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**Sibilla Aleramo, Lina Poletti and Giovanni Cena:
 Understanding Connections between Lesbian Desire, Feminism and Free Love in
 Early-Twentieth-Century Italy**

Feminist author Sibilla Aleramo met her first and only lesbian lover, Lina (Còrdula) Poletti, at the national meeting of the CNDI (Consiglio Nazionale Donne Italiane) held in Rome from April 24-30, 1908. The women, seven years apart in age, engaged in a two-year long romance documented in their extensive correspondence¹ and in Aleramo's lyrical novel, *Il Passaggio* (Aleramo 1982 and 1919).² The women's letters provide clues as to the ways in which they conceptualized their relationship. While a second set of letters, between Sibilla Aleramo and her male lover, Giovanni Cena, demonstrates Aleramo's personal need for a double relationship much aligned with contemporary views of free love, along with Cena's positive and negative analysis of this need. Aleramo was living with Cena when she met Poletti and engaged in an open relationship with them both simultaneously.

Aleramo and Poletti loved each other in the surrounding atmosphere of the first wave of feminism. The first two decades of the twentieth century saw a plethora of feminist activism and thought in Italy and Europe. The women's very relationship embodied this climaxing social movement; they used language from the feminist movement to express their feelings for each other as well as to explain their desires. Additionally, because Sibilla Aleramo admittedly wanted to have a relationship with both Poletti and Cena at the same time, she was greatly

¹ The letters referenced here are housed at the *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci* in Rome, Italy. Alessandra Cenni edited and published some of the letters between Sibilla Aleramo and Lina Poletti in *Lettere d'Amore a Lina*, Alessandra Cenni (Ed.). Milan: Grafica Sipiel (1982). This article quotes the letters published by Cenni when possible. The translations are my own. All other quotations from letters by Sibilla Aleramo, Lina Poletti or Giovanni Cena were transcribed from the originals at the Gramsci Institute and translated by me into English.

² I translated quotations from Italian published materials cited in this article (unless otherwise noted in the bibliography).

influenced by contemporary ideologies of free love. Therefore, both free love and feminism intersect with lesbian desire, while feminism also intersects with free love, in the telling of this love story.

While Poletti is the “lesbian” of this story, this article focuses on Aleramo because of her double love for both Poletti and Cena. For many Italians, homosexuality was more of an ideology than an identity at this time (“homosexuality” is the term used in the documents); the bohemian women and men of this story contextualized their desires through gendered terms like active and passive, masculine and feminine, and above all, through understandings of love and morality.

This article has three parts. Section I provides a brief history of Aleramo and Poletti’s relationship.³ Section II analyzes the correspondence between Cena and Aleramo, while section III considers the influence of the feminist and free love movements on women’s same-sex desire and particularly, Sibilla Aleramo’s own, very personal, interpretation of her sexual ideal.

I. Sibilla Aleramo and Lina Poletti: A Brief History

Sibilla Aleramo

When Lina Poletti and Sibilla Aleramo met in 1908, Poletti was a student of philosophy living in Ravenna. Both women shared a passion for education and feminism. Aleramo, born in 1876 as Rina Faccio, was, at the time of their meeting, seven years older than Poletti and already a celebrity in the world of Italian feminism because of the recent publication of her semi-

³ Because the majority of the secondary scholarship on this topic is in Italian and thus I believe many readers of this journal will not be aware of the Aleramo and Poletti story, I borrow heavily in section I from the work of Alessandra Cenni, an academic in Comparative Literature, who began researching the Aleramo and Poletti story in the 1980s. In this section, I use quotes from Cenni’s edited volume of the Aleramo/Poletti correspondence (Cenni and Aleramo 1982), interspersed with sections of letters she did not use that I read and transcribed during the summer and fall of 2008 in the Aleramo archive of the Gramsci Institute in Rome. Cenni’s pioneering efforts reconstructed the women’s relationship, but did not discuss Giovanni Cena’s opinions in concert with the women’s correspondence (Cenni 1982 and 2007).

autobiographical novel, *Una donna*.⁴ In this novel, Aleramo told her story of being raped at fifteen, marrying her rapist, having a son with him, and choosing to leave their home and her son because of her husband's mental and physical abuse. Her tale of self-liberation was quickly translated into the major European languages and earned her speaking engagements and recognition by organizations in support of women's emancipation.⁵ Coincidentally, Poletti was part of the generation of young feminists influenced and inspired by the honesty of *Una donna*.⁶

Aleramo wrote and published *Una donna* with the guidance of her partner, author and editor Giovanni Cena, then the director of the journal *Nuova Antologia*. They met in 1899 in Turin, Aleramo moved in with him in 1902, and their co-habitation without marriage exemplified the "new secular religion" of the free love movement (Cenni 2007). Through Cena's contacts and the success of her first novel, Aleramo became a regular in a circle of Italian intellectuals, socializing with the likes of Luigi Pirandello, Giacomo Balla, Gaetano Salvemini, and Grazia Deledda. During this time, along with writing and editing, she traveled with Cena to aid earthquake victims in Sicily and Calabria and taught literacy at a secular Sunday school for migrant workers in the Agro Romano, the rural area around Rome (Cenni 2007).

Aleramo's friend and founder of the *Unione Femminile Nazionale*, Ersilia Majno, established one of the first secular Sunday schools in the Agro Romano in 1904. The 28-year-old Aleramo was among the first wave of missionary teachers and became a leading figure in the school movement. She was herself a teacher, a recruiter of other teachers and a member of the executive committee. Therefore, her relationship with Cena led her to Rome's reformist and feminist circles – and Cena even attended the women's conference at which she met Poletti (Drake 1990, 255).

