

The Pursuit of Feminist Language in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet

Carlotta Moro

To cite this article: Carlotta Moro (18 Sep 2023): The Pursuit of Feminist Language in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet, *The Italianist*, DOI: [10.1080/02614340.2023.2254125](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2023.2254125)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2023.2254125>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Sep 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The Pursuit of Feminist Language in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet

Carlotta Moro 

University of St Andrews

ABSTRACT

The issue of women's relationship to language is at the heart of Elena Ferrante's thought and fiction. This article examines the Neapolitan tetralogy's pursuit of a feminist tongue that would enable women to flee the 'cage' of the patriarchal symbolic order. First, the exchange of the dolls for *Little Women* will be interpreted as a transaction that taints literary language as 'the master's tool'. Then, focusing on the relationship between the narrator and Lila, the article will trace Ferrante's reflection on the inevitability of the phallogocentric poetic voice attained at the expense of a subaltern muse. Lila's disappearance emerges as the only strategy of resistance, but this gesture leads to an outcome akin to the silencing that has excluded women from the canon. Ferrante suggests that women are rendered mute in the patriarchal symbolic order: their voices are unheard, ignored, misinterpreted, or suppressed, or become material for their manufacturing.

SOMMARIO

La questione del rapporto delle donne con il linguaggio è al centro del pensiero e della narrativa di Elena Ferrante. Questo articolo esamina la sua ricerca di una lingua femminista che permetta alle donne di fuggire dalla 'gabbia' dell'ordine simbolico patriarcale all'interno della tetralogia napoletana. In primo luogo, lo scambio delle bambole con *Piccole donne* verrà interpretato come una transazione che inficia l'italiano come 'strumento del padrone'. Poi, concentrandosi sul rapporto tra la narratrice e Lila, l'articolo tratterà la riflessione della Ferrante sull'inevitabilità della voce poetica fallogocentrica ottenuta a spese di una musa subalterna. La scomparsa di Lila emerge come unica strategia di resistenza, ma questo gesto porta ad un esito simile al silenziamento patriarcale che ha escluso le donne dal canone. Ferrante suggerisce che le donne sono messe a tacere nell'ordine simbolico patriarcale: le loro voci sono inascoltate, ignorate, mal interpretate, sopresse o diventano materia per la loro manifattura.

KEYWORDS

Elena Ferrante; feminist critique of language; *questione della lingua*; *écriture féminine*; women's writing

PAROLE CHIAVE

Elena Ferrante; critica femminista del linguaggio; questione della lingua; *écriture féminine*; scrittura femminile

'Ogni volta che le parole sistemano le cose con bella coerenza non mi fido',¹ writes Elena Ferrante, whose novels dwell on points of incoherence in the tangle of women's lives. A

CONTACT Carlotta Moro  cmm38@st-andrews.ac.uk

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

passionate reader of feminist thought, the Italian author declared: 'l'attraversamento delle culture femministe è parte indispensabile della mia esperienza, del mio modo di stare al mondo'.² Her fiction tends to share several concerns of 'feminism of difference', which gained prominence in 1970s Italy, revolving around a core premise: female difference carries within itself its own language and its own symbolic order. Its theorists are preoccupied with the long debate initiated by Virginia Woolf when she observed that 'the very form of the sentence does not fit [the woman writer]'.³ Between the 1970s and the 1980s, Carla Lonzi, art critic and feminist revolutionary, attempted 'to find new words, a grammar, and a syntax to examine and express the truths of women's lived experience',⁴ and feminist groups like the Libreria delle Donne di Milano were 'engaged in a search for symbolic female reference points and, more importantly, a different language'.⁵ Philosopher Adriana Cavarero further dissected the illusory universality of language, developing Woolf's ideas about women's exclusion from the symbolic order: 'la donna non è il soggetto del suo linguaggio. Il suo linguaggio non è suo. Essa perciò si dice e si rappresenta [...] attraverso le categorie del linguaggio dell'altro'.⁶ According to Cavarero, women are held captive in a 'gabbia del linguaggio'⁷ — that is, having to speak a foreign idiom, having to express themselves through the androcentric discourse created and dominated by men: 'lo stessa [...] sto ora scrivendo e pensando nel linguaggio dell'altro, [...] né potrei fare altrimenti. Questo linguaggio [...] mi nega come soggetto, si regge su categorie che pregiudicano il mio autoriconoscimento'.⁸ Drawing from Cavarero the concept of the 'gabbia del linguaggio', Ferrante maintains that writing, moulded over centuries of male domination, is a nearly inescapable cage: 'la scrittura [...] è una gabbia e ci entriamo subito, già col nostro primo rigo'.⁹ This spatial metaphor lies at the heart of Ferrante's poetics, used to picture the claustrophobic nature of a phallogocentric symbolic order, of 'a patriarchal society and an androcentric literary tradition'¹⁰ where 'nemmeno una pagina, splendida o rozza, dice davvero la nostra verità di donne fino in fondo, anzi spesso non la dice affatto'.¹¹

Ferrante's works narrate the stories of creative women who seek linguistic escapes from the patriarchal textual frameworks that constrain them. In her Neapolitan tetralogy,¹² female characters grant tremendous power to language: from the first pages, when Elena responds to Lila's voluntary disappearance by writing to conjure her back, to the moment when the narrator throws her friend's notebooks in the river Arno 'quasi che fosse lei, Lila in persona, a precipitare',¹³ to the last novel, when the friends collaborate on an essay to destroy the bosses of the Camorra.¹⁴ According to Olivia Santovetti, the saga can be read 'as a novel of formation — and, postmodernly, deformation — of a writer who while narrating ponders, explains, and exposes the very act of writing, its mechanisms, and what it means to be a writer, particularly a woman writer today'.¹⁵ Depicting a woman's efforts to express herself creatively and authentically in collaboration with her brilliant friend, the Neapolitan Quartet probes the unresolved struggle of female subjects attempting to write about their experiences within and against an androcentric literary tradition. A central preoccupation of the tetralogy, I contend, is the search for a way out of the symbolic order, an end to 'la solitudine femminile delle teste',¹⁶ a form of writing that would allow women to establish a shared literary tradition. This article examines the ways in which the Neapolitan Quartet contributes to the feminist *questione della lingua*, exploring Ferrante's critique of

phallogocentrism and her quest for a feminist language and mode of expression. How to escape from the cage? Ferrante's arduous pursuit of a language capable of expressing the truth about women's lives ultimately casts doubt upon the viability of such an enterprise, laying bare the limits of language, literature, friendship, and feminism.

The Feminist *Questione Della Lingua*

Ferrante's political worldview has been significantly influenced by Rivolta Femminile, a women's collective founded in 1970 in Rome and later also established in Milan.¹⁷ Rejecting assimilation into a male-dominated society, the group endeavoured to sever all ties with patriarchal language, culture, and institutions through the practice of separatism. Among the most iconoclastic feminist thinkers in Italy, Carla Lonzi, the group's co-founder, maintained that genuine change cannot be achieved through social reform, and that attaining equality with men is insufficient for women's liberation. Lonzi's feminism not only constitutes the ideological premise that informs the Quartet but also becomes subject of the narrative, when her essay *Sputiamo su Hegel* ignites Elena Greco's feminist awakening. One of Lonzi's most important legacies is 'the radical refusal to participate in those systems of culture that have been shaped by the historical exclusion of women'.¹⁸ To free herself from patriarchal influence, she pioneered the practice of 'deculturalization' — a deliberate process of disentangling from the male-dominated world. In her words: 'Il mio primo bisogno come femminista è stato quello di fare tabula rasa delle idee ricevute, una tabula rasa dentro di me per privarmi di ogni garanzia offerta dalla cultura, convinta che le certezze acquisite nascondono un veleno paralizzante.'¹⁹ Lonzi believed that women are reduced to objectified spectators in the theatre of patriarchal culture, a position that 'leaves them no choice but to remain silent or to speak a language of self-negation'.²⁰ Therefore, deculturalization, or complete withdrawal from the arena of culture in order to stay among women, emerges as the only viable form of feminist resistance — a stance that resonates also in Lonzi's own decision to abandon her career as an art critic. As stated in the essay 'Assenza della donna dai momenti celebrativi della cultura maschile' (1971), signed collectively by Rivolta Femminile: 'Con la sua assenza la donna compie un gesto di presa di coscienza, liberatorio, dunque creativo.'²¹ In the words of Federica Bueti,

If language and knowledge are already colonized by patriarchy, deculturalization for Lonzi meant not only and simply to refuse to participate in culture, but to find new words, a grammar, and a syntax to examine and express the truths of women's lived experience.²²

Lonzi sought 'a woman's language to name, elaborate, conceptualize the contradictions and distortions produced by patriarchal culture as they manifested in her everyday life'.²³

