kinship belongs to a patriarchal culture, Bonaria's choice to create a family based on mutual needs rather than on social conventions is grounded, to some extent, outside patriarchal culture.¹⁰ Even the physical descriptions of the two women stress the differences between them: "le due donne si trovarono l'una di fronte all'altra, la maestra vestita con un piccolo tailleur blu pied-de-poule come usavano in città, e la sarta con la sua lunga gonna tradizionale e lo scialle sulle spalle" (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 20). Moreover, the narrator insists on this opposition between Bonaria and Luciana, noting that "avevano non più di una decina d'anni di differenza, ma sembravano venire da generazioni diverse" (20). Surprisingly, the woman who endorses a more unconventional idea of family, motherhood, and social relationships is not

Luciana, the younger and more educated of the two women. The charming and elegant Luciana represents a conservative vision of society even though she is from the most developed and socioeconomically progressive region of the country. Conversely, the old-fashioned, traditionally clad and poorly educated Bonaria adopts a pattern of parenthood that is, according to patriarchal logic, socially and culturally disruptive and transgressive.

Maria is bemused by the two opposite maternal models that Bonaria and Luciana embody. Her dream of a different life under the protective wing of Luciana, who acts as an apparatus of patriarchal ideology, turns into a personal defeat. Contrastingly, Maria's return to her place of origin and to her adoptive mother Bonaria, leads to her acknowledgement of Bonaria as her mother, and also drives her to assert her own identity as a woman.

MARIA'S MULTIPLE MOTHERS: MOTHERHOOD AS A TEMPORARY CONDITION

Maria's biological mother, Anna Teresa, does not show any interest in her last born and wishes that she had never been born, a sentiment that the narrator describes as an "aborto retroattivo" (146). Anna Teresa embraces her three older daughters, but she defines Maria's birth as a mistake, "l'errore dopo tre cose giuste," often referring to her as "l'ultima" (2). Maria is accustomed to this dismissive nickname rather than her proper name. The day Bonaria meets the child for the first time is also the day of Maria's second birth insofar as "le colpe, come le persone, iniziano a esistere se qualcuno se ne accorge" (145). Until then, in the eyes of her biological mother and of the community, Maria "era come un niente" (145). As the narrator underlines, Maria was so invisible to the community that "non aveva beneficiato nemmeno di quei commenti benevoli che fanno le donne quando si dichiarano deliziate dai figli degli altri" (145). Maria had been a forgotten child, "una bambina dimenticata," until she was acknowledged by Bonaria's benevolent gaze for the first time (145).

Given Anna Teresa's hostile treatment of Maria, it is not surprising that she promptly agrees to allow Bonaria to replace her as Maria's mother when Bonaria proposes a very generous agreement to her, "tale che alla vedova di Sisinnio Listru non venisse nemmeno la tentazione di dirle di no" (147).¹¹ Indeed, Anna Teresa receives food and money from Bonaria in exchange for entrusting her younger daughter to Bonaria as a *fillu de anima*. As the third-person narrator comments, "non le sembrava vero di poter infilare tutti i giorni nella minestra anche due patate dei terreni degli Urrai," and if the price to pay was the child, it was nevertheless a fair deal (147). Unlike Bonaria, Maria's biological mother considers her a burden and a resource to exploit. Anna Teresa's feelings toward her youngest daughter change when Maria inherits Bonaria's wealth, as Maria becomes "quella figlia che dal suo più grosso errore credeva adesso mutata nel migliore dei suoi investimenti" (6).

Maria's adoptive mother, Bonaria, is presented as Anna Teresa's opposite. The wealthy, clever, yet lonely Bonaria devotes her undivided, unfailing, and unconditional attention to her *fillu de anima*. In Bonaria, Maria finds a mother who gives

her the love she needs. This mother-daughter relationship, which is based on a voluntary and temporary bond, more effectively satisfies the daughter's need for love and compensates for the love that the daughter did not receive from her first and biological mother. Bonaria is an example of what Murgia defines as "altre madri," that is, women "che si fanno tali non in virtù del legame che ha luogo a partire dal corpo, ma a partire dalla scelta di una per l'altra e dalla relazione che si origina da ciò."¹² Motherhood here is defined by volition, not by biology, and is grounded in the relationship rather than in the body.