⁴ Sibilla Aleramo is a pseudonym for Rina Pierangeli Faccio. Rina became Sibilla upon the publication of her first novel, *Una donna*, in 1906. According to Rosalind Delmar, "Sibilla" is a "reference to the Roman Sybils, women gifted with oracular powers of prophecy" (Delmar, *Afterward to A Woman*, 177). Cena is credited with suggesting the name Sibilla. In 1907 he wrote in a sonnet titled, "Sibilla" – "I discovered her and I called her Sibilla" (Zancan, *Il doppio itinerario*, 200). Regarding her last name, "Aleramo," Sibilla chose that herself because it was the family name of the Faccio's ancestors. She writes, "I chose 'Aleramo' one evening while reading 'Piedmont' by Carducci. I am from Monferrina: [quote from Carducci:] 'and the great lover of castle and vineyards – the essence of Aleramo'" (Zancan, *Il doppio itinerario*, 200.).

⁵ Aleramo's novel, *Una donna*, published in 1906 is cited by many as the book that launched Italian feminism.

⁶ Much of the biographical information on Lina Poletti is from the introduction and postscript to *Lettere d'Amore a Lina*, written by Alessandra Cenni and Cenni's 2007 chapter in *Fuori della norma*.

Despite the fact that Aleramo appears to have been in only one same-sex relationship, as a prolific writer she was no stranger to the world of early-twentieth-century lesbian Europe. She corresponded with American salonnière Natalie Barney in Paris, who passed Aleramo's book onto one of her partners, Renée Vivien, with whom Aleramo engaged in an extended correspondence.⁷ Aleramo herself wrote about, thus publicizing, her relationship with Poletti in *Il Passaggio*, a lyrical novel in which she described the “fairy tale” with blond hair and golden eyes. However, this book wasn't all that Aleramo published on homosexuality. In the anthology *Andando e stando*, which is a collection of prose written and published by Sibilla Aleramo from the 1910s to the 1940s, there are book reviews of works by Otto Weininger (whose *Sex and Character* is discussed below), Natalie Barney (Aleramo titled the book review, “The Living Room of an Amazon,” as it is a review of Barney's *Aventures de l'Esprit*), and Virginia Woolf (Aleramo favorably reviews *Orlando*). Yet it is her relationship with Poletti, the volume of their letters, and Aleramo's *Il Passaggio*, that make these two women an obvious starting point for historians of early-twentieth-century Italian lesbian history.

After her relationship with Poletti, Aleramo spent a year alone until she began her next relationship with writer Vincenzo Cardarelli. After Cardarelli, Aleramo engaged in romances with many famous male writers including Giovanni Papini, Umberto Boccioni, Giovanni Boine, Dino Campana, and Salvatore Quasimodo. Her final relationship, at age sixty, was with poet Franco Maticotta who was forty years her junior. In her lifetime, Aleramo published over 25 volumes of novels, poetry and diaries. She died on January 13, 1960. She was 83 years old.

Lina Poletti

Biographical information on Sibilla Aleramo is not hard to find, but who was this “fairy tale with blond hair and golden eyes” called Lina Poletti?⁸ Born Cordula Poletti in Ravenna on August

⁷ For more information on Aleramo's friendship with Barney and a close reading of *Il Passaggio* see Daniela Danna (2004).

⁸ A recent chapter by Alessandra Cenni, an academic in Comparative Literature, documents Poletti's life before and after Aleramo. Cenni's pioneering efforts provide an essential history of one of the first well-documented Italian lesbians. Because Cenni's work has not been translated into English and therefore readers here may not be able to

27, 1885, Poletti was the second youngest of four sisters. Her family was well off and they lived on via Rattazzi, near the *Piazza del Popolo* in Ravenna. She graduated in 1907 from the University of Bologna with a thesis on Carducci's poetry. According to Alessandra Cenni, Poletti had a "negative legend" in her town because of her "unprejudiced life choices"; she dressed in men's suits and "showed no love for the stagnant atmosphere" of her small town (Cenni 2007, 44). Nonetheless, Cenni implies that it was this very eccentricity that attracted the attention of her husband and childhood friend, Santi Muratori. Her marriage, according to Cenni, was a social cover that worked well because like Cena had been for Aleramo, Muratori was also a feminist, a "humanist of tenacious and intransigent loves" and understanding of Poletti's great struggles (Cenni 2007, 54-55).

When Poletti met Aleramo, she was a young student of literature and philosophy who also volunteered as a fundraiser for the schools of the Agro Romano and planned conferences on behalf of Italian workers around the country – often coordinating the schedule of her events with Aleramo's so that the women could see each other (Cenni 2007, 49). In fact, Richard Drake, who wrote an introduction to the second English translation of *Una donna* as well as an article about Sibilla Aleramo's work in the Agro Romano claims that it was her relationship with Poletti that prevented Aleramo from publishing the "powerful novel of social realism" based on her work as a literacy teacher. He quotes Anna Celli, an Agro Romano volunteer as having "begged [Aleramo] to turn away from 'the abyss' [of lesbian love] while there was still time, to find satisfaction in 'the fulfillment of our [workers'/volunteers'] duties,' not in fleeting passion" (Drake 1999, 266). Certainly Aleramo and Poletti must have faced some criticism towards their relationship, but the writing that Aleramo *did* produce during her time with Poletti exists as one of the most extensive collections of lesbian love letters from this time period. Certainly that is more significant than any missed opportunity to produce yet another "powerful novel of social realism."

read her work themselves, I have chosen to summarize a portion of her chapter: "Ritratto di un'amazzone italiana: Cordula Poletti (1885-1971)" in Nerina Miletta and Luisa Passerini (Eds.) *Fuori della norma: Storie lesbiche nell'Italia della prima metà del Novecento* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2007). Incidentally, while Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna* has been translated into English, Aleramo and Poletti remain on the periphery of European lesbian and feminist history while they are central to these histories of Italy.