In the 1970s, Lonzi's French contemporary Hélène Cixous expressed the urgent need for a different language and theorized *écriture féminine*, a form of writing distinct from the patriarchal models of communication predicated on violence, expropriation, and exclusion. Noting that 'the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection',²⁴ Cixous contends that discourse is always structured according to 'dual, hierarchical oppositions',²⁵ such as man/woman, master/slave, father/mother, self/other. Associating masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity, this organization by hierarchy

privileges the phallus as the central signifier. Hence, revolving around singularity, phallogocentrism does not tolerate difference and plurality: the first half of the dichotomous binary always subordinates and annihilates the second. The symbolic order hence depends on woman's constant abasement, suppression, and elimination. According to Cixous, in the *Empire of the SelfSame*, language works according to this Logic of Destruction: narratives are constructed on woman's subordination and propelled by Hegel's master/slave dialectic, in a cyclical process that entails 'the subject's going out into the other *in order to come back* to itself, [...] with the perfect smoothness of Hegelian machinery'.²⁶ Literature is the locus where the feminine is annihilated discursively and symbolically, where patriarchal repression is enacted,

where woman has never *her* turn to speak — this being all the more [...] unpardonable in that writing is precisely [...] the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure.²⁷

Similarly, Lonzi's *Sputiamo su Hegel* repudiates the Hegelian notion of recognition and the deterministic belief that history is founded on aggressive clashes for supremacy between competing forces. In contrast to patriarchal discursive efforts to establish a position of domination, for both Cixous and Lonzi a feminist approach to language entails a rapport in which both self and other can flourish. The only escape from phallogocentrism is, according to Cixous, *écriture féminine* — or 'the endeavour to write [...] in ways which refuse to appropriate or annihilate the other's difference in order to create and glorify the self in a masculine position of mastery'.²⁸ Similarly, for Lonzi, feminist language does not destroy the other but rather seeks to establish reciprocal relationships and connections: her works strive to 'transform writing [...] to a form of recording the ordinary events of a life that disclose both the insidious character of patriarchal oppression and the possibilities of refusing it, by affirming one's own specific and unique way of being-in-relation'.²⁹

Cixous's and Lonzi's appeals to do away with patriarchal narratives and write authentically about women's experiences are congruous with the poetics of Ferrante, who adopted an exclamation from Amelia Rosselli as her literary manifesto: 'Quale nero profondo impegno nelle mie mestruazioni!'³⁰ It seems that Ferrante shares a separatist urge with regard to language and the literary canon similar to that which led Adriana Cavarero, Carla Lonzi, and Hélène Cixous to formulate a language and a mode of expression for women. In fact, the same message is reiterated over and over again across Ferrante's fictional and theoretical corpus: in the words of Stiliana Milkova, 'women must countermand the frame of patriarchal representation and construct their own literary tradition'.³¹ For Ferrante's female subjects, art-making is tantamount to chasing 'self-actualisation outside male constructs and artistic forms'.³² Part of what makes her work revolutionary is her pursuit of a feminist language that would be alive to the vicissitudes of her life and body, emboldened by a female literary genealogy and a matrilineal philosophical tradition, and capable of truthfully describing women's experiences. Throughout her career, Ferrante has lamented that literature 'has been widely colonised by men', and advocated instead for the revolutionary potential of female storytelling: 'the female story, told with increasing skill, increasingly widespread and unapologetic, is what must now assume power'.³³ In an unsent letter to Goffredo Fofi, Ferrante writes:

D'altronde — credo — deve pur venire il momento in cui riusciremo a scrivere davvero *fuori di lui*, non per pretesa ideologica ma perché davvero, come le anime platoniche, ci ricorderemo di noi senza doverci, per comodità, per consuetudine, per prendere le distanze da noi stesse, rappresentare in lui.³⁴

The female voice has been marginalized, has been made to sound realistic but almost never true, for it has been mimicked for centuries 'con verosimiglianza, cosa però ben diversa dall'autenticità' by male writers, who have imposed themselves to such an extent 'da far sembrare inautentica la verità delle scritture femminili'.³⁵ Even today, Ferrante writes, women cannot fully be themselves:

Noi ancora oggi, dopo un secolo di femminismo, non riusciamo a essere noi fino in fondo, non ci apparteniamo. I nostri difetti, le nostre malvagità, i nostri crimini, le nostre qualità, il nostro piacere, *la nostra stessa lingua* si inscrivono obbedientemente nelle gerarchie del maschile, sono punite o lodate secondo codici che ci appartengono pochissimo.³⁶

Women writers ought to interrogate the patriarchal sources of their narratives and articulate their own literary language and tradition:

Abbiamo bisogno, tutte, di costruirci una nostra [...] genealogia che ci inorgoglisca, ci definisca, ci permetta di vederci fuori dalla tradizione in base a cui gli uomini da millenni ci guardano, ci rappresentano, ci valutano, ci catalogano. È una tradizione potente, ricca di opere splendide, ma che ha tenuto fuori molto, moltissimo, di noi. Raccontare a fondo, con libertà — anche provocatoriamente — il nostro 'di più' è importante, tende a comporre una mappa di cosa siamo o vogliamo essere.³⁷

I margini e il dettato (2022) is a testament to Ferrante's longstanding preoccupation with the question of feminist language, and warrants an in-depth analysis of the prevalence and development of this theme within her writings. In particular, the essay 'Storie, io' chronicles the difficulties of writing as a woman within a male-dominated canon, of being a 'io femminile nutrito di scrittura maschile'.³⁸ Echoing Virginia Woolf's belief that literary language has been commanded mainly by men for centuries and therefore is unsuited for a woman's use,³⁹ Ferrante observes:

una donna che vuole scrivere deve vedersela inevitabilmente non solo con l'intero patrimonio letterario di cui si è nutrita e in virtù del quale vuole e può esprimersi, ma col fatto che quel patrimonio è essenzialmente maschile e per sua natura non prevede frasi vere femminili.⁴⁰

Like Elena Greco, who struggles to feel at home in a suffocating Italian that remains the preserve of men, Ferrante perceives 'una eccedenza che sfata, per la quale occorrerebbe un contenitore apposito',⁴¹ as soon as she puts pen to paper, awaiting those moments when she can write 'con la verità di cui sono capace, squilibrando e sformando, per farmi spazio con tutto il corpo'.⁴²

It is important to note that, rather than adhering strictly to the principles delineated by Lonzi and Cixous, Ferrante is seemingly inspired by the ideas and questions they raise, and utilizes them as a foundation to forge her own distinct theory of what constitutes feminist writing. Indeed, as Milkova points out, she 'is wary [...] of the hegemony of any single theory or prescribed formula, advocating for a literary syncretism which better serves the narration — and reality — of feminine experience'.⁴³ Ferrante coined a neologism, *inlearsi*, as an illustration of the language to which she aspires. This term, which is

translated into English by Ann Goldstein as ‘entering into her’, is inspired by Dante’s invention of the terms *inluiarsi* (‘enter into him’), *intuarsi* (‘enter into you’), *inmiarsi* (‘enter into me’).⁴⁴ This form of writing shares similarities with Lonzi’s intersubjective and interdependent chronicling of ‘one’s own specific and unique way of being-in-relation’⁴⁵ and with Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine*: it is a ‘reciproco *inleiarsi*’,⁴⁶ a ‘dislocarsi nell’altro’,⁴⁷ ‘la smania di snodarsi da sé; il sogno di diventare l’altro senza ostacoli; un essere te mentre tu sei me; un fluire della lingua e della scrittura senza più sentire l’alterità come un intralcio’.⁴⁸

Another facet of Ferrante’s theory of female writing is explored in the essay ‘Storie, io’, which expresses a desire to create a bewitching language that will lift women out of their well of subalternity.⁴⁹ In this context, the figure of the witch becomes the emblem of Ferrante’s feminist poetics. Before she started writing the Quartet, the author reveals that she found inspiration in Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘Witchcraft was hung, in History’,⁵⁰ which led her to imagine a female ‘I’ that, rising from the ‘scrittura che aveva soffocato gli incantesimi’, would derive a witchy language that could return to complete the spells ‘fondendo insieme persone e cose date per inconfondibili’.⁵¹ In her longing to write, Ferrante strives to summon the witch’s unruliness: she builds coherent worlds through acquiescent words, only to frantically rip them apart. The riotous magic of the witch electrifies her texts with a ‘scrittura convulsa, disaggregante, generatrice di ossimori, bruttabella, bellabrutta, che sventaglia coerenze e contraddizioni’,⁵² dissolves the margins between past and present, mothers and daughters, and ‘trasforma il veleno del dolore femminile in un veleno vero’.⁵³ The following analysis will explore how this reflection on female writing unfolds within the tetralogy.