Maria also finds a third temporary mother in Luciana who helps her make the decision to move to Turin. This is not the first time Luciana acts as a mother for Maria. As a schoolteacher, Luciana initially assumed the task of transmitting language—an important maternal function according to feminists—even though she shares this task with Bonaria, who carefully supervises Maria's education.¹³ Unlike Anna Teresa, who openly manifests her own coarseness by declaring that it is unnecessary for Maria to continue to attend school after she acquires the basic skills to count money, Bonaria strongly encourages Maria's educational progress. Although she is unable to speak standard Italian to the child, Bonaria is consistent with her maternal duty, insisting that the young girl learn it in school. Luciana likewise performs this maternal function because she is the one who introduces Maria to the value of language. Consistent with *Accabadora's* representation of motherhood as a fragmented responsibility, Bonaria and Luciana share the task of helping Maria develop her linguistic skills, accomplishing a fundamental maternal task for which Anna Teresa proves to be absolutely unfit.

Having already introduced the notion of *altre madri* in her 2008 work, in *Accabadora* Murgia clarifies how temporary and non-biological parenthood operates. In *Accabadora*, the maternal bond is disentangled from biology and becomes a bond of love between women. In this way, the author echoes Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchy, which is based on the idea that reducing women to their reproductive role deprives them of subjectivity. In her investigation of the mother-daughter dyad, the philosopher's main preoccupation is to consider the identity of women as women, not as mothers, in order to bring to light a female-centered system of significance: "we are always mothers once we are women. *We bring something other than children into the world* [. . .] love, desire, language, art [. . .] But this creation has been forbidden to us for centuries, and we must re-appropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women."¹⁴ Irigaray describes what Bonaria and Luciana bring into Maria's life, inasmuch as they provide her with love, language, and desire. In Irigaray's work, the maternal dimension is clearly detached from biology and greater emphasis is placed on the social functions of the maternal role. Similarly, *Accabadora* is a novel that centers on "la figura fondativa della madre, o meglio [alle] diverse possibilità di essere madri—la prima, l'ultima—tutte accomunate dall'assunzione della responsabilità del lavoro di cure."¹⁵ Bonaria explains to Maria that all human beings encounter several maternal and paternal figures during their lifetime: "Non

c'è nessun vivo che arrivi al suo giorno senza aver avuto padri e madri a ogni angolo di strada" (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 117). Bonaria is one of the mothers Maria finds along the way and she also proves to be the most instrumental in her growth and development.

The motherhood enacted by the figure of Bonaria is not rooted in the centrality of the reproductive function, but rather in the idea of the maternal as a relational task. This notion of motherhood has been widely explored by Italian feminists, like Luisa Muraro, whose work on the topic is particularly noteworthy.¹⁶ In her analysis of the symbolic implication of the mother-daughter relationship, Muraro devalues the biological basis of the mother-daughter bond and hypothesizes the "irrelevanza dell'elemento naturale e la rilevanza esclusiva della struttura."¹⁷ In Muraro's view, "la madre biologica può essere sostituita da altre figure senza che la relazione di lei con la sua creatura perda le sue fondamentali caratteristiche."¹⁸ Likewise, Murgia's novel hinges on the idea that the maternal figure can be replaced, and that the reproductive function is only one of many that characterize motherhood. In the novel, the relational aspect of motherhood, or the ability to develop bonds of love between women, is more significant than biological tasks, possibly because the former requires women to act as conscious agents rather than mere vehicles for reproduction.