Poletti is described by Aleramo as having dressed in masculine clothes.⁹ Her pseudonym, “Tristano Somians,” may offer a small clue as to how she might have conceptualized her own gender identity. The first name, Tristano, makes one think of Tristan and Isolde, the famed medieval secret lovers. Would Poletti think of herself as the lover who engaged in a secret relationship with his uncle’s wife? Cena and Aleramo were certainly old enough to be Poletti’s aunt and uncle. Her taken last name is more challenging. “Somians” is the term for an Ethnic group, also of medieval origins, from the East Baltic region.

After her relationship with Sibilla Aleramo, Lina Poletti had a relationship with Eleonora Duse; after Duse, Poletti began a relationship with Countess Eugenia Rasponi who, coincidentally also attended the 1908 congress of the CNDI. Poletti and Rasponi lived together for 40 years; Rasponi was, indeed, the love of Poletti’s life.

Sibilla Aleramo and Lina Poletti

When Aleramo and Poletti met at the CNDI in 1908, Poletti was 23 and Aleramo was 30.¹⁰ Aleramo wrote that as she was leaving her seat on the committee for women’s suffrage one night, “the young girl” accompanied her home because it was late. They walked close to one another down a dark and narrow street. A nervous shudder went through Aleramo and she felt like she couldn’t speak. Aleramo was afraid to turn toward the girl, but wondered if the girl was looking at her. Aleramo didn’t sleep at all that night. She wrote to the girl immediately and told her that all she thought of was her – her “isolated and imperious figure.” She asked the girl if she was aware of the place she has taken in her life and she said that without her, she felt a “rut” in the space she occupied (Aleramo 1982, 26).

⁹ Alessandra Cenni (2007) analyzes Poletti’s masculine gender expression; therefore this article will not go into depth on this topic. The picture published in Bruna Conti and Alba Morino’s book displays a smartly dressed young woman, a stark contrast to the overt femininity of Aleramo (Conti and Morino 1981). Also, the photo of Poletti in Cenni’s article (2007) can be seen on the Italian lesbian community website elleXelle: <http://www.ellexelle.com/leswiki/index.php?n=Biografie.PolettiCordula> (accessed March 30, 2009).

¹⁰ At the CNDI, topics of discussion included women’s economic independence, equality in love and marriage, fair child custody laws, and women’s suffrage. For more information on the CNDI see *Donne e conoscenza storica*: <http://www.donneconoscenzastorica.it/testi/accardidonne/actutconsiglio.htm> (accessed March 30, 2009)

Aleramo's friends at the conference talked about this young girl: Lina Poletti. They said she was "irresistible." Aleramo wondered if this made Poletti laugh. Aleramo told Poletti that she could not stop thinking about the first time she saw her, "at the legal session of the Congress, one morning." It was a beautiful Roman spring in late April, 1908:

You came into the room, you had a diffused look. You smiled at me without knowing me and maybe without noticing me, and I felt... I don't know what to say to you...something profound, like I was swooning...then, later, you talked to me...do you remember? And then I left and you wrote to me. I saw in you the first Italian woman. Do you remember?...And I felt and feel that you liked me a lot....And now the anguish is in your voice, with the passion that seems to make your voice crack. I would like to talk to you for a long time. I would like that you let me breathe into your soul, yes, but I fear, I fear....can I be frank? It seems to me from seeing this in your eyes, you don't like my sentiment...no, no? I am young, you see, and all that you try is for vehement strength...But don't be offended, you say? Permit me to be like this?...I am already terrified of losing you. Oh your enigma, your smile (Aleramo 1982, 26-27).

Continuing this letter to Poletti, Aleramo asked her if she remembered their "first hour of passion." Aleramo envied Poletti and was jealous that Poletti seemed to already know the ways to love women, even though they both were "invested from the same sacred wind." Aleramo felt tremendously, dizzy and out of breath. She wrote:

Lina, I never had in my life thought of the possibility of loving a woman, never, do you understand? I didn't believe in the love of the human couple, to the integration of the two human branches...Reading one time of a sad passion of Michaelangelo for a young man I had shivered, like in front of incomprehensible insanity. But no desire ever came to me to scrutinize the dark horror. And no soul of a woman had attracted me with its secret, like no feminine shape I had ever desired. You can imagine, then, that a strange destiny came instead from a young girl against this mystery; can you imagine how I would have been upset when I discovered that I was in love with you? Oh your soul! Because it was a woman's, because it was a sister's I felt it vibrate like that next to mine

like no other had before? With which intoxication did I welcome its sigh? And how it expanded itself to the breath of your ample and strong being! And your youth, in front of which I found myself time and time again mother and infant! (Aleramo 1982, 27-30).

Aleramo here said she loved Poletti because she was a “woman” and a “sister.” There was a sense of newness, apprehension and exhilaration in their love. Aleramo was surprised by her same-sex desire, but also found a familiarity in Poletti’s body because of her femininity. Cenni points out the paradox of the fact that while Aleramo described Poletti as the “masculine young girl,” she also admitted being attracted to her because of her femininity (2007, 51). Aleramo wrote:

We are in the light of dusk, in the closed room. I am lying on a small bed, and I have my hair scattered on the pillow and my eyes half closed. You speak to me, with your face leaning over mine, flaming pink face, and your hands lightly play with my hair like it was a harp. You speak beautiful and sweet words to me, with a voice that goes with the palpitations in my veins. Your hands pass over my forehead like the springtime wind. And all of the fragrance and pang of the spring enwraps me, it lays this way motionless in the little, obscure room, in front of my half-closed eyes...To the man that I loved I gave my smile. To you, woman, go my tears. You can love life also across them, like the stars do (Aleramo 1982, 35-36).