Don Achille’s Gift

Throughout the Quartet, language is central to the bond between the protagonists Elena and Lila. Their tumultuous relationship is ‘formed around the pleasure’ — and, I would add, the pain — ‘of fabulation’.⁵⁴ Olivia Santovetti and Sarah Hudspith describe the tetralogy as ‘a sustained reflection on the nature of writing, the difficulties of authentic expression, and the necessity of multiple voices for exposing existential truths’.⁵⁵ Ferrante intended ‘il racconto della scrittura — della scrittura di Elena, della scrittura di Lila e, di fatto, di quella della stessa autrice’⁵⁶ — to be the thread that holds together the entire tetralogy. The friendship between the girls stems from a linguistic pact: together, Elena and Lila will write a novel like *Little Women* and become as wealthy as Louisa May Alcott. However, only Elena is allowed to attend school and to achieve her dream of becoming a novelist, while Lila, whose father opposes her desire to study, remains stuck in her violent neighbourhood. For Elena, schooling is the only pathway to social mobility, yet educational institutions are also androcentric domains, where the narrator absorbs patriarchal rules and language, and is never allowed to outshine or surpass her male peers. In contrast, Lila rejects the male order and often condemns her friend’s implication with it. As several scholars have noted, throughout Ferrante’s narratives the Neapolitan dialect is the ‘mother’s tongue’, impregnated with millennia of patriarchal violence and associated with the narrator’s oppressed female ancestors.⁵⁷ In opposition, Italian is the language of the father, of the male-dominated symbolic

order. While dialect, like a chain, drags behind itself a crowd of anguished female spectres, Italian is a 'new' foreign language that promises a future of emancipation. As Neapolitan spells the cyclical transformation of the daughter into the mother, Italian, in contrast, is the linear language of narrative and institutions, heralding progress. Having left the South to attend the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, Elena is determined to drown her origins by repressing the sounds of her upbringing. By rejecting her Neapolitan mother tongue in favour of the Italian language of books, the narrator utilizes what Audre Lorde would call the 'master's tools'.⁵⁸ As noted by de Rogatis, 'la formazione universitaria di Elena è una costante imitazione delle parole e delle posture maschili'.⁵⁹ Attempting to excel as a student in order to climb the social ladder, Elena camouflages her femininity and poverty with the Italian language, internalizes phallogocentrism, and becomes 'abituata a raffreddare la vita immagazzinando idee e dati'.⁶⁰ 'Nessuno meglio di me conosceva cosa significava mascolinizzare la propria testa perché fosse ben accolta dalla cultura degli uomini',⁶¹ she admits. Thereby 'l'usurpazione di questa giovane donna è duplice',⁶² for she is forced to adopt the language of the upper classes and become 'maschio nell'intelligenza'.⁶³ With iron discipline, Elena employs the master's language to build a successful career as a writer, while for the most part Lila chooses to retain the dialect of the neighbourhood.

According to Gayle Greene, 'in feminist *Künstlerroman* [the artist's novel], the protagonist's writing is her means to liberation',⁶⁴ but the Quartet problematizes this notion, questioning whether language can be redeemed and whether literature can dismantle 'the master's house'. Throughout the narrative, in fact, books are closely aligned with deceit and treachery, and an urge to tell stories concurs with an omnipresent distrust of language. The predatory Donato Sarratore flaunts one of his articles, 'scritto con frasi altisonanti che leggeva in modo commosso',⁶⁵ to groom and sexually abuse the young Elena, and his poetry collection unleashes Melina's madness.⁶⁶ When, with polished and carefully crafted phrases, Elena influences the choice of her friend's wedding dress, Lila hisses with contempt: "'Questo impari a scuola?' "Cosa?" "A usare le parole per prendere in giro la gente."⁶⁷ Lila's mental health deteriorates when her denunciation of the working conditions at the Soccavo factory is appropriated against her will, embellished and printed in a pamphlet, and her words become 'roba [...] tutta ordinatina e piena di smancerie emozionate'.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the book of unpaid debts is at the core of the Camorra's criminal activities in the neighbourhood, evoked by Michele Solara to threaten Lila.

Language and literature originate from evil: Don Achille's money, the thread that joins many of the disasters and tragedies in the tetralogy. Presented as 'l'orco delle favole',⁶⁹ Don Achille is the head of the local Camorra clan, the incarnation of the patriarchal decay that infests Naples. With his mutable nature, Don Achille can infiltrate into any matter or substance, polluting it. Like a toxic stream, the money he has accumulated through criminal activities spoils everything it touches; it is the rotting marrow of Naples that slowly oozes corruption. For Lila, Don Achille's money is 'the master's tool' that defiles and enslaves, instead of dismantling 'the master's house'. In fact, she soon recognizes that her marriage to Don Achille's son and, more importantly, her acceptance of his dirty money have thwarted her plans to improve the neighbourhood and leave behind '[i] soprusi e le ipocrisie e le crudeltà del passato':⁷⁰

Tutto, qua dentro, non è mio, Lenù, è fatto coi soldi di Stefano. E i soldi Stefano li ha accumulati partendo dai soldi di suo padre. Senza quello che Don Achille ha messo sotto il materasso facendo la borsa nera e lo strozzino, oggi non ci sarebbe questo [...]. È chiaro dentro che cosa mi sono messa? [...] Non mi piace più quello che ho fatto e quello che sto facendo.⁷¹

According to Lila, the genesis of the friends' troubles can be traced back to their acceptance of Don Achille's money:

'Ti ricordi che invece delle bambole don Achille ci diede dei soldi? [...] Non avremmo dovuto accettarli.' 'Comprammo *Piccole donne*.' 'Facemmo male: a partire da quel momento ho sempre sbagliato tutto.'⁷²

Lila is referring to the opening of the Quartet, when she tossed Elena's doll into the cellar of Don Achille and Elena imitated her gesture, casting Lila's doll into the shadows. The friends ventured into the cellar looking for their toys and, unable to retrieve them, became persuaded that Don Achille had abducted them. When Lila and Elena confronted him, Don Achille offered them a small sum of money, which the girls used to purchase *Little Women*. The deal with the neighbourhood's patriarch generated Elena's passion for literature, and the origins of the whole text can thus be traced back to this incident. While intense critical attention has been devoted to the symbolism of the dolls in Ferrante's work and in this opening scene,⁷³ I believe that we should extend our focus to the figure of Don Achille, analysing the exchange of money and dolls as a transaction. In fact, this is a reciprocal barter, rather than Don Achille's generous gift. Handing down the money to Lila, Don Achille mutters: 'Compratevele, le bambole [...] e ricordatevi che ve le ho regalate io.'⁷⁴ Although apparently benign, these words allude to the barter system typical of the mafia: extortion is disguised as favour, gaining leverage is masked as a donation. Don Achille's offer barely conceals a threatening command: I expect to receive everything back. Like Snow White's poisoned apple, or the goblin fruit in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*,⁷⁵ the ogre's treacherous gift provokes disasters.

Emma Van Ness has argued that the dolls signify 'traditional femininity' and that therefore their rejection represents a transgressive act that unlocks 'the opportunity for new significance, for new possibilities for [...] female subjects outside of the familiar, gendered semiotic framework'.⁷⁶ Following this line of interpretation, one could posit that the friends' decision to buy *Little Women* with Don Achille's money turns the frightening loss of their dolls into a positive, empowering episode. Yet considering the ambivalent, contradictory *Little Women* solely as an affirmative signifier of feminist progress would be reductive. On one hand, the bestseller written by Louisa May Alcott is a landmark in the history of women's writing; on the other, the text overtly and covertly yields to the patriarchal ideology it seeks to oppose, and therefore has at times been read as a tale of feminine self-denial and thwarted ambition. These punitive tendencies are crystallized in the parable of the fierce Jo March, who initially devotes herself to writing and is adamantly against marriage, but ultimately marries Professor Friedrich Bhaer and relinquishes her preferred literary genres in favour of those deemed appropriate by her husband.⁷⁷ Like Jo, Louisa May Alcott herself was not able to write her story according to her wishes, and instead capitulated to her publisher's demand to include romantic elements in

the plot: in a letter to Elizabeth Powell she wrote that 'Jo should have remained a literary spinster',⁷⁸ and lamented to Samuel Joseph May that 'publishers are very perverse & wont let authors have their way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style'.⁷⁹ As one of many metafictional components in the Quartet,⁸⁰ *Little Women* ought to be counted among the 'several strategically planted *mise-en-abymes* of the Neapolitan series':⁸¹ Alcott's novel about the March sisters self-reflexively mirrors and discloses the tensions at play in Ferrante's novels, which negotiate the desire to create a truthful portrayal of women's experiences while being stifled by a patriarchal literary tradition and society.