The emphasis on the social functions of the maternal role recalls another concept elaborated by Italian feminist theorists—the notion of entrustment. Entrustment is the possibility to develop an asymmetric relationship between two women in which the disparity works as a lever for the weaker woman in order to fulfill her desires.¹⁹ According to Muraro, entrustment can only occur outside of a patriarchal context. Therefore, the practice of entrustment may be interpreted as a critique of patriarchy, as Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino have observed.²⁰ In fact, the mother-daughter dyad formed by Bonaria and Maria, based as it is on "una disparità e un debito," departs from a patriarchal scheme and prefigures something new in terms of relationships between women.²¹ Murgia herself suggests this reading, by hypothesizing a matriarchal structure in Sardinian society:

Sull'isola da che c'è memoria c'è matriarcato, in una forma di organizzazione sociale tutta imperniata sul ruolo dominante della donna [. . .] È così semplicemente da sempre. In una società pastorale dove l'uomo sta lontano da casa settimane [. . .] o addirittura mesi [. . .] è perfettamente normale che la donna abbia assunto compiti [. . .] come la gestione completa dell'economia, dell'educazione e dell'organizzazione politica e giuridica del mondo affidatole, casa, terreno o regno che sia.²²

Even if their relationship does not yet represent an entirely feminine system of kinship, it does move beyond a patriarchal paradigm of recognition and legibility.

AN ODD COMBINATION: LIFE, DEATH, AND MOTHER-DAUGHTER ARCHETYPES

Accabadora problematizes what is traditionally understood as a maternal role, or “the role of procreator, carer and educator of children.”²³ The character of Bonaria cuts across the conventional idea of motherhood and performs tasks that do not necessarily concern the dawn of life, but rather its end. She is Maria’s caregiver and nurturer, and she provides for her education and encourages her to learn the Italian language properly. In addition, Bonaria goes even further to broaden the social functions of motherhood, insofar as she is simultaneously the mother who gives life to a child without childbirth, as well as the mother who brings death to a dying person as an accepted social necessity.

These two facets of her character are revealed to the reader from the very beginning of the novel. The acts of caregiving and ending life hold the same degree of importance in the narrative hierarchy, as well as in the culture in which the novel is set.²⁴ Murgia skillfully harmonizes the importance of both. The first phrase of the novel is “fillus de anima” (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 3) and its title is *Accabadora*. While the narration begins with Bonaria’s motherhood and Maria’s second birth, the title clearly emphasizes Bonaria’s role as the last mother. Furthermore, both the first word of the book and the title do not belong to standard Italian but to Sardinian, which Laura Fortini considers Murgia’s mother tongue: “Una doppia storia di nascita quella che ha luogo nel romanzo, quella della lingua materna, che trova a partire dal titolo accoglienza in un romanzo che guarda non solo alla Sardegna, [. . .] e quella della maternità d’elezione.”²⁵

Accabadora is a term used only in one variety of Sardinian dialect, and derives from the Spanish verb *acabar*, to terminate, or to put an end to something. In the context of rural Sardinia, the *accabadora* is the woman who facilitates a merciful death when it becomes necessary, though scholars disagree about the actual historical existence of such a figure.²⁶ It is commonly accepted that the practice of helping the terminally ill to die, called *accabadura*, was sometimes used. However, there is not sufficient evidence to prove that women *accabadoras* existed as institutionalized figures. In her well-documented survey on Sardinian culture, Murgia discusses female roles and figures in traditional Sardinian society. In her words, the *accabadora*

ha i tratti della leggenda, e sebbene la sua esistenza sia stata più volte attestata specialmente in Barbagia, Barigadu e Gallura, vi sono tuttavia diversi antropologi che ne contestano la funzione e il riconoscimento del ruolo sociale [. . .] le testimonianze sul suo operato giungono certe almeno fino al 1952 quando nel paese di Orgosolo fu arrestata una donna accusata di aver praticato questa funzione su uno specifico moribondo.²⁷

A nurturing attitude, which is a distinguishing feature of the maternal role, is equally necessary to foster life as well as to terminate it, as Murgia explains:

