

On Rejecting Motherhood: *The Stone Baby* by Laudomia Bonanni

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ABSTRACT

Published in 1979 by Bompiani, Laudomia Bonanni's novel *Il bambino di pietra* (The Stone Baby) is written in the form of a childless woman's diary. The title refers to a recurrent image in the book that represents a rare clinical malformation called *lithopedion*. The powerful image illustrates the fact that the child is perceived as an intrusive element, a growing mass alien to the maternal womb; thus, maternity becomes a frightening condition, a monstrous damnation that positions the mother between the impossibility of regaining her unified identity and the inability to expel the foreign body. In this essay, informed by philosopher Luisa Muraro's seminal work *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (1991), I investigate how Bonanni's exploration of the maternal figure empowers the female subject, bringing about its symbolic independence. In this process of self-discovery, the protagonist faces her internal block, projected in the *lithopedion*, by conducting an intense and merciless self-analysis that leads her to revisit the role of the/her mother and of women in general. At the same time, she comes to envision a different type of motherhood: a symbolic one, based not on sacrifice and traditional conventions, but rather on a transmission of knowledge and confidence.

KEY WORDS: Laudomia Bonanni, *Il bambino di pietra*, motherhood, entrustment, Italian Feminism

In 1979 the publishing house Bompiani released a novel by Laudomia Bonanni entitled *Il bambino di pietra* (The Stone Baby) that was favourably reviewed and even nominated for the prestigious literary Strega Prize. The award that year went to Primo Levi and his *La chiave a stella* but, as the poet and jury member Maria Luisa Spaziani recalled, the vote for a moment seemed to favour Bonanni, “una scrittrice schiva e ricca d’ingegno come pochi [...] che occupa scarsissimo posto nella mondanità ma che con questo libro e con i dieci precedenti lascerà certo il segno nella narrativa di questi anni” (Spaziani, in Zullino 2004, 123).¹ The name of the Abruzzese writer had emerged on the literary scene in 1948, when she was awarded the *Amici della domenica* prize from the well-regarded *Salotto Bellonci*, and was greeted by critics such as Eugenio Montale as one of the most original voices in Italy’s post-war literature. In the mid-sixties, however, her prolific career came to a painful halt when, suffering from severe depression, Bonanni stopped writing and withdrew into seclusion. Only in 1977 did she return to narrative fiction, publishing with Bompiani a collection of short stories, *Città del tabacco* (Tobacco City), and, two years later, *The Stone Baby*.

The novel, while providing a commentary on the bourgeois family and on women’s roles, focuses on the theme of motherhood and its refusal, thus confronting issues that had all previously informed Bonanni’s prose; its content, however, is also indebted to the heated atmosphere of the seventies, which witnessed important legislative battles staged by the feminist movement and a renewed cultural attention paid to the figure of the mother. A 1974 referendum, in fact, had rejected the repeal of the law allowing divorce, while the legalisation of abortion, commonly known as “Legge 194,” was passed one year before the publication of Bonanni’s novel, which has its protagonist clearly state “[s]ono per l’aborto” (Bonanni 1979, 34), in addition to showcasing tragic incidents of the illegal termination of pregnancy. After the seventies, feminism turned into a more intellectual movement, and motherhood and mother-daughter relationships became the focus of attention. In particular, the philosophical group Diotima, born in 1983 in Verona, and Luisa Muraro, one of its founders, promoted empathy and solidarity over estrangement, calling for a greater understanding of both roles within an “elective mother-daughter relationship” (Parati and West 2002, 19). Works such as Muraro’s *L’ordine simbolico della madre* (1991), evinced a progressive rejection of Western philosophy, founded as it was on the “erasure” of the figure of the mother. Muraro and others instead sought to rehabilitate the mother, and to make love central to the maternal bond.²

I argue in what follows that Laudomia Bonanni criticises both the traditional family and the role of motherhood from multiple perspectives, while at the same time echoing the debates of the *movimento femminista* around the institution of the family and the mother-daughter bond. Moreover, with her innovative proposal for a new female relational model, Bonanni anticipates the notion of entrustment (*affidamento*) that was to be developed in the following decade by Diotima and Muraro. By highlighting the importance of a maternal continuum, Bonanni comes to fully embrace the significance of what Muraro calls the *ordine simbolico della madre*. It is the