It is perilous to assume lesbian desire was enabled by feminism. However, when I look at these diary entries and letters, and pair them with the feminist action in which the women partook during the day, the energy is not unfamiliar or difficult to imagine. For Poletti and Aleramo, being feminist was intertwined with being in love with each other. When Aleramo wrote that she gave her tears to Poletti, she meant that Poletti understood her struggle as a woman and could therefore love her in a more profound way than any man who would love her simply for her superficial appearance, such as her smile. Supporting this idea, are Aleramo’s words to Giovanni Cena, her male lover, in an undated letter written between 1909 and 1911, “I was for you the

extreme smile of youth, I was beauty, serenity, [here she crossed out “the smile”], harmony...” (Aleramo, Lettera 39).

In 1908 when the two women met, Sibilla was still living with author Giovanni Cena. Aleramo and Cena broke up after a seven-year relationship because of the “revelation” of her love for Poletti (Cenni 1982, 15). But it wasn’t a clean break. Cena, progressive enough to have been one of the only men in attendance at the Congress of Women in 1908, held out for a while to see if this infatuation would last. Aleramo had hoped to maintain both the relationship with him, “her companion,” and Lina, her “creature.” Alessandra Cenni writes that “Sibilla believed in the possibility of a relationship between three people – in which it wasn’t necessary to renounce a bond with one in order to maintain the other” (Cenni 1982, 17). Comparing this relationship to that between Vita Sackville West, her lesbian lovers and husband Harold Nicolson, Cenni cites “free love” as the burgeoning and popular concept among artists and middle-class socialites that contributed to Aleramo’s belief in a successful multiple relationship. Yet I believe that this “free love” is more of the ilk described by Caroline Arni: a “freedom to love” denoting a more modern, romanticized and autonomous relationship instead of a promiscuous one (Arni 2004). I provide a detailed explanation of this thesis in the third section of this article. The following section of this article will examine Cena’s reaction to Aleramo’s desire to maintain a relationship with her “companion” (Cena) and her “creature” (Poletti).

II. Giovanni Cena and Sibilla Aleramo

There is evidence that Giovanni Cena both supported and rejected Aleramo and Poletti’s relationship. For Aleramo, Poletti was a creature that she could love much in the same way that Cena loved her. In a letter to Cena, Aleramo wrote: “For so much time I didn’t even understand it. But you, you who loved me for this, you who I had given this happiness, and had blessed me, oh you can understand what that creature means in my life, that no one before had meant...” (Aleramo, Lettera 39).¹¹ Aleramo assumed that Cena could understand her love for Lina by

¹¹ Emphasis in original.

relating it to his love for her. She also recognized that he saw her love for Poletti as “disloyalty” toward him or a “sickness”: “You told me that I am disloyal or very sick. It’s neither the one nor the other, my poor Giovanni. Disloyalty would be maintaining for you the illusion” (Aleramo Lettera 48). She did not see herself as having had an affair behind his back; she was honest about her love for both Cena and Poletti. Yet neither could accept the love of the other for her.¹²

One long letter, dated June 10, 1909 attempts an early understanding of Aleramo’s love for Poletti. Cena begins:

I had an agitated night thinking of you. In the morning, I received your letter and all day long the words “to live *constricted*” echoed in my head...The thing is very difficult for me...Because I see you as far away with a love full of sadness, but without reserve, without criticism? ...I feel I yelled, sometimes waited, sometimes unreasonably irritated, almost cruel against you? P. [Poletti] is therefore a great difference...The truth is that we feel like two spouses against our will, that are more willing to be in company other than only ours...our dialogue [is] ...the opposition of two discordant and irreconcilable opinions (Cena, Lettera 66).

Cena’s reaction to Aleramo’s new romance was a mix of jealousy and compassion. He asked why she did not criticize her own love for Poletti as she did seem to dive head first into this romance, while at the same time, he expressed concern that she did not seem happy in this new love. He wanted to understand why she felt “constricted” by a heterosexual monogamous relationship with him and obviously did not feel so “constricted” himself. In stating that they were like a married couple who stayed together against their will, he acknowledged that there was something missing from their relationship, but his last sentence indicated that perhaps he did not think Aleramo should have engaged in her relationship with Poletti as a remedy. The letter then becomes more confrontational:

¹² Many of Cena’s letters to Aleramo are short, detailing only meetings about publishers or travel plans; many are written on letterhead from *Nuova Antologia*. His handwriting is extremely difficult to read and for this reason, some words are illegible. For any words that are illegible in the primary sources, I’ve indicated this simply by using parentheses around the word “illegible”.

But we come to us. Constricted in life! No...There aren't modern or antique morals...and your [Aleramo and Poletti] morals tells you that each life has its reasons of being in itself and in others: you can be useful to others, in a reformist mode...On the other hand the suicide wants to say the failure of all that you had behaved and preached in your book [*Una donna*] and the triumph of the old morals of the Albino Snake! (Cena Lettera 66).¹³

The suicide Cena referred to could be both Aleramo's own attempt, and the suicide of her mother. Aleramo's mother committed suicide because of unhappiness in her relationship with her husband, and Aleramo attempted suicide for the same reason (Aleramo 1906). Both acts represented a rebellion against the patriarchal system of heterosexual marriage and oppression.