“Spesso l’accabadora era anche la levatrice del paese, ‘sa femina pratica,’ era la donna esperta, colei che sa che cosa fare quando è necessario farlo. Perciò era chiamata in diversi momenti della vita: la nascita e la morte.”²⁸ Birth and death are presented as two inseparable aspects of existence, and this is why a mother is needed to supervise both. By defining her function as a carrier of death, Bonaria describes herself as a mother to underline the social importance of her task: “Anche io avevo la mia parte da fare e l’ho fatta. [. . .] Io sono stata l’ultima madre che alcuni hanno visto” (Murgia, *Accabadora*, 117). Hence, in the multiplicity of parental figures that human beings encounter during their life, the *accabadora* too is a mother figure, albeit the last one.

It is worth investigating where this broadened idea of motherhood originates. What kind of mother does Murgia depict? Why does she bring death as part of her duties? How does the familiarity with death affect the relationship with the daughter? If the *accabadora* is a necessary social function, why is the role exclusively female? Although the idea of a mother whose social function requires her to kill presents a new facet of the mother–daughter dyad previously unexplored in Italian women’s literature, the association of life and death with femininity and the mother–daughter bond is not unheard of in Western culture. In ancient Greek mythology the archetypal representation of the mother–daughter dyadic relationship is deeply intertwined with the natural cycles of life and death. Mother, daughter, and death are three constitutive elements of the myth of Demeter and her daughter.²⁹ Demeter is the goddess of harvest, agriculture, and fertility; her name purposely echoes that of Mother Earth. Her name in Greek, *Δημήτηρ* (de-meter), incorporates the word *μήτηρ*, mother. The daughter, known as Kore or Persephone, is the queen of the underworld. The myth is associated with two religious cults, the Thesmophoria and the Eleusinian Mysteries, that celebrated the two goddesses. Since its first appearance, by the middle of the second millennium BCE, the myth has been connected to the underworld and binds together “the life-giving, death-bringing forces of the earth.”³⁰

Well before the publication of *Accabadora*, the figure of the death-bringing and life-giving mother and her relationship to her daughter were well addressed in literature. The story of Demeter and Persephone has been widely re-elaborated within the literary repertoire of classical civilization. In ancient Greek literature, the oldest text dedicated to the Eleusinian myth is the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. Written approximately in the eighth century BC, it qualifies as

a mother–daughter narrative, not only the story of intense mother–daughter attachment and separation, but also the story of both the mother’s and the daughter’s reactions and responses. [. . .] They connect to the images of Freudian psychoanalysis, such as the pre-Oedipal, and to the anthropological and archaeological research of matriarch theorists of the 1920s.³¹

The subsequent interpretations variously combine death and the mother-daughter tie, inasmuch as the myth of Demeter and Persephone interweaves “the human fear of death and hope for immortality” and “the deep bond that exists between women, particularly mothers and daughters.”³²

As theorized by the Swiss jurist and classicist Johann Jakob Bachofen, the myth of the mother-daughter dyad and its connections to the earth’s seasonal cycle belong to an archaic pre-patriarchal civilization spread across the Mediterranean.³³ When the mother’s rule drew to an end, the myth of Demeter and her daughter survived and adapted to patriarchy.³⁴ However, regardless of the myth’s connections to a matriarchal society, what is pertinent to my analysis is that several elements constituting the myth’s structure are still recognizable in the plot of *Accabadora*. Maria’s decision to abandon her mother arises from the clash between a mother-centered culture embodied by Bonaria, and the Lacanian idea of the Law of the Father, to which Maria has temporarily given her allegiance.³⁵ Nevertheless, the novel suggests an interesting outcome of the struggle between matriarchal and patriarchal cultures, in that the mother is not defeated. In fact, Maria ends up reappraising the maternal system of values she initially rejected.