¹ Laudomia Bonanni’s biography reveals a secluded, discreet life. Born in L’Aquila in 1907, she trained as a schoolteacher and started teaching in remote mountain villages when she was seventeen. At the time of her literary breakthrough, she had already published children’s books and several articles. Despite the 1948 success of *Il fosso*, her successive books, though well reviewed in major newspapers and journals, did not bring her the readership and critical recognition she constantly sought. In 1974 she published a collection of articles that stemmed from her twenty-year experience as a lay judge in the Minor Court and, in 1982, *Le droghe* came out. She was working on another project, *La rappresaglia*, but Bompiani asked her for major revisions before publication. She refused to modify her manuscript and stopped writing altogether. Bonanni died in Rome in 2002. Her last novel was published posthumously, in 2003. For a complete and exhaustive overview of Bonanni’s life and works, see Giustizieri 2008.

² Examining the Western philosophical tradition and in particular Plato’s legacy, Muraro stresses the “removal” of the mother: “It is a very simple operation, which could almost be compared to a metaphor, the most common rhetorical device; it consists of transferring the qualities of the mother’s power and work to cultural production (such as science, law, religion, etc.), while reducing her to opaque and shapeless matter, which the subject (the wise man, the legislator, the believer, etc.) must overcome, in order to dominate her” (10; quoted and translated in Benedetti 2007, 97).

mother who teaches us how to speak (the so-called mother tongue), providing us with the tools to interpret what is real, to make sense of the world; rejecting the mother, then, as the symbolic order of the father demands, makes the woman “symbolically sterile,” incapable of thinking: “women, in order to be free, symbolically need maternal power, like they physically needed it to be brought into the world” (1991, 9). Bonanni’s intimate novel paradoxically juxtaposes the rejection of motherhood with a final re-evaluation of the mother figure. This original and puzzling interplay of themes and narrative turns ultimately contributes to the empowerment of the female subject, bringing about its symbolic independence (Biondi 1996, 31-9).

The Stone Baby, subtitled *Una nevrosi femminile*, takes the form of a diary written (at the suggestion of a psychotherapist friend) by Cassandra, a married woman in her late forties who suffers from anxiety neurosis. Given her degree in literary studies and her passion for reading, Sandra, as she is familiarly called, is encouraged to transcribe on paper everything that she would say on the analyst’s couch (Bonanni 1979, 14). The obvious reference to Italo Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), the first and archetypical fictional text based on the psychoanalytic model and structured as a memoir written by Zeno at the behest of his psychiatrist, is playfully highlighted in the text by Bonanni. Like Svevo’s protagonist, Sandra, in fact, confesses at one point that she should give up smoking and tells herself to do so every day, well aware that she simply does not want to (44).³

Sceptical at first about the psychoanalytic cure, Sandra then decides to take her friend’s advice, and sets out to “sviscerarsi l’intimità” (17). The verb “sviscerare,” with its literal meaning “to take out the entrails,” is not accidental here, and figuratively indicates the extraction of the inner part of something and therefore the ability to peer at the innermost core of an issue.⁴ In this journey within herself, Sandra will retrieve her visceral fears, which are unsurprisingly interwoven with the issue of motherhood (the expression “viscere materne” appears later in the text).⁵

Sandra sees herself as “una donna emancipata e sotto certi aspetti spregiudicata,” but acknowledges some difficulties, which are “retaggio delle famiglie in cui non era (non è?) contemplata la sessualità femminile” (11). Her “typical” bourgeois family (“Una famiglia modello, di sani principi, perfetta armonia, coniugi molto legati,” 90) is exposed as enforcing inhibiting taboos and affected prudery, as deeming all bodily functions “vergognose,” and as censoring free speech (9, 43, 88). The repressive family institution, with its behavioural and linguistic constraints, constitutes the background of Sandra’s intimate journal and her “visceral quest.”

The Stone Baby is divided into two parts, each comprised of short chapters that are connected through the recurrence of a topic or word, in a way that aims to reproduce the free

³ There are a few considerations to be made about the significant name of the protagonist, Cassandra, which demonstrate how Bonanni’s work should be placed (and revalued) within a wider and more international perspective. The name recalls the heroine of classical mythology whose story was famously retold from a feminist perspective by Christa Wolf in 1983. The East-German writer turned the literary figure into a symbol of all intellectual women who oppose the patriarchy and are therefore ignored and silenced. Cassandra’s role was also examined by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein in 1963; for Klein, Cassandra acts as moral conscience, but her predictions evoke in others “a refusal to believe what at the same time they know to be true, and expresses the universal tendency toward denial, denial being a potent defence against persecutory anxiety and guilt” (Klein 1975, 293). Like Cassandra, Bonanni’s protagonist exposes and investigates uncomfortable feelings with brutal honesty.