What Cena meant by the "old morals of the albino snake" is less clear. I hypothesize that Cena was referring to the Chinese legend of the white snake which is also a famous Chinese Opera by the same name. It is the story of a young male herbalist who falls in love with a beautiful woman who is in reality, a white snake demon. The white snake also befriends another female snake whose powers were not as potent as her own. The white snake woman helps the herbalist, who becomes her husband, make his herbs more potent. A monk discovers that this woman, who is also now pregnant with the man's child, is really a snake demon and banishes her for eternity to the Leifeng Pagoda. But the other woman snake destroys the Pagoda and in one version the two women snakes retire to heaven, and in another version, they live happily ever after with the man and the child (Shepard and Zhang 2001).¹⁴

The legend of the white snake also can be seen to represent a feminist rebellion. The husband is impotent and the woman is saved only by her female friend. In this paragraph, perhaps Cena is telling Aleramo that they do not have to be constricted to heteronormative patriarchal values and recognizes that his relationship with Aleramo and Poletti is mirrored by the relationship of the herbalist with the white snake woman and her friend. But then Cena

¹³ Emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ For a queer analysis of this story, see Tan See-Kam, "The Cross-Gender Performances of Yam Kim-Fei, or the Queer Factor in Postwar Hong Kong Cantonese Opera." *Journal of Homosexuality* 2000, Vol. 39, Issue 3/4, 201 – 212.

contradicts this understanding by making an argument about the natural love between men and women – stating that he needs her in a most respectful and complete way:

By constricted you want to mean that you live for me, I feel the duty of freeing you from this constriction. For as much as I believe that you are necessary for me (you should think that you are necessary for me in a complete way, not as an illicit lover, nor a devoted sister, but as a legitimate lover, as a woman in respect to a man, in all that a woman can represent in a man's life, morally, intellectually, physically) you don't have to dedicate yourself to me in strength or piety... (Cena Lettera 66).¹⁵

He then ends by telling her to go and live alone. That he will always be her friend, and always read her work, but that he believes it was Poletti's influence on her, not hers on the younger woman's, that ended his relationship with her. He writes of Poletti: "To her the absolute didn't cost anything" meaning that Poletti had nothing to lose in pursuing Aleramo. Cena was sad in the end, knowing that he was unable to save the relationship. "Sometimes I judged poorly, but I prefer to believe that I didn't get it" (Cena, Lettera 66). In a letter dated October 8, 1909, Cena expressed much of the same, impotent sentiment:

I feel profoundly useless now...you reply to me with the reality of your feelings, if I speak to you of my feelings, you tell me to change them in the sense that favors the illusion or voluntary error...You need my love, you wrote (illegible) but it isn't enough for you. I need yours, but I can't support you if it's not total. Maybe the tragedy and what one wants is a double love that destroys also another. You can tell this theme to your friend and lover...you didn't become this way because of accidents in life, but for another woman, for something that is superior to all of my pain, to all of my love, to everything; much stronger, etc (Cena, Lettera 66).¹⁶

In stating that the tragedy was that Aleramo wanted a "double love that destroys also another" perhaps he meant that Aleramo's attempt at loving both Cena and Poletti at the same time was

¹⁵ Emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ Emphasis in the original.

futile and maybe even selfish. Cena's emotions were normal for someone who had lost a love to another person. But Cena felt especially emasculated by Poletti and acknowledged that the women's attraction was far more powerful than anything he could have offered Aleramo.

But how did Aleramo see this situation of loving two people at once? She felt despair over the failure of her relationship with Cena in light of her relationship with Poletti. While Cena and Aleramo were not married, but living together, Aleramo did not see her relationship with Poletti as the cause of her breakup with Cena, but instead she lamented the fact that both Cena and Poletti could not accept each other's love for her. On August 8, 1909 she wrote to Poletti:

This, for our relationship. Then he is tormented from the thought that my only love for him is over, and that I love you at least as much as I love him...My poor companion [Cena] is always more and more desperate. Not only for changed relationships, but for the love that I bring to you...He told me that I can't divide myself...that I must, despite myself, choose... (Aleramo 1982, 35).

She also told Poletti that Cena, "doesn't presently agree absolutely with my judgment of the relationship that we have, and he repeats to me with crudeness that he believes it is the result of a mental aberration, to which *you* led me for a favorable disposition of mine, physiological or pathological I don't know well" (Aleramo 1982, 39). In these two quotes, it is obvious that Cena feared the women's relationship, but also believed it was either a result of a medical problem or a pathological vice. Perhaps Aleramo was referring to his letter of 1909 cited above when he admonished Poletti for leading Aleramo down the path of lesbian deviance. In a later letter to Poletti, Aleramo explained that Cena accepted her feelings for Poletti, but questioned why Poletti could not accept Aleramo's feelings for Cena.

The words "mental aberration...physiological or pathological," indicate that both Aleramo and Cena were aware of the scientific writings on sexuality of their time. Psychological, sexological, and criminological discourse was prevalent at the turn-of-the-century in Italy. In 1878 the German theories of *Conträsexualität* were brought to Italy by forensic physician Arrigo Tamassia, furthered by Guglielmo Cantarano in 1883 with his study on the woman known as "X," and developed later by criminologist Scipio Sighele in 1892" (Danna 2004, 118). Famous

criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who believed that “born” female criminals had a taste for violence, weapons, horses, a voracious sexual appetite and abnormal virility, outlined a physical and psychological sketch of the female deviant (Gibson 2004, 90-104). Additionally, anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza, who believed that marriage brought more restrictions rather than freedom, joined the debate over women’s bodies and sexuality (Mantegazza 1938, 157-158).