Ferrante's works convey diverging and at times conflictual perspectives concerning women's writing, illuminating its potential as both an emancipatory medium and a vehicle for perpetuating patriarchal structures. As pointed out by Maria Morelli, Delia, Olga, and Leda, the protagonists of Ferrante's earlier novels, wield the pen to resist the threat of bodily and psychic dissolution posed by *frantumaglia* and *smarginatura*. Within *L'amore molesto* (1992), *I giorni dell'abbandono* (2002), and *La figlia oscura* (2006), Morelli contends, the act of writing assumes a magical quality akin to Ariadne's enchanted thread, guiding women through the labyrinth of patriarchal constructions that jeopardize their subjectivity.⁸² Within the Neapolitan Quartet, however, Ferrante explores literature's latent propensity to perpetuate patriarchal violence. The exchange with Don Achille alongside the metafictional significance of *Little Women* establish that language and literature are treacherous and fraught with danger: narrative has been tainted by the presence of Don Achille, and hence should not be trusted. Elena Greco fully understands this when, in an epiphanic moment, she acknowledges the androcentricity of the Western canon. As she undertakes a research project on the representation of women throughout the history of literature, Elena discovers that

Eva non può, non sa, non ha materia per essere Eva fuori di Adamo. Il suo male e il suo bene sono il male e il bene secondo Adamo. Eva è Adamo donna. E l'operazione divina è così ben riuscita che lei stessa, in sé, non sa cos'è, ha lineamenti cedevoli, *non possiede una lingua sua*.⁸³

Women are trapped between the lines, silenced in male prose:

Mi spinsi [...] dalla prima e dalla seconda creazione biblica fino a Defoe-Flanders, fino a Flaubert-Bovary, fino a Tolstoj-Karenina, fino a *La dernière mode*, a Rose Sélavy, e oltre, [...] in una frenesia disvelatrice. [...] Scoprivo dappertutto automi di donna fabbricati da maschi. *Di nostro non c'era nulla, quel poco che insorgeva diventava subito materia per la loro manifattura*.⁸⁴

Aesthetic forms, Elena understands, disguise a heart of violence; literary language sustains the same phallogocentric structures within which the lives of women, instead of unfolding freely, end up brutalized. If literature is historically complicit in patriarchal oppression, Elena's espousal of literary writing has implicated her in the phallogocentric structures that underpin patriarchal violence. The narrator has admitted to masculinizing her mind, assuming a stance equivalent to that of the patriarchal author: 'a quali patti segreti con me stessa avevo acconsentito, pur di eccellere',⁸⁵ she confesses. Thus, Elena's implication with literature aligns her with the phallogocentric structure that supports patriarchal violence.

Can the Subaltern Muse Speak?

The metafictional frame of *L'amica geniale* — the story of a novelist who is writing her memoir — contains different tales nested inside each other like matryoshka dolls, questioning the dichotomous boundaries that separate life from mimesis, author from muse. Wallace Martin suggests that narratives within narratives disturb the traditional distinction between fiction and reality, disclosing the arbitrary nature of margins;⁸⁶ in this sense, the text's metafictional qualities of 'open-endedness, refusal of linearity, processiveness, inclusiveness'⁸⁷ are antithetical to phallogocentric discourse and upset its borders. Elena Greco's self-reflexive storytelling, incorporating the incident that prompted her to craft the narrative, unveils the inner workings of the loom on which her phrases are woven together. At the same time, Lila's voice directs the reader's attention to the flaws, fallacies, and lies in the tapestry within which she is embedded. As the reader becomes entangled in the deceptively seamless webs of narrative, Lila's metafictional interjections, like her experience of *smarginatura*, disrupt the story, pointing to its futility and artificiality. Our compulsion to read is mirrored by Elena's compulsion to write — and both are attacked by Lila, whose dissenting voice condemns the violence that drives the phallogocentric writing. Hence, with its metafictional structure, the Quartet probes the suspect association of narrative with forces of violence and domination; it explores the seemingly inescapable power dynamic that characterizes the relationship between who writes and who is written — a dialectic that more often than not resembles the Hegelian master/slave paradigm highlighted by Lonzi and Cixous.

The meditation on the ethics of artistic representation has always been present in Ferrante's work.⁸⁸ Her first novel, *L'amore molesto*, is interspersed with portraits of naked women painted by violent men. In a salient scene,⁸⁹ the protagonist Delia peruses and criticizes her father's painting of the Gulf of Naples, refusing to assume the demeaning, subordinate role of muse and model and instead occupying the 'position as artist, spectator and critic of her father's art'.⁹⁰ This reflection becomes a central concern of the Quartet, in which ethical anxieties are exacerbated by the apparent inevitability of the poetic voice attained at the expense of the subaltern muse. It is no coincidence that the charged term 'subaltern' recurs throughout the Italian text. Frequently replaced with synonyms in Ann Goldstein's English translation, the word 'subaltern' is of central importance. The term appears in Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's discussions of the class struggle in Italy, utilized to identify members of social groups who, like Lila, exist at the remotest margins of history and of the social order. The postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak revisited Gramsci's concept to address 'the immense problem of the consciousness of the woman as subaltern'.⁹¹ Concerned with the manipulations, interventions, and revisions that occur when the subaltern other is represented in writing, Spivak asks: 'can the subaltern speak? And can the subaltern (as woman) speak?'⁹² Through Lila's metafictional protests, Ferrante seeks to answer exactly this question: can Lila speak? Can her voice break through the phallogocentric structure erected by Elena's writing? As we shall see, reflecting on the inherent phallogocentrism of traditional literary genres and conventions, from the *topoi* of the *Künstlerroman* to the muses' investiture of the male poet, Ferrante ponders: can literature incorporate dissenting female voices? Or is the mechanism by which 'quel

poco che insorge' becomes 'materia per la loro manifattura'⁹³ inescapable? Can the muse speak without being ventriloquized by the poet? How can women voice their dissent without being inscribed in the echo chamber of the phallogocentric system as 'automi di donna fabbricati da maschi'?⁹⁴

Throughout the Quartet, Elena uses books to extricate herself from Lila, from her family, and from her husband, attempting to fashion a unitary, autonomous identity through writing:

Tra qualche mese ci sarebbe stata della carta stampata cucita, incollata, tutta piena di parole mie, e sulla copertina il nome, Elena Greco, io, punto di rottura di una lunga catena di analfabeti, di semianalfabeti, cognome oscuro che adesso si sarebbe caricato di luce per l'eternità.⁹⁵

Authorship and publication are perceived by the narrator as confirmations of a whole and coherent individuality: 'ero segretamente convinta che sarei esistita davvero solo dal momento in cui sarebbe comparsa stampata la mia firma, Elena Greco'.⁹⁶ For Elena, the organic text establishes a correspondingly organic, sovereign identity. Therefore, she adopts a dominant authorial position: 'devo incollare un fatto a un altro con le parole, e alla fine tutto deve sembrare coerente anche se non lo è',⁹⁷ she tells Lila. As Toril Moi notes, 'emphasis on integrity and totality [is] a patriarchal [...] construct. [...] It can be argued [...] that belief in unitary wholes plays directly into the hands of [...] phallic aesthetic criteria'.⁹⁸ Elena embraces precisely this androcentric view of 'the integrated humanist individual [as] the essence of all creativity'⁹⁹ when she strives to seek on the page 'un equilibrio tra me e lei'.¹⁰⁰ In fact, it is specifically in relation to Lila that Elena asserts her wholeness and takes up a dominant position.

According to Grace Stewart, the traditionally androcentric genre of the *Künstlerroman* 'casts woman as muse, mother or sphinx to the male artist'.¹⁰¹ In a similar way, the asymmetrical relationship established by Elena's writing demands Lila's submission: adhering to the pattern outlined by Stewart, Elena adopts the authorial position, whilst Lila is forced to impersonate the muse. For more than 1600 pages, Lila insists that she does not want to end up in Elena's narrative. Elena, however, defies her friend's wishes. Although she is convinced that 'nessuna forma avrebbe mai potuto contenere Lila',¹⁰² the narrator desperately seeks to capture, defeat, and calm the muse with her prose: 'ho scritto per mesi e mesi e mesi per darle una forma che non si smargini, e batterla, e calmarla'.¹⁰³ As Stephanie McCarter notes, 'Elena's panic over Lila's disappearance is that of an artist deprived of inspiration'.¹⁰⁴ Elena wants to steal 'un fluido che non era semplicemente seducente ma anche pericoloso'¹⁰⁵ that emanates from her muse, that 'forza cattiva che rende inutili le buone maniere'.¹⁰⁶ In order to give her muse — whose form, Elena repeatedly admits, could never be contained — a definite shape and solid boundaries, Lenù inserts her friend in the well-crafted organization of her writing, absorbing Lila's voice within her own. Observing that Lila often guides Lenù's storytelling with her critiques, Tiziana de Rogatis suggests that the narrative 'si fa polifonica, duale, ospitando all'interno della voce narrante di Elena l'altra voce, quella dell'amica scomparsa e che va richiamata a sé'.¹⁰⁷ As Milkova proposes, one could read the tetralogy as 'the culmination and completion of Lila's and Elena's joyous feminine collaboration set into motion by the wedding photograph [...], as their shared feminine creative practice'.¹⁰⁸ Through the act of writing Lila's narrative, one could

argue that Elena lends her a voice, enabling her to recount her own tale, thus etching her presence in history. Yet doing so would mean disregarding the less benevolent aspects of Elena's endeavour. The Quartet finds its inception in an act of betrayal and appropriation: after her friend's vanishing, the narrator resolves to steal Lila's words and ideas to recreate and ventriloquize her with prose, against her will: 'Mi sono sentita molto arrabbiata', Elena confesses upon discovering Lila's disappearance, 'vediamo chi la spunta questa volta, mi sono detta'.¹⁰⁹ As Ferrante explains, Elena Greco attempts to contain her muse's convulsive talent in her diligent lines: 'L'io che scrive e pubblica è quello di Lenù. Della scrittura straordinaria di Lila noi, lungo tutta *L'amica geniale*, non sapremo mai altro che ciò che Lena ci riassume'.¹¹⁰ Elena's longing to write her friend into existence betrays an autocratic desire for supremacy, a will to control and to win. The narrative thus exposes a complex interplay of agency and power dynamics, where the act of immortalizing Lila's voice coexists with the unsettling undercurrent of her story being manipulated, appropriated, and reshaped without her consent. At the end of the series, Elena publishes her last novel, *Un'amicizia*, which is based on Lila's life, dwelling in particular on the tragic abduction of her daughter, Tina, going against Lila's wishes:

Certo sapevo bene che stavo violando un patto non scritto tra me e Lila, sapevo che non l'avrebbe sopportato. [...] C'è questa presunzione, in chi si sente destinato alle arti e soprattutto alla letteratura: si lavora come se si fosse ricevuta un'investitura, ma in effetti nessuno ci ha mai investiti di alcunché, abbiamo dato noi stessi a noi stessi l'autorizzazione a essere autori [...]. Mi aveva esplicitamente vietato [...] di scrivere di lei. [...] Se fosse stato per lei non avrei dovuto pubblicare mai nemmeno un rigo.¹¹¹

At this cardinal moment, Elena references the ancient trope of poetic investiture by the muses. Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus were among the classical poets who claimed to be inspired by the songs of the female muses, goddesses who would confer their poetic gifts on a mortal through the ceremony of the investiture. The powers of the female muse have since been absorbed by the figure of the male poet: for instance, Petrarch's muse, Laura, is a silent figure, who provides access to a spiritual dimension. Since Dante and Beatrice, in the earliest days of Italian vernacular literature, the muse has been crystallized as a textual icon, 'a means of elaborating and emblematising successive literary ideals, [...] a vessel for meaning and a vehicle for male intellectual self-fashioning'.¹¹² At the end of the Quartet, Ferrante's reflection arches back to this ancient, masculinist topos: Elena cannot avoid filtering reality through a phallogocentric model; the authorial self she has constructed requires a subaltern other.

Lila's experience of *smarginatura* is integral to her condemnation of literature: it is *smarginatura* that provokes her profound scepticism at 'the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity'.¹¹³ Dismantling anthropic exceptionalism and stripping away its illusions of detached individuality, *smarginatura* reveals that our margins are yielding and porous, and that we are enmeshed in streams of interactions with the metamorphic amalgam of human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic entities surrounding us. As noted by Alessia Ricciardi, 'the very phenomenon of dissolving margins hints at the inadequacy of aesthetic categories altogether when it comes to determining the limits of representation with respect to our subjectivity'.¹¹⁴ Exposing the atomized self and its projections of order onto the nonhuman world as delusions, Lila shatters Elena's anthropomorphic pretensions to singularity. As Enrica Maria Ferrara convincingly argues,

Lila's worldview can be understood as posthuman:¹¹⁵ in her eyes, 'boundaries between humans and nonhuman entities are a figment of our imagination',¹¹⁶ and the notion of the autonomy, rationality, and exceptionalism of the human individual, as well as the idea of nature as external, inert matter, are simply at odds with reality. Therefore, the linearity of phallogocentric narratives is rejected by Lila as a wicked lie.

Through Lila's scathing reproval, the Quartet's prose builds a metafictional critique of the aesthetic forms that conceal phallogocentric constructs. Lila loathes literary mystification and despises Elena's desire to edulcorate brutality, to fabricate meanings, to order chaos. The muse mocks the narrator's hubris and condemns her 'tendency to focus on the discursive at the expense of the material',¹¹⁷ her proclivity towards transcendence rather than immanence, insisting that no amount of ornate language can enclose *smarginatura*, or hide the force of evil that pervades the world:

Borbottò ridendo che il male prende vie imprevedute. Ci metti sopra le chiese, i conventi, i libri — sembrano così importanti, i libri, disse con sarcasmo, tu ci hai dedicato tutta la vita — e il male sfonda il pavimento e sbuca dove non te l'aspetti.¹¹⁸

Lila's metafictional interjections question the efficacy and intentions of Elena's narrative, mocking her faith in language: 'Cominciò a sminuire tutto quel mio affannarmi a scrivere. Diceva divertita: il senso è quel filo a segmenti neri come la merda di un insetto?'¹¹⁹ Tearing the beautiful veil sewn by Elena, Lila exposes the ugliness and confusion that lurk behind it:

E che è il mare, da là sopra? Un po' di colore. Meglio se ci vai vicino, così ti accorgi che è monnezza, lota, pisciazza, acqua impestata. Ma a voi che leggete e scrivete i libri vi piace dirvi le bugie, non la verità.¹²⁰

The only form of collaborative writing to which Lila willingly submits herself is militant, polemic, and journalistic in nature; in Elena's words, 'Lila ha ragione, non si scrive tanto per scrivere, si scrive per fare male a chi vuole far male'.¹²¹ In the final, joint writing scene, when together the friends compose an article to expose the Solaras' criminal deeds, Lila agrees to take part in the writing process only because she believes that her words will have concrete repercussions. The article is a weapon of resistance against patriarchal violence, written with the intention of inflicting 'un male di parole contro un male di pugni e calci e strumenti di morte'.¹²² As Lila and Elena write together on the computer, the margin that distinguishes self from other is slowly eroded, and eventually vanishes:

Lei carezzava coi polpastrelli tasti grigi e la scrittura nasceva sullo schermo in silenzio, verde come erba appena spuntata. Ciò che c'era nella sua testa [...] pareva rovesciarsi all'esterno per miracolo e fissarsi sul nulla dello schermo. Era potenza che pur passando per l'atto restava potenza, uno stimolo elettrochimico che si mutava immediatamente in luce. Mi sembrò la scrittura di Dio come doveva essere stata sul Sinai al tempo dei comandamenti, impalpabile e tremenda. [...] E mi insegnò, e cominciarono ad allungarsi segmenti abbaglianti, ipnotici, frasi che dicevo io, frasi che diceva lei, nostre discussioni volatili che andavano a imprimeri nella pozza scura dello schermo come scie senza schiuma. Lila scriveva, io ci ripensavo. Lei allora cancellava [...]. Ma subito dopo era Lila a cambiare idea, e si modificava tutto di nuovo.¹²³

Like the divine Verb, this co-authored writing will fall on the Solara brothers, the neighbourhood criminals, with the might of God's wrath during the Last Judgement. The computer provides a space that facilitates polyphony, eclipsing any trace of

individual authorship and making it impossible to distinguish Elena's words from Lila's. This writing process mirrors Lila's experience of *smarginatura*, as all distinctions and binaries fade away. In contrast, Lila metamorphoses into Elena in a fluid process of *inlearsi*. Adhering to dynamics that belong to *écriture féminine*, the friends jostle with language: Lila leads and Elena follows, Elena *si inleia* into Lila, Lila writes and Elena translates, Elena reconsiders and Lila transforms everything again until their two heads merge into one. Yet this brief moment of joy and cooperation ends in tragedy. The article is published solely under Elena Greco's byline, garnering acclaim, but it is Lila who suffers the catastrophic consequences of this text. We, the readers, are led to believe that Lila's daughter, mistaken for Elena's child, is kidnapped by the Solara family as a punishment for the article. As a direct retribution against Lila's text, her little girl disappears without a trace.

As this episode illustrates, Lila is the female Mephistopheles who relentlessly battles the local criminals, the fascists, the mafia, and the exploitative owners of the Soccavo factory, fighting against every form of injustice. She is the witch evoked by Ferrante in the essay 'Storie, io': the 'amica-strega',¹²⁴ the 'diavolo quando [...] assumeva le sembianze di femmina',¹²⁵ the 'fattucchiera zoccola',¹²⁶ accused of infernal misdeeds, the 'compagno [...] che sia tenuto a fare la parte del diavolo',¹²⁷ as stated in the first volume's epigraph drawn from Goethe's *Faust*. As Silvia Federici notes in *Caliban and the Witch*, historically,

the witch was the rebel woman who talked back, argued, swore, and did not cry under torture. [...] Descriptions of witches remind us of women [...] ready to take initiatives, as aggressive and lusty as men, wearing male clothes, or proudly riding on their husbands' backs, holding a whip.¹²⁸