⁴ The *Dizionario Etimologico Online* gives the following definition: “cavar le viscere o dalle viscere (ex visceribus); fig. estrarre la parte interna di checchessia; e per conseguenza entrare bene addentro nella sostanza di una cosa” (“Sviscerare”).

⁵ Sandra’s sister, Ester, mocks the concept of “Viscere materne, macché, quel viscere in più per procreare” (134). As much as this sounds autobiographical, Bonanni – who wrote extensively about motherhood but never had a child and had to resort to tranquillisers and to a psychoanalyst herself – explicitly dismissed this interpretation and insisted: “it’s not an autobiographical book, as many believed for too long. It is as autobiographical as any book can be. I wrote it because the topic imposed itself on me” (quoted in Zullino 2004, 122). See also her interview with Sandra Petrigiani (1984, 63-4).

associations of the mind. This intense and merciless self-analysis that takes place in the first part of the narrative, when Sandra seeks to forge an identity and a voice outside familial strictures, lays bare all of her fears and insecurities. Through her diary entries Sandra investigates her childhood traumas and her first sexual experiences – since, as she dutifully observes, sex is at the origin of every neurosis – from her naive self-education to puberty, from her first kiss to her loveless marriage. The outcome of her self-analysis leads not only to awareness of her own blocked sexuality, but also a painful reckoning with her deeply harboured fear of motherhood. This fear is crystallised in recurrent symbolic imagery and material forms, such as the “eggs” and, more significantly, the “stone child” that gives the novel its title.

Sandra describes herself as having been obsessed since childhood with the idea that women carry “eggs” inside them: “Ovaie di chiara etimologia. Uovo. Abbiamo dentro le uova. Come le galline” (18). She is horrified at the sight of difficult animal births, because in the case of egg binding, for example, hens can die horribly. In her imagination, the animal and human worlds overlap, as “uno di noi si era presentato storto e mia madre per poco non moriva” (18). When the family doctor observes, “questa bambina cova,” Sandra promptly interprets the remark literally and eventually asks about her own “eggs”: “Fu al nostro vecchio medico, in una certa occasione, che parlai delle mie uova. Alle mie ho pensato a suo tempo. E ci ripenso. Ai figli che non ho lasciato venire al mondo” (34). Finally, one of the obsessive refrains that haunts her mind is “Non ucciderelamosca” (31). Here “mosca” recalls the insect-remains squashed against the windowpane: “un pizzico di pasta cerosa color carne, ed era frastagliato agli orli, come composto di minuscole cosine,” where the “cosine” are revealed to be eggs (32). Thus the commandment “Don’t kill the fly” can be interpreted as “Don’t kill the eggs.” While repudiating the “evil nature” that forces us to kill (both the fly and the eggs), Sandra is at the same time convinced that her own body has refused conception altogether. She “absolves herself,” because “il rifiuto c’era in me, così radicato che sono riuscita a non trovarmi nella condizione di decidere sulla sorte delle mie uova. Che siano rimaste infecondate non può equivalere nemmeno allo schiacciamento di una mosca. Rifuggo dall’idea di uccidere” (34).

Over and above eggs and flies, Bonanni’s text privileges an even more symbolically charged and visually impressive image that serves to register Sandra’s fear of motherhood: that of the stone child, which recurs throughout the book. The first time it occurs, it takes the form of a literal “bambino di pietra,” a child statue sculpted by a local marble craftsman for his child’s tomb (“pareva un bambino e non una statua,” 53). The narrator is given a copy-in-progress of one of his statues, which look to her like unborn children: “Mi regalò il più fortunato. Lo tenni in mezzo ai libri, tutti ci vedevano un teschio raccapricciando. Finii per toglierlo, ma l’ho sempre serbato, dev’essere ancora da qualche parte” (52). Only a few years later, this stone copy is unearthed in the novel, when, in her parents’ house, Sandra rediscovers a suitcase containing mementos from her university years. She finds what seems at first to be a “stone,” but turns out to be “la testina del marmista. Nella memoria era una testa d’angelo ben modellata e levigata. In realtà è un ruvido abbozzo, una sorta di feto rugoso, la polvere nelle scabrosità e dentro l’orbita lo rendono informe e cieco” (137). This foetus is the visual embodiment of the protagonist’s unconscious rejection and profound terror of motherhood; it represents a catalyst for her fears and phobias. The repulsive image of an unborn foetus resurfaces in the diary under different circumstances. When Sandra’s brother, Riccardo, falls fatally ill and claims “Ho qui un pezzo duro gelato come un sasso,” the narrator notes that “era un eufemismo, aveva dentro un pezzo morto capace di crescere mostruosamente” (122). Sandra thus draws a connection between pregnancy and a tumour, figuring the unborn baby as a parasite. On that same occasion, their mother, remembering a past miscarriage, recalls “quando portava dentro il bambino morto e sentiva un freddo di gelo nelle viscere” (121). Riccardo himself, her deeply beloved child, reduced by the fatal disease to the status of a larva, becomes “pesante di sasso” (123). Motherhood, then, is not only “petrified,” but intensely pathologised; later in the novel, in fact, the narrator retrieves and reads an old, carefully preserved newspaper article that reports: “Nel