While they all had something to say about lesbianism, the anthropologist Mantegazza stands out for his analysis of lesbianism and heterosexual marriage. While Aleramo and Cena were not married, but living together, Cena’s feeling of impotence and Aleramo’s feeling of self-righteousness are mirrored in Mantegazza’s analysis. He is clear about his belief that “Lesbianism” is a death knell to heterosexual marriage:

More often than once, Lesbianism brings with it domestic unhappiness; and it behooves the married man to keep a sharp eye out for those strange and hidden manifestations of lasciviousness...Where the vice is of long standing, a cure is all but impossible; for the reason that the clitoris, with prolonged exercise of its nerves, becomes unduly sensitive and overdeveloped, and all normal pleasure is thereafter a pale and colorless thing, compared to the Lesbian’s convulsive spasms. The husband then may find himself in a cruel dilemma, having to choose between loathing and condemning the companion of his love, or himself acquiring a vice, which alone can satisfy and make her happy (Mantegazza 1938, 80).

Mantegazza believed that women’s same-sex love will ruin a heterosexual marriage, ruin her ability to be pleased by a man and drive a man to vice (most likely performing oral sex on her) in order to please her. Mantegazza began this section by noting how frequent this occurrence is, and that Italians should not believe the myth that women’s same-sex love is rare. He follows this section with a discussion of the “shamefulness” of sodomy, practiced upon a man or a woman and likewise the shame of bestiality, especially that which women practice with their little poodles.

But Cena never showed any signs of making an effort to bring Aleramo any more pleasure to enhance their relationship. Instead, his greatest concern consistently seemed to be his own well-being. In the following letter, he writes about how he missed her while she was in Venice, and in the quote after that, he trembled at the thought of her with Poletti at the beach house in Santa Marinella.

I need peace, if not that, then the complete caress of your love...I can live alone; I don't want to be alone, but I can, I've convinced myself, live without sweetness, without joy, with anger, like being on the run from something...It would be an agitated and toned-down life, but maybe productive like its been in these days [without you here] (Cena, Lettera 96).

The second example of Cena's crippling fear was from a letter dated June 12, 1909. It was sent to Aleramo while she was staying with Poletti in a house by the sea in Santa Marinella, just north of Rome: "Why do my hands tremble when I open your letter? Instead I find you calm – up until another letter from Ravenna, that could also be bad [the word *cattiva* could mean "evil" or "naughty" in this context too]...maybe my letter will reach you together with that other girl!" (Cena, Lettera 82).

Cena was starting to realize that Aleramo's feelings for Poletti weren't fleeting. Aleramo's letters to Poletti indicate her intention to live a double life – one with Cena and one with Poletti – yet being honest about it all: "It was in me the divine force of love until death, of living the double life of one who loves, double the pain and double the joy, a free soul perpetually in front of another woman, in a perennial exchange, in a perennial reaction with God" (Aleramo May 29, 1910).

Sibilla's belief in free love as well as her right to experience a same-sex relationship while maintaining her heterosexual relationship with Cena directly coincided with not only the women's emancipation movement but her belief in how love nurtures the soul. Historian Bruno Wanrooij pointed to Aleramo who was famous for her positive attitude about physical love nourishing her soul and her writing. She said in *Amo dunque sono*: "The seed enriches the woman who receives it, if she has the deep virtue of love, and every embrace, if it doesn't

fertilize the womb, it fertilizes one's intellectual substance" (Aleramo 1982, 182). Wanrooij writes, "Sibilla Aleramo distinguished herself from those who indicated in sexual relations with a man a precondition, or a guarantee, of a true and sentimental physiological maturity. The woman had true autonomy, although in her opinion, physical contact with a man contributed at times to the development of her 'profound treasures'" (Wanrooij 1990, 183). The following section will explore how ideas about free love and feminism intersected with Aleramo and Poletti's relationship. More than something that helped her writing or creativity, Aleramo believed that love was essential in any relationship – heterosexual or homosexual – and that without it, the relationship had no moral base and was just an expression of physical desire.

III. The Matrix of Ideals: Free Love, Feminism and Lesbian Desire

Historian Lucienne Kroha states that in Italy "[w]hat emerged from the half century between the completion of Unification (1871) and the onset of Fascism (1922) was a conscious attempt to renegotiate and extend the parameters of female identity..." (Kroha 2000, 174-175). As an example of this "renegotiation," Aleramo's book, *Il Passaggio* along with her letters to Poletti and Cena, indeed attempted to "extend the parameters of female identity" through an analysis of female sexuality, morality and social norms. Aleramo blended biological sex with the construction of gender by using the terms "active" and "passive" in a discussion with Poletti in an attempt to make sense of both their love and Poletti's (perhaps feminist, perhaps transgender) choice of wearing masculine attire:

You don't divide humanity into *masculine and feminine*, but into *active and passive*...In every way, the fact is that active or passive, in the physiological and psychological order, the men would always be men in their *shape* (maybe the language is not scientific, but it's not important), and the women will always be women (Aleramo 1982, 53).¹⁷

¹⁷ Emphasis in the original.

Arguing for biological determinism (in shape only), Aleramo here believes that women can be both active and passive. While she admits that she is not using scientific language, in doing so, one can assume she is aware of a scientific discourse on what was deemed the “Sexual Question.” She continues:

[Y]ou, my Lina, energetic and active as ever, you however, like it or not, have a nice, blond, sweet girlish form, and the soul that unconsciously rises to the lips...is the soul of a woman, more ready, more tender, more passionate, than a soul of a man. ...[S]ome generations of women who are cultured and free will have had enough of radical modification of the *feminine concept*...*Particularly women*, like me, and I could not at my time tell you that *you don't know me*, because all of the instincts of conquest, of control/domain, of savage will of pleasure that are in my father, I possess them, they were honed for good fortune... (Aleramo 1982, 53).¹⁸

Here, Aleramo encourages Poletti to see that she, despite any masculine appearances, is actually a woman underneath and should be happy to have such passion and tenderness that comes with being a woman. In the same breath, Aleramo admits that within herself are instincts of domination, like those of her father. Working a few generations before Aleramo, in fact he died in 1909, Criminal Anthropologist Cesare Lombroso marked female “born” criminals as having received traits from their father (Gibson 2004). Sibilla certainly believed that her “activity” was a legacy from her father, a man for whom she worked as an adolescent and put on a pedestal until she, as a teenager, learned he was unfaithful to her mother (Aleramo 1906).