For Federici, the witch is 'wicked' because she struggles against patriarchal control in all its forms. In the Quartet, it is Lila Cerullo who embodies this rebellious force. Her language displays remarkable similarities with the witch's alchemical writing that is pursued by Ferrante: not only are her words effortless, powerful, and often — as in the case of her speech to the Soccavo factory workers or the article against the Solara brothers — used to punish individuals who have caused harm to others, but she also reveals a prodigious talent for darting from the minuscule to the celestial, linking what seems impossibly distant, and making connections between very different things. Furthermore, in her capacity to be authentic and tell the truth about her experiences, to establish surprising relationships between disparate subjects and objects, and to denounce injustice, Lila's language also echoes Cixous's and Lonzi's theorizations of feminist language. Indeed, Lila 'prendeva i fatti e li rendeva con naturalezza carichi di tensione; rinforzava la realtà mentre la riduceva a parole, le iniettava energia',¹²⁹ while also leaving no trace of effort — 'non si sentiva l'artificio della parola scritta'.¹³⁰ Her diaries embody the essence of the enchanting writing envisioned by Ferrante, when impetuous words flow with unrestrained fervour into a 'scrittura convulsa, disaggregante, generatrice di ossimori, bruttabella, bellabrutta':¹³¹ 'a volte Lila, come se una droga le avesse inondato le vene, pareva non reggere l'ordine che s'era data. Tutto allora diventava affannoso, le frasi prendevano un ritmo sovraccitato, la punteggiatura spariva'.¹³² Lila effectively turns 'il veleno del dolore femminile in un veleno vero',¹³³ as she encourages Elena to write an article to defeat the criminals in the neighbourhood. Moreover, she possesses the

extraordinary ability to forge connections between seemingly disparate elements: her stories, like the witch's language that merges 'persone e cose date per inconfondibili',¹³⁴ have the capacity to bridge remote moments in time, so that even ancient Neapolitan history begins to look modern. When Nino publishes an article about Naples, the narrator discerns the unmistakable influence of Lila in the lines that show 'un contatto lampo tra cose molto distanti tra loro'.¹³⁵

When considering the friendship between Elena and Lila as a metafictional reflection on gender, language, and literature, it becomes evident that their dynamic operates as a dialectic between two distinct forms of writing: the phallogocentric and the feminist. While Elena, the master, imprisons Lila in her prose, Lila, the witch, attempts to deform and break the bars of the male cage with her spell. In its very language, the Neapolitan Quartet replicates the power dynamic that exists between the poet and the reluctant muse, between the master and the witch. In fact, in its original form the tetralogy is written in Italian, and the language spoken by the characters is indicated with metalinguistic insertions, such as 'she said in dialect' or 'she answered in Italian'. De Rogatis observes that the latent Neapolitan is conveyed in the para-vernacular sound of certain Italian expressions, obtained through camouflaged insertions of dialect and with certain linguistic structures that combine indirect speech and free direct speech to obtain a melodramatic register.¹³⁶ Although a few dialect expressions are sprinkled throughout the novels, Neapolitan is seldom used and thus becomes a 'presenza fantasmatica'.¹³⁷ Beneath the Italian prose of the Quartet, the muse's Neapolitan dialect is a muted, whispered buzz, a spectral presence that rumbles beneath the narrator's writing, imprisoned and kept under control by the male cage of a haunted Italian language.

At the end of the tetralogy, Lila's disappearance after the publication of *Un'amicizia* prompts the narrator to reflect on her past and on her writing:

Un'amicizia aveva di buono, secondo me, che era lineare. Raccontava in sintesi, con tutti i travestimenti del caso, le nostre due vite, dalla perdita delle bambole alla perdita di Tina. [...] Mi sono convinta che la ragione del suo ritirarsi fosse [...] nel mio modo di raccontare l'episodio delle bambole. Avevo esagerato ad arte il momento in cui erano sparite nel buio dello scantinato, avevo potenziato il trauma della perdita, e per ottenere effetti commoventi avevo usato il fatto che una delle bambole e la bambina scomparsa portavano lo stesso nome. Il tutto aveva indotto programmaticamente i lettori a connettere la perdita infantile delle figlie finte alla perdita adulta della figlia vera. Lila doveva aver trovato cinico, disonesto, che fossi ricorsa a un momento importante della nostra infanzia, alla sua bambina, al suo dolore, per compiacere il mio pubblico.¹³⁸

In a metafictional twist, *Un'amicizia* is revealed to be a *mise-en-abîme* of the book we are reading, thus explicitly incriminating the Quartet and its narrative strategies. Santovetti observes that the narrator 'has ransacked [...] the life of her friend in order to provide material for her writing',¹³⁹ while de Rogatis notes that 'la scrittura di Elena si mostra [...] inadeguata non solo sul piano estetico ma anche sul piano etico, perché — come dichiara Ferrante parlando del nesso tra biografia e arte — è una "appropriazione indebita"'.¹⁴⁰ Elena acknowledges that, in her self-serving narration, she has employed all the tricks despised by her friend: a feigned linearity, a fabrication of meaning, and an exploitation of Lila's life story and emotions. The muse's rebellious commentary, her fierce attempt to resist the absorption into the phallogocentric system, has failed. When Lila's objections reach us, she has already been tethered in the phallogocentric

snare of language. The subaltern's critique is inextricably interwoven within the master's prose, her protest is beautifully presented with the master's well-crafted phrases, her dissent is conveyed by the master's voice. The subaltern's rejection of literary language can only be spoken with perfect grammar and through the master's Italian.

With all her actions, Lila expresses a radical refusal to be used as a mouthpiece at the service of the phallogocentric system. Self-elimination and self-removal clearly emerge as her preferred strategies to assert her will when she 'undoes' her wedding photograph. The portrait, which captures Lila's magnetic energy, becomes the focus of a fight among the Solara brothers, her husband, Stefano, and her brother, Rino, all determined to appropriate her likeness. With Elena's help, Lila 'negotiates successfully the right to modify the image to her liking',¹⁴¹ and covers the white wedding dress with funereal black, 'con i cartoncini neri, coi cerchi verdi e violacei che Lila tracciava intorno a certe parti del suo corpo, con le linee rosso sangue con cui si trinciava e diceva di trinciarla, realizzò la propria autodistruzione *in immagine*'.¹⁴² Lila's enduring wish is to vanish without leaving a trace: 'di me non voglio lasciare niente, il tasto che preferisco è quello che serve a cancellare'.¹⁴³ 'Voleva volatilizzarsi; voleva disperdere ogni sua cellula; di lei non si doveva trovare più niente',¹⁴⁴ Elena thinks, when she learns that Lila has cut herself out of every photograph.

Silence and disappearance are traditionally aligned with passivity, whilst expression and self-assertion are associated with action. However, in the face of authoritative demands, refusing to sing for the master and to utter the words that have been scripted for you is a form of rebellion. Lila's disappearance is clamorous: her corporeal absence is also a haunting presence, the holes and gaps created by her unavailability are conspicuously visible. Self-erasure, absence, and the withholding of words signify an emphatic ideological commitment. Only by avoiding representation can Lila truly and authentically represent herself: 'cancellarsi era una sorta di progetto estetico'.¹⁴⁵ By refusing to speak and to be represented, the subaltern muse is able to exert a certain amount of control over her own ontology. According to Michel Foucault, when self-exposure is a coercive requirement, it is the silent subject who gains authority: 'the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained) but in the one who listens and says nothing'.¹⁴⁶ Elena Ferrante develops this notion into a feminist strategy. Asked to define the meaning of disappearance in her works, Ferrante answers:

La scomparsa delle donne non va interpretata solo come un crollo della combattività di fronte alla violenza del mondo, ma anche come un rifiuto netto. C'è in italiano un'espressione intraducibile nel suo doppio significato: 'io non ci sto.' Se presa alla lettera significa: io non sono qui, in questo luogo, di fronte a ciò che mi state proponendo di accettare. Nel suo significato comune suona invece: non sono d'accordo, non voglio. Il rifiuto è assentarsi dai giochi di chi schiaccia tutti i deboli.¹⁴⁷

Lila's 'non ci sto' embodies the feminist potential of silence and disappearance. Through her self-erasure, the muse becomes 'an absence, outside the system of representations and autorepresentations [...] a *hole* in men's signifying economy'.¹⁴⁸ Pinto observes that 'Lila subirà continuamente il fascino dell'auto-cancellarsi come pratica di resistenza, ovvero per sottrarsi all'oppressione maschile'.¹⁴⁹ Santovetti acknowledges the 'ambivalent, enigmatic and disturbing' character of Lila's self-mutilation, but argues

that her 'self-erasure is not a surrender but is a sign of irreducibility' and a strategy 'of resistance and emancipation'.¹⁵⁰ Elena is forced to acknowledge her friend's 'non ci sto' as a defiant aesthetic project when, at the end of the last volume, she receives the mysterious package that holds the most surprising gift:

Ho riconosciuto subito le bambole che [...], quasi sei decenni prima, erano state gettate [...] in uno scantinato del rione. [...] Don Achille [...] ci aveva risarcito con del denaro perché ce ne comprassimo altre. Però noi con quei soldi non avevamo comprato bambole [...] ma *Piccole donne*, il romanzo che aveva indotto [...] me a diventare ciò che ero oggi. [...] Ho esaminato le due bambole con cura, ne ho sentito l'odore di muffa. [...] Nel constatare che erano povere e brutte mi sono sentita confusa. A differenza che nei racconti, la vita vera, quando è passata, si sporge non sulla chiarezza ma sull'oscurità. Ho pensato: ora che Lila si è fatta vedere così nitidamente, devo rassegnarmi a non vederla più.¹⁵¹

With this gesture, which is profoundly reminiscent of Carla Lonzi's separatist tactics, Lila asserts her presence, the truth of materiality and of *smarginatura*, urging Elena to recognize the insincerity of phallogocentrism. The subaltern speaks without saying a word. Yet this solution is profoundly ambivalent and paradoxical: despite the feminist implications of this act, the only possible escape from the symbolic order offered by Ferrante leads to an outcome akin to the patriarchal silencing that has long obscured the historical contributions of women and eliminated their voices from the literary canon.