ventre di una donna operata d'urgenza, questo corpicino tutto formato 'che sembrava fatto di alabastro.' Citato da un certo (per me) Heinrich Martius, un altro antico caso di litopedio scoperto durante l'autopsia di una novantaquattrenne e lo portava in grembo da quarantasei anni" (138-9).⁶

It emerges that the stone baby refers to a rare clinical malformation called lithopedion (from the Greek *lithos*, stone + *paidion*, child). During an extra-uterine pregnancy, an excess of calcium can lead to the formation of a calcified foetus that can go undiagnosed for years. In Bonanni's novel, the lithopedion, together with the proliferating tumour, effectively "concretises" the idea of a child as an intrusive body, a growing mass alien to the maternal womb. This image depicts maternity as a frightening condition that has long obsessed the protagonist, a monstrous damnation in which the mother can neither regain her unified identity nor expel the foreign body. As Simone de Beauvoir observed in her seminal 1949 work *Le deuxième sexe*, which widely influenced generations of women after its publication in Italy in 1961, pregnancy:

est surtout un drame qui se joue chez la femme entre soi et soi; elle la ressent à la fois comme un enrichissement et comme une mutilation; le fœtus est une partie de son corps, et c'est un parasite qui l'exploite; elle le possède et elle est possédée par lui; il résume tout l'avenir et, en le portant, elle se sent vaste comme le monde; mais cette richesse même l'annihile, elle a l'impression de n'être plus rien (307).

Sandra, though claiming to be unable to interpret the evidence she has uncovered, finally wonders in her diary: "Avrò rimosso il bambino da cui ero ossessionata e traumatizzata? Il figlio rimasto inespresso come un feto calcificato? Questo il blocco che ho portato dentro: l'immaginario bambino di pietra?" (Bonanni 1979, 139). This disturbing truth forces her to come to terms with reality, as if suddenly placed before a mirror, and to face her irreducible fear of motherhood ("l'irreducibile paura della maternità," 139). In her perspective, motherhood is an inescapable fate: "La natura t'inchioda alla maternità, che tu l'accetti o la respinga. Per affrancarsi la donna dovrebbe andare contronatura" (134).

In the second part of Bonanni's novel, Sandra temporarily relocates to her ageing parents' house and stops reflecting on the ghosts of her past (107, 108). At this critical point, the protagonist's matrophobia is confronted through the story of Ester, Sandra's older sister, who, burdened with five consecutive pregnancies, functions as a mirror image for the protagonist. Listening to Ester's story, it seems to Sandra that women cannot repudiate nature; regardless of whether one accepts or refuses to perpetuate the family lineage, there is always a penalty (a *pena*, both punishment and suffering) for the woman: "Non si froda la natura impunemente" (137), Bonanni writes, in a sentence that also appears as an epigraph. Sandra, however, *has* defrauded nature, and her rejection represents a withdrawal into her own private, corporeal space, a space from which she both physically resists her husband's sexual embrace and refuses motherhood. "Frigid" and childless – "nullipara," as she defines herself in clinical terms – if considered through the lenses of patriarchy, she is an incomplete woman, "una donna a mezzo busto" (103; Grosz 1989, 133-4).⁷ But Sandra has come to realise that children are often used as an alibi ("A sé la vita non basta," Bonanni 1979, 162) for women who feel exonerated from other responsibilities, first of all towards themselves. She then wonders about her own alibi: "Non mi

⁶ Heinrich Martius was a famous German gynaecologist (1885-1965). The other newspaper article found inside the suitcase reports the suicide of a young German woman whose body was found in a hotel room with a "recipiente di vetro contenente un feto. Sul tappo scritto: Jesus" (139).