Over the last few decades the association of the archetypal mother-daughter dyad and death has attracted the attention of numerous feminist scholars.³⁶ They have not failed to recognize the association between the feminine and death, which characterizes most patriarchal cultures. As Hélène Cixous famously maintains: “Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex.”³⁷ Her conviction is echoed by Julia Kristeva, who contends that “the unrepresentable nature of death was linked with that other unrepresentable [. . .] which for mythical thought is constituted by the female body.”³⁸ The idea of the *accabadora* as “the last mother,” which links motherhood and death, then finds its deepest roots in a wide cultural, historical, and social background and cannot be detached from its complement, the relationship to the daughter. Although *Accabadora* recalls some crucial aspects of the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone, it goes even further than the myth. In the destiny of the two goddesses, feminist scholars such as Irigaray and Cavarero have seen a severance of female genealogy. Illustrating the feminine as dominated and distorted by patriarchal supremacy, the myth describes

un ordine simbolico della Grande Madre, sconfitto e cancellato dalla società patriarcale, che ne stravolge il significato originario consegnando tuttavia al contesto tracce evidenti del misfatto. [. . .] Il tema centrale del mito è [. . .] dunque la *potenza materna*, inscritta nell’intera natura [. . .] che custodisce il luogo umano del venire al mondo ma anche il nulla come il non più della nascita, la fine del *continuum materno* [. . .] che disegna la radice femminile di ogni umano.³⁹

In *Accabadora* this *continuum materno* is not interrupted, but merely disengaged from biological bonds. Maria considers Bonaria as her mother, despite the lack of any bodily and genetic connection. The separation of the daughter from her mother, which feminist theorists interpret as a sign of the defeat of the Great Mother, here assumes multiple meanings as the separation occurs twice for Maria: the departure from her biological mother, which implies no trauma, and the separation from Bonaria, which, although caused by circumstances very different from the myth, similarly leads to a new balance in the mother-daughter relationship.⁴⁰ Only after her reunion with Bonaria is Maria able to accept what Cavarero defines as the “‘segreto femminile’ della vita” in relation to the maternal power, that is, the “potenza di generare e non generare.”⁴¹

Accabadora locates the mother-daughter dyad in a more favorable context and prefigures the construction of a female frame of reference, unrelated to a male-dominated system of symbolization. In the construction of this symbolic order disentangled from patriarchal law, the death of the mother plays a relevant role. Murgia appears to rewrite the socio-symbolic exclusion of the mother in patriarchal cultures through the combination of motherhood and death. In fact, the matricide enacted in the novel does not create severance from the mother, but rather enacts a continuity with her. Maria’s final decision to act as an *accabadora* and hasten the death of the terminally ill Bonaria does not work as a disavowal, but precisely as a recognition of the maternal role. Consistent with the fact that Bonaria as a mother has not gone through the bodily experience of pregnancy and delivery, the point of contact between this mother and daughter is not the daughter’s birth, but the mother’s death. In helping Bonaria to die, Maria not only accepts and embraces her mother’s role, but perpetuates it. Maria’s decision to take on the role of *accabadora* finally allows her to, in Irigaray’s words, “establish a woman to woman relationship of reciprocity with [the] mother.”⁴²

CONCLUSION

Contingent on a mother-daughter dyad that is based on volition rather than bloodlines, *Accabadora* proposes a multifaceted notion of parenthood, seen as a temporary condition. Far from proposing a simplified opposition of “bad” mother versus “good” mother, *Accabadora* demonstrates that the maternal discourse can be plural. Once disassociated from bodily functions, maternal or filial bonds can be forged at any point during a woman’s life, independently of her biological birth and according to her needs and desires. Bonaria represents an idea of motherhood disengaged from biology and also embodies a forgotten matriarchal archetype. As in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the daughter’s relationship to the mother is characterized by an underlying connection between life and death. However, the outcomes are completely different from the myth. Not only does *Accabadora* attempt to rectify the erasure of the mother in patriarchal cultures, but, through the recovery of powerful female archetypes, it also prefigures the

construction of a female frame of reference. In this yet-to-be female frame of reference, maternal-filial ties become the predominant pattern of relationships between women.