The Solitude of Women's Minds

The Quartet's epilogue is imbued with a sense of obstruction, failure, solitude, and isolation. In her youth, Elena dreamed of a collaborative writing relationship with Lila and of *inleirsi* with, through, and into her brilliant friend: 'avremmo scritto insieme, avremmo firmato insieme, avremmo tratto potenza l'una dall'altra'.¹⁵² Yet Elena Greco's career as a writer is plagued by a perpetual dissatisfaction, an unrelenting effort to match the power of Lila's words. She admits: 'Voglio che lei ci sia, scrivo per questo. Voglio che cancelli, che aggiunga, che collabori alla nostra storia rovesciandoci dentro, secondo il suo estro, le cose che sa, che ha detto o che ha pensato'.¹⁵³ At the end of her life, however, the narrator is forced to recognize that her fantasy has not been fulfilled, and that her efforts to write with Lila have been unsuccessful: 'Ho dovuto prendere atto che queste pagine sono solo mie. [...] Lila non è in queste parole'.¹⁵⁴ In the course of the story, every artwork created by the duo is destroyed, stolen, disappointing, or misunderstood: Elena plagiarizes her friend's remarks on the fourth book of the *Aeneid*; Lila's childhood fable *La fata blu* meets a fiery end by her own hand; Elena hurls Lila's notebooks into a river; Lila's extraordinary shoes fall into the clutches of her nemesis Michele Solara; the photographic panel-collage is misinterpreted and eventually goes up in flames; the joint article leads to the disappearance of Lila's daughter, Tina; Elena's novels bitterly disappoint her, ruin her bond with Lila, and earn the scorn of her daughters. Lila's absence emerges as the only strategy of resistance offered by Ferrante, yet this gesture leads to an outcome similar to the silencing that has excluded women from history and from the canon. The protagonists' creativity appears destined to be vanquished by patriarchal violence unless it mimics patriarchal forms and norms. Ferrante thus suggests that women are either silenced or rendered mute in the symbolic order. If their voices manage to emerge, they are often unheard, ignored, misinterpreted, harshly suppressed,

and punished, or become material for their manufacturing. In contemplating the saga's conclusion, Ferrante writes:

Lena [...] sa che scrive mettendo nei margini la scrittura dell'amica. Lei sa che da sola non riuscirà mai a uscire dalla cattiva lingua, da immagini vecchie che suonano false, mentre l'amica probabilmente sì. Inserire in questo impianto una fusione delle due scritture, una confusione, significava arrivare a un lieto fine in cui ciò che le due bambine non avevano fatto — scrivere insieme un libro — riuscivano ora a fare da adulte in una sorta di libro finale che era la storia della loro vita. Impossibile, per me. Mentre scrivevo *L'amica geniale*, un finale del genere mi era inconcepibile.¹⁵⁵

The dream of *inleirsi* remains a wish, inconceivable even within the realm of fiction. As Ferrante admits in 'Storie, io', in her pursuit of a female language that would overcome phallogocentrism, she succeeded in moving from a lone female 'I' to the 'you and I' of Lila and Elena, but she did not attain an 'us'. Shedding light on the insurmountable difficulties of this quest, Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet questions the very possibility of a feminist language and narrative.

Notes

1. Elena Ferrante, *La frantumaglia* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2016), p. 268.
2. Ivi, p. 299.
3. Virginia Woolf, quoted in Deborah Cameron, 'Introduction to Part One', in *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, ed. by Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 25–32 (p. 29).
4. Federica Buetti, *Critical Poetics of Feminist Refusals* (London: Routledge, 2023), p. 22.
5. Andrea Hajek, 'A Room of One's Own: Feminist Intersections between Space, Women's Writing and Radical Bookselling in Milan (1968–1986)', *Italian Studies*, 73.1 (2018), 81–97 (p. 92). See also Elisa Bolchi, 'Filling the Void: Virginia Woolf and the Feminism of Difference in Italy', *The Italianist*, 41.1 (2021), 97–115.
6. Adriana Cavarero, 'Per una teoria della differenza sessuale', in *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, ed. by Adriana Cavarero and others (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987), pp. 43–79 (p. 49). Unless otherwise stated, all emphasis is in the original text.
7. Adriana Cavarero, 'Il pensiero femminista: Un approccio teoretico', in *Le filosofie femministe: Due secoli di battaglie teoriche e pratiche*, ed. by Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 78–115 (p. 84).
8. Cavarero, 'Per una teoria della differenza sessuale', pp. 48–49.
9. Elena Ferrante, 'Storie, io', in *I margini e il dettato* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2021), pp. 81–118 (p. 96).
10. Stilian Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 22.
11. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', pp. 103–04.
12. Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet comprises the following novels, all published by Edizioni e/o in Rome: *L'amica geniale* (2011), *Storia del nuovo cognome* (2012), *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (2013), *Storia della bambina perduta* (2014).
13. Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, p. 18.
14. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 293.
15. Olivia Santovetti, 'Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels', *Modern Language Review*, 113.3 (2018), 527–45 (p. 532).
16. Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, p. 323.
17. Ferrante mentions Carla Lonzi, the co-founder of Rivolta Femminile, as one of the feminist thinkers who inspired her the most: 'Faccio nomi di donne a cui devo molto: Firestone, Lonzi, Irigaray, Muraro, Cavarero, Gagliasso, Haraway, Butler, Braidotti.' Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, p. 406.

18. Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi, 'Against Culture: Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy', in *Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi*, ed. by Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 1–22 (p. 1).
19. Michèle Causse and Carla Lonzi, 'Perché si sappia', in *È già politica*, ed. by Maria Grazia Chinese and others (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977), pp. 103–09 (p. 104).
20. Ventrella and Zapperi, 'Against Culture: Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy', p. 10.
21. Rivolta Femminile, 'Assenza della donna dai momenti celebrativi della manifestazione creativa maschile', in Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel: E altri scritti*, ed. by Maria Luisa Boccia and others (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2010), pp. 49–51 (p. 51).
22. Bueti, p. 22.
23. Ivi, p. 20.
24. Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 63–134 (p. 63).
25. Ivi, p. 64.
26. Ivi, p. 79.
27. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875–93 (p. 879).
28. Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 12.
29. Bueti, p. 22.
30. Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, p. 362.
31. Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*, p. 105.
32. Ivi, p. 106.
33. Elena Ferrante, 'A Power of Our Own', trans. by Ann Goldstein, *The New York Times*, 17 May 2019. Not available in Italian.
34. Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, p. 59.
35. Ivi, p. 296.
36. Elena Ferrante, *L'invenzione occasionale* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2019), p. 26.
37. Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, p. 437.
38. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', p. 102.
39. Woolf, quoted in *The Feminist Critique of Language*, ed. by Cameron, p. 29.
40. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', p. 103.
41. Ivi, p. 105.
42. Ferrante, 'La pena e la penna', in *I margini e il dettato*, pp. 9–44 (p. 39).
43. Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*, p. 13.
44. Dante, *Par.* 9.73–81.
45. Bueti, p. 22.
46. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', p. 114.
47. Ferrante, 'La costola di Dante', in *I margini e il dettato*, pp. 119–52 (p. 131).
48. Ivi, p. 135.
49. Carlotta Moro and Rebecca Walker, 'Pains, Pens, and Poets: Elena Ferrante's In the Margins: On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing', *Reading in Translation*, 11 March 2022 <<https://readingintranslation.com/2022/03/11/elena-ferrantes-in-the-margins/>> [accessed 11 March 2023].
50. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 1583.
51. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', p. 84.
52. Ivi, p. 64.
53. Ibid.
54. Rebecca Falkoff, 'To Translate Is to Betray: On the Elena Ferrante Phenomenon in Italy and the US', *Public Books*, 25 March 2015 <<https://www.publicbooks.org/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us/>> [accessed 25 May 2023].