⁷ Sandra remains "spettatrice, benché strumento" and her "passività vigilante" has paralysed (or petrified, like a modern Medusa) her husband "fino all'impotenza." Painfully, she acknowledges that "Sono dunque questa cosa un po' allarmante e un po' ridicola a pronunciarsi: anestetica all'introduzione. Frigida suona ancora peggio. E donna a mezzo busto" (Bonanni 1979, 103).

sono fatto un figlio. Forse ho scritto un libro?” (162).⁸

Maternity is portrayed as a cruel sacrifice by Ester, who denounces the difficulties she had endured while expecting. Pregnant after her honeymoon, when she experienced sexual intercourse as “an aggression” and nobody had explained to her how to avoid unwanted pregnancies (and yet all women do something in order not to have “twenty-four children,” 133), she is offended by being treated as an object of coitus and reproduction (134; Lonzi 1974, 69). Pregnant for a second time, Ester miscarries after failing to follow the doctor’s recommendations, despite denouncing abortion and swearing that she could not have voluntarily done “that thing” (Bonanni 1979, 134).⁹ Nevertheless, in a subsequent flashback, the same sister painfully relives a haunting memory: one night, feeling overwhelmed and exasperated, she leaned her whining newborn against the windowsill. Infanticide, she claims, never crossed her mind because “children’s lives are sacred” (135). An obvious literary subtext is provided here by D’Annunzio’s 1895 novel, *L’innocente*, one of the first books Sandra reads in her childhood, and whose protagonist, Tullio, intentionally exposes his newborn to the freezing winter temperatures on the windowsill, causing the infant’s fatal illness (Ruddick 1989, 65-7).¹⁰

Why is motherhood seen as a condemnation and portrayed with dreadful, petrifying images such as imagined infanticide or lithopedion? Why does maternity demand either the physical or spiritual death of the mother or child? Why must an inevitable punishment ensue if a woman rejects constraining, devouring maternity? Following Freud’s teachings, Bonanni undertakes to trace Sandra’s fears and obsessions back to her family relationships. What Sandra does not want to replicate in her own life is indeed the selfishly sealed sphere of interests and emotions that constitute the traditional bourgeois family institution; therefore, she passionately denounces the “calcification” of familial ties, generated, in the first place, by her “controlling” mother. It is precisely this complex maternal bond that is difficult to untangle and come to terms with. When the protagonist goes back to her childhood house, the cocoon where she grew up, solitary, she discovers, much to her dismay, that she has never cut the umbilical cord, she has never consciously broken the circle tightly drawn by her mother, who was an “accentratrice possessiva” (Bonanni 1979, 146).¹¹ Her brother Riccardo warned her once that, staying in the parental house, one is doomed never to grow up because of the “attaccamento corpo a corpo con la madre,” an emotional and carnal bond that takes years to break (120). Trapped in the tangled web of family relationships, the narrator explores a knot that feels crucial to her identity formation and accuses all blood-related groups of replicating themselves by “parthenogenesis,” a process whereby the mother cell clones itself without being fertilised (therefore, without the so-

⁸ Ester reprimands her sister for her aseptically clean house: “Con tono di spregio, come di cosa sterile morta, che non può più produrre nemmeno microbi. ‘Tu tu,’ mi si è scagliata contro, ‘tu, non ti sei fatto nemmeno un figlio’” (162). The same burdening questions can be found in the concluding pages of Bonanni’s last novel, *The Reprisal*, where the first-person male narrator states: “I am seized with confusion and doubts. If I try to read it again, I almost can’t distinguish between truth and fiction. [...] And this is the pleasure of creating. Maybe I am a writer” (Bonanni 2013, 141).

⁹ Abortion, as mentioned before, is, unsurprisingly, one of the “didactic” themes of *The Stone Baby*. The most significant example is provided by Sandra’s aunt, a woman encumbered with her household and maternal chores, who bleeds to death after a clandestine abortion “per non mettere al mondo il quarto figlio” (75). Her husband, claiming to be completely unaware of the pregnancy, is regarded by society and his close family as a victim. Another woman, Giulia, a former prostitute, who is pregnant, is abandoned by her lover with the money to pay for an abortion (“L’ha mollata coi soldi per abortire,” 72).