If death is a central part of a male-dominated symbolic horizon, its inclusion in a female mythology can be read in at least two different ways: as a defeat of a matrilineal society, as many theorists read it, or as the announcement of a new era of mother-daughter relationships, as *Accabadora* seems to propose.⁴³ This new era is heralded by a fictional mother-daughter dyad that finds its validation in the voluntary acceptance of the twofold meaning of maternal power.

Notes

1. The condition of a *fillu de anima* (*fill'e anima* in standard Italian) may resemble that of a foster child, but with two significant differences: 1) the minor is placed in the care of another family following an agreement between the biological and host families, along with the expressed consent of the child; 2) the bond with the family of origin is not severed, and the experience is not as traumatic as that of adoption or fostering. Furthermore, it is not an institutional procedure, but a social practice. As Murgia maintains, the practice of giving and taking a *fillu de anima* is rooted in a different logic and context. Michela Murgia, "Michela Murgia si confessa," interview by Benedetta Verini, *Vita*, September 6, 2010, <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2010/09/06/michela-murgia-si-confessa/104421/>.

2. Michela Murgia, *Accabadora* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), 117.

3. The concept that the experience of pregnancy is akin to a blind date expands on the following idea from Murgia: "A Cabras si usava una parola per definire il bambino dentro la pancia, si diceva: *i stranguiu*, che non vuol dire estraneo, vuol dire proprio straniero, sconosciuto. Lo trovo molto bello, perché indica che il bambino è un mistero per la sua stessa madre. E spesso, dopo questo appuntamento al buio, si passa tutta la vita a farsi perdonare di non essere proprio come ci si aspettava. Tra *anima* e *fill'e anima* questo gioco non comincia mai, perché chi mi ha scelto ha scelto proprio me e mi ha chiesto anche il permesso." Murgia, "Michela Murgia si confessa."

4. Murgia, "Michela Murgia si confessa."

5. Murgia, "Michela Murgia si confessa."

6. Sharon James and Sheila Dillon, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 49.

7. See Marina D'Amelia, ed. *Storia della maternità* (Rome: Editori Laterza, 1997); Luisa Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Press, 1977).

8. See Marina D'Amelia, *La mamma* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005); Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood* (London: Flammarion, 1980).

9. Murgia provides more details on the singular practice of the *fillu de anima* and its social perception: “La comunità locale sostiene e certifica questo passaggio di patria potestà che però non recide i legami di sangue. Non è un meccanismo facile da capire, perché a noi oggi manca il forte contesto relazionale di co-genitorialità che era proprio delle piccole comunità rurali, dove la solidarietà era l’unica forma di stato sociale possibile. Le cose che per noi oggi sono inaccettabili perché ce le aspettiamo dai servizi sociali allora le faceva il vicinato, lo stretto parentado.” Murgia, “Michela Murgia si confessa.”

10. The interconnectedness of rigid family structures (characterized by women’s subordinated position) and the onset of patriarchy has been debated among scholars for many decades. An exhaustive account of the debate can be found in Shelley Phillips, *Beyond the Myths: Mother-Daughter in Psychology, History, Literature and Everyday Life* (Sydney: Hampden Press, 1991), 213–60.

11. However, this is not always the case, as Murgia confirms: “La maggior parte dei casi di fill’e anima avviene per affetto da parte di entrambe le madri e il bambino viene coinvolto, gli si chiede se è d’accordo. Una madre dà via il suo bambino perché in realtà non lo perde in questa maniera, e il bambino acquista un’altra madre.” Michela Murgia, “Michela Murgia: Stradanove incontra l’autrice dell’emozionante romanzo *Accabadora*,” *Stradanove*, www.stradanove.it/interviste/personaggi/michela-murgia.

12. Michela Murgia, “Altre madri,” in *Questo terribile intricato mondo*, ed. Eraldo Affinati (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 205–9; Laura Fortini and Paola Pittalis, *Isolitudine: Scrittrici e scrittori della Sardegna* (Pavona: Iacobelli Editore, 2010), 138.

13. See Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991); Luisa Muraro, *L’Ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991).

14. Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 42–3 (my italics).