55. Sarah Hudspith and Olivia Santovetti, 'Dostoevsky, Ferrante, and the Challenge of Writing Authentically', *Bloggers Karamazov: The Official Blog of the North American Dostoevsky Society*, 23 August 2022 <<https://bloggerskaramazov.com/2022/08/23/dostoevsky-ferrante-and-the-challenge-of-writing-authentically/?fbclid=IwAR0rQCtNwXfsKusBD0YYQ6EBgkPtNirSZA6JTNk40vcweHNYf921RRblxAl>> [accessed 2 April 2023].
56. Ferrante, 'La pena e la penna', in *I margini e il dettato*, pp. 9–44 (p. 10).
57. See Jillian R. Cavanaugh, 'Indexicalities of Language in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: Dialect and Italian as Markers of Social Value and Difference', in *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, ed. by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 71–98; Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, 'Playing with the Maternal Body: Violence, Mutilation, and the Emergence of the Female Subject in Ferrante's Novels', *California Italian Studies*, 7.1 (2017), 1–15; Tiziana de Rogatis, 'Le due lingue, l'emigrazione e lo studio', in *Elena Ferrante: Parole Chiave* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2018), pp. 165–205; Rita Librandi, 'Una lingua silenziosa: Immaginare il dialetto negli scritti di Elena Ferrante', *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, 66.2 (2019), 385–98.
58. Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), pp. 89–93.
59. de Rogatis, p. 200.
60. Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, p. 58.
61. Ivi, p. 255.
62. de Rogatis, p. 200.
63. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 47.
64. Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, 16.2 (1991), 290–321 (p. 308).
65. Elena Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 220.
66. Ivi, pp. 155–56.
67. Ivi, p. 290.
68. Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, p. 110.
69. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 24.
70. Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, p. 38.
71. Ivi, p. 134.
72. Ivi, p. 46.
73. Stilian Milkova, 'Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: On Disgust in Elena Ferrante's *La figlia oscura*', *Italian Culture*, 31.2 (2013), 91–109; Emma Van Ness, 'The Significance of the Maternal Voice in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels', in *Works of Elena Ferrante*, ed. by Bullaro and Love, pp. 293–312; Elisa Sotgiu, 'Elena Ferrante e il femminismo della differenza: Una lettura dell'*Amica Geniale*', *Allegoria*, 76 (2017), 58–76.
74. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 63.
75. Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Betty S. Flowers (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 5–19.
76. Van Ness, p. 298.
77. The scholarship on this topic is extensive. Ann B. Murphy lists the punitive aspects of *Little Women*: 'the incarceration of Meg in claustrophobic domesticity, the mysterious, sacrificial death of good little Beth, the trivialization of Amy in objectifying narcissism, and the foreclosure of Jo's erotic and literary expression'. Agreeing with Carolyn Heilbrun's observation that 'Alcott betrayed Jo', Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant wrote that the author has been 'forced to wage war upon her protagonist. [...]. The horrifying subtext of *Little Women* reveals that for an independent, self-determined Jo, no future is possible.' Similarly, according to Beverly Lyon Clark, 'though Alcott gives some play to subversive ideas of self-expression, her overt message is that girls should subordinate themselves and their language to others'. See Carolyn Heilbrun, 'Louisa May Alcott: The Influence of *Little Women*', in *Women, the Arts, and the 1920s in Paris and New York*, ed. by Kenneth Wheeler and Virginia Lussier (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1982), pp. 20–26 (p. 23); Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant, 'Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*', *Children's Literature*, 17 (1989), 98–123 (p. 101);

- Beverly Lyon Clark, 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Little Woman', *Children's Literature*, 17 (1989), 81–97 (p. 81); Ann B. Murphy, 'The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*', *Signs*, 15.3 (1990), 562–85 (p. 564).
78. *Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1987), pp. 124–25.
 79. Ivi, pp. 121–22.
 80. On the Neapolitan Quartet's metafictional structure and concerns, see Simona Micali, 'La scrittura e la vita', *L'indice dei libri del mese*, December 2014 <<https://www.lindiceonline.com/letture/narrativa-italiana/elena-ferrante-storia-della-bambina-perduta/>> [accessed 26 May 2023]; Caterina Falotico, 'Elena Ferrante: Il ciclo dell'*Amica geniale* tra autobiografia, storia e metaletteratura', *Forum Italicum*, 49.1 (2015), 92–118; SANTOVETTI, 'Melodrama or Metafiction?', 527–45; Stiliana Milkova, 'Beyond Postmodernism: Mirrors, *Mise en Abîmes*, and Labyrinths in Elena Ferrante's Works', *MLN*, 136.1 (2021), 54–74.
 81. Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, 'Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: Writing Liminality', *Allegoria*, 73 (2016), 204–10 (p. 207).
 82. Maria Morelli, 'Margins, Subjectivity, and Violence in Elena Ferrante's *Cronache del mal d'amore*', *Italian Studies*, 76.3 (2021), 329–41.
 83. Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, p. 343. Emphasis mine.
 84. Ivi, p. 323. Emphasis mine.
 85. Ivi, p. 256.
 86. Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 178.
 87. Greene, p. 319.
 88. On Ferrante's negotiation of the male gaze and patriarchal aesthetics, see Stiliana Milkova, 'Outside the Frame: The Aesthetics of Female Creativity and Authorship', in *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*, pp. 105–29.
 89. Elena Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* (Rome: e/o, 2006), pp. 139–47.
 90. Stiliana Milkova, 'Artistic Tradition and Feminine Legacy in Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto*', *California Italian Studies*, 6.1 (2016), 1–15 (p. 11).
 91. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. by Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 21–78 (p. 47). Spivak writes from a postcolonial context, which only applies to Ferrante's novels insofar as, in the words of Loredana Di Martino, they explore 'the Orientalist tradition that has evacuated the Italian South from the "imagined community" of the modernized, Northern-centric and less ambiguously *white* nation'. See Loredana Di Martino, 'Addressing Each Other's Eyes Directly: From Adriana Cavarero's "Relating Narratives" to Elena Ferrante's Intersectional Ethics of Narrative Relations', *gender/sexuality/italy*, 7 (2021), 49–74 (p. 50).
 92. Spivak, p. 48.
 93. Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, p. 323.
 94. Ibid.
 95. Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, p. 450.
 96. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 300.
 97. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 246.
 98. Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 67.
 99. Ivi, p. 77.
 100. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 17.
 101. Grace Stewart, *New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1981), p. 107.
 102. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 261.
 103. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 444.
 104. Stephanie McCarter, 'Elena Ferrante's Virgil: Rewriting the *Aeneid* in the Neapolitan Novels', *Eidolon*, 17 November 2016 <<https://eidolon.pub/elena-ferrantes-vergil-2f6babd05f16>> [accessed 25 May 2023].
 105. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 139.

106. Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, p. 85.
107. de Rogatis, p. 56.
108. Milkova, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*, p. 125.
109. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 19
110. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', p. 111.
111. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, pp. 441–42.
112. Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400–1650* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 30.
113. Moi, p. 10.
114. Alessia Ricciardi, *Finding Ferrante: Authorship and the Politics of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), p. 14.
115. On Elena Ferrante's post-human philosophy and poetics, see Enrica Maria Ferrara, 'Performative Realism and Post-humanism in *The Days of Abandonment*', in *The Works of Elena Ferrante*, ed. by Bullaro and Love, pp. 129–58; Ferrara, 'Posthumanism and Identity in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels', in *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film: Boundaries and Identity*, ed. by Enrica Maria Ferrara (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 93–116; Isabella Pinto, *Elena Ferrante: Poetiche e politiche della soggettività* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020); Rossella di Rosa, 'Material and Trans-corporeal Identities in Ferrante's and Atwood's Narratives', *MLN*, 136.1 (2021), 143–63.
116. Enrica Maria Ferrara, 'Grief and Posthuman Identity in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: The Precarious Life of Women and the Right to Disappear', *MLN*, 136.1 (2021), 96–117 (p. 100).
117. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 'Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory', in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 1–22 (p. 3).
118. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 428.
119. Ivi, p. 441.
120. Ivi, p. 120.
121. Ivi, p. 290.
122. Ivi, pp. 290–91.
123. Ivi, p. 293.
124. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', p. 85.
125. Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, p. 140.
126. Ivi, p. 141.
127. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*.
128. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014), p. 184.
129. Ivi, p. 126.
130. Ivi, p. 222.
131. Ivi, p. 64.
132. Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, p. 16.
133. Ibid.
134. Ferrante, 'Storie, io', p. 84.
135. Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, p. 349
136. de Rogatis, pp. 176–77.
137. Ivi, p. 175.
138. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 444.
139. Santovetti, 'Melodrama or Metafiction?', p. 539.
140. de Rogatis, p. 52.
141. Stilian Milkova, 'Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics: Ekphrasis in *Troubling Love, My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Story of a New Name*', in *Works of Elena Ferrante*, ed. by Bullaro and Love, p. 174.
142. Ferrante, *Storia del nuovo cognome*, p.122.
143. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 433.
144. Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, p. 16.
145. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 433.

146. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 61.
147. Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, p. 399.
148. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 50.
149. Pinto, p. 76.
150. Olivia Santovetti, “‘lo non ci sto”: Elena Ferrante, the Theme of Erasure and the *Smarginatura* as Poetics of Resistance’, in *Resistance in Italian Culture from Dante to the 21st Century*, ed. by Ambra Moroncini, Darrow Schecter, and Fabio Vighi (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2019), pp. 281–94 (pp. 281, 282, 289).
151. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, pp. 450–51.
152. Ferrante, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, p. 323.
153. Ivi, p. 91.
154. Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, p. 447.
155. Ferrante, ‘Storie, io’, p. 113.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Carlotta Moro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8263-5365>