¹⁰ “Con infinite precauzioni aprii. Una colonna d’aria gelata m’investì. Mi sporsi sul davanzale, ad esplorare. Non vidi nessuna forma sospetta, non udii se non i suoni della Novena diffusi. Mi ritrassi, mi avvicinai alla culla, vinsi con uno sforzo l’estrema ripugnanza; presi adagio adagio il bambino, comprimendo l’ansia; tenendolo discosto dal mio cuore che batteva troppo forte, lo portai alla finestra; l’esposi all’aria che doveva farlo morire” (D’Annunzio 1895, 341).

¹¹ In Ingmar Bergman’s 1978 film *Sonata* the daughter tells her mother: “Mother and daughter, what a terrible combination of feelings and confusion and destruction [...] It is as if the umbilical cord had never been cut” (quoted in Benedetti 2007, 95).

called father's intervention). These groups form a cluster of transmitted norms and biological bonds that are impermeable to the outside world. It is a self-reproducing, almost "incestuous" cycle that Sandra has voluntarily decided to interrupt: "Riproduzione in gruppi tribali a immagine e somiglianza. Perfettamente separati e chiusi. Sono contenta di non aver perpetuato questa storia" (142). By "cloning" ourselves we refuse to acknowledge the other in her individuality: only those who are blood-related can be loved because we see ourselves reflected in them ("Si ama sempre se stessi e il figlio è il se stesso incarnato," 129). Husband and wife, coming from different lineages, are condemned to grow estranged to one another, as she observes, considering her own marriage and her parents' decayed relationship, which provides an example of the many "matrimoni deteriorati senza rompersi: inconcepibile per la loro generazione, catena ben saldata" (146). Sandra's mother's resentful rejection of her spouse has somehow broken this chain, an image that returns during a conversation with Ester, who hopes that her only daughter, Amina, will remain with her, to console and help her with her maternal chores. Sandra can't help but think that her sister wants to tie her own daughter to her chain ("legare alla propria catena," 162; Aleramo 1992, 193; Lucamante 2008).

Moved by her sister's dramatic experience, Sandra paradoxically perceives the possibility of connecting to the women in her family by breaking the familial chains that bind her to them, chains made of constraints and rigid conventions. Dissolving these "calcified" ties thus becomes a means of forging more authentic relationships: "Non c'è mai stato un rapporto fra noi, esse ragazze io bambina per pochi anni di differenza oggi colmati, siamo tre donne anziane" (Bonanni 1979, 114-5). Only the transition from sisters to "women" can be a prelude to a process of mutual (and self-) recognition: if Ester is the first to come and share intimate confidences – not because they are sisters, but because they are two women ("non perché siamo due sorelle carnali, siamo due donne," 133) – the same change of perspective in relation to her mother triggers a deeper conversion in Sandra. She sits by her every morning, and observes her, "intensely curious" about her mother, "[c]urious about the woman" (144; Grosz 1989, 119).

This is a pivotal point at which the rejection of motherhood transforms into something else. Here again, Bonanni echoes the socio-political and philosophical debates surrounding the mother figure in the 1970s. That Bonanni closely followed these debates is confirmed by several hints in the novel, where we find for example, together with a dutifully annotated "feminist slogan," "Sesso sesso delle mie brame, chi prova l'orgasmo nel reame? Lo specchio risponde: nessuna," (Bonanni 1979, 148), the phrase "i ragazzi dell'erba voglio" (129), which arguably recalls the Milanese journal *L'erba voglio* (1971-77), founded by Lea Melandri and Elvio Fachinelli. In addition, Bonanni introduces the character of Olimpia, a would-be writer, who has named herself after Olympe de Gouges, symbolic mother of the feminist movement (91). It was Olympe de Gouges who published in 1791 the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, exhorting women to "wake up" and fight for the same rights as men, and the first and most influential manifesto of Italian feminism, the 1970 *Manifesto di rivolta femminile*, opened precisely with a quotation by the French political activist: "Le donne saranno sempre divise le une dalle altre? Non formeranno mai un corpo unico?" (Lonzi 1974, 13). The *Manifesto* was a critical account of the female condition in society that reclaimed the importance of sexual difference against the paternalistic concept of equality.¹² It also addressed motherhood and claimed that while the latter had been "distorted" by all the popular patriarchal myths, such as the myth of mothers' selfless devotion to their children, it was actually a "resource of thoughts and feelings" (42).

In these heated debates, motherhood was first perceived by Italian women as an essential female experience and a source of a unique form of initiation, but it was also feared and rejected as "a force that could draw [*women*] back into the isolation and daily routines associated with the

¹² One of the creators of the *Manifesto* was Carla Lonzi, who wrote in 1971 the provocative *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (1974), which is also echoed by Bonanni when she observes: "Oggi poi le ragazzine sono capaci di dichiararsi clitoridee o lesbiche o perfino anali. Io non sono niente" (Bonanni 1979, 11).

traditional family structure” (Benedetti 2007, 86). At the end of the decade, though, maternity was re-conceptualised in light of new feminist practices, a turning point similar to the one represented in the novel. After the practice of *autocoscienza* (self-awareness) that led women to “search for themselves in other women,” a shift towards psychoanalysis brought about “a re-evaluation and emphasis on the figure of the mother” (Sambuco 2012, 32), seen now as a woman of greater experience.¹³ No longer the enemy, one’s own mother became a central figure that must be confronted and understood. Moreover, the *pratica delle relazioni tra donne*, privileging and sharing individual experiences, was an essential step in recognising the differences between women while defining their own subjectivity, and it eventually developed into the practice of *affidamento* (entrustment) (35).

In parallel fashion, Bonanni aims to take back the maternal legacy in her novel; her unexpected reconnection in adulthood with the maternal figure is attained through a key change in perspective (Friday 1977; Rich 1976; Walker 1983). Sandra ponders the hardship that the woman sitting opposite her had to face in her life, acknowledging how her aphasic and uncommunicative parent has always lived in the service of others, and she grows compassionate. Only now does she understand her mother’s plight. The authoritarian, imposing mother has assisted a long series of family members, starting with the old, tyrannical but wealthy aunts by whom she was adopted as a child to serve as their “*schiava infermiera*”; “Per quel che ne so, deve aver assistito perfino la suocera. E poi la propria madre. Il conto è lungo. Le toccò, come si dice, seppellire le zie. Quelle zie ricche a cui fu ceduta, per il suo bene. Lo ebbe: l’eredità” (Bonanni 1979, 117). After her aunts’ deaths, she marries in order to have children and loves her offspring dearly, especially her male child, who is ironically defined as: “Il figlio maschio, gloria e passione delle madri, fanatismo della donna che ha avuto un matrimonio freddo” (146). She has been alone in charge of the family, encumbered with “un bambino morto. Aborti. Le gravidanze. I parti. I figli, sei figli. Allevarli. Malattie dei bambini a catena” (118). As Sandra now realises, her mother is the nurturer and the “*necroforo*,” the “*undertaker*” of the family, while men exempt themselves. Women (re)create and maintain the life cycle.

Suddenly, the mother gets her voice back and starts speaking, uttering short sentences that, though apparently disconnected, follow an internal thread. While openly and honestly confirming Sandra’s long-harboured suspicion (“E io non ti volevo,” 145), her mother looks for her daughter’s physical and moral support. Sandra’s daughterly feelings are not threatened by the revelation, because now she is looking at the woman in the armchair – “the mother figure that embodies the bourgeois myth” as the book’s back cover reads – with different, sympathetic eyes.

In Bonanni’s narrative, the moment Sandra reconnects with her mother, the moment she regains love for her mother and learns how to love her (“*saperla amare*”), she makes sense of her own experience and her world again. As Muraro states: “solo la gratitudine verso la donna che l’ha messa al mondo può dare a una donna l’autentico senso di sé” (1991, 92). In *L’ordine simbolico della madre*, Muraro explores and revalues the maternal figure as a key to empowering the female subject: “per la sua esistenza libera una donna ha bisogno, simbolicamente, della Potenza materna [...] e può averla tutta dalla sua parte in cambio di amore e di riconoscenza” (9). Love seems to be a necessary step, as much as the aspiration to enter into the symbolic order of the father and gain symbolic independence appears at first in contrast with the maternal figure. In her work, Muraro relives her struggle with a culture that denies the central maternal role: “io sentivo e agivo come se la donna che mi ha messa al mondo fosse nemica della mia

¹³ A 1974 manifesto by the periodical *L’erba voglio* states: “è necessario uscire dalla sequenza temporale, pensare la donna-madre a prescindere dal rapporto di filiazione” (quoted in Melandri 2000, 196). On Bonanni’s feminism, Giorgio de Rienzo wrote in 1977: “Certo, la Bonanni respira il clima del femminismo dei nostri anni: e incombe anche nelle sue pagine la figura ‘esecrata’ e ‘onnipotente’ del ‘maschio,’ che provoca ‘timore reverenziale’ [...] Ma il femminismo della Bonanni non è di maniera; è un femminismo storico e non semplicemente ideologico: persuasivo più di quanto non sia aggressivo, profondo più di quanto non sia arrogante” (*Tuttolibri*, 23 aprile 1977; quoted in Zullino 2004, 103).