15. Fortini, *Isolitudine*, 140.

16. See Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (Milan: Rosenberg & Seller, 1987).

17. Muraro, *L’ordine simbolico*, 54.

18. Muraro, 53–54.

19. See Lia Cigarini and Luisa Muraro, “Politica e pratica politica,” *Critica Marxista* 3–4 (1992): 13–17; Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti*; Muraro, *L’ordine simbolico*.

20. Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino, *Le filosofe femministe: Due secoli di battaglie teoriche e pratiche* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002), 99.

21. Cavarero and Restaino, 99.

22. Michela Murgia, *Viaggio in Sardegna: Undici percorsi nell’isola che non si vede* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 173.

23. Adalgisa Giorgio, “The Passion for the Mother: Conflicts and Idealisations in Contemporary Italian Narrative,” in *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother*

in *Western European Narratives by Women*, ed. Adalgisa Giorgio (New York: Berghahn, 2002), 119.

24. Murgia herself is aware of the deep link between the two almost opposite maternal sides of Bonaria, who epitomizes a wide range of social functions that today have disappeared: "L'azione dell'accabadora [. . .] s'inserisce in [un] discorso di relazionabilità in cui si sviluppava anche l'accudimento dei bambini." Murgia, "Michela Murgia si confessa." There are other traces of the proximity of birth and death in Sardinian rural culture, as the following newspaper article demonstrates: "A Sindia, al contrario, fino agli anni '80 era possibile affittare prefiche professioniste specializzate in lamentazioni funebri a soggetto. Le 'attitadoras' nutrivano il morto in partenza con le loro lacrime. Erano 'allattatrici' perché solo chi sa dare la tetta a un bimbo per nutrirlo, è capace della dolcezza estrema di un trapasso assistito." Gianluca Nicoletti, "La Femmina terminatrice," *La Stampa*, January 5, 2005.

25. Fortini, *Isolitudine*, 137–8.

26. Dolores Turchi's latest work, *Ho visto agire s'accabadora* is a well-documented anthropological study on the figure of *accabadoras* in Sardinia. After examining a wide variety of sources and scholarly works on the topic (including travellers' memoirs and historical investigations), the author interviews an old woman who witnessed the performance of an *accabadora*. Turchi's conclusion is that "la figura de s'accabadora non è un'invenzione." Dolores Turchi, *Ho visto agire s'accabadora* (Olivenza: Iris, 2008), 36. Other works on the same topic display a more cautious approach, such as the very recent *Antichi mestieri e saperi di Sardegna* (Cagliari: Arkadia Editore, 2010). However, this publication does not show the same degree of academic competence and accurate research as Turchi's. Murgia's approach is very different. When asked if the *accabadora* has ever existed, the writer maintains that, in her mind, the *accabadora* lives only in oral narratives: "Esiste nella narrazione. Si racconta che sia esistita una figura del genere e quindi per me è come se fosse esistita: la narrazione genera mondi dove la gente va ad abitare. C'è una scuola molto severa di antropologi sulla figura dell'*accabadora* e non tutti sono concordi. Cioè sono tutti d'accordo che ci siano stati episodi di *accabadura* ma non che sia esistita una figura a cui la comunità deve questo ruolo. In sintesi: *accabadura* forse; *accabadora* no." Murgia, "Michela Murgia."

27. Murgia, *Viaggio*, 180.

28. Murgia, "Michela Murgia."

29. This mythological account is one of the most powerful images of femininity in the ancient world and the only one that exclusively focuses on female figures. In classic Greek mythology, Demeter's daughter is raped and abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld and Demeter's brother. The mischief happens with the consent and endorsement of Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods. Having been violently separated from her daughter, Demeter starts looking for her in despair, refusing to fulfil her duty to bring forth blossoms and fruits. As a consequence, the earth becomes barren and human beings are threatened with starvation. The conflict between Demeter and the male gods ends with a compromise. Persephone will spend six months with her husband Hades, and

six months with her mother. Nature, therefore, will bring forth flowers and fruits again, which will then wilt at Persephone's departure for the underworld. Persephone's existence, forever split between the two worlds, overshadows the natural cycle of the seasons, which from then on includes an endless alternation between life and death.

30. Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple, and the God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 70–79. The Hungarian scholar Karl Kerényi maintains that the meaning of the term *eleusis* refers to the underworld. Karl Kerényi, *Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 23.

31. Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 35.

32. Christine Downing, "Introduction," in *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time*, ed. Christine Downing (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 1. In ancient Greek and Latin literature, a wide range of texts mention the story of Demeter and her daughter. Besides the nameless author of the *Hymn to Demeter*, other poets dealt with or mentioned it in the subsequent centuries: Hesiod in his *Theogony*, Apollodorus in his *Library*, Euripides in *Helen*, and Sophocles in his *Oedipus at Colonus*, to name a few. In Latin literature, too, poets gave an account of this ancient chthonian myth. The most important among them is Ovid. He wrote twice about Demeter and Persephone, giving two different interpretations of the same story in *Fasti* and in *Metamorphoses*. Recently, the myth of Demeter and her lost daughter has again become a source of inspiration for writers and thinkers. Downing has explored the flourishing of its multiple interpretations from the last few decades. This reappraisal of the ancient myth is a result of an urge felt by women scholars and writers to recover a mythography "of their own." As Downing states, referring to Demeter and Persephone: "Some women have found in this myth resources for the imaginal re-creation of a pre-patriarchal matristic, that is, woman centred, world. Many have seen it as primarily in terms of how it valorizes the beauty and power of the mother-daughter bond. Others have focused on Hades' abduction of Persephone and read the myth primarily as a story about paternal violation [. . .] about the rise of patriarchy and the suppression of goddess religion" (2–3).

33. See Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

34. Charlene Spretnak investigates the myth of Demeter and Persephone through a pre-patriarchal perspective. Her work is a re-imagining of a lost tradition, aiming at a re-appraisal of the female presence in myth and history. Her hypothesis is based on the analysis of the same sort of sources (texts, manufactures) used by other scholars to draw different conclusions. See Charlene Spretnak, *The Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). A more cautious approach characterizes the essay of Vera Bushe, who, although recognizing the existence of a pre-Olympian body of myths, believes that "in order to understand ourselves in the world today we have to understand self in patriarchy [. . .] Because modern women are products of patriarchy, patriarchal myths help us to understand who we are and how we react to living under patriarchy." Vera Bushe, "Cycles of Becoming," in Downing, *The Long Journey Home*, 173–4.

35. The Law of the Father is Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory on how the child differentiates and separates from the mother. Drawing from Freud's research on the Oedipal complex, Lacan maintains that the Law of the Father corresponds to the law of language and is essential for the existence of desire. Feminist theorists such as Irigaray, Muraro, Benjamin, and Stone have argued that the idea is rooted in a patriarchal frame of reference where the mother is othered and is seen as an object. Some theorists, such as Irigaray and Muraro, go as far as to hypothesize a "Law of the Mother" where women and mothers can find their own subjectivity. See Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*; Alison Stone, "Against Matricide: Rethinking Subjectivity and the Maternal Body," *Hypatia* 27, no.1 (2012): 118–138.

36. Among feminist scholars, many have tackled the connection of the Eleusinian mother-daughter myth to the female psyche. See Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone: Figure femminile nella filosofia antica* (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1990); Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot*; Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Rich, *Of Woman Born*; Delfina Lusiardi Sassi, "Demetra e il Figlio della Regina" in *L'ombra della madre*, ed. Diotima (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2007), 125–49).

37. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 885.

38. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 27.

39. Adriana Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, 66–7 (my italics).

40. Maria's act of leaving and returning is also relevant in light of Murgia's attachment to her cultural roots. According to Fortini, the act of leaving and coming back reproduces an attitude that is characteristic of Sardinian people, notably writers. See Fortini, *Isolitudine*, 123–143.

41. Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, 71.

42. Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 50.

43. Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, 74.