This dual self-identity of masculine and feminine appears frequently in Aleramo’s writing. She wrote in *Il Passaggio*, “I thought that I had in myself elements of war, the softness of my mother and the violence of my father, the fearful melancholy of one and the rebellious boldness of the other...the instinct of devotion and the instinct of conquest in perpetual opposition” (Aleramo 1919, 4-6).

In many ways, Aleramo can’t seem to get past the idea of Poletti as “masculine.” She believed that Poletti was trying to hide her own womanhood. At the same time, Aleramo claimed

¹⁸ Emphasis in the original.

to know more about women because she was more feminine, and believed that Poletti didn't understand women because she was more masculine. Aleramo writes: "In the gift of love, the woman...doesn't have at all that sense of *submission* that you [Lina], with a masculine psychology, presume. The theory of the passive and the active...has also, in this anatomical camp, the need for more...reserve" (Aleramo 1982, 54). She continued to defend women who were forced unwillingly into the subordinate position of relationships, as she once was in a heterosexual marriage, and attacked Poletti's equation of masculine with dominant. In a later paragraph, Aleramo attacked her again for thinking of women in such subordinate positions as if they were prostitutes, consenting to the whims of the active male.

Then, using this example of the crime of prostitution, she twists her logic and says: "You tried to commit that same crime [prostitution] that pigeonholed you into the masculine, the crime of enjoying, without love, taking advantage of someone else's abjection." Aleramo accused Poletti of being "evil" because she had sex with her, without loving her. "And homosexuality doesn't postpone the relief either" (Aleramo 1982, 55). Just because it was lesbian sex, there still was no excuse for sex without love for Aleramo.

She believed that "free love" included emotion, not just sexual encounters, an idea that pairs well with Caroline Arni's thesis on free love in the same time period. Arni focuses on the writings of Swedish pedagogue Ellen Key, who was a social reformer popular throughout Europe at the turn of the century, and German literary critic Helene Stöcker, who was a main advocate of the "New Ethic," a social ideal advocating a higher morality through love not legitimized by the state through marriage. In examining Key and Stöcker's writings, Arni finds that "free love" was not a movement for promiscuity, but one that incorporated the ability for women to have the freedom to love, to end love, to have control over their romantic relationships and therefore engage in love that would not be reduced to eroticism (Arni 2004).

Ellen Key and Sibilla Aleramo knew each other. In a letter dated between the 19th and 27th of March, 1909, on a Friday morning, Aleramo wrote to Poletti: "I'm not leaving tomorrow evening, or else I'll give up the chance to see Ellen Key again" (Aleramo 10-27 March, 1909). This is the only mention of Key in Aleramo's letters that I have read, but this short sentence is quite significant as Aleramo shared Key's beliefs on the significance of love in relationships.

Key, like Aleramo, believed that love was defined by erotic impulse but both women also believed that engaging in relationships with more than one person at a time was essential because one might find one characteristic in one partner, and another in someone else. Arni writes that for Key, love began and ended according to an “astronomy in the world of emotion;” therefore state sanctions like marriage could not prevent people from infidelity or divorce. Additionally, Key believed that men, and sometimes women, should love more than one person at a time because a great, true love may not have been given to them. Thus the ideal is “one-love”, but in its absence, individuals should feel free to find characteristics in different partners in order to express their true love (Arni 2004).

This is exactly how Aleramo felt. She found the ability to share a depth of emotion and pain with Poletti; and as we read above, she gave Cena her “smile.” Additionally, she believed that Poletti didn’t really love her and therefore Poletti’s lack of love made Poletti’s physical desire for her immoral and masculine.

Related to feminism, Arni demonstrates that for Key and Stöcker, keeping love as an essential component in any relationship coincided with the women’s emancipation movement:

By taking into account its far-reaching consequences, namely the possibility of simultaneous love, the authors I have cited radicalized their argument about love as a relationship between individualized subjects. Furthermore, this entailed a radicalization of what was intrinsic to this concept of love: the feminist promise of including women in modernity as well as the theorem that social cohesion would be the ultimate outcome of personalized love (Arni, 2004. 200).

The examples of Key and Stöcker, along with Aleramo and Poletti, provide case studies of women’s same-sex desire intersecting with the first wave of the feminist movement. Another writer, of whom Aleramo was aware, theorized on this connection in detail. Infamous for his anti-Semitism and misogyny, Otto Weininger is worthy of exploration here because of his attempt to link women’s same-sex desire and women’s emancipation in the same discourse. He said that “women’s need for emancipation, and her capacity for emancipation, derives

exclusively from the proportion of M[asculinity/Man] in her” (Weininger 2005, 57).¹⁹ He explains:

W[oman] has no need and, accordingly, no capacity, for this kind of emancipation. All those women who really strive for emancipation, all those women who have some genuine claim to fame and intellectual eminence, always display many male properties, and the more perceptive observer will always recognize in them some anatomically male characteristics, an approximation to the physical appearance of a man...Its application to the problem of homosexuality led to the discovery that a woman attracted to another woman is half man...the degree of a woman’s emancipation is identical to the degree of her masculinity (Weininger 2005, 58).