indipendenza simbolica. E come se quest'ultima comportasse necessariamente la mia separazione da lei e la sua fine" (9). It is only by restoring her relationship with her mother that Sandra can escape the trap of a culture that, as Muraro says, "non insegnandomi ad amare mia madre, mi ha privato anche della forza necessaria a cambiarla, lasciandomi soltanto quella di lamentarmi, indefinitamente" (14). By regaining "competenza simbolica," women finally break free from the "incertezza che le parole possano veramente dire quello che vogliono dire," and cease the habit of timidly seeking support and confirmation in others' words (for example from a psychoanalyst or doctor) whenever they want to advance their original ideas (34).

Sandra offers a new interpretation of the institution of the family, based on authentic communication and connected by love, where familial ties, formerly imposed and compulsory, are now accepted and chosen; all of this thanks to the empowerment granted by love for the mother. The fact that these women are related by birth is not secondary, in spite of the narrator's assertion; by rejecting the close and resented circle of the traditional family, she gives new authenticity and relevance to these blood ties. Sandra effects this crucial passage when she decides to take her rebellious niece Amina, who wants to attend university, to live with her and her husband in Rome. Amina is sixteen and very drawn to her aunt; she would like to follow in Sandra's footsteps, but faces strong opposition from her father. A special bond connects the older woman and the teenager, who is evidently seeking a point of reference. Sandra, breaking from her secluded life, must ready herself to be responsible for a young woman who will overturn her solitary habits. Hugging her niece, she "capitulates" immediately: "un assenso fisico percepibile al contatto. È stato come se si rompesse una scorza e il corpo si ammollesse in una cedevolezza consenziente" (Bonanni 1979, 163). This corporeal welcome (D'Annunzio 1903-4; Bonanni 1979, 14; Petrigiani 1984, 61) seals the acceptance of a symbolic motherhood not based on sacrifice but rather on a transmission of knowledge. Convinced that "nessuno ha figli" ("Guai a credere di possederli, che si siano procreati o no," Bonanni 1979, 169), Sandra must refrain from being possessive and protective with Amina, who is not her daughter and never will be: "Quello che provo è solidarietà femminile e una sorta di ammirazione quasi intimidita" (166). Sandra wants to view Amina as another courageous woman, a woman who "won't let herself be repressed and won't suffer from *impotenza*" (164). In this "sympathetic" relationship, Amina won't have to lie or repress her sexuality hypocritically; on the contrary, she will learn from her mistakes and develop her own interpretation of the world, an experience that Sandra denied herself in her voluntary isolation. The chain is not as it was before; it is now a bond based on love. Sandra has consciously enlisted in the *continuum materno*, and, as Muraro would claim, she has drawn a continuum of the maternal figure that allows her to move beyond the symbolic male order – an order that confines women to a fate of reproduction and care – and finally form herself as a free subject.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between Sandra and Amina closely resembles the entrustment described by Muraro and the Diotima circle: Amina recognises in her aunt a woman she trusts, a woman who can give guidance because of her maturity of judgement or her wider experience, and from whom she will not have to hide hypocritically; Sandra, empowered by her reconstituted relationship with her mother, will act in her turn as a symbolic mother and will pass on this new-found empowerment to Amina and transmit the authority and confidence she would not otherwise have had. "The relationship of *affidamento*," as Patrizia Sambuco explains, "will enrich the less experienced or weaker woman and will lead her to define her subjectivity" (2012, 41). The practice of *affidamento* constructs a female symbolic order where each woman engages in signification through the relationship with other women. Amina, like Sandra, can thus construct and fashion her subjectivity through her relationship with other women.

Like Laudomia Bonanni, the American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich, in her seminal

work *Of Woman Born* (1976), published just a few years before *The Stone Baby*, differentiated the important experience of mothering from the oppressive institution of motherhood, and stressed the necessary “rediscovery” of the maternal figure, as demonstrated by Sandra’s story: “It was not enough to understand our mothers; more than ever, in the effort to touch our own strength as women, we needed them” (1976, 225).

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BIOGRAPHY

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