Taking at face value the fact that Aleramo and Poletti met each other at a conference for women’s emancipationists, and certainly other women’s emancipationists were involved in same-sex relationships, Weininger is not completely off the mark in connecting feminism with women’s same-sex desire. However, Aleramo was decidedly feminine and as we have seen from her scoffing at Poletti’s masculine gender expression, she saw no need for any woman to dress in a masculine style. As for Weininger’s claim that women attracted to women are “half men” – this does agree with common contemporary beliefs about those with characteristics of the opposite gender, but he is applying this to all women who loved women. Of course, all women who loved women, in his mind, appear masculine. This process of essentializing is problematic. More importantly, he claims that feminine *women* feel no need for emancipation. It is the part of women that is masculine that feels this need and therefore women who have no part that is masculine, have no need to be emancipated (Weininger 2005, 62).

Not surprisingly, Aleramo read Weininger critically. In 1933 in the *Journal of Politics and Literature* she wrote about him:

¹⁹ Weininger also believed that every sexual invert displayed some degree of gender characteristics of the opposite sex. Additionally he differed from those who came before him in thinking that sexual inverts are all bisexual, defined as capable of intercourse with both men and women (Weininger 2005, 41).

When he was 33 years old, in 1903, he killed himself. His great book, *Sex and Character*, was translated into Italian. Few readings are more tragic. We know in which moment of his precocious adolescence Otto Weininger asked himself for the first time the sense that he had on the ground and under the sky of the creature called woman, the creature that had an organized mind like that of the man... (Aleramo 1997, 126).

Weininger's pairing of women's emancipationists with women who have romantic and sexual relationships with other women is a result of the fact that women's emancipationists were quite often rebelling against many of society's rules. For Poletti, loving Aleramo was a form of rebellion against patriarchy. In a letter dated March 8 (probably 1910), Poletti wrote: "I love you and I bring you with me in the vast sense of our communal mother, the natural saint, from whom came Virgo to the rebellion against the society of men, I bring you with me with my disdain and my fury..." (Poletti March 8, 1910?). Poletti, born on August 27, was a Virgo and saw a direct relation between her own rebellion and her astrological sign. This quote also indicates that she saw their love as a rebellion against the confinement of patriarchal society and that together, with all their "disdain and fury" they would triumph against this oppression.

Additionally, the events of Aleramo's life existed as one example after another of unjust oppression due to patriarchal norms. She was raped at fifteen; coerced into a violent marriage with her rapist; the one joy she had – her son – could not sustain her as she was constantly abused by her husband and was not helped by any official authority or even family member; because she ran away to escape the abuse, she could not gain custody of her son. By living with Cena she rebelled against marriage – the institution that led her into the world of pain from which she had escaped – and then in discovering her love for Poletti, she saw the possibility of having a love that wasn't plagued by patriarchy and oppression. I'm not saying that Aleramo "experimented" with lesbian desire because she was hurt by men or because she was engaged in the women's movement, but she instead was supported by the new ideas of free love (even Cena accepted some of these ideas) and the desire to find a love that would be free from patriarchal oppression and make her happy in all aspects of her life. Even though these loves did not last, hers is a story of triumph over adversity. She loved men, but knew that it was patriarchy and the institution of marriage that enabled misery to seep into her life. Therefore, in loving Poletti and

Cena together she attempted to reach a new ideal and height of romantic love, one that was uniquely personal to her, and suited her own needs and desires. Individually Poletti and Cena would not have been enough for Aleramo, but together they provided her with a complete sense of love and desire.

IV. Conclusion

When I began this research, I wanted to understand how women who engaged in same-sex relationships in early-twentieth-century Italy understood their own expression of masculine gender identity. I was curious to know if Poletti saw her gender identity as something intrinsically connected to her sexuality, or as Joan Scott found of Poletti's contemporary Madeline Pelletier, something more connected to the women's emancipation movement (Scott 1996, 125-160). But when I got to the Aleramo archive in the Gramsci Institute, I saw the plethora of letters between Giovanni Cena and Sibilla Aleramo during the same years of the letters between Sibilla Aleramo and Lina Poletti. I had just read Caroline Arni's piece on Stöcker and Key for my oral exam in Queer History and the similarity between Key and Aleramo's words were striking. When I found Aleramo mentioned Key, I had an "ah ha!" moment that made me redirect my research toward an analysis of free love and its intersection with women's same-sex desire and feminism. In the end, I see the feminist movement as an integrated thread that runs between the two.

Aleramo needed a double relationship for herself and for her own reasons. She didn't have the "one great love" that was so idealized by Key. But she found elements that she liked in both Cena and Poletti, and thought of herself as a modern woman who had the right to enjoy this new form of double love that laughed in the face of society's norms. In being honest and requesting this, she's demonstrated to those of us who came one hundred years after her, the real meaning of free love and its relationship to both feminism and lesbian desire in her time.

My original question about Poletti's gender expression was answered in Cenni's chapter in *Fuori della norma* (2007). Cenni argues that Lina's masculine attire reflects her sexuality

more than her feminism. Supporting this, Cenni found a very salacious story about Poletti at Eleonora Duse's house attempting to seduce American art collector Mable Dodge. I'm encouraged by her research knowing that there is so much more to be done in the burgeoning field of queer Italian history. As I mentioned above, Aleramo and Poletti are only the first path of inquiry for historians of Italian lesbian history because of the availability of the sources. But I predict that the small group of historians interested in the question of sexuality in Italian history will soon grow, as will the connections between historical subjects like Aleramo and Key, phenomena like feminism and free love, and sources like letters and the medical/legal publications. Buon lavoro